

Nurturing the Spirit

Small Group Teaches Character Values, Coping Skills & Mindfulness

Our Unique Small Group "Coping Curriculum" Nourishes Your Child's Spirit

WE ARE TEACHING THESE VALUES:

Belonging and Friendship
Cooperation, not Competition
Kindness and Compassion
Problem-solving
Peace, not Violence
Wonder
Silence, Stillness, Mindfulness
Harmony (mind, body, spirit)
Relaxation and Reduction of Stress
Unity and Community
Respect for Others
Care for Our Earth
Self-Discipline
Understanding Our Emotions

♦ **The Mission of Small Group:** To give children the social and emotional building blocks for living a positive and productive life.

Maria Montessori's Legacy: Nourishing the Spirit of the Child

"The child is endowed with an inner power that can guide us to a more luminous future."

Maria Montessori left a brilliant career as a physician to give her life to nourishing the inner spirit of the child. Written on her tombstone were the words: "Famous scientist...who dedicated her entire life to the spiritual renewal and the progress of humanity through the child."

Montessori believed that the way to bring peace and harmony to the world was by *not* through political means, but by cultivating in children a deep reverence for all of creation. "Spirituality" to Maria Montessori did not mean religion or dogma, but a deeper truth. It meant cultivating a respect for all peoples of the world and caring for our earth and all its creatures. Her work was attractive to people of many varied religious and cultural backgrounds because of this emphasis on universal values.

The Character-building Nature of A Montessori Education

Did you know that character development is an essential outcome of Montessori education? Character development is part of the complete Montessori vision of a view towards altruism, empathy, and humanitarian values leading to global change. Teaching children to treat each other with dignity, to act with concern for others, to take personal responsibility, and to be of service are "noble characteristics" that Maria Montessori believed would benefit humanity.

An Education for the WHOLE Child: Mind, Body, and Spirit

When we founded Mandala, we defined our philosophy as "Providing an education for the Whole Child: Mind, Body, and Spirit." These words capture the essence of the Montessori ideal. During Small Group Time, we specifically focus on educating each child's "Spirit."

Teachers & Caregivers of Young Children Face New Challenges

The Brain Is Wiring The Emotional Building Blocks For A Child's Future

For the first time, brain research is revealing the fact that the brain is actually "hard-wiring" the emotional building blocks for the future during the first years of a child's life. Empathy, trust, and conscience are being built into a child's inner "roadmap" in the very earliest years. This new knowledge makes "character-building" even more critical during the preschool years.

"It's easier to build a child than repair an adult..."

Pressure and Stress: Growing Up In A Challenging World

Young children today live in a highly stressful world. They must cope with more pressure, more uncertainty, and more exposure to fearful events at an earlier age. There are fewer and fewer opportunities for moments of quiet and reflection. Unstructured time to ponder and imagine (to be free from the constant chatter of TV, cell phones, and electronics) is a rare occurrence for our children today. The pace of life moves with increasing

velocity, and everyone pays a price. Families face greater demands—with fewer supports. At Mandala, we are well aware of the stress that permeates our culture, so we try to offer children a different experience, as well as teach children coping skills.

We Teach Resiliency

We have created a unique prevention program called “*The Coping Curriculum – Nurturing The Spirit.*” It takes place daily during our 20-minute Small Group Time, when each teacher meets with her eight children for a quiet time. The children participate in structured activities related to a monthly theme (such as *Growing Gratefulness, Nurturing Compassion, Caring for Mother Earth, Facing Fears, Learning About Feelings, etc.*). The teachers use relaxation exercises, puppets, symbolic play, story telling, and creative art to help the children develop awareness, discharge emotion, and learn good problem-solving skills.

Protective Factors In Resilient Children

Studies show stress-resistant children share these factors:

- Connection to a supportive, competent adult
- Able to “regulate” their emotions
- Good problem-solving skills
- Stress-tolerant disposition

Children Learn “Tools for Life”

Children at Mandala not learn only to count and recognize their numbers. They also learn to manage their feelings, to respect differences, to make amends when they have hurt someone, to talk about their feelings, and to sit down together and resolve conflicts. When children leave Mandala, they take with them “tools for life.” This is part of what makes our school such a unique and special place.

What Is the Purpose of Small Group?

◆ Relieve Children of Stress

We want to give children a place to release their daily stress. When children are allowed to talk (and play) about what they feel, and their feelings are validated, they are not compelled to act them out in negative ways. In Small Group, the teachers (with the help of puppets) offer children a unique opportunity to share their joys, frustrations, dreams and fears. Being “listened to” helps children cope with difficulties and find solutions.

The Magic of Listening

Children can be helped to heal their disappointments by expressing their feelings and being heard by a “compassionate witness.”

Moral Character is...

- Having EMPATHY for others (feeling another’s pain)
- Knowing the difference between right and wrong
- Being able to *feel* emotions but not having to act on them

◆ Build Character and Values

Moral development starts first with teaching children to have empathy for others. Empathy is the first building block of “conscience.” Empathy means the ability to feel another’s pain. We see the beginnings of empathy in children as young as 18 months old who show concern for another child who is crying or in distress. Without the capacity for empathy, a child will be unable to connect with others in a healthy way.

We build character by teaching compassion, helpfulness, responsibility, and a respect for differences. We also teach children how to regulate their emotions

instead of acting them out. We are shaping an internal framework that tells a child what is right and wrong.

◆ Provide Tools for Resiliency

We agree with Barbara Oehlberg, author of *Making It Better*, a guide for helping children cope with a stressful world. She emphasizes that we must build resiliency skills early in children’s lives in order to prepare them for what comes their way. One of the best ways to build resiliency, she says, is helping children with their feelings:

“Probably the richest gift adults can give children is the ability to honor and trust all their feelings. Before a child can develop skills for managing feelings, the feelings must first be validated and affirmed. Children who have been given the right to honor their feelings are free to build skills for managing those feelings, as opposed to venting or acting them out.”

Children build resiliency by learning to...

- Express their feelings
- Regulate their anger
- Tolerate Disappointment
- Manage their stress
- Deal with conflict
- Conquer their fears
- Solve Problems

All of our Small Group activities are created to help children with their feelings and their relationships. By providing a nurturing teacher who listens, respects, and affirms their feelings, we help young children gain confidence and self-esteem.

How Do We Build Character & Teach Coping Skills in Small Group?

◆ We Try Be Good Role Models

Above all, the wisdom of Montessori calls for teachers to ‘put their own house in order first.’ We believe we must be very intentional in our attitudes and actions at Mandala. Being committed to “nurturing the spirit” means that we must cultivate an attitude of peace and compassion, both inside and outside of our classroom walls. It is vital for children

today to be in the care of adults who live in this awareness if we want to create a better world for the future. As Aline Wolf, author of *Nurturing the Spirit*, reminds us, "Montessori teachers must have some sense of 'spirit' themselves in order to convey to children that sense of wonder and connectedness to all of the universe." What adults actually ARE (not what they say!) makes the greatest impression on children. "The child is the sense organ reacting to everything to which he is exposed."

Children learn what they see.

All the best ideas in the universe are not as powerful as the small acts of love and kindness we can offer in daily life. Making a commitment to the spiritual growth of our children means that we, too, learn to live with gratitude and compassion, moment to moment.

-Morgan Simone Daleo, *Curriculum of Love*

THE ABSORBENT MIND

Young children literally soak up everything in their environment, including the behavior and attitudes of their principal caretakers.

Maria Montessori called this unique way of learning "the absorbent mind."

- Aline Wolf, *Nurturing the Spirit*

◆ We Teach Mindfulness

At the beginning of every Small Group, we start with a mindfulness practice to calm and center the children and the teacher. This may be anything from deep breathing to a yoga exercise to playing some quiet music. Practicing mindfulness helps us to be in touch with life in the present moment. Many teachers begin by asking their asking their group to take three deep breaths, and say a calming word three times (such as the Yoga practice of saying "Om..."). Then they say, "My spirit salutes your spirit..." or "The beauty in me salutes the beauty in you." By teaching mindfulness, we help children learn to value moments of silence and to become more aware of the world around them.

◆ We Use "The Language of Play"

Preschoolers often cannot describe their feelings or needs. They do not have the full range of language skills to tell adults how they see their world and themselves. "talking through play." All over the world, children try different experiences through their toys, their art, and children learn. It's how they solve their problems.

Children talk through their play...

Children are really most comfortable out different roles and play out their dramatic play. This is how Even children who are seriously traumatized find recovery through "healing" play.

Our Coping Curriculum Uses These "Play Activities" To Teach Children

- Relaxation and movement exercises
- Symbolic play
- Puppets
- Story-telling
- Story-reading
- Role-play and acting
- Creative art (drawing, painting, collage, clay)

These "play" activities help children discharge their feelings and gain a sense of power and mastery. They help children learn about themselves and each other.

◆ We Teach Emotional Literacy

One of our objectives in Small Group is to introduce children to the "language of feelings." Children who are able to understand and name their feelings have more skills for coping with disappointment and frustration. They can "use their words" rather than simply acting out their distress. Here are some examples of Small Group Coping Curriculum activities for the month of Feelings.

CURRICULUM EXAMPLES for the month of "Feelings"

- ◆ *Feeling Faces*: Draw different feeling faces on sticks
- ◆ *The Question Box*: How would you feel if...?
- ◆ *I Might Explode*: Balloons show feelings building inside us
- ◆ *Poor Little Sad Eyes*: Permission to have sad feelings
- ◆ *Some Like It, Some Don't*: We all feel differently
- ◆ *What About the Spider?* Identifying feelings in nursery rhymes

◆ We Use Special Puppets

We use puppets as a regular part of Small Group to teach positive behaviors and to encourage children's self-expression and release of emotions. Children talk to the puppets as through they are real, which allows the puppets to be a teaching tool. In this way, we make use of young children's "magical thinking," which is a natural way children learn through play.

★ Chester the Raccoon (Early Preschool and Preschool)

Chester acts as "the voice of all children." He speaks the feelings of children this age. He enters the role plays and activities with the children. The teachers talk to him and give him helpful messages about how to manage feelings in this non-threatening, "playful" way.

★ Happy Bear & Worry Bunny (Preschool Only)

These two loveable puppets come often to Small Group. They invite children to share a bit of good news or express a worry they might have. *Worry Bunny* "holds children's worries" so they don't have to carry them, and they can be free to enjoy their school day. *Happy Bear* celebrates children's positive feelings and experiences.

★ **Bully Dog** (Preschool Only)

It's Bully Dog's job talk to kids when they "feel welcome or unwelcome" and help them with all the social challenges kids face with each other. Bully Dog helps kids learn to solve problems and be peacemakers.

★ **Chester's Parents** (Early Preschool and Preschool)

Chester's parents come to Small Group later in the year. They are each a different kind of animal to show the idea that all children do not look like their parents and all families are unique. We say that although all families are different, they are all held together by love.

Monthly Small Group Themes

◆ **Preschool**

We have chosen themes for every month. Our *Coping Curriculum: Nurturing the Spirit* runs on a three-year cycle of rotating themes. Each daily Small Group activity teaches a skill reflecting the monthly theme.

◆ **Early Preschool**

In the Early Preschool, we follow a much slower and simpler pace, which reflects the developmental needs of two year-olds. The Early Preschool class is learning to separate from parents (and caregivers) and learning to build trust with teachers and peers. Mastering separation is the goal of the year.

Preschool Small Group Themes

SAMPLE (Themes change yearly in these classes)

<i>September</i>	Experiencing Belonging & Building Trust
<i>October</i>	Appreciating Beauty
<i>November</i>	Growing Gratefulness
<i>December</i>	Nourishing Compassion
<i>January</i>	Cultivating Stillness
<i>February</i>	Celebrating Unity & Community
<i>March</i>	Experiencing Wonder
<i>April</i>	Expressing Gentleness
<i>May</i>	Caring For Mother Earth
<i>June</i>	Rituals: Beginnings and Endings
<i>June-July</i>	The Beach
<i>July-August</i>	Camping

Early Preschool Small Group Themes

(Themes remain consistent in this class)

<i>September</i>	Separation/Building Trust ("Chester" Puppet)
<i>October</i>	Adjusting To School and Building Trust/Fall Season
<i>November</i>	Adjusting To School/Fall Season
<i>December</i>	Adjusting To School/Winter Season
<i>Jan-Feb</i>	Mothers ("Mother" puppet): <i>Teddy Bear's Picnic</i>
<i>Feb-March</i>	Fathers ("Father" puppet): <i>Hat Day</i>
<i>April</i>	Growth & Change/ Spring Season: Chester's Birthday Party
<i>May</i>	Transportation/Night Time
<i>June- July</i>	Growing and Harvesting
<i>July-August</i>	Camping/Beach

Starting with *Chester* and the book, *The Kissing Hand*, the teachers read stories, sing songs, and talk about what it's like to be at school and away from home. They also do simple activities.

Children of this age are comforted by repetition and ritual, so the teachers read some of the same stories over and over again in Small Group. This helps the children build confidence and master their anxious feelings.

Midyear, the teachers introduce "Mother" and "Father" puppets" and these puppets join in the Early Preschool Small Group activities and stories. During this time, they have a "*Teddy Bear's Picnic*," which mothers and caregivers are invited to attend. There is also a "*Hat Day*," where dads and caregivers are invited to come and spend an hour with their child, wearing funny hats. The children delight in this connection of home to school. Toward the end of the year, Chester has a birthday party to celebrate his growing-up.

☞ **We Are Building Stress-Resistant Children** ☞

Our goal is to help Mandala children become "stress-resistant." We want to help tilt the balance from "vulnerability to resiliency" in early childhood. We hope you will do your part by supporting our teachers in this important work. If you ever have a question or concern, please talk with us. Let us know what is happening in your child's life. Working together at Mandala, we can truly make a difference in children's lives!

Let's tilt the balance from
vulnerability
to RESILIENCY
in early childhood.

"Maybe infant-toddler caregivers and preschool teachers should be seen as more central to the well-being of our society than college professors?"

Bonnie Bodenoch, *The California Therapist Journal*

Sources:

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