

MOMENTS FROM...

THE INFANT, TODDLER, AND EARLY CHILDHOOD ROOMS

Infant Room: Transitions How We Phase-In Our Infants

By Donna Pellegrin, Infant Head Teacher

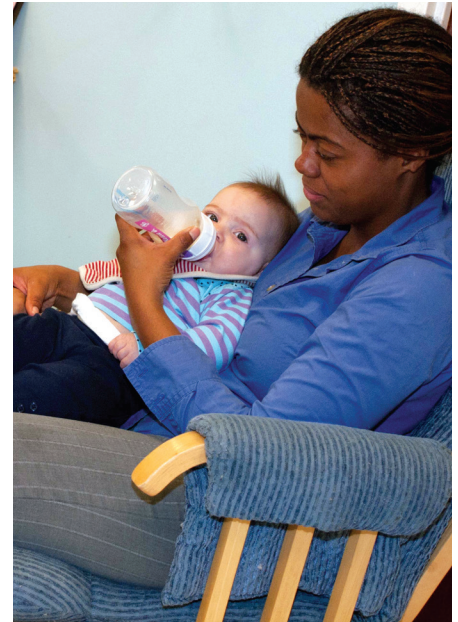
Our relationship with a new infant begins even before the child enters our environment. When we begin the Phase-In Process for infants, we truly are beginning our relationship with the entire family. We have an initial visit a few weeks before the child starts, to give us the opportunity to hear from the parents about the child from the very start: including the pregnancy, birth, early post-natal experiences and first months. We learn about the child's temperament, rhythms, siblings, and extended family. This information gives us a glimpse into the world that our new friend has known. Our goal is to establish trust with both the child and parents as we learn the different ways the child communicates his or her basic needs.

One member of our Infant team pairs with the new child and parent, observing how they help the child feel comfortable during feeding, diapering, transition to sleep, etc. We know that basic trust develops in an environment that is responsive to the child's communication of his or her needs to be loved,

respected, and accepted. Infants have unique ways of communicating and we are interested in learning the specifics of all those expressions—cries, words, movements, gestures, facial expressions, and body positions—so that we, too, can be attuned to the child.

The Phase-In period typically takes one to two weeks and allows us to begin to learn the nuances of each child's individual "voice" while the child begins to develop trust in our ability to respond and meet his or her needs. Children adapt differently to new situations so the length of the Phase-In depends on the needs of each individual child. Because we are working with such little ones, their time with us will always be a time of process, growth, and change. Because of that responsibility, we work to ensure the consistency of our routines and responses so that the child feels safe and secure as s/he grows and develops. The Phase-In enables us to create a strong, trusting foundation on which to build our relationship with the child. Our goal is to have laid this secure foundation by the end of the Phase-In process.

This initial time of Phase-In is also an important opportunity for the adult (mother, father, grandparent, or nanny) to become comfortable and trusting of the new environment that they have chosen for this child. While they are in the environment as the child phases-in, the adult observes our team-teachers with all the children, listens to our language, watches our methods and movements, and feels for him/herself the rhythms of energy and calmness in our environment. As the adult gains trust in us, so too will the infant.



Sometimes we have an older infant (12-to-16 month-old) phasing into our program. This process can often be a little more challenging because of the child's older age, but ultimately it is very rewarding. Before coming to us, the child has been with Mom or Dad, in another center, or cared for by a grandparent or nanny. Sometimes the child has been in a child-care situation that was not completely successful or was not a good match for the child. Depending on how the early experiences have been and on the personality of the child, the child might have a difficult time relaxing enough to allow a connection to be made with a new person. In this case, it can take tremendous patience and understanding on the part of both parent and teacher as the process can take a few weeks. We watch as the child slowly becomes curious and begins to connect to the environment while s/he continues to struggle to let go of the security and known comforts of their primary caregiver. The familiar adult



remains a beacon for the child and s/he stays with us as long as the child needs until the child can engage with the new environment. We watch closely as the child looks around the room. When something seems to spark an interest—it might be a material or another child—we then try to help the child make that connection. With patience and respect for this process, we observe and assist as the child slowly opens up to this new and exciting experience. Tentative smiles become playful laughs and eventually we see the child feels safe, secure, comfortable, and competent.

The children experience many new accomplishments and developmental milestones in our environment, as they grow and develop from infancy to toddlerhood: from crawling to walking; from sitting with assistance to sitting on their own; from making sounds to speaking; from having a bottle to drinking with a cup. The final transition in our environment occurs when our young toddlers are ready to expand their horizons and join the toddler community next door.

We will begin this next process by sitting with the child at the low window that separates the Infant Room from the Toddler Room and showing the child their friends in the room. They see their friends moving around the room, using attractive, enticing materials, interacting with the other children, interacting with the teachers, as they offer their help and guidance. On the playground and in the



hallway, the toddler teachers begin to make friendly, positive interactions with their future friend. When the time comes to take this next big step forward, one toddler teacher is selected to be the child's partner. The child has a first visit to the Toddler Room for an hour. The visits then increase a little each day until the child is comfortable and feels secure with the new environment and the many changes that come with this new experience. Typically within a week or two the child is ready to start the morning with drop-off in the Toddler Room.

We are always a little sad to see the children move up, but we are joyful too, as we celebrate each child in his/her work toward independence, self-actualization, and developing the richness and comforts that come from connections with others in our community.

As I write this I am reminded of the many—sometimes difficult but ultimately wonderful—changes that our very young children make in such a short period of time. How awesome is our responsibility in helping them to experience this important period of their life with peaceful, loving, and positive transitions to enable each and every one of them to have the confidence to continue their journey of self-discovery.

Toddler Transitioning

By K.T. Korngold

Most of our Toddlers come from the Infant Room and, as such, we already know a little about them. When a friend from the Infant Room will soon be coming to join us, we begin to reach out to him/her throughout the day, in the playground, in the hallway, and of course, across the window that connects our classrooms. Then our new Toddler will visit us first for an hour, and then in gradual increments, depending on the comfort level of the child. During the time of Phase-In, the child will start each day in the comfort zone of the Infant Room, until s/he is



completely ready for a morning drop-off. As always, a consistent drop-off ritual with the parent helps the child to let go with confidence.

The process of Phase-In for a Toddler who is new to our school will begin with a meeting of the parents and child with the Head Teacher. At the start of the Phase-In, the child will come into the classroom for a short visit of a half an hour. On subsequent days, the visits will extend, according to the child's comfort. If the child is new to the school, the parent will sit in the classroom during these initial visits. The presence of the primary adult in the classroom serves as a beacon to the child as s/he begins to explore the possibilities of the new environment. We ask that the parent bring a book or magazine to read (we prefer that the parent not use their cell phone or computer in the classroom), so that s/he is available to the child if needed, but also engaged in "work." This conveys a message to the child that the parent is confident and supportive of the child. "I am here for you when you need me. I know this is important work that you have to do to separate from me. I will help you and I am not worried about you." The parent in the chair serves as a kind of "safe base" for the child. The child can stay close and get a hug, and then venture out into the classroom.



Little by little, depending on the temperament and personality of the child, s/he begins to move out into the classroom with the help and support of the teacher/partner, and begins to feel secure in his/her ability to function without Mom or Dad nearby.

We often suggest that parents try to take this Phase-In time off from work (as a vacation time), as it is often challenging for the child to feel at ease if they also feel the pressure of the parent's need to leave or return to work. The time in the classroom can be very valuable for the parent as well, as it gives a chance to observe the interactions of the teachers with the children and see how our Montessori classroom works on a daily basis. This also contributes to the parent's sense of trust and confidence in the new environment. If one or the other parent is unable to give this time to the Phase-In, a close relative or nanny can substitute.

When a child experiences their own separation from their parent in a calm and accepting way, we believe that it helps the child develop a strong inner foundation and sense of trust that stays with the child for a long time. Through our process of transition, each child develops feelings of being supported and being secure, and this, in turn, helps to nurture the child's self-esteem and confidence.

Each new Toddler is given a teacher/partner to help guide the child during the Phase-In process. The teacher serves as the link to the classroom. Because the children are guided toward appropriate

behaviors in a consistent, non-judgmental atmosphere, they begin to understand the balance between freedom and limits. With the presence of comforting, reassuring teachers, the Toddlers learn very quickly that our classroom is safe for them, both physically and emotionally. To successfully overcome separation anxiety is one of the major learning experiences for a Toddler and it is our goal to help make this a success for each child.

Most Toddlers quickly adjust to the Montessori environment of our classroom. Because the Toddler age is a time of insatiable curiosity and boundless enthusiasm for activity, most Toddlers literally propel themselves through their busy day! As their muscles, core strength, limbs, vestibular system, and coordination develop, they discover a newfound freedom and capacity for movement: walking, running, climbing, balancing, jumping, even sitting still! Along with these accomplishments comes a flourishing of concentration on an enticing array of activities. The children begin to focus and engage in hands-on activity, music, movement and song, group time, and participate both in the daily care of their classroom and in their own personal care. Patience, self-control, and respect of peers emerge as children participate in community life.

The prepared Montessori Toddler environment is specially designed to help in the critical areas of Toddler development, including: separation, development of trust, thinking, problem solving, and learning to care for him/her self and for others. By giving the Toddler the opportunity to establish new and bonded relationships with other children and new adults, while at the same time offering specifically designed activities appropriate for this age, we help the Toddler fulfill the tasks of self-development and move toward self-mastery.

Maria Montessori wrote in *The Absorbent Mind*: "An interesting piece of work, freely chosen, which has the virtue of inducing concentration rather than fatigue,

adds to the child's energies and mental capacities, and leads him to self-mastery." It is exciting to see the little ones who first toddle into our room, emerge a year and half later ready to take on the challenges, pleasures, and discoveries of the Early Childhood program.

Early Childhood Transitions



By Pamela Serra,
Early Childhood Head Teacher

As we look ahead toward the late spring and summer, we can see that this is a busy time of transitions in the Early Childhood classroom. During the next several months, we will all be experiencing a series of phase-overs, phase-ins, and phase-outs. We look forward to welcoming new friends to our community and to wishing our current children congratulations as they graduate.

The transitions that occur in our environment touch every child in the room: the child phasing in from outside, the child phasing over from the Toddler Room, the child graduating, and the children continuing in the classroom, all influence the experience of our community of children. Change affects all of us in different ways. Changes can bring a feeling of uncertainty that may produce anxiety or can be unsettling until the new pattern becomes the norm. It is for this reason that we have established a gradual, consistent, and peaceful process that centers on following the needs of each individual child



We consider that the transition into the classroom is the first step in preparation for the many transitions the child will have throughout his/her life.

as the child makes the adjustment. This process allows each child to develop trust in his/her new environment at a comfortable pace. Once trust is established, the transition is a success for the child.

Part of our Montessori philosophy is to consider that the transitions a child experiences early in life play a definite role in how they experience transitions later in life. Transitions are a natural part of our everyday lives—beginning when we enter the world and take our first breath, and even at the end, when we take our last. This is another reason we take such time, care, and planning in transitioning from one class to another.

We know children go on to experience many more transitions after they leave our program, so we want to make sure we give them every opportunity to have this transition be a success so we can create a good foundation for future experiences, such as moving on to Kindergarten and elementary school, the addition of a sibling, sleeping over at a friend's home, taking the bus to school, going off to sleep away camp, leaving for college, getting married, starting a new job, moving from one house to another, becoming a parent, and much more.

How do we know it is time for a Phase-over from the Toddler Room to the Early Childhood Room?

When we know there will be an opening for a new child in the Early Childhood Room, we begin a discussion in our Head Teachers' meeting by looking at the readi-



ness of children in the Toddler Room. We consider age, toileting skills, and whether the children are ready for the activities that occur in the new class in terms of their social, physical, and cognitive development. The process may include an Early Childhood teacher observing in the Toddler Room to gain additional insight into the children's interests and abilities.

To ensure a successful phase-over for the child, the Early Childhood Head Teacher will want to learn as much information as possible about the new student. The next step is a meeting between the Early Childhood Head Teacher and the parents of the child. The meeting gives parents and teacher a chance to talk together about the child's development, interests, temperament, routines, eating and sleeping patterns, teachers' backgrounds, classroom schedule, classroom procedures, curriculum, and for the teacher to explain to parents the ways the Early Childhood curriculum is designed to provide a balance of freedom of choice with boundaries within a structure, as appropriate to children of this age.

In the Early Childhood Room the phase-over process looks like this:

- The first visit is held on a Monday and lasts for one hour only.
- For six subsequent days (Monday to Monday), the visit time is increased

each day, according to how the child adjusts.

- During visit days, the parent continues to drop-off the child in the Toddler Room, in order to help the child begin each day by connecting to their familiar surroundings.
- At 9:30 am, an Early Childhood teacher arrives in the Toddler Room and invites the child to join her in the Early Childhood class. If the child is hesitant, either a Toddler teacher will escort them or an Early Childhood child will join them.
- The Early Childhood teacher becomes the child's phase-over partner and introduces the child to the other children, teachers, activities, rituals, patterns, and habits of the class. Often, an older child also becomes a phase-over partner. It is a joy to observe the connection the two children make with each other and to witness the nurturing that is given so freely from the older to the younger.
- Usually by the following Tuesday, the parent is asked to drop off the child in the Early Childhood Room.

DROP-OFF PROCEDURE:

To support your child in this new transition, it is vital that the drop-off procedure you establish be consistent. Keep in

mind the idea that change may produce anxiety. Not every child wants to get older or bigger, or feels ready to take on the challenges and increased responsibility that come with the next step of his/her development. It may be difficult for your child to say goodbye to you or to let you go: your child may cling, cry, or be hesitant because now s/he is entering a new class or because s/he is worrying about you. You may wonder why your child seems to be having trouble going into the Early Childhood class, when previously s/he walked easily into the Toddler Room. This may be because the Toddler Room has become like a home base, where the child feels a sense of trust, and now s/he is having to leave that familiar place behind before the trust in the new classroom has fully developed. We will work with you to help transfer the trust the child felt in the Toddler drop-off experience to their Early Childhood drop-off.

Here are some helpful hints to encourage the development of trust in the morning drop-off and make it easier for you and your child:

1. Arrive at 8:30 am so your child can enter the classroom with friends;

It is often very difficult for a child to walk alone into a room once all the children and teachers are actively engaged and working. It is similar to the feeling an adult may have when we go to a party and arrive alone, late and have to walk into a room when everyone is already talking in groups. If you find you are consistently arriving after 9:00 am and your child is having a hard time coming into the classroom—try to alter your morning schedule to come early and see if that helps make it easier on the both of you.

2. Arrive anytime before 9:00am so your child will be greeted at the door by a teacher, who will help draw her into the classroom;



3. Establish a consistent routine of a series of events or rituals that your child can learn and anticipate, and that would conclude with him/her walking into the classroom. Knowing what happens next helps lower anxiety. Your child will learn the routine and will begin to know what is expected and what comes next. It can become a source of shared pleasure and joy each morning as you go through the steps of your shared ritual.

- a. Put the jacket in the cubby (have your child place it him/herself if possible) "It's time to put your coat away, now."
- b. Have your child sign the attendance card.
- c. Bend or kneel down to the child's eye level and look your child in the eye: "It's time to be with your friends at school, now."
- d. Let your child know now is the time for hugs, kisses, etc.
"It's time for two goodbye kisses, now" (Give the specific number of hugs, kisses, or high-fives that is in your ritual)
- e. Tell your child who will be picking him/her up: "Gramps will be picking you up today, after school."
- f. Make a positive statement about having a fun day and remind him/her when you will see each other again, for example: "Have a great day and I'll see you before dinner."
- g. Have a closing line that you use each time: "Time to say goodbye, now. See you later, alligator!"

We're glad to work together to help all our children gain and establish trust during their transitions at school and in their lives. If you have a morning drop-off ritual or transition ritual that works well for and your child or children, let us know. We'd love to share your ideas with our families.

