The new year will be lively with events

As no newsletter will be published in January, please hold on to the schedule on page 8 of this edition. In addition to the Open House programs highlighted in the next column, The Montessori Journey will be on January 7, and Early Childhood Mornings of Learning on January 24, 25, 26 and 27. And don’t forget a student holiday on Martin Luther King day, January 16.

Heads Up! More Important News!

Following through on the Open House Programs begun in November, the remaining three will take place in January. Again, families from all levels are invited to attend. All three evening programs will begin at 7 PM.

The Tuesday, January 10, program will focus on the Woods Upper Elementary Class. Faculty will discuss Montessori principles and educational materials for grades 4, 5, 6.

The Lower Elementary Classroom will be featured on Tuesday, January 17. This is an opportunity to see Montessori cross-age instruction in action for students in the first, second and third grades. After Pre-K and Kindergarten, these young children are at their next step to a lifetime of learning.

The Early Childhood & Kindergarten program comes on Tuesday, January 24. Participants will observe how the fundamentals and specific materials of the Montessori system begin to develop a child’s intellect from the earliest ages.

All parents are urged to attend, and the sessions are open to friends and the public, as well.
“All I do is tell Tim, ‘no’. He’s into everything, and by the end of the day my fuse is short. I lose it and yell. It hurts me to see the hurt in his eyes. But I’m just exhausted,” Mary sighed over the phone to me. Tim, a redheaded three-year-old, had been “busy” that day. He had opened a bag of flour all over the kitchen and dropped his plate of spaghetti while trying to clean up his spilled juice. In the bathtub he had opened and emptied a new bottle of shampoo.

I knew Mary was going through a lot of transitions. With their recent move, she was home full-time. Her husband Jeff traveled overseas frequently, and Mary was five months pregnant with their second child. I met Mary at a neighborhood party, where we visited about her situation along with the frustration of not having a husband in the same time zone.

When Mary discovered I was a teacher and had survived similar circumstances, she asked if she could call for “a sanity check.” From personal experience, I know it is difficult to stay positive with many changes. From Mary’s phone call, I sensed she wanted to see things differently.

“Mary,” I asked, “what things did Tim do right today?” “I know he must have done a lot of things perfectly,” Mary replied. “I’m so frustrated, I can’t think of any.”

“Let’s look at when he got out of bed this morning,” I ventured.


Mary told me he ate a good breakfast. He went cheerfully to pre-school. He made a drawing for his grandparents. In a couple minutes, Mary came up with a list of seven things.

“Put that on the refrigerator,” I suggested. “Then put a note in your pocket that says, ‘Catch him doing something right.’ Carry it all week, and when you see Tim doing something right, tell him right then. Don’t gush. Just state the facts. For example: I see you ate a nice breakfast. I like how you are ready for school. I enjoy cooking with you. Try to ignore and make light of any mishaps. Be friendly with error. Remember, he’s learning,” I coached.

“At bedtime, tell him the story of his day with all the things that he did well. Also ask him what was wonderful about his day. Try it for a week, and see if it helps.”

“I think I can do that. Timothy is a great little guy, and I think this will help me remember it even if I’m tired,” Mary said.

As Mary related the “trouble” that Timothy had caused, I recognized the incidents as motivated by a desire to help.

Working with young children for years, I see how they want to please but lack the inner discipline and skill level to match actions with intentions.

They have the will but not the skill.

To develop skills, we give opportunities to work and make mistakes in a friendly environment. Also, because their memory and skill level are developing, children can do something one day and not the next. When we focus on positive behavior, we’ll reinforce skills, attitude and long-term memory.

A few days later, I saw Mary at the grocery story. She felt that focusing on what Tim was doing right and being friendly with error were helping her stay calm, and Tim seemed to be less work.

“Tim told me at bedtime that his ‘favorite thing’ was having a happy mom. Jeff could see the difference, too, when he got back home. He asked me what I was doing with Tim,” Mary said with a laugh, “and I told him. Just catching him doing something right!”

Maren E. Schmidt
www.kidstalk.com
Books for the winter holidays

Teacher Margi Dhruv recommends three of her favorite books, all by author Richard Paul Evans. One of them just happens to be about Christmas.

The Christmas Candle, illustrated by Jacob Collins. On a snowy Christmas Eve, a young man on his way for a family celebration stops in a chandler’s shop where the mysterious old chandler sells him a special Christmas candle. Back on the cold street, the candle tricks him several times, shining its light on needy people who resemble some in his family. He aids them, leaving him penniless but richer for realizing that we are all part of one family. Ages 4-8, 32 pages.

The Tower, A Story of Humility, illustrated by Jonathan Linton. A poignant allegory that explores the virtue of humility. In ancient China, a powerful man who believes the only way to be greater than others is to be above them constructs a great wooden tower reaching into the clouds. He descends and soon meets an old woman feeding birds. He then realizes that acts of kindness make a person truly great. Ages 4-8, 32 pages.

The Spyglass, illustrated by Jonathan Linton. A king ruled over a darkened kingdom where people were impoverished and dispirited. A traveler arrives and shows the monarch his kingdom through the lens of an enchanted spyglass – a kingdom not as it is, but as it could be. The king’s imagination is ignited by the spark of faith and hope. By sharing his vision and inspiring his subjects to work alongside him, the king restores his land to glory. Ages 4-8, 32 pages.

Finding Winnie: The True Story of the World's Most Famous Bear, by Lindsay Mattick, illustrated by Sophie Blackall. This is the true story of the bear who inspired Winnie-the-Pooh. In 1914, Harry Colebourn, a veterinarian on his way to tend horses in World War I, rescued a baby bear, buying her from a trapper. He named her Winnie, after his hometown of Winnipeg, and took the bear to war. Harry Colebourn's real-life granddaughter tells the true story of a remarkable friendship and journey - from the fields of Canada to a convoy across the ocean to an army base in England. And finally to the London Zoo, where Winnie made another new friend: a real boy named Christopher Robin. Vintage photos are included. Ages 5-9, 54 pages.

Benjamin Franklin, by Kathleen Krull. In this Giants of Science volume, the author focuses on Franklin's passion for science and his drive to make scientific knowledge useful in everyday life. Despite his achievements as a statesman being more extensive he viewed science as his true calling. The author emphasizes Franklin's experiments and the resulting useful applications—the Franklin stove, the lightning rod, the cure for scurvy, bifocals – and tells readers that Franklin was a "superb networker," making connections with the best-known thinkers of his day. Grades 4-6; 121 pages.

Equipped with his five senses, man explores the universe around him and calls the adventure Science.

Edwin Powell Hubble, The Nature of Science, 1954
From the moment that human beings first stared into the sky, contemplated their place in the universe, and tried to create something that bettered the world and outlasted their lives, we have been purpose seekers. “Purpose provides activation energy for living,” psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi told me in an interview, “I think that evolution has had a hand in selecting people who had a sense of doing something beyond themselves.”

In his book called *Drive*, Daniel Pink describes the meaning and benefits of adding purpose to our lives:

“The first two legs of the Type I [intrinsically motivated people] tripod, autonomy and mastery, are essential. But for proper balance we need a third leg - purpose, which provides a context for its two mates.

“Autonomous people working toward mastery perform at very high levels. But those who do so in the service of some greater objective can achieve even more. The most deeply motivated people-not to mention those who are most productive and satisfied-hitch their desires to a cause larger than themselves.”

It is not enough to teach a man a specialty. Through it he may become a kind of useful machine but not a harmoniously developed personality.

It is essential that the learner acquire an understanding of and a lively feeling for values. He must acquire a vivid sense of the beautiful and of the morally good. Otherwise he - with his specialized knowledge - more closely resembles a well-trained dog than a harmoniously developed person. He must learn to understand the motives of human beings, their illusions and their sufferings, in order to acquire a proper relationship to individual fellow men and to the community.

These precious things are conveyed to the younger generation through personal contact with those who teach, not - or at least not in the main - through textbooks.

It is this that primarily constitutes and preserves culture. This is what I have in mind when I recommend the 'humanities' as important, not just dry specialized knowledge in the fields of history and philosophy.

Over-emphasis on the competitive system and premature specialization on the ground of immediate usefulness kill the spirit on which all cultural life depends, specialized knowledge included.

It is also vital to a valuable education that independent critical thinking be developed in the young human being, a development that is greatly jeopardized by overburdening him with too much and with too varied subjects (point system).

Overburdening necessarily leads to superficiality. Teaching should be such that what is offered is perceived as a valuable gift and not as a hard duty (Albert Einstein, "Education for Independent Thought").

Current brain-based research on adolescent development reveals the fact that it is a strong sensitive period for
social information-processing. Montessori would have had “the whole life of the adolescent revolve round this idea of society, its structure, and its obligation” (E.M. Standing). It is during this period of growth that the individual explores and is primed to learn the functioning of societies and relate that to their individual purpose.

Dr. Montessori leaves us volumes and detailed descriptions on the first two Planes of Development (0-6 and 6-12). She didn’t go into such detail on adolescence, but she did make some astute observations and suggestions: “Whereas in the preceding epoch the individual tended to be an extrovert, [adolescence] is one of those mysterious periods when something is being transformed which does not yet exist; a mystery of creation which is taking place within him independently of his own will—the creation of the socially conscious individual.”

Dr. Montessori saw a keen need to reform education and developed practices based on the needs of each stage of human development, providing autonomy, engagement, and purpose from infancy all the way to the age at which one enters into adult society.

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**Homework for the Holidays**

*Don't let those idle hours go to waste*

Although the following home ‘work’ suggestions are good for the whole year, the winter holiday may provide a little extra time for families to explore some of these ideas:

- Involve your child and yourself in a community charity activity.
- Plan and prepare a dinner for your family together.
- Plan and prepare a dinner together for your family the way the Greeks, Mayans, or some other ancient peoples of interest may have eaten.
- Read together and discuss books that touch the soul and fire the imagination.
- Go to a boatyard together and learn what you can about different kinds of boats, their purposes, cost, advantages, and disadvantages.
- Visit a place of worship of a different faith than your own. Talk to the people there and learn as much as you can about this other faith.
- Buy some stock together and follow its course over time. Pretend that you have a thousand dollars to invest, ten thousand, or a million.
- Get out tape measures and some paper and help your child figure out how many square feet of carpet it would take to cover your entire house.
- Assist your child in building a square-foot model of the floor plan of your house out of cardboard, one floor at a time.
- Make a list of all the things you might like to do with your lives—work, places to visit, developing athletic, art, or music abilities, and things you want to learn.
- Plant a garden, tree, or bulbs around your house.
- Work on teaching your dog a new trick.
- Write a play and perform it for your family or make puppets and a puppet theater for the play performance.
- Master some magic tricks to perform.
- Interview the older members of your family and write a history of the family.
- Meet a local artist and visit the artist’s studio.
- Select a science experiment or art project to do together.

Adapted from *Homework, Tomorrow’s Child Magazine*, Spring 2001
It was a BOO-ful day

Here are just a few of the great photos from the Grand Spooky March on October 31.

Free Play Benefits
Children’s Development

Wondering whether to boot up your child’s favorite computer game or send him/her outside to play? Experts from the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia and Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., in Princeton say outdoor play should be given the highest priority. In addition to providing the benefits of physical activity, play helps develop three key areas of well-being:

- Attention. Being able to pay attention is an important skill that’s needed for learning, and play helps to develop it. Many parents and teachers believe that when kids get plenty of play time, they are better able to learn and behave in the classroom. In addition, the unstructured environment of the outdoors lets kids make decisions and encourages them to solve problems. The problem-solving kids learn that playing outdoors aids them in learning executive functioning – a term used to describe the complex skills of planning, organizing, sequencing and decision-making.

- Affiliation: In play, kids learn to connect with peers and family members while at the same time learning cooperation skills and how to compromise. Working with others while playing also helps them cultivate empathy for others and learn to be flexible, self-aware, and self-regulating.

- Affect: The fact that play makes children happy (and improves their mood, or affects it) could be one of the most important reasons for frequent outdoor play. Regular physical activity (and for kids that means play) is thought to reduce anxiety, depression, aggression, and sleep problems and improve overall emotional well-being.

Researchers emphasize that many parents may be haunted by their own discouraging experiences with exercise or negative associations with weight-loss attempts, which could lead them to be reluctant to encourage physical activity in their children.

What this means to you: Encouraging your child to simply play on a daily basis – preferably in an outdoor environment like a yard, playground, or park – not only provides great physical benefits but also has positive effects on learning, social relationships, and mood. When looking for an outdoor play space, seek an area that has equipment appropriate for your child’s age and development level.

Adapted from article in Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine, January 2005, by Hillary L. Burdette, MD, MS, and Robert C. Whitaker, MD, MPH; reviewed by Steven Dowshen, MD.
Noise hinders learning in young children

From the cacophony of day care to the buzz of TV and electronic toys, noise is more distracting to a child’s brain than an adult’s, and new research shows it can hinder how youngsters learn. In fact, one of the worst offenders when a toddler is trying to listen is other voices babbling in the background, according to researchers at a recent meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

“What a child hears in a noisy environment is not what an adult hears,” said Dr. Lori Leibold of Boys town National Research Hospital in Omaha.

That’s a Catch-22 in our increasingly noisy lives because “young children learn language from hearing it,” said Dr. Rochelle Newman of the University of Maryland. “They have a greater need for understanding speech around them but at the same time they’re less equipped to deal with it.”

It’s not their ability to hear. For healthy children, the auditory system is pretty well developed by a few months of age.

Consider how hard it is to carry on a conversation in a noisy restaurant. Researchers simulated that background in a series of experiments by playing recordings of people reading and talking while testing how easily children detected words they knew, such as “playground,” when a new voice broke through the hubbub, or how easily they learned new words.

The youngest children could recognize one person’s speech amid multiple talkers, but only at relatively soft noise levels, Newman said. Even the background noise during relatively quiet day care story time can be enough for toddlers to miss parts of what is read, she said.

It’s not just a concern for toddlers and preschoolers. The ability to understand and process speech against competing background noise does not mature until adolescence, Leibold said.

Nor is the challenge just to tune out the background buzz. Brief sudden noises -- someone coughs, a car horn blares -- can drown out part of a word or sentence.

An adult’s experienced brain automatically substitutes a logical choice, often well enough that the person doesn’t notice, Newman said, adding, “Young children don’t do this. Their brain doesn’t fill in the gaps.”

Children who were born prematurely may have an additional risk. When preemies spend a long time in an incubator, their brains get used to the constant ‘white noise’ of the machine’s fan – different from a full-term baby who develops hearing mom’s voice in the womb and thus is wired to pay more attention to voices, said Dr. Amir Lahav of Harvard Medical School.

He had mothers of preemies record themselves singing lullabies or reading stories, and filtered them along with the sound of mom’s heartbeat into the incubator three times a day when she wasn’t otherwise visiting. The brain’s auditory cortex became more developed in babies given that extra womb-like exposure compared with preemies with typical incubator care, Lahav found. Moreover, when those babies were big enough to leave the hospital, they paid more attention to speech, he said.

Noise also is a special challenge for children with hearing loss, who may need technology beyond standard hearing aids to cope, Leibold said, describing special receivers that can transmit a teachers voice directly to the ear so it’s not lost in classmates’ chatter.

The research has implications for classroom design, too, Leibold added, as the type of flooring or ceiling height can either soften kids’ natural noise or bounce it around.

But learning starts at home, and the University of Maryland child language specialist Nan Bernstein Ratner offers these tips:

-- Don’t leave the TV, radio and other electronics on in the background. It’s not clear whether soft music is distracting, but lyrics might be, Ratner said.

-- Speak clearly and make eye contact. Especially in noise, make sure tots see your face. They can pick up on mouth movements, Newman said. If the child doesn’t understand, try again with simpler words.

-- If a child is having school behavior problems, make sure being unable to hear in class isn’t the problem.