

Austin Montessori School

Guidelines for Upper Elementary Family and Social Life

INTRODUCTION

Supporting Our Families to Support Our Classroom Communities

As our school has developed over the decades to encompass three of the four stages (planes) of development, we have come to understand more fully the characteristics and needs of children at various stages and how the child's life experiences in one plane either support or undermine optimal development at the next stage. We know from long experience that meeting the child's needs during each phase cannot be done by us at school alone – that the partnership of school and family is essential to the child's success. We have also become increasingly sensitive to the frustration of parents who feel that they are all alone in trying to support their children's development. Because elementary children are actively forming their mental, moral and social habits in dialogue not only with their parents and guides but also with their peers, if some families choose a family life incompatible with Montessori education as we know it, it complicates family life for other families and distorts the classroom experience not only for the children of those families but for the entire community of children. By choosing Montessori education for your children, you have already demonstrated that you want to give your child the very best childhood and that you are committed to thoughtful decision-making, decisive action and personal growth to see that they have it. The school, for its part, is dedicated to pro-actively communicating what we know about the conditions for optimal child development and what we need from each family as we work to build and maintain a compatible school culture. *Our school will continue to stand in solidarity with families seeking a long, healthy childhood for their children.*

Planes of Development

The attached guidelines are not the arbitrary personal preferences of the staff and parents at Austin Montessori School. Instead, they flow out of Dr. Montessori's 45 years of observation and work with children all around the world, out of more recent research in developmental psychology and neuroscience, and out of over 40 years of our own experience implementing the Montessori approach in contemporary American culture. Key to our understanding of the needs of children are the Montessori "planes of development." Each 6-year stage of human development has its own needs, drives, goals, psychological characteristics and contribution to the overall development of the fully integrated adult. Understanding Dr. Montessori's stages of development helps us see how it could be that some experiences are developmentally constructive for one age but developmental obstructions at another.

Our Upper Elementary children are slowly and thoroughly completing the second half of their elementary years. The natural characteristics of childhood so carefully preserved by the dedicated partnership of family and the Early Elementary communities are now continuing their slow, steady progress in Upper Elementary in preparation for adolescence. The emotional and intellectual development of our children demands that we remain dedicated and steadfast in our protection of them from the invasive influence of pre-adolescent and adolescent pop culture for three more years, both at home and at school. Our aim is to support the children to thrive in these next three years of upper elementary and be prepared to enter the Adolescent Community from a position of strength.

Freedom and Responsibility

As parents in American society, we are, in principle, free to shape our family culture in any way we like. This is a wonderful thing and something that many parents around the world could never dream of. It is, in fact, this very freedom that allows us to choose alternative education and to learn how to raise our children in a highly conscious way not yet universally recognized or understood by the dominant parenting culture. Once we have freely chosen the Montessori way for our children, we become part of something bigger than our nuclear family, and we take on some responsibility not only for our own family but also for this particular community of Austin Montessori School families and even, at least in a small

way, for the success of Montessori education as a whole. Because of our interconnectedness in community, our parenting decisions and how we shape our family culture affect the health and happiness of the whole community, and we must begin to balance our own preferences and opinions against the community's needs and values and to bring those needs and values into our family dialogue and decision-making, learning year by year how to create a more harmonious, synergistic home/school environment for our children and ourselves.

Conscious parenting is hard work, and the Montessori parenting community, for its part, can be our strongest support, our primary resource and our greatest source of wisdom in this difficult but joyous work of parenting. In exchange for our consideration of the community and our sometimes sacrificial work of building it up, the community is there for us when we need it most.

A. TELEPHONE

Children in upper elementary need to form the habit of experiencing downtime after school. These are not the years for developing habits of spending time on the telephone. Reading, writing stories and poems, drawing, gardening, cooking, sewing, crafts, climbing trees, riding bikes, building clubhouses, and keeping a diary will fill the time when children aren't on the telephone.

To preserve family life and free the members' activities and experiences from interruption, telephone calls could be answered by an answering device or service or screened by caller ID. As a general practice, parents could screen their own calls and return them later instead of answering them on the spot. In this way, parents model for the children their value of uninterrupted family life.

On the occasion that the upper elementary child calls a friend, telephone manners are important. This is the age for a child to practice refinements in making telephone calls to the pet store, a restaurant, a craft store, etc. Role-play the details until refinement is reached and the child can make the call.

As time spent communicating by telephone increases, the following suggestions may help avoid conflict and prevent interference with healthy family life and social development.

1. Parents and children should agree on acceptable phone time within their household. Basic standards should be:
 - a. No calls before 7:00 am or after 7:00 pm.
 - b. Children's calls are answered in agreed upon numbers during agreed upon hours and should be limited to five to ten minutes each.
2. When placing a call, the caller should always identify him/herself before being asked to do so. If a child caller doesn't identify him/herself, the person answering the phone asks, "Who is calling, please?" Repeated role-play is the key.
3. Consideration of others should govern the use of the telephone. Calling friends as a group is not an experience for this age. Using the phone as a toy or entertainment can quickly slip into rudeness and is inappropriate for children.
4. Children who call your home should be expected to do so with consideration and good manners. When this is not the case, parents should respectfully remind the caller of appropriate telephone behavior. When the response is not polite, parents of the caller should be calmly and respectfully contacted and informed. Children in our community deserve the support of all the parents.
5. Children in upper elementary should use the telephone in their parents' presence, not in the other room. They need their parents' guidance to learn good manners and form good habits. This is important later as the child enters teen years.
6. Upper Elementary children should not have personal cell phones. A family cell phone can be kept in a basket in the kitchen for any special and rare circumstances. This cell phone should never go to the child's room nor should any telephone be used there.

B. MOVIES

Movies and TV are not recommended as a habit or an expectation for upper elementary children. We recommend no more than one and a half hours total of TV/movies each week.

1. Movies at home

All movies should be watched together by children and their parents. A certain few **PG** movies *may* be appropriate for children of this age, but **PG-13**-rated movies are not for upper elementary children in this Montessori community. If for some specific and special reason a certain movie is under consideration, the parent watches the movie first without the child present and then decides which parts of it are appropriate for the child to see with the parent later.

Perhaps the child has just finished reading *The Secret Garden* and the parent and child will now watch the movie together. Perhaps the child has just attended the ballet Cinderella and the parent and child will now watch the video of the production by a ballet company. Perhaps the child has just completed a lengthy report on birds and the parent and child will now watch *Winged Migration* together.

2. Movies at sleepovers and other visits away from home

Always make clear to the parents whose home your child is visiting that you expect to be informed in advance if the children will be watching TV or a movie. It is up to the parent to insist that *if* their child is allowed to view movies or TV *at all*, that the child sees only movies the parent approves and only for the amount of time agreed upon in advance. Carefully screen and monitor all media before allowing it to enter the child's life. Another parent's judgment is often a poor substitute for your own. Parents have different levels of awareness and mindfulness, self-discipline and attention.

Asking children in the company of their friends whether their parents would allow them to see a certain movie is unkind and unwise. Of course they will wish to go along with the others and may say what others want to hear.

3. Movies at a theater

Take care in not forming an expectation of going to the movies on a regular basis during the upper elementary years. There may not be even one movie worth seeing during any given period. Keep in mind that the child's aesthetic sensibilities are being formed by experience. Before taking a child to a movie, parents should consult a movie screening website, such as the ones listed below, which provide detailed movie reviews (including specifics on any inappropriate subject matter): www.screenit.com/movies and www.familystyle.com.

Upper Elementary children should not be left alone at a theater under any circumstances. Parents who take children to see movies at the theater must be prepared to watch the same G or PG movie as the children, in order to be prepared to discuss the values reflected.

For more information on school policy regarding television and movies, please refer to “Homework in the Elementary” and to the articles on television in the “Writings” section of the school handbook.

C. VIDEO GAMES

Life’s too short! There’s too much other fun to be had! Take a hike, go rock climbing, take an art class, a cooking class, or work in the garden.

Video games should never be introduced into the life of any child in this Montessori community at any time on any level. Video games are addictive, difficult to manage, and nearly impossible to eliminate once introduced into the child’s life. This includes hand-held/portable video games such as Game Boy. A portable chess set has served a fine substitute for electronic games in many Montessori families.

There is a plethora of information available in print concerning video games and their negative effects on children.

D. COMPUTER AND INTERNET USE

All screen -- computer, game, video, and TV-- should be kept in the family room of the home where adults are always present.

Internet use is not appropriate for upper elementary age children. This is the time for them to acquire and perfect sophisticated research skills. It’s best for parents to use the Internet while the child is at school or asleep in bed.

A couple of sets of encyclopedias, World Book, Britannica Jr, and one other, should be available for the child’s use at home. These need not be new.

The child’s development of the skills needed to use three-dimensional books in the sensorial three-dimensional world for research and pleasure can be prevented, interrupted, or interfered with by use of the Internet. Take your child to the library. Encourage your child to use varieties of paper, pencils, scissors, art supplies, crafts, calligraphy, and many, many books. Show your child how to trace a map with tracing paper, draw a grid upon it, draw a larger scale grid upon a larger piece of paper, and enlarge the map. Show your child how to do the same for illustrations, drawings, and model-making. Provide your child with serious books on how to draw, not cartooning, and practice drawing with her.

Early adolescence is the time to introduce the child to research online.

- ? The Internet allows immediate and unrestricted access to sites on the World Wide Web containing graphic sexual content, profanity, racist and other “hate” materials, and violence. These sites can be accessed easily, and even unintentionally, through legitimate use of search engines.
- ? Internet use should be limited and always done in the parent’s company. Limit your child’s use to those times when a fully mindful parent is available to devote full attention to the child’s use of the Internet.

- ? Internet access requires discussion by parents and their children regarding what is or is not appropriate for this age. Check with your child’s guide for community standards for our school. Tell your child about sexual victimization via the Internet, as well as potential online dangers. In the event they might one day gain Internet access when you are not present, it is advised to caution them to:
 - a. Never arrange a face-to-face meeting with someone they met on-line
 - b. Never post pictures of themselves onto the Internet without explicit permission from you to do so
 - c. Never give out information such as their name, home address, or school name, and make sure your child understands that what he/she is told on-line may not be true
 - d. Tell you right away if someone asks them for personal information or suggests meeting face-to-face

- ? Instant Messaging and email are not appropriate for the social life or formal language development of Upper Elementary children. Wait until middle school or high school for these.

- ? “Chat rooms” are increasing in popularity and give access to unidentified people conversing with children. Chat rooms are not appropriate for Upper Elementary children in our school.

- ? Programs to monitor and limit children’s Internet access are available through many Internet service providers, and may also be downloaded off the Internet, including Net Nanny and CyberPatrol. Even with these safeguards in place, limit your child’s web intervals to the amount of time you can spend involved with him/her.

E. PARTIES

Parties of various kinds can be a great deal of fun for Upper Elementary children. If properly planned and chaperoned, they can be part of the children’s important work of experiencing and practicing appropriate social interactions in different situations. If not properly planned or chaperoned, they can be the source of great harm to the children and to the classroom community. Activities should be age-appropriate and in keeping with the school culture.

Upper elementary children need books on party planning so can do elaborate planning themselves, within the school and family culture.

Chaperoning an Upper Elementary Party

- ? All parties should be for only the number of children that a chaperone can maintain an atmosphere of stability and joyful celebration. The shorter the party, the more children may attend—even a dozen or so for two or three hours. Longer parties should be limited to four to six children. **Slumber parties should be for a few children, all of the same gender.** They should be well-chaperoned to safeguard the children emotionally as well as physically. A hyper or manic atmosphere is unhealthy for children (and adults).

- ? Adults should be fully present and fully mindful. Adults who are too reticent or uncomfortable about setting limits should not host children’s parties at their houses. Chaperones support the children to solve their own problems independently using appropriate skills.

- ? Parents should not allow their children to go to houses where the parents are uncomfortable setting and maintaining limits, or where they are easily distracted or unable to win the respect and trust of children.
- ? Parties should be carefully planned with sufficient age-appropriate activities in keeping with the school culture to fill the time and sufficient adults on hand to supervise. The parents of the host or hostess should plan to be home the entire time to supervise the party properly.
- ? Chaperones should be in immediate proximity to the children's space and should circulate among them regularly. They should always be within full hearing seeing distance in order to guide the children to be independent in solving problems.
- ? Good chaperones are bold, fun, comfortable, and firm.
- ? Parents should feel free to call other parents for assistance with chaperoning, particularly at large parties.
- ? If there is a problem with a guest, chaperones should feel free to respectfully and firmly instruct the child. If a child is not able to hear and follow such instruction, the chaperone should respectfully contact his or her parents.
- ? Refreshments should be healthy and served in limited amounts. Overeating and heavy sugar intake sets habits of body and mind that may lead to abuse of food or drink later. Habits of healthy or unhealthy forms of celebration are set early in life.
- ? Alcoholic beverages, cigarettes and other drugs, weapons, and fireworks should not be available in the home. They should be kept locked up. If a young person brings any of these to a party, his/her parents should be notified immediately, and the child should be picked up.

Invitations

- ? Written or oral invitations may NOT be extended at school. A host or hostess should invite guests by telephone or through an invitation mailed to the home.
- ? Encourage your child's good manners by having him/her reply to invitations by mail or by telephone, not at school.
- ? Parents of invited guests should be informed of all party details, including time and place. Parents should phone the host parents for omitted or additional details concerning the planned activities and refreshments.
- ? Every effort should be made to avoid excluding anyone. If 50% or more of the class or gender is invited, then the entire class or gender should be invited

Co-ed Parties

- ? Dating at this age, even when accompanied by adults, is inappropriate. Any "boyfriend/girlfriend" activity, even in groups, interferes with the Upper Elementary child's social development and creates serious social problems in the classroom.

- ? Group activities create an environment more conducive to healthy social development. These should truly be *group* activities and not couples within a group.
- ? Co-ed parties should not be sleepovers.

F. SLEEPOVERS

- ? Sleepovers are for one friend of the same gender and need not be a regular event at the upper elementary level nor do they necessarily add significant value to the child's life. Go slowly during upper el. It's much easier to speed up than to slow down, to go forward than to pull back. Sleepovers should be few and far between. Beginning-cycle children *may* have one or two sleepovers a semester. It is not helpful to develop a dependence on sleeping away from home or having someone else sleep over too often at this age.
- ? Bedtime should be no more than an hour later than the regular bedtime. Children of this age, with very few exceptions, need 9 hours of sleep each night. Lack of sleep creates chaos in the child's body and mind; it should not take the child an entire weekend or more to recover from a slumber party. Sleep researchers have found that it takes several days of extra sleep to recover mentally and physically from the "sleep debt" created by one night of insufficient sleep.
- ? Toying with a child's sleep clock should not be done lightly. Undue stress during these pre-adolescent years can trigger episodes of obsessive/compulsive disorder or depression. According to sleep experts, symptoms of chronic sleep deprivation (which could mean missing as little as an hour of sleep per night over an extended period of time) are often misdiagnosed as ADHD.

SLUMBER PARTIES

Slumber parties, sleepovers for more than two children of the same gender, are appropriate no more than once a semester.

- ? "House" rules for the slumber party should be determined by the hosting parents and child in advance and explained to the guests when they arrive. The child hosting the party can be the one to explain the rules, but the adult(s) should also be present during the explanation to insure that it is accurate and complete.
- ? Rules governing TV, movies, the telephone and use of the computer should not be forgotten during slumber parties and should be firmly and respectfully enforced.

G. TRANSPORTATION

- ? This should be arranged in advance. Under no circumstance should a young person be left to find a ride home. Host parents should remain visible and keep the children in sight at all times, until they are safely in their parents' vehicles.
- ? If someone other than a parent is driving a child other than their own (i.e. a babysitter or older sibling), parents need to be notified for consent in advance.
- ? When parents come to retrieve their children at the designated time, the host parent should actually see the child off. Therefore, the parent picking the child up either comes into the house to speak to the host parent, or the host parent walks the child to his/her parent's vehicle.
- ? Parents or another responsible adult should always be at home when another parent returns their child.

- ? Because late-model vehicles are equipped with passenger-side airbags, and those airbags have proven to be dangerous to children, children should not be allowed to ride in the front seat of these vehicles. Parents should discuss this situation with their children and with other parents with whom their children will be riding.

H. MUSIC

Upper elementary children should have frequent access to a wide variety of musical genres, periods, and artists – not only to what the music industry is currently selling and the mass media are programming. It is vitally important that parents be aware of what their children are listening to, just as they are aware of what TV and movies they are watching. No child is enriched by crude, disrespectful, or violent messages, or by harshly raucous music.

Groups and artists available to upper elementary children should be those who project a wholesome image and produce music that aids the development of pro-social attitudes. Lyrics should be age-appropriate – which excludes much pop music about love affairs, adult or teenage sexuality, consumerist values, suicide and other morbid themes, etc. Parents should review CDs before their children listen to them, just as they would preview a video before showing it to the children. When children are exposed to inappropriate lyrics in public places or on the radio, it is important to discuss them with the children, always encouraging critical thinking and clear understanding of values.

I. BOOKS

Join the school's Upper Elementary Read-aloud Book Club and plan to read aloud to your child all the way through early adolescence. Read to your child at a level three years above your child's reading level.

Read or carefully review the books on the child's reading level for reading alone before giving them to your child. Be ready to comment on the hierarchy of values represented. Call attention to flawed philosophies of life such as might-makes-right, a domination system is acceptable, winning is everything and winner takes all, rankism is taken for granted, accumulation of wealth is a worthy life goal, vengeance is needed. Look for themes of collaboration, truth and reconciliation, serving the common good, non-violent activism, being and serving over getting and having, compassion and forgiveness, and courageous confrontation. Children can understand that history is full of mistakes that we are overcoming. Glorifying in mistakes of the past plants seeds for the future. This of course is a challenge for all of us, but keeping it in mind and discussing it with our children helps them and us develop and maintain the clarity of our mission.

J. TOYS and GAMES

Same as above. Review for values. Give guidance.

K. ROCK CONCERTS

Rock concerts are not appropriate for upper elementary children in our school community.

L. MALLS

There are many better places to go. So much more fun to be had! Wait for adolescence to begin the malling experience. Get as much shopping done as possible while the children are at school. Keep *doing and being* elevated and valued over *buying and having* in the children's lives.

Children this age should not go to shopping malls with other children and their parents. Parents should stay right with their children wherever they go any time they are in a mall – walking with them, having lunch with them in view, going to the restroom with them, etc.

Accustom the children as much as possible to buying and eating in Austin places rather than chains.

M. MISCELLANEOUS ACTIVITIES

? **Unattended Visitors**

If your child has a visitor, please notify the visitor's parents and get their approval if you plan to be gone for even a very short period of time. Many parents do not approve of their children being left unattended or with hired help or an older sibling. It is very important that children not be left alone.

? **Bicycles, Roller Blades, Skate Boards, Trampolines**

Many families do not allow unsupervised, unrestricted bicycle riding, roller blading, skate boarding, or trampolining. Please call visiting children's parents to determine any limitations, including helmets and other safety gear. Riding and walking after dark is dangerous and should be discouraged.

? **Guns**

Always ask whether there are guns kept in a home where your child will be visiting. If so, make sure they will be locked up and the key will not be available to the children. Your children should know that guns are very dangerous and that an adult should be notified if a gun is found to be accessible.

? **Appropriate Risk-Taking Activities**

Children in upper el need to participate in taxing or risk-taking activities such as long backpacking trips, caving, orienteering, snorkeling, rock climbing, and volunteering for Habitat for Humanity or at orphanages in Mexico. Washing jeans by hand on a stone washboard in a foreign country is an example of an appropriate challenge. Parents can brainstorm together to make appropriate activities available. When children are challenged with appropriate activities their urge to test themselves will be satisfied in appropriate ways.

I. PUBLIC SAFETY RULES

Parents should instruct their children about proper behavior in public places. Carefully and frequently role-play options in the event things get out of hand. If children are taken unexpectedly and unannounced by other parents to places you have not approved, they should know to speak up and ask for their parents to be called right away. This will take repeated practice with you at home.

They should say, "I feel uncomfortable and I'd like to speak to my mother or father privately. Please help me call them right away." or, "I'm feeling pressured and I want the support of my parents."

Children should familiarize themselves with the following guidelines so that they will know when things are off course:

1. Never go alone to public places unaccompanied by a mindful, responsible, strong adult who knows how to say “no” when necessary.
 - a. Do not go to a mall or shopping area alone.
 - b. Do not go to a movie alone.
 - c. Do not go to a public restroom alone.
 - d. Stay with your friends at all times in public places and in sight of your accompanying adult at all times.
2. Be cautious of all strangers.
3. If you find yourself unaccompanied, and a problem arises, call your parents from the closest public telephone or home of someone you know.
4. When you have a designated time and place to be picked up, be there on time.
5. Be wary of anyone trying to dare you into picking up an item and not paying for it. The consequences of shoplifting are serious.
6. Express your concerns about disturbing, dangerous, or unsafe behavior to your parents, guides, or other adults.
7. Practice good judgment: do not let anyone pressure you into doing something you know or suspect is not right!

SUMMARY

The leadership of the school administration, the presentations of the guides, the support of the staff, and the work of the children in the classroom are all dedicated to upholding the values reflected in these guidelines. Children need to feel the concordance of their family and social life with their school community for their best emotional and social development.

We ask that parents help us in this difficult mission by taking utmost care with the influences on their children during these especially violent times. Help us protect our children from literature and the media that can easily overwhelm them with vicarious violent experiences, deadening their sensibilities and addicting them to violence as entertainment and as the inevitable solution human problems. We ask parents to join us in keeping hope alive for our children now and for their future.