Growing up as a Montessori child in Mexico shaped much of my life and gave me a great passion to teach. Learning with the beautiful and precise Montessori materials led me to become fascinated with the language of mathematics and geometry, and, as I watched older students discover them as I had, I discovered a passion for working with adolescents.

Being a Montessori child, I learned how to carefully observe what is happening around me. In Montessori, we quietly observe what the students with whom we work are doing. We try to remain objective, avoid judgments, and not jump to conclusions. We simply try to be present in the moment, taking note of what is unfolding before our eyes.

Today, I would like to share with you one of the experiences that helped me to appreciate how practical Montessori insights can be when we use them in our homes. This one night has guided me over the last 26 years as I have worked with adolescents. It ultimately led me to a better understanding of the special language of teenagers.

This memory is of a night 17 years ago when I first brought my newborn daughter home from the hospital. That night my heart was full with mixed feelings. On the one hand, I was filled with joy to have my baby at home with me, but, at the same time, it was a nightmare. Here I was, a brand new mom, and I knew almost nothing. My baby was crying, but I could not understand what she wanted. Trying to calm her, I spoke softly, I sang to her, I gave her milk, I did everything a new mom could do or think of, but nothing stopped her from crying. That night I could not fall asleep, and neither did she.

I thought that first night would never end. At times, I could not help myself, and cried right along with my baby girl. The next morning, at dawn, I called her pediatrician and asked him for help. He gave me a very simple answer and it worked. Then I realized that all his experience and knowledge with babies is what made it easier for him to help me; He had experience and knowledge that I lacked at that point. From that day on, I was anxious to learn whatever was necessary to help and to understand my daughter.

My memories of that night, combined with my years of working with adolescents, lead me to think: if we strive hard to understand and help our babies, even though they cannot speak the same language as us, why don’t we try to do the same with teenagers, whether they are our own children, or students that we teach?

Let’s begin with a fact: adolescents have their own language, even though on the surface they seem to speak the same language that we do. The language of adolescents becomes more difficult to understand when, for example, you add the factor of technology.

First, let’s talk about this special language, the language of technology, since its differences are more noticeable. I invite you to sit for one minute next to one of your favorite teenagers and try to read what he or she is writing in the text that is being sent from a cell phone or on a social network. In less than a minute, you will realize that, no matter what language you think he or she speaks (Spanish, English, French, etc.), your teenager is writing in a completely different language than yours, a language that is normally very difficult for adults to understand.

To understand this 'different' language, perhaps, you will need to make inferences or generate your own code between the language that you speak and the language that your teenager is using. Or you could simply ask your son or daughter to decode any cryptic words that you don’t understand.

Through this language, teenagers are doing what they are most interested in: connecting and communicating with their friends. For many parents, the way teenagers socialize may be very different from what we saw when our children were younger. It takes effort on our part to learn their spoken and written language, but only through understanding what our teenagers are saying and feeling, can we hopefully help them as they progress through this next stage of development.

In her book From Childhood to Adolescence, Dr. Maria Montessori reminds us that, just as a baby is born into this world, an adolescent is born into the world of social life. Adolescents are in the process of learning to communicate with their peers, and just as babies, adolescents have their own language during the first stage of their social birth as they begin to enter society. Teenagers need help to understand the society where they are about to play a role as adults. To help them in this understanding, we must offer different activities to give adolescents the feeling of living within the larger society; we need to give them more love and support than ever. (Montessori, From Childhood to Adolescence, Clio Edition, 1994)

To reinforce this idea, let’s remember that in the Four Planes of Human Development identified by Dr. Maria Montessori*, she notes that adolescents tend to show characteristics and behavior that can be quite similar to when they were in the years of early childhood. Perhaps an analogy will help us to better un-
understand the similarity between the First and Third Planes of Human Development. Let’s suppose a six-month-old baby begins to whimper and exhibits specific body language. Before long, the parents will begin to understand that what the baby wants is milk.

Similarly, adolescents tend to behave in ways, from the tone of their voice to their body language, at times when they are getting hungry. Of course, they can, and often do, just tell you that they want to eat. But not always. Watch! Listen! You will probably notice that as mealtime approaches, they may become irritable, silly, or boisterous, all of which may be outward symptoms that they are getting hungry.

When a one-year-old is in pain, he or she will normally whimper or cry. From the intensity or duration of the crying, or the baby’s body language, parents have to deduce what kind of pain the baby is experiencing, because the baby cannot yet tell them what is wrong.

Similarly, teenagers typically go through periods of embarrassment, anxiety, sadness, and/or loss over conflicts with friends or first loves. While each may display it in different ways, adolescents may experience real pain or confusion. Often they can’t explain what is wrong or know how to process it. Loss may come out as hostility, sarcasm, tears, or they may run to hide in their room or anywhere where they can be alone and where adults cannot find them. They do not yet have the strength to say, “My heart hurts,” They often don’t know how to express love.

In the first case, although the crying baby causes her parents anxiety at the beginning, their alarm is often accompanied by tenderness and love, even if we just wish that she would stop crying. Our instinct as human beings tells us that the baby is a defenseless being.

The heartbroken adolescent who is equally distraught and unable to tell us what she wants should, ideally, generate in us the same feeling. An adolescent is, in his or her own way, just as helpless as the infant, because she also What teenagers feel may be sadness, disappointment, frustration, fatigue, physical pain (headache, muscular pain, stomach ache, etc.) or emotional pain (love). The latter is commonly present during adolescence. However, when I approach my teenage students, 90 percent of the time, their first response is: “I am angry,” instead of, “I don’t know what to do about love.”

When this happens, try to give the adolescent in your life the confidence that you’ll be there when he or she is ready to talk, saying something like, “I’ll be here when you are ready to talk,” or, “Please take a sheet of paper and pencil, and write or draw on it. When you’re done, if you want to share with me, I’ll be right here.” The first time you do this, it is more likely that he won’t come to find you, but just give him some space, and after a couple of hours, or maybe a couple of days, you can say: “Nice to see that you seem more calm. Do you want to talk about ... ?”

Little by little, with patience and love, you are going to carefully start building lines of communication between you. Teenagers need, and like, to know that there is an adult with whom they can communicate and trust; an adult who is willing to listen to him even though his social vocabulary is limited. They need to find an adult who will not judge but will listen and gently guide.

A Montessori Guide accompanies the child at all times. Accompaniment involves carefully observing, listening, and trying to understand.

Let’s analyze another example. A young teenage girl asks a fellow student, who happens to be a boy, if they can work together on a newly assigned project, but he says, “No.” This situation could lead her to feel rejected. Moments later, she might verbalize her feelings as anger, but what she really feels is sadness, disappointment, or rejection. Possibly, the boy was just busy doing something else, or he may have been unsure of how to respond to the invitation.

An efficient way to help an adolescent to begin to understand his feelings is through the empathy of the teacher, or any caring adult. One strategy is to help the teenager to discuss and describe what he is feeling.

However you establish a channel of communication with your
teenager; it sometimes involves a little more effort and strategy to begin a dialogue. Establishing a channel of communication with adolescents often requires a little more time and effort.

To start a dialogue, try not to make close-ended questions—questions that are answered by a good, bad, yes, or no. For example, a close-ended question could be: “How was school today?” While some open-ended questions might be: “What is your opinion on what you talked about today in the conference?” “Why did you choose these colors for your drawing? do they mean something?” “What did you play during recess time; what were the teams?” “How’s the school team doing?” etc.

Try to start a conversation with questions that do not involve feelings. What teenagers need to know is that you are genuinely interested. You really have to show (and have) a genuine interest in the conversation, because, as you can notice, for teenagers, these are very personal questions. On the other side of the coin, since you love your favorite teenager, spending valuable time with him will be easy for you.

Gradually, you will use this first and basic information to help you promote deeper dialogues where feelings may be involved.

Keep in mind when the time is right to speak, and when the time calls for you to just be silent and listen. The goal here is to learn their language.

In future articles, we will explore the process of being in love, the physical changes, academic performance, and other issues that adolescents confront in their lives. The purpose of these articles is to be able to nourish the land where our teenagers are beginning to form into the men and women they will soon become.

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