
Home and Distance Learning Handbook

Youngest Children's Community, Children's House, Early and Upper Elementary

Austin Montessori School



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Cover photo by Anna Kolosyuk.

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Introduction

“An education capable of saving humanity is no small undertaking; it involves the spiritual development of man, the enhancement of his value as an individual, and the preparation of young people to understand the times in which they live.” ~ Dr. Maria Montessori

The mission of Austin Montessori School is to guide the development of each child towards their full and unknown potential. We cultivate compassion and respect, independence and belonging, and freedom and self-discipline, in rich academic and social environments that honor the complementary needs of the individual and the community. We provide an educational setting that is inclusive, and recognizes the authentic nature of the child and nurtures a reverence for the natural order of the universe.

Replicating what happens in our classrooms is not something we can achieve during this period of ‘Home and Distance Learning.’ Our goal is to work in collaboration with families to keep alive the culture of learning that is unique to Montessori and provide families with support and activities that match the developmental needs and characteristics of each child.

As we embark on a time of ‘Home and Distance Learning,’ we aim to create a Montessori-based framework that serves our students while supporting parents as we all adapt to a different daily rhythm. It is important to us that the children's activity during this time be enjoyable, thoughtful, challenging, and rewarding. It is also essential that this new daily rhythm honors everyone’s needs in the home. Thus, it will likely take some patience and time to establish these new routines. The key is to build consistency over time.

At Austin Montessori School, we put our students and families at the heart of everything we do. We are committed to providing you the support you need during this unprecedented time.

The Prepared Environment

Dr. Montessori continually reminds us to look at the child; that the nature of childhood is central to learning, not an educational pedagogy. She tells us, *“Education is not what the teacher gives, education is a natural process spontaneously carried out by the human individual... by his experiences upon the environment.”*

If ‘Home and Distance Learning’ is not online assignments or worksheets, what is it? What we are looking for are opportunities for the children to both consolidate and expand the knowledge they have gained in the classroom. Inevitably, these real world experiences, even if limited to the home environment, will spark new questions and other interests which the child will bring back to the classroom, enriching both their own classroom work and that of the other children. We are looking for learning at home as a way of life. And, regardless of the situation, of the two, the home will ultimately have a far greater influence on the child’s future way of life than will the school.

Early Childhood

For our younger children, the learning environment is your home and, if available, backyard. This means finding ways to support independence, engage in meaningful tasks and supplement learning through various activities suggested by the school. Creating a learning environment will require some thought in how to set up the physical environment. As younger children thrive on consistency, it will also involve attention being paid to the temporal environment by means of a daily rhythm.

In setting up the physical environment for a young child, we recommend against purchasing Montessori materials that we have in the classrooms for use in the home. This, more often than not, causes confusion in the children because the materials have a very intentional use in the environment and the children are shown to use them in very specific ways. Rather, attention can be given to the following aspects to mirror the what’s and why’s of the Montessori classroom environment:

Limited Material / Toys

Too much material impedes the ability of the child to make choices and engage in an activity deeply. Consider having no more than eight activities or toys out at a time and rotating them. If you have multiple children below the age of six, it is a good reminder that children in the first plane are not developmentally able to take turns. If so, you may set up separate work/play spaces for each child.



Order

Young children are in a sensitive period for order. They develop concentration when the items they need are accessible to them in a specific place, and those places stay the same. It is helpful for young children when the material is grouped together. For example, farm animals in a basket and building blocks in another. When each material or toy has a specific location on the shelf, young children are oriented to where they can be returned after use. This applies to indoor and outdoor spaces.



Beauty

Young children are called to activity when the material available to them is beautiful and in good order. This means removing from the environment items that are incomplete or in disrepair. Children of this age enjoy being involved in caring for their



belongings and keeping their environment clean. Having child-sized tools such as a broom and dustpan at a child's level assists the child in caring for the environment.

Elementary

For elementary-aged students, a prepared environment encompasses all of the above, plus establishing a quiet space, expectations and routines for purposeful work and exploration.

We recommend discussing 'Home and Distance Learning' with your child and including them in the decision-making processes. For example:

- Ask them where to set up their space (if applicable)
- Make a schedule together that works for your family (when to take breaks / have time outdoors, etc.)
- Gather ideas for activities and projects
- Organize materials

Consider having work spaces in communal areas of the home as bedrooms can be isolating. Depending on the schedule, when there are 'cycles of activity' it can be agreed upon by the adults and children that conversation and other noises be limited. It make take a few tries before a rhythm is established.



The Temporal Environment

An essential part of a prepared environment is related to time. As adults, having structure to our day makes us efficient. Children *need* structure to their day as it orients them to what to expect. In his book *Simplicity Parenting*, author Kim John Payne emphasizes the difference between having a schedule and a rhythm to daily life. When an event is scheduled, it is at a fixed time and can be canceled. For example, soccer practice is at 10:30 a.m. on Saturdays. In contrast, events that form part of a rhythm happen consistently because they reinforce *value*. For example, a family eats dinner together around 5 p.m. because they value the nourishment and connection with each other. Dinnertime happens with enough regularity that all members of the family come to expect it, and is cannot be canceled.

The following page shows an example of a daily rhythm adapted from a schedule created by Dr. Caroline Adelman, Founder of Chicago Psychotherapy LLC. This is just a guideline for your reference. Carefully consider what works best for everyone involved while developing a new daily rhythm for your family. The key is to build consistency *over time*. Consistency gives children a sense of security, which in the long-run helps to build resilience.

We recognize that it can be challenging for adults of young children to work from home while their children are at home. The following strategies may help in creating a rhythm for your family:

- ❖ Align calendars with the other adult in the house, so you are aware of each other's meetings, etc. and when you can be available to your child.
- ❖ Have confidence in your child's ability to engage in an activity, and to be independent - try scaffolding by starting the child up with an activity and tell them that you will check back in a certain amount of time.
- ❖ Prepare a workspace for your young child next to yours, so they feel connected to you.
- ❖ Work in shorter blocks of time, giving yourself breaks to connect / do an activity / take a walk with your child.
- ❖ If you decide to relax screen time rules, identify the areas that are vital for a child's development and, therefore, non-negotiable, for example, open-ended play, time in nature, etc. and put those on the schedule first. You may find that this leaves very little time, if any, for screens.

- ❖ Keep in mind that not all screen time is created equal - for example, video chatting with grandparents has excellent value. If including screen media in your daily schedule, keep it to a minimum and for a fixed length of time. Carefully select high-quality programming that is slow-paced, non-violent and commercial-free.

Time	Plan	How will I do this?
Start by 8:30 a.m.	Start the day right	Eat breakfast, brush teeth, get dressed.
9:00 – 9:30 a.m.	Get active!	Pick an exercise plan and get moving! If possible, go for a walk, scooter ride or bike ride to get some sunshine and fresh air (while staying a healthy distance from others outside).
9:30 a.m. – 11:30 a.m.	Work Cycle	Engage in age-appropriate activities based on child’s needs, resources available, and recommendations from the school / your child’s guide.
11:30 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.	Connect	Take time to play a game together as a family. Write to your pen pal. Call grandparents. Send your best friend a note telling them how much you love them. Write a gratitude note to the healthcare workers in your community. Make a sign for your window that will make neighbors smile. Sing a duet. Have a silly face contest. Build a fort together.
12:00 p.m. – 12:30 p.m.	Lunch time	Fuel your body with something healthy, and take time to have conversations with family or other caregivers who may be in your home with you.
12:30 p.m. – 2:30 p.m.	Rest/Work Cycle	Rest your body and mind. Young children nap. For kids who have outgrown naps, this is a great time for some quiet reading, drawing, or journaling. Put on some relaxing music.
2:30 p.m. – 3:00 p.m.	Get active!	Get some fresh air and sunshine, if possible, even if that means doing jumping jacks or dance parties right outside your front door!
3:00 p.m. – 4:30 p.m.	Creative time	Build a lego tower. Practice (or learn!) an instrument. Narrate or write a chapter of an epic story. Put on a skit. Play dress-up.
4:30 p.m. – 5:00 p.m.	Pull the house together	Everyone has a job (or two, or three)! Use a chart or age-appropriate responsibility spinner (for all kids in the home) to assign jobs each day. Set the table, run a load of laundry, put away any school supplies and toys that are still out.
5:00 p.m. on	Prepare dinner and eat together as a family, wrap up the day	Enjoy a meal together. Slow down and treat each other with curiosity and kindness. Take a bath/shower. End your day with a family game, gratitude practice, reading or journaling. Talk to loved ones outside the home via phone.

The Cycle of Activity



Establishing a rhythm that works for your family is an essential first step to creating a successful learning environment at home. Children are very familiar with this framework from school. In a Montessori classroom, children are given large blocks of time in order to explore their work deeply. This contributes directly to the development of concentration and provides opportunities to collaborate and problem-solve. It is the framework

that fosters child-centered as opposed to teacher-directed learning.

The younger the child, the greater the adults' role in preparing the environment to foster independence and concentration. In this series of photos, the adult's preparation is key in the child's ability to prepare her own breakfast. The



work surface is at the child's height and

all tools are child-sized. Ingredients are pre-measured by the adult. The availability of water allows the child to complete the cycle of activity by cleaning up her dishes.



Practical Life

Dr. Montessori wrote: *“The exercises of practical life are formative activities, a work of adaptation to the environment. Such adaptation to the environment and efficient functioning therein is the very essence of a useful education.”* Practical life activities are tasks (often performed daily) that create, maintain, and enrich both our environment and ourselves. In a Montessori classroom, each child engages in practical life activities daily, and these can be mirrored at home. Through these activities, children refine fine motor and movement skills and practicing coordination, planning, and problem-solving. As adults, we perform practical life activities to get things done. Children, however, are more interested in the process rather than the product/final outcome.



Practical life activities:

- ❖ foster order and sequence
- ❖ develop concentration
- ❖ foster physical independence;
- ❖ foster the development of fine motor control
- ❖ provide opportunities for planning and carrying out tasks

Inherent in these activities is the development of key executive functions: decision making, organization, problem-solving, impulse control, collaboration, and communication. These skills form the foundation of a child’s academic learning.

Practical life is engaging for children at all stages of development and tasks are designed according to their level of coordination and independence. You can organize a “responsibility chart” or list of household needs that need tending as a way to help guide your child’s interests. Planning and gathering resources to complete the tasks is purposeful work. The key to successful practical life activities is understanding that young children perform these tasks

alongside and in collaboration with the adult. As the child grows with age and ability, the level of autonomy increases.



Practical life activities for children in the Youngest Children's Community and Children's House may include:

- ❖ taking care of pets
- ❖ preparing or helping to prepare a snack / meal
- ❖ tending to the yard / garden
- ❖ art / crafts / handwork

For elementary-aged children, engagement in practical life activities directly impacts their ability to

function successfully at school, at home, and beyond. Below is a list of age-appropriate responsibilities for elementary-aged children in four categories: self-care; family life and social skills; around the house; and yard, garden, auto.

All elementary-aged children are capable of these responsibilities. However, each child will have areas in which they take longer to achieve true independence. This is normal and expected. For those areas, adults must be present to:

1. Relieve the child when their physical stamina is not built up enough yet to complete the task.
2. Continue to give verbal instruction and support.
3. Encourage reflection and feedback afterward in a highly supportive manner.

Self-Care

- ❖ Carry clothing to laundry room and sort. Use washer and dryer appropriately. Fold, hang, and put away laundry after it is clean
- ❖ Organize their closet sensibly
- ❖ Clean own room regularly
- ❖ Make own bed in the morning

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- ❖ Change own sheets regularly
 - ❖ Mend clothing (for example, sew on buttons)
 - ❖ Prepare own breakfast
 - ❖ When bicycling, use appropriate safety measures and equipment
 - ❖ Work from a list of tasks that need to be done; this can include schedules and checklists

Family Life and Social Skills

- ❖ Answer a parent's cell phone / family phone politely, identify self, and take a message
- ❖ Help plan and prepare dinner
- ❖ Write cards and letters to family and friends
- ❖ Address and envelope properly
- ❖ Help other members of the family when asked

Around the House



Although elementary-aged children can do all of the following tasks, no one in the family does *all* of these tasks. It is good to rotate new skills in occasionally so children can get a variety of experiences and feel secure and confident in handling different areas of life. Each child will ideally do some of the following alongside other members of the family as joint efforts - and, if there is interest, some can turn into the children's "speciality" or even hobby.

- ❖ Wash windows and mirrors
- ❖ Do common laundry such as dish towels and bed linens; fold and put away
- ❖ Load and unload the dishwasher
- ❖ Feed, water, and play with pets

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- ❖ Wash and brush pets
 - ❖ Vacuum an entire room
 - ❖ Sweep and mop a floor
 - ❖ Clean the toilet, bathtub, sink, shower stall, etc.
 - ❖ Set the entire table for breakfast or dinner
 - ❖ Clear the table of dishes after a meal
 - ❖ Help wash pots and pans
 - ❖ Dust an entire room or more
 - ❖ Take out compost, trash, and recycling to bins; wheel bins out to street
 - ❖ Read and follow basic recipes to make food
 - ❖ Clean the refrigerator
 - ❖ Tidy up living spaces
 - ❖ Clean sink, countertops, outsides of cabinets', etc. in the kitchen.
 - ❖ Help organize a family “purge” for donation

Yard, Garden, Auto

- ❖ Help clean the inside or outside of car
- ❖ Fill windshield wiper fluid tank
- ❖ Clean and maintain own bicycle
- ❖ Rake and bag leaves take yard waste bin to the street
- ❖ Turn and maintain a compost pile
- ❖ Build and maintain an insect hotel
- ❖ Learn to prune shrubs correctly
- ❖ Spread compost or natural fertilizer on the garden
- ❖ Water plants with a hose or watering can
- ❖ Feed bird feeders regularly
- ❖ Help with bigger landscaping projects like starting a new garden
- ❖ Clean outdoor furniture



Play

During this period of 'Home and Distance Learning' it may be prudent to remember that



Dr. Montessori said, *“Play is the work of the child.”* Learning at home can happen naturally through open-ended and uninterrupted play.

The following are research-based reminders of the importance of play adapted from *Young Children in the Digital Age: A Parent's Guide* by Dr. Nancy Carlsson-Paige.

#1. YOUNG CHILDREN USE THEIR WHOLE BODIES AND ALL OF THEIR

SENSES TO LEARN

A Montessori classroom affords the child the freedom of movement. During this period of 'Home and Distance Learning,' children will benefit from being given many opportunities to move their bodies.

#2. YOUNG CHILDREN LEARN BEST FROM DIRECT, FIRST-HAND EXPERIENCE

A Montessori classroom is rich in real-life experiences. Homes are equally filled with opportunity for these experiences through caring for oneself and the environment.

#3. YOUNG CHILDREN LEARN BY INVENTING IDEAS

In a Montessori classroom, lessons are presented in a manner that allows children to have “ah-ha” moments. Dr. Carlsson-Paige writes: “For genuine learning to happen, kids need to construct ideas for themselves, in their own minds. This is the kind of learning that is real and genuine and stays with us.” Open-ended play, art-activities, and unstructured time in the backyard provide this kind of learning.

#4. YOUNG CHILDREN MAKE SENSE OF THEIR WORLD THROUGH PLAY



In the words of Dr. Carlsson-Paige: “Play is so vital to young children’s emotional and mental health that it is sometimes called the ‘engine of development.’ Play is universal among children, as universal as walking and talking. All children know how to play, and no one has to teach them. Surely, any activity that is wired into humans this way is critical for human adaptation and development.” In other words, when children play, they learn!

#5. YOUNG CHILDREN BUILD INNER RESILIENCE AND COPING SKILLS THROUGH PLAY

It is likely and understandable that children may experience a higher level of emotional dysregulation while adjusting to our new circumstances. Creative play is how children learn problem-solving, cooperation, self-regulation, self-control, and how to make meaning of their experiences. Dr. Carlsson-Paige says, “Inner resilience builds in children over time. When children have the chance to play every day, they increasingly build skills that help them work through challenging experiences.”

#6. YOUNG CHILDREN LIVE AND LEARN IN A CONTEXT OF SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

While it is natural that children will miss the learning which comes from physical interaction with their peers, it is worth remembering that the immediate family is *always* the child’s most significant social group. Using this time to be more intentional about the way we interact with each other can provide many learning opportunities.



Freedom and Responsibility

One of the hallmarks of Montessori education, yet one that is often misunderstood is that of freedom and responsibility. Freedom and responsibility are interrelated. When the body and mind are working together, and there is engagement, a child's work and concentration develops the will. Increasingly the child makes better choices as he grows in independence. This leads to a child being able to handle increasing levels of responsibility. Dr. Montessori said: *"The child who has never learned to work by himself, to set goals for his own acts, or to be the master of his own force of will is recognizable in the adult who lets others guide his will and feels a constant need for approval of others."* Finding the delicate balance between freedom and responsibility (especially during a time of uncertainty) is crucial for authentic learning to occur at home. The following pages have a general framework of expectations that we hope will allow our partnership with our families to thrive as we navigate uncharted waters.

Expectations: Youngest Children's Community

Children may be expected to:

- ❖ Enjoy family life with developmentally appropriate contributions.

Parents are invited to:

- ❖ Monitor communication from the school and your child's guide.
- ❖ Remain mindful and respectful about the growing self-esteem and sense of independence that your child is developing.
- ❖ Help your child with the hardest part of a task (not the whole task).
- ❖ Be consistent; follow routines and clear sequences for each activity.
- ❖ Limit screen time.
- ❖ Include your child in caring for the home environment.
- ❖ Provide opportunities for outdoor activities.
- ❖ Let go of perfection. What you are experiencing now is not the final goal.
- ❖ Enjoy and appreciate time with your child.

Youngest Children's Community Guides will:

- ❖ Schedule and host parent-guide conferences to discuss each child's progress and provide suggestions on how best to continue the child's learning at home.
- ❖ Provide office hours between 1 - 3 p.m. Monday through Friday and be responsive to parent questions. Appointment sign-ups will be provided.
- ❖ Share ideas and resources for age-appropriate activities at home, e.g., practical life, songs, poems, etc. in a weekly communication to the community.
- ❖ Communicate in a consistent fashion with parents, replying within 24 business hours to emails.

Expectations: Children's House

Students may be expected to:

- ❖ Enjoy family life with developmentally appropriate contributions.

Parents are invited to:

- ❖ Monitor communication from the school and your child's guide.
- ❖ Remain mindful about your child's stress or worries during this time of change.
- ❖ Initiate communication with guides about questions, ideas, concerns, feedback.
- ❖ Support your child's independence in daily life activities.
- ❖ Be mindful of and allow children to continue periods of concentration.
- ❖ Establish daily routines and expectations.
- ❖ Limit screen time.
- ❖ Provide opportunities for daily physical activity.

Children's House Guides will:

- ❖ Schedule and host parent-guide conferences to discuss each child's progress and provide suggestions on how best to continue the child's learning at home.

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- ❖ Provide office hours between 1 - 3 p.m. Monday through Friday and be responsive to parent questions. Appointment sign-ups will be provided.
 - ❖ Share ideas and resources for age-appropriate activities at home, e.g., practical life, songs, poems, etc. in a weekly communication to the community.
 - ❖ Communicate in a consistent fashion with parents, replying within 24 business hours to emails.

Children's House-Specific Needs and Characteristics

- ❖ Children aged 2.5 - 6 thrive in environments that promote repetition, routine and the mastery of purposeful movement.
- ❖ Allow your child to choose activities and provide the opportunity for periods of time without distractions.
- ❖ The key to a successful learning environment is order, access to tactile resources, space to explore, and purposeful activity. For the Children's House child, "work" and "play" should be interchangeable - a natural, fun and exciting part of life.

Expectations: Early Elementary

Students are expected to:

- ❖ Plan and organize daily work with guidance from parents.
- ❖ Follow guides' guidelines and expectations.
- ❖ Engage positively and productively in family life.

Parents are invited to:

- ❖ Monitor communication from the school and your child's guide.
- ❖ Guide your child to set up a prepared environment at home.
- ❖ Establish a consistent routine and work schedule together.
- ❖ Limit screen time; where appropriate select high-quality programming using a resource such as 'Common Sense Media.'

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- ❖ Follow along with the guides' suggested activities to continue developmental work.
 - ❖ Provide opportunities for your child to share/present work to you.

Early Elementary Guides will:

- ❖ Schedule and host parent-guide conferences to discuss each child's progress.
- ❖ Prepare Spring Developmental Reviews (Conference Reports) for each child and send to parents to read before the scheduled conference.
- ❖ Provide office hours, the schedule for which will be forthcoming, Monday through Friday, and be responsive to parent questions. Appointment sign-ups will be provided.
- ❖ Prepare a variety of appropriate tasks and activities for children to complete at home to continue their developmental work.
- ❖ Communicate in a consistent fashion with parents, replying within 24 business hours to emails.

Early Elementary-Specific Needs and Characteristics

- ❖ Many Early Elementary students are at a "concrete level" and require the Montessori materials to complete certain tasks. Children at this stage of development are imaginative explorers, easily inspired by history stories, scientific exploration, and the natural world.
- ❖ Develop ideas that allow the opportunity for Early Elementary students to build from their interests. Examples may include projects, journals, creative writing, geometry constructions, Practical Life at home.

Expectations: Upper Elementary

Students are expected to:

- ❖ Plan and organize work as independently as possible.
- ❖ Follow guide's guidelines and expectations.
- ❖ Be own advocate when assistance or further clarification is required.

Parents are invited to:

- ❖ Monitor communication from the school and your child's guide.
- ❖ Guide your child to set up a prepared environment at home.
- ❖ Establish a routine and work schedule.
- ❖ Limit screen time; where appropriate select high-quality programming using a resource such as 'Common Sense Media.'
- ❖ Follow along with the guide's suggested activities to maintain skills and concepts.
- ❖ Provide opportunities at home for work presentations.

Upper Elementary Guides will:

- ❖ Schedule and host parent-guide conferences to discuss each child's progress.
- ❖ Prepare Spring Developmental Reviews (Conference Reports) for each child and send to parents to read before the scheduled conference.
- ❖ Provide office hours, the schedule for which will be forthcoming, Monday through Friday, and be responsive to parent questions. Appointment sign-ups will be provided.
- ❖ Prepare a variety of appropriate tasks and activities for children to complete at home to continue their developmental work.
- ❖ Communicate in a consistent fashion with parents, replying within 24 business hours to emails.

Upper Elementary-Specific Needs and Characteristics

- ❖ Upper Elementary children share similar developmental characteristics as in the Early Elementary, however, their world, interests, and exploration are more complex and nuanced. They are capable of extended periods of deep concentration, and big work.
- ❖ Develop ideas that allow the opportunity for Upper Elementary students to build from their interests. Examples may include projects, journals, creative writing, geometry constructions, Practical Life at home.
- ❖ Upper Elementary students are extremely social both within the context of their friendships and have a growing moral and social consciousness. They will likely have a need to connect with their friends. We recommend parents coordinate with each other and create parameters around communication with their friends (e.g., phone calls, FaceTime, etc.). The children should be included in this planning process

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