

About the Author, K.T. Korngold:

K.T. Korngold is the Director of the Montessori Children's Center, one of the first Montessori childcare centers in the United States. With a lifetime of dedication to authentic Montessori principles and practices, K.T. was instrumental in the design and creation of the Montessori Children's Center at the new location in West Harrison, NY. She is widely known for her published articles about Montessori and parenting for regional and national magazines and has been featured in *Connecticut Parent*, *Montessori Life*, *Tomorrow's Child*, *Westchester Family Magazine*, and *Infant and Toddlers Journal*.

Since 2011, K.T. had been the CEO of the Center for Montessori Education|NY, a recognized leader in Montessori teacher and administrator education, which has credentialed over 3,000 Montessori teachers and school administrators. K.T. received a **Certificate of Recognition** for her leadership "preparing children for learning and success in school and life," from George Lattimer, Westchester County Executive. She was awarded a **Certificate of Merit** from New York State Assemblyman Kevin Byrne, and a **Certificate of Recognition** for her service to the community and to Westchester's children by the Westchester County Board of Legislators. In June 2019, she was inducted into the first Early Education Hall of Heroes, for her innovative work in Early Childhood Education, with a celebratory gala dinner at Mercy College.

K.T. has a Master's degree from Columbia University, 12 Graduate Credits in Early Childhood Education from The College of New Rochelle, and a Bachelor's degree from Wesleyan University. She holds an AMS (CME|NY) Administrator credential and an AMS (CME|NY) Infant and Toddler Montessori credential. As a child, K.T. was part of the model classroom of the first Montessori education program for Head Start teachers in the United States, a training initiated by her mother, Carole Wolfe Korngold. A member of the American Montessori Society, K.T. is married and the mother of two adult daughters, both of whom attended Montessori schools.

HOW TO CALM A CHILD IN DISTRESS

By K.T. Korngold

Recently, a 2 ½-year-old toddler at our school became accidentally locked in her mother's car, with the keys inside the car. It was after 5 p.m., and as our school policy is to have at least one administrator present until all families depart, I was still in my office when the event occurred. I immediately called the police, who arrived after 5 minutes. They assessed the situation and, after determining the child was not in immediate or life-threatening danger (the outside temperature was moderate), they contacted the "lock-kit squad," who had the necessary tools to open the vehicle through the window seal. The squad took over 30 minutes to arrive. From the time the mother realized the key was locked inside the car to the time the child was

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freed, over 45 tense, anxious minutes had passed. Both the child and the adults present experienced a number of emotions as the minutes ticked by. It was our expectation that the child would not be harmed and that she would be released without injury, but we still felt anxiety. What we did know for sure was that providing a calm and supportive presence could make a difference in the emotional outcome for both mother and child.

While we waited for help to arrive, the child was initially calm, eating her snack of sliced apples, content to be in the car seat. However, after some time, she became angry, throwing the food on the floor of the car, kicking her legs, and screaming. Then she became scared, turned away from our faces at the window, and began to snifle, which escalated into tears and then into full-blown crying. We stayed close by the car, never leaving the mother's side, while offering words of encouragement and repeating various mantras to support the child through the closed window.

Once mother and daughter were reunited, there were more tears, this time of relief and joy, as well as additional words of comfort: "You were brave." "You are safe." "That was scary, and you are okay." After the child calmed a bit, the mother took her for a long walk through the trees by our school, holding her hand, and letting her feel the support of the ground beneath her feet. Her breathing returned to normal; the tears abated. The mother's instinct to allow her child time to reset and process what had happened was right on target. Being outdoors in nature has a calming and soothing effect on most children. The child was able to connect with her mother—both physically and emotionally—by holding hands, as they soothed each other with their touch and by slowly walking in nature. When they returned to their vehicle, it was as if nothing traumatic had transpired.

As parents and caregivers, we want to shield children from life's difficult moments. But learning how to deal with fear and distress is an important skill that will help a child not only in childhood moments of duress but also later in life. We can support children in our care by giving them tools to deal with difficult situations that create uncomfortable feelings such as fear, sadness, and anxiety. Acknowledging how the child feels, and providing language to reflect those feelings, offers a road map for coping mechanisms and lays the foundation for a child to grow into a teen—and then an adult—who can manage difficult feelings.

Whether it is helping any child who misses Mommy or Daddy, assisting a little one who has fallen and has a scrape or bump, or helping a family in an emergency situation, being a calm and caring adult who can offer kind words of encouragement provides nurturing and support to help children from Toddler through Middle School years through the challenges they encounter. Here are some helpful phrases and tools to assist a child in distress.

1. "YOU ARE SAFE."

Being told you are safe by a person who loves or cares about you is very powerful. We trust those we love best to give us accurate information about what is happening. Anxiety makes us feel as if we are in danger. Repeating "you are safe" to a child can soothe an overactive nervous system.

2. "LET'S BLOW OUT THE CANDLES. TAKE A DEEP BREATH FROM YOUR BELLY; NOW BLOW."

Have the child repeat this process three, four, or five times. If you touch the child's belly (if s/he will let you), you can say, "Fill your belly here with air." When a child is nervous or afraid, breathing tends to accelerate (Star, 2018). Breathing deeply can help children become aware of their breath, and this awareness can help them calm down. Gently rubbing a child's belly can also be soothing.

3. "LET'S LIST ALL THE PEOPLE WHO LOVE YOU."

Sometimes we forget that many people care about us. Being connected to others and to family makes us feel safe, protected, and special. Family is the most important influence on a child's life—family members teach each other, learn from each other, serve each other, and share life's joys, sorrows, and challenges. Being part of a family informs and influences our very identity. When you list the folks who love you, you are creating a figurative circle of loved ones to surround you emotionally.

4. "YOU ARE BRAVE!"

Affirming a child's ability to cope with a scary or difficult situation lays the foundation for them to persevere and handle new challenges in the future. Being brave is a quality most children can relate to. Overcoming something that caused fear in the past gives a child a feeling of self-confidence.

5. "IT'S OKAY TO FEEL YOUR FEELINGS. IT LOOKS LIKE YOU ARE FEELING _____. I AM HERE WITH YOU."

Acknowledging another person's feelings shows that you accept them. It feels good when a person cares enough to accept us as we are and allows us the space to be just who we are. Being with a child in their fear or sadness, and accepting and helping them name their feelings rather than trying to change or discount them, can be deeply soothing.

6. "MAY I HOLD YOUR HAND?"

Holding hands not only decreases the production of the stress hormone cortisol, but it also increases oxytocin, the love hormone (Wolstoncroft, 2017). Hands and fingers contain the most nerve endings in the human body. During stress, the skin on the hand becomes even more sensitive (American Academy of Dermatology, 2007). Thus, the relief felt in holding a loved one's hand is real and significant.

Finally, physical action can also help a child reduce feelings of stress, burn energy, and lower blood pressure. During exercise, our body releases endorphins, which trigger a positive feeling in the body and help reduce pain (WebMD). These effects can last a few hours. In addition, getting outside connects us with nature and helps us to get "out of our head." We notice the natural world around us and feel connected to things larger than ourselves. Children are especially and naturally attuned to small things, which helps them see the smallest ant or tiny bud.

Here are some suggestions you can offer to help children release their energy in an effective and beneficial manner through motion:

- Go for a slow walk.
- Stomp your feet on a mat.
- Squeeze a stress ball.
- Push both hands against a wall as if you were trying to move it.

Often parents ask me what the advantages of a Montessori education are. I prefer to reframe the question this way: Does the influence of Montessori affect the inner life of the child and later the grown adult? Does the daily, monthly, or yearly experience of an authentic Montessori environment determine or influence the opportunities for a fulfilling career, the ability to have healthy relationships, the tenacity to face problems with grit and perseverance, the desire to contribute to the world, the capability to make sense of the world and create a meaningful life, the development of a sense of purpose, the tendency to have feelings of generosity and compassion toward others? Or, looking at it another way: Taking the warp and woof of the child, the cosmic spark that self-creates that child, when immersed in a Montessori environment, does it propel or inspire a different type of outcome for the child than if they were in a traditional setting? I answer yes and yes and yes.

At the very heart of the authentic Montessori environment are the trained and skilled Montessorians who observe children and create an environment to meet not only their academic needs but also their social and emotional ones. Calming children in distress by acknowledging how they feel and supporting them as the feelings wash over them and ultimately pass is just one layer of our very carefully prepared environment. We not only believe, but we observe, each day, that this approach makes all the difference.

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