Cornerstone Monthly Newsletter

October 2026

Dear Families,

A few weeks ago several of our staff attended the first day of Molly O'Shaughnessy's Observation Refresher Course (Montessori-speak for "intensive workshop focused on pedagogy"). I had the pleasure of hearing Molly's workshop back in 2010 and still have the brick she gave to each attendee, with the word "observe" inscribed on it. Although I've never talked to Molly about this, I'm assuming that she gave us each a brick to symbolize that observation is the foundation of our work with children. When we sit and watch, we see so much that we can't possibly note when we're busy interacting.

This morning I spent about 40 minutes in the Toddler Community, observing the arrival and breakfast routines. It's difficult not to interact with the toddlers, but by staying in one spot I was able to see that the children, even those who do not speak Spanish, fully understand what Katie says to them. When she asked, "¿lavaste tus manos?", the children raised their hands to show they were clean. I saw that a child who wasn't able to reach the chair to take it off the table and so climbed up themselves, pushed it down, and then clapped, saying "I did it!" The child who often seems to not sit still completed several cycles of activity, choosing work and putting it away each time, pushing in their chair in between each material. One child dipped their napkin into their milk cup, and another washed their hands for breakfast, went to paint, and then washed their hands again.

Was all this information relevant? Not necessarily. But imagine that I hadn't been observing the entire activity and had only seen or heard small pieces. My responses might have looked something like this:

- Katie speaks Spanish to a group of children, none of whom respond verbally. I don't see that they respond with non-verbal cues and think, *They don't understand her and she should repeat herself in English.*
- Child pushes a chair off the table. I don't see that there was a well-intentioned reason behind it and chastise, *We don't stand on tables.*
- Child is frequently moving between a shelf and a table, choosing work and cleaning it up. I don't realize they are completing a work cycle and chastise, *Please go push in your chair.*

The child who dipped their napkin in milk and the one who washed their hands multiple times may be demonstrating a pattern, or they may be toddlers who act on impulse. This is why observation matters – we can see if there is a pattern and perhaps what it tells us by watching over time. Of course, it's not always possible to observe for 40 minutes, but there is still much to gain from simply slowing down and allowing things to unfold. Unless a child is hurting themselves or others, it is rare that we need to step in immediately. Despite hearing this statement repeatedly in training, stepping back is a skill that took me years in the classroom to learn and one that I still

struggle with as a parent. But how much better for the child, and for our own nervous systems, if we can wait, see what is going to happen next, and then respond (or don't!) accordingly?

By the time I got to the Toddler Community this morning, I had already had ample opportunity to practice patient observation. Like many of you, I'm sure, getting from bed to car is a daily nightmare, and this morning was particularly rough in the Schwartz/Morris household. The girls refused to get dressed, and then they refused to brush their teeth, and then they wound each other up giggling and spilling milk everywhere. And I, in the back of my mind and verbally, am sure that we are going to be late and I have to find a sub for someone and am thinking twenty steps ahead about what the morning is going to look like if my children don't decide to participate. Does this sound familiar? What ended up happening, even though my children never did decide to participate, was that we got to school on time, I found coverage for the absent adult, and was able to do everything that I had expected to this morning. It would have been better for everyone if I had kept my calm when I felt forced to manhandle Ellie into socks. Hindsight is 20/20, of course, but what Molly's *Observe* brick should remind me every day is that it's rarely an emergency. Except for those moments when Sadie has a wad of Ellie's hair in her fist, it's probably okay if I pause, take a beat, and wait to see if they can resolve their struggles independently. Maybe they'll even put on their own dang socks!

In these busy weeks leading up to the solstice, I wish for each of you the reminder to pause and observe, to see what will happen if you just let it unfold a bit.

Happy November,
Alyssa

Toddler Community



October was a big month for practical life in the Toddler Community. We introduced dish washing and most of the older children received presentations while some of the younger children spent time observing. A few younger children even started the process all on their own after seeing others get presentations! On several occasions, the child who chose to dishes after breakfast washed every dish on the dirty dish cart.



While not every scrap of food made it off the dish, the important part of the work is their concentration, and they were certainly focused!

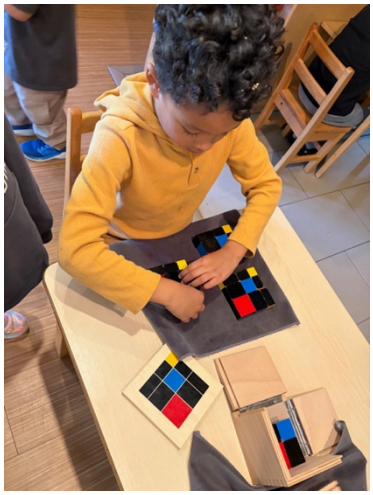
There was a lot of interest in other water based practical life activities as well. The cloth washing stand and handwashing stand got a lot of attention as did flower arranging and plant watering. The other biggest interest in the environment is the rain gear language set; the children have loved trying to put on the doll-sized rain boots and walking around with the miniature umbrella. On the drizzly days

this month the toddlers enjoyed playing hide and seek, looking up to the sky to feel rain on their faces, and using their own rain boots to splash in puddles.





Children's House 1



Math has taken over CH1 this month, and we are not complaining! Addition, subtraction, multiplication: the children love it all, especially when they get to tackle it with a friend. It has been wonderful to watch their curiosity and inner drive to explore their mathematical minds.

Many friends have practiced so much that they've earned the title of "guide" and are now giving presentations on the multiplication board and the stamp game. Nothing beats the pride on a five-year-old's face when they're the one saying, "Here, let me show you!" Peer learning at its finest.

Pumpkins have also made an appearance in our room! Now that some of our younger friends have joined us from the toddler community, we brought out our pumpkin work, stretching rubber bands around the pumpkin to build those strong fine motor muscles. It's a classic this time of year, and it never fails to be a hit. One afternoon we even cut a pumpkin in half and baked it with cinnamon and honey for a sweet snack. Our classroom smelled amazing, and there were many requests for seconds.



Our classroom community has settled into a lovely rhythm of morning and afternoon work cycles. The children are choosing their own work, coming back to it again and again, and asking for more. This is the development of the will in action. As Maria Montessori said, "The children are now working as if I did not exist." (We try not to take it personally. 😊)






Children's House 2





Intro to Elementary – Freedom and Responsibility

Dr. Montessori believed that education should be an "aid to life," meaning that we are not only striving to share knowledge and information, but to prepare the child to be fully functioning members of society. For the child to become part of society in a meaningful way they must become functionally and intellectually independent, have a developed will, and have a healthy understanding of how their own actions impact others. In order to develop this level of independence and functioning the child needs freedom. In our Montessori classrooms, the

children have three basic freedoms: the freedom to choose, the freedom to move, and the freedom to communicate. Within this basic freedom structure, the children are able to choose the work that most interests them, how long to work on a given task, with whom they want to work, where to complete their work, etc.

All of this freedom is balanced with certain responsibilities. The children are free to choose their own work, but they are responsible for choosing work that is purposeful, balanced, and challenging. They are responsible for completing work to demonstrate that they are learning those things that the government and school require them to learn. The children are free to move during the work cycle, but they are responsible for moving carefully and with purpose. They are free to take care of their needs and move freely to gather the items they need for their work, but they are responsible for moving in such a way that they do not disturb the work of others and that the materials are well cared for. The children have the freedom to communicate, but they have the responsibility to communicate respectfully. They are responsible for communicating about their work during the work cycle and ensuring that the things they speak or write about are appropriate.

With all of the freedom that is inherent in the classroom there is an appropriate level of responsibility that provides balance and creates a dynamic learning environment. When this balance is off we guide the children by setting limits until responsibility is built and balance is restored. Ultimately, we hope for the children to build the skills of responsibility so that they can lead productive and purposeful lives. This is some of the biggest learning and greatest development that happens during their school years. When we embrace this aspect of development, education truly becomes an aid to life.

As Mario Montessori wrote in Education for Human Development:
"One can speak of a true community only when each member of the group feels sufficiently free to be himself or herself, while simultaneously restricting his or her own freedom for the sake of adjustment to the group. It is in seeking an optimal solution to this tension between personal independence and dependence on the group that the social being is formed. Too much individual freedom leads to chaos, too much uniformity imposed by adults, leads to impersonal conformity or to rebellion." (edited)

Lower Elementary – Garden

During the first few weeks of school, we discussed the concept of freedom and responsibility using the balance scale. We first established the idea of *balance* as keeping something steady as we place equal weights on either side of the scale. When we place too much weight on one side, like having too much freedom when making work choices that don't help us learn or getting too silly when we sit next to a favorite peer, we have some disruption. Accordingly, we must add some weight, some responsibility, to the other side to reach an equilibrium. This responsibility might come in the form of making a different choice after doing some reflection or placing a limit after a conversation with an adult.



Since our initial conversation with the balance scale, children have had many conversations around freedoms and responsibilities. I've heard children often remind their peers that they really should choose a different work so that they can have a "balanced day." One first-year even came up to me with her palms facing up like a scale, sharing that she just did a bunch of writing in her journal (tipping one hand down toward the floor) and wanted an idea for another work she could place in her other palm to reset her tipped scale. Another example with this concept is when the children discovered classroom library books being left on the floor and in piles around the shelves. In a class meeting, the children shared that they were having too much freedom with the books and if they were to continue, the books could get lost or damaged. Older children knew from previous experience that the adults could place a class-wide limit that would close the library for a while. Knowing that our library is a well-loved and cozy space in the classroom, some third-years took charge in developing an organizational system for their classmates and created a set of beautifully illustrated labels to facilitate the care of the library.





This month, we read several books featuring a strong-willed character who has her own encounters with freedom and responsibility. In the Lulu series by Judith Viorst, the title character is a boisterous 8-year-old girl who *almost* always gets what she wants from her parents by yelling and throwing tantrums. (Upon hearing this, the children were immediately shocked by Lulu's behavior and commented that she needed to spend some time in our classroom at Cornerstone Montessori to learn more about freedom and responsibility.) In *Lulu and the Brontosaurus,* Lulu eventually learns that screaming and whining does not always work when she meets Mr. B, a brontosaurus who refuses to be her pet. (Sometimes even using the word "please" can help you communicate your needs and wants!) In *Lulu Walks the Dogs*, Lulu takes on the enormous responsibility of walking other people's canine pets when trying to earn some money for something incredible. Walking three normal dogs may already seem like a hard task, but imagine how much more difficult it would be if one of them must be serenaded by a flute while another will only come out of hiding if you flatter her in German. Lulu also learns the responsibility of

treating other people with kindness and respect, like her neighbor Fleishman, even when they frustrate and annoy you.





Lower Elementary – Pond

In Montessori we often say that we want to give children as much freedom as they can handle... responsibly. This can be a tricky task not least because children often show different levels of responsibility in different parts of their life, or over time, or based on what else has happened in the day! As we try to balance a student's freedom in the classroom with the level of responsibility they are capable of, we have two main approaches, limiting the amount of freedom to match the level of responsibility, and giving students the skills to expand their level of responsibility.



A good limit targets the particular responsibility that's missing as precisely as possible. A student who has been doing lots of purposeful work but forgets to do math might just need an adult reminder to do math first thing every day. A student who struggles with choosing purposeful work most of the morning might need to make a work plan with an adult every morning, and then check in throughout the day to see how they're progressing on that plan.

Some limits can also help build responsibility. Practicing making a plan for the day with an adult can lead to students becoming comfortable making a plan without an adult, and no longer needing the limit anymore! Other times building responsibility can come from an explicit lesson. Our social-emotional lessons at the start of the year help students build their ability to think about, express, and be resilient with a variety of strong emotions, underpinning the skills needed for greater responsibility.

It can be hard to know when a student doesn't need a limit anymore, and sometimes limits stay on after a student shows they don't need them anymore, or end before a student has the skill to manage without them. As adults we try our best to provide that perfect level of support knowing, but also know that our job is NOT to prevent children from ever making mistakes. Often when a student makes a mistake after having had experience with success, say spending a day making unproductive work choices after having seen what they are capable of with adult support, it motivates them to consolidate the skills they have and step up to a higher level of responsibility, without the same need for adult support!





Lower Elementary – Prairie

In Prairie this month, students are learning to identify and welcome different feelings throughout the school day. When children arrive in the classroom, students place their picture in the Zone they are feeling. Students name their feeling(s), with help from an adult, and match it a corresponding Zone.

During morning collective, students take turns sharing their happy, sad, mad, and surprised faces. We talk about sometimes being in more than one Zone (*One student shared that they were in the purple Zone - both tired and mad - even though we don't have a purple Zone yet!);* how to care for each of our feelings; and we've discussed that all of our feelings are okay. Sometimes Happy needs a smile or a high five or to run and get out energy. Sometimes Sad needs a hug, space, or for an adult to stay near. Sometimes Mad needs to get out energy, space, or to say, "I feel mad!". In other one-on-one lessons, we are learning to utilize skills to help put children in control of their feelings and build a sense of confidence in knowing that they can do something safe when they feel out of control. In Prairie, children are also learning to accept and care for others who learn and communicate in different ways. It was exciting to see a new student help another student to take breaths to come to a place of calm. We are learning and growing together this year.

Upper Elementary – Forest

I can't believe we are already almost 2 full months into the school year! Starting off the year, there is a strong emphasis on developing our classroom culture, agreeing on expectations of respect in our community, and learning how to follow through with those expectations. In this "culture forming" stage, we returned frequently to the discussion of balancing the freedom we have in our classroom with the responsibility each member of our community demonstrates. I want to share with you an example of a tangible way in which this has manifested itself in Forest this year.



We believe that movement is an important part of learning, so the students have the freedom to go outside during the work cycle and move their bodies. However, we discussed with the children how we can balance this freedom with responsibility. We prompt this discussion by asking questions such as: what's a reasonable amount of time to move outside and also have time to do other important work? Where can this be done safely? How many people should be allowed so this activity remains productive? We came to a class agreement that the freedom to do outdoor movement work is balanced by the responsibility of a 20-minute time limit, only once a day, with 3 people, and must be on the classroom patio.



This type of discussion and agreement guides most of our classroom routines. Learning the skills as a community to evaluate how we can best function as a group, be honest if we need to evaluate our freedoms, and agree to abide by the expected responsibilities, is a "work" in and of itself. The children respond to this beautifully and learn so much since they are part of the process.







Upper Elementary – Marsh



October is ending with the excitement and big project of preparing for conferences. For upper elementary students, conferences are a great example of the balance of freedom and responsibility. They are all preparing to present their work to their families - that is, to take on the responsibility of noting their own growth and learning! Every child will share their work journal, showing how they track their time and work in balance with their freedom of choice. Many children will discuss their work (freedom of choice), work partners (freedom of choice), and their collaboration (freedom of communication). And of course, when freedoms and responsibilities are not balanced, there are occasional limits to freedoms - as when children are pressed for time for conference prep and are limited in their seating and work choice until fully prepared!

Some of the work chosen this month has included pond clean-up, boat building and testing, and designing board games. Some work presented has included leaf chromatography and group thinking challenges. We continue to read aloud *Fifty-Four Things Wrong with Gwendolyn Rogers* by Caela Carter, which has struck a chord with many children as they empathize with Gwen's struggle to figure out herself and her world.





1611 Spotlight – Melanie Booker



This month I am excited to highlight Melanie Booker, an assistant in Children's House 1! Melanie joined us in January, 2024, and has been a steady presence ever since. When asked last year who Ellie's safe person at school was, she without hesitation named Melanie (and this is a child who considers all the adults here at Cornerstone as her BFFs). Melanie clearly loves the children as much as they love her, and her own children are remarkable young people (we've all agreed that Melia can take over leadership at the school whenever she'd like!).

This year we are especially proud of Melanie for starting her AMI 3-6 training at the Montessori Center of Minnesota next door. Since beginning training in September, it has been a joy to see Melanie simply glowing with the learning she has gained. She's handling the extra work with grace and continues to be her down-to-earth self for the children.

In Melanie's limited free time, when she is not at school or training, she enjoys taking walks with her kids, cooking recipes she finds on TikTok, and journaling. I don't know where she finds this time, but she also enjoys rearranging her house and planning parties. I wish I had that kind of energy at the end of a long day!