

Gestures of Acceptance & Belonging

SMALL ACTS CAN BE INSTRUMENTAL TO SUCCESS / By K. Meagan Ledendecker

Over the summer I took a seven-week course, and as the weeks went by I began to think my teacher didn't like me. It was a vulnerable feeling and I found myself devastated and confused about my experience. I was intensely aware of wanting to feel accepted. To help process these emotions I talked to colleagues and turned to articles, books, and life experience to help find perspective. Eventually I was able to communicate my feelings to the teacher, and thus better understand my experience in relation to her perspective.

Even so, the whole ordeal drained me emotionally and highlighted the importance of feeling accepted. As humans, we need to feel a sense of belonging. World-renowned philosopher and psychiatrist Alfred Adler describes this desire to connect with others as our "social interest," while Montessorians speak about the human tendency to communicate and associate with others.

As I processed my experience and desire for acceptance, I considered the children in my life who have an equally strong need for acknowledgement, reassurance, and support. I thought back through small encounters when I could have offered more encouragement or regular gestures of recognition.

We, as adults, have a responsibility to ensure that the young people in our lives feel unconditionally accepted and loved, that they are heard and can communicate with us, and that they are acknowledged and supported.

The significance of this is highlighted in a study by Harvard professor Robert Rosenthal, who explored how teacher expectations can affect student outcomes. As an experiment, Rosenthal told a group of teachers that test results indicated that a number of their students were expected to show blossoming intellectual and academic growth. In actuality, the students were randomly selected. But over the course of two years, the

randomly selected "blossoming" students showed gains in IQ, and teachers described them as curious, well-adjusted, happy, and interesting. Yet the only difference between these children and the others was how their teachers perceived them.

In an NPR Morning Edition report, Alix Spiegel states how these expectations influence IQ: "As Rosenthal did more research, he found that expectations affect teachers' moment-to-moment interactions with the children they teach in a thousand almost invisible ways. Teachers give the students that they expect to succeed more time to answer questions, more specific feedback, and more approval: They consistently touch, nod, and smile at those kids more."

These small acts of touching, nodding, and smiling, combined with the assumption that the children would succeed, were instrumental to actual success.

How vital and how simple.

Most likely all I needed this summer were some of those almost invisible acts – little messages that would have assured me that my ideas mattered and that I was liked and appreciated.

As we embark on the year ahead, let's all reach out to children (and adults) to offer small, yet significant, gestures of acceptance and belonging.

~ K. Meagan Ledendecker, co-founder and Director of Education of The Montessori School of the Berkshires, feels a sense of belonging and acceptance most of the time but also believes there is much to learn from those moments when we don't feel recognized. Visit www.berkshireremontessori.org.

