St. John the Baptist Catholic Montessori School: ***Adolescence Explained***

Introduction

Adolescence is a powerful time of transition, struggle, and self-discovery for every child. For some the passage is more dramatic than for others, but every young person experiences the physical, emotional, and intellectual changes that characterize the age. As our school mission statement states, our mission is "to help children prepare themselves for life." As a Montessori school, our work is based on the developmental needs at each age. For the young adolescent, the developmental needs are particularly powerful, evident, and exciting.

These young people are not quite children, not yet adults, and they have many characteristics of both: they are focused on themselves, physically and emotionally. They are intensely idealistic, concerned about injustice in the world and in their community. They are noisy, messy, funny, unpredictable, and apt to shout with laughter or burst into tears. Their bodies are changing so fast that they can be unbelievably awkward and incredibly graceful in almost the same moment. They are beautiful; they are anxious; they are supremely self-confident; they are brilliant; they can't remember where they left their shoes or calculator or the three pens they brought to school or, of course, their homework. They have ten best friends and nobody likes them.

Dr. Montessori called these young people the children of the soil and wrote that the "work of the soil is at the same time an introduction to nature and to civilization." Not only is the physical labor and contact with nature important to the adolescent, but the very experience connects the young person with the human story that is thousands of years old. The adolescent is in the process of moving away from the family and finding the context of her own work, her own experience, grounded in the deeply human interaction with making things grow. Adolescents are beginning the process of creating their adult identities.

Our Vision and Goals

St. John the Baptist Catholic Montessori School Middle School is founded on the belief that adolescence is a powerful age, an age of explosive growth and change on physical, social, emotional, and intellectual levels. Dr. Maria Montessori's vision of adolescence, which presents the developmental characteristics and needs of this age, guides our work. We are also guided by the following goals:

- Create a supportive community where adolescents feel respected and loved; where they can struggle, work hard, be responsible, challenge themselves, and discover their best selves.
- Provide an environment where students can be leaders and where each of their voices can be heard. We provide opportunities for students to take responsibility for the community and for their own education. We value resolution of conflicts through community meetings and peer mediation.
- Provide an education that prepares adolescents to think deeply and critically, to be intellectually independent, and to value the viewpoints of others. We encourage questions and honest, open discussions that connect students to the world of ideas.
- Provide a land-based experience rooted in Montessori's vision for the Adolescent that provides meaningful, authentic work on the land as well as authentic economic experiences.
- Create opportunities for students to accept the challenge of hard work, both physical and intellectual. Meaningful manual labor teaches skills, self-reliance, and fosters respect for the work of the hand.
- Provide a program that embraces the development of their sexual identity. We encourage co-ed social events, co-ed sports, and open discussion on issues of human sexuality.
- Form authentic connections with the natural environment through direct experience and through physical work. We hope students leave St. John the Baptist Catholic Montessori School with an environmental ethic that includes respect and reverence for the natural world.

Virtues and Principles in the Middle School

Central to the creation of community is the articulation of the virtues and principles held in common in the Middle School. It is important to provide language and clear expectations around community values and interactions. The following virtues and principles are ones' staff members refer to often and that are held up as touchstones for behavior and interaction in the Middle School.

Civility: We assume that all students in the Middle School will be respectful to each other; to the adults they work with, and to members of the larger school community. The virtue of civility also implies a self-respect that curbs the impulse toward crudeness, cruelty, or insensitivity towards others.

Creating Community: Creating a healthy community is the responsibility of every person in the Middle School. It is a goal that must be consciously worked towards and the students often hear that the person least like them may have the most to offer them. The issue of learning to live well together is essential to the adolescent because it is so easy to slip into exclusive friendships, "cliques," that are hurtful to others and limiting to the people in them. Being inclusive and working consciously to create a good community, one that everybody is proud to be a member of, are central values.

Citizenship: Being a citizen of any group, large or small, carries both responsibilities and privileges. Being conscious that each person in the community is also a citizen of the Middle School and carries the obligation to make the Middle School a good place to be.

Being a Good Neighbor: This simple virtue is a reminder to offer a helping hand when it is needed, to be aware of others, to be helpful and kind.

Human Heartedness: Human heartedness speaks to the core of what makes us human and asks each student to be generous to others, to see the best in each person, and to remain open and accessible to others in the community.

Community Service: Thinking of others and being generous with our resources- time, talent, and treasure- is central to the development of moral responsibility. Commitment to some aspect of community service is expected of every student.

Small and Large Acts of Leadership: As the oldest students in the school, Middle School students have a responsibility to model good behavior and to assume responsibility for younger children when necessary. We ask students to be aware of the power of small acts of leadership and to realize and accept that they are powerful role models for others. We also ask them to accept large leadership roles in the Middle School and in the school as a whole. The opportunities for leadership include being active in their leadership group, assuming responsibilities for organizing activities, speaking up in class meetings, being proactive in addressing community concerns, and initiating community service activities.

Developmental Tasks of Adolescence

Professor Robert Havighurst of the University of Chicago proposed that stages in human development can best be thought of in terms of the developmental tasks that are part of the normal transition from childhood to adulthood. *The Developmental Tasks Havighurst (italized and underlined below)* associated with adolescents, along with **Montessori's vision of adolescence (bold below)**, are a useful context as we describe the vision, goals and scope of St. John the Baptist's adolescent community.

The adolescent must adjust to new intellectual abilities. **The general program of studies must ... supply that which we consider to be the creative elements necessary for the physical being of [humans] in general and must put the adolescent into relation with present civilization by bringing him general culture and by experience**. In addition to a sudden spurt in physical growth, adolescents experience a

sudden increase in their ability to think about their world. Being able to think about more things includes being able to think about the world with a new level of awareness and abstraction.

The adolescent must adopt a personal value system. **It is at this age that the "sensitive period" that ought to develop feelings of justice and personal dignity occurs**. During the early stages of moral development, parents provide their children with a structured set of what is right and wrong, what is acceptable and unacceptable. Eventually the adolescent must assess the parents' values as they come into conflict with values expressed by peers and other segments of society. To reconcile differences, the adolescent restructures those beliefs into a personal ideology.

The adolescent must develop a personal sense of identity. **Success depends on self-confidence, on the awareness of one's own talents and of the many possibilities of their adaptation**. Prior to adolescence, one's identity is an extension of one's family. During adolescence, a young person recognizes her or his uniqueness and the need to separate from parents.

The adolescent must develop expanded verbal skills. **The general program of studies must ... open the way to the possibilities of personal expression.** The language of childhood is no longer adequate to express the intellectual abstractions and the complexity of their emotions and relationships. Initially, adolescents may appear less competent because of their struggle to express themselves meaningfully.

The adolescent must adjust to a new physical sense of self. **The period of life during which the body attains maturity is, in fact, a delicate one: the organism is transformed; its development is rapid**. At no other time since infancy does an individual undergo such rapid and profound physical changes as during early adolescence. The effect of this rapid change is that the young adolescent often becomes focused on his or her body.

The adolescent must develop increased impulse control and behavioral maturity. **Respect for young people is essential**. In their shift to adulthood, most young people engage in one or more behaviors that place them at physical, social, or educational risk. Such behaviors may be a normal developmental process of adolescence and is particularly evident during early and middle adolescence. As Montessori points out, "the young must be left with sufficient liberty to act according to individual initiative ... But, in order that individual action be simultaneously free and fruitful, it must be confined within certain limits and obey certain rules which constitute the necessary direction."

The adolescent must develop stable and productive peer relationships. **During the difficult period of adolescence it is desirable to have the child live outside his habitual surroundings, outside the family, in the country, in a peaceful place, in the bosom of nature ... This form of work introduces the children to the heart of social life by experience and study**. Friends are always important to young people, but the need for peer interaction peaks in importance during early and middle adolescence. The degree to which an adolescent is able to make friends and have an accepting peer group is a major indicator of how well the young person will successfully adjust in other areas of social and psychological development.

The adolescent must establish emotional and psychological independence from his or her parents. **The feeling of independence that results [from the awareness of one's own usefulness] must be born from the ability to be sufficient to oneself and not from a vague liberty due to the benevolent and gratuitous help of adults**. Childhood is characterized by strong dependence on one's parents. A primary task of the adolescent is to move towards independence and autonomy, but most adolescents vacillate between their need for independence and their desire to be dependent. This ambivalence is manifest in many ways, with emotional highs and lows, antagonism, unusual dependence, and lack of cooperation in the family.

The adolescent must establish adult vocational goals. **If from the physical point of view, puberty is the transition between childhood and adulthood, it is, from the psychological point of view, a transition between the mentality of the child-who lives in the family-and that of the [adult] who must live in**

society. As part of the process of establishing a personal identity, the adolescent also begins the process of discovering his or her role in society. How am I connected? What is my place in the world?

The adolescent must learn to manage her or his sexuality. With their increased physical and sexual maturity, adolescents need to incorporate into their personal identity, a set of attitudes about what it means to be male or female. Their self-image must accommodate their personal sense of masculinity and femininity.

Academic Program

The adolescent must adjust to new intellectual abilities. **The general program of studies must ... supply that which we consider to be the creative elements necessary for the physical being of [humans] in general and must put the adolescent into relation with present civilization by bringing him general culture and by experience.**

The Middle School curriculum is configured in a two-year cycle in which students work together in mixed-age classes. The Fall Retreat sets the stage for the formation of the community and also sets the academic tone for the first semester of the year. In the spring the group embarks on their great Odyssey. Odyssey destinations are on a two-year rotation, with the first year being a trip to (To be decided) and the second year being a visit to Washington D.C. The description below gives a general idea of the specific areas that might be covered in a given year. In most instances, the work of the students is focused on their own research and projects. Each year some projects are integrated across disciplines, and so the list below is intended to give a simple impression of the content, but does not necessarily describe the depth or the scope of the experience of most students.

Core Subjects: The core subjects are Humanities (English and Social Studies), Mathematics and Science.

Humanities: Humanities is an exploration of the Human Story through literature, history and the arts. The themes of each year flow from the Odyssey. Through the themes students practice skills such as discussing, questioning, analyzing, researching, note-taking, outlining and many forms of writing. Students complete projects related to the themes that are oral presentations, formal research papers, timelines, other visual presentations and creative types of presentations such as dramatis persona. Through our lessons, activities and the students' sharing their work, we try to keep the human story alive in our classes.

Students participate in an integrated Humanities class and also go more in-depth with individual English and social studies classes.

Humanities/English includes creative and expository writing, literature, grammar, spelling, vocabulary, and public speaking. Students gain fluency in written expression through writing frequently in a variety of forms, including letters, journals, essays, poems, research reports, speeches, and visual presentations. The focus is on the writing process from start to finish: telling ideas orally, brainstorming, journaling, writing drafts, revising, editing, proofreading, and receiving peer and adult feedback. Students often read aloud or present their final work to peers or publish in class anthologies.

Students also read literature throughout the year that is connected to the Humanities topic. They engage in discussions and small-group activities to help them understand and gain pleasure from their reading.

Humanities/Social Studies includes history, anthropology, geography, current events, and economics. Through lessons and activities, we unveil the human story and share in the telling and analyzing through student projects and in-class seminars. Students read from historic texts, primary sources and current events magazines and discuss these in seminar format. Students are encouraged to ask questions, to create questions to guide our discussions and to answer questions as well.

Mathematics: Students enter our mathematics program in either the Pre-Algebra or Algebra classes. Mathematics classes meet formally four days a week, and informally a fifth time during "math studio" in which they may receive extra support.

In Pre-Algebra, students are introduced to concepts of data analysis, probability, and number theory, while building on concepts of mathematical reasoning, algebra, and geometry. There are daily assignments, activities and periodic assessments.

In Algebra, students build on their knowledge of variables, expressions, equations and graphs, and begin working with two-variable relationships. Students end the year working with functions and polynomials. There are daily assignments, activities, and periodic assessments.

Students who complete Algebra enter Geometry. In Geometry, students are introduced to the concepts of logic and proof, as well as concepts and reasoning in two and three dimensions. Spoken, written and pictographic fluency in the language of geometry is stressed. There are daily assignments, group investigations, and periodic assessments.

Science: The science program incorporates lessons, labs, projects and field studies into a hands-on, experiential format. The program includes life and earth science, in addition to the scientific method and the scientific disciplines studied in the themes of the two-year cycle.

Art: Students build on their Elementary II art experience and focus on the elements and principles of design and composition in drawing, painting, sculpture, ceramics, and mixed media. Self-reflective projects are particularly successful at this level because adolescents need to have a real and personal connection to the work they are creating. They develop a sense of self and identity as they express themselves visually. The students use a variety of materials and focus on two- and three-dimensional problem solving. In addition, students design and construct the sets for the Middle School play. Art class is once a week throughout the year.

Physical Education includes team and individual sports, personal skill building and growth, and dance. There is an aerobic or fitness component to each class. Many activities are peer taught; students run all the warm-ups.

The Creation of Community

It is at this age that the "sensitive period" that ought to develop feelings of justice and personal dignity occurs. ***The adolescent must adopt a personal value system***.

The agreement each student signs asks him or her to work to build community. This agreement to work together for the good of the whole is a central value of St. John the Baptist Catholic Montessori School. At a time when each individual's need for social interaction and acceptance with peers is so high and so sensitive, it is essential that the school community be safe, empowering, and open to every style and point of view. The community and social components described below are essential as we strive to create a safe, non-exclusive community.

Living in Community: The Odyssey, the Bike Trip, and other events are central to the creation of community. In each of these experiences every person has an essential role to play and the responsibilities of each member of the group toward the success of the experience are clear. These opportunities are the true prepared environment for the adolescent: the structure is clear, the work is purposeful and essential; there is freedom of movement and the appropriate balance between individual independence and responsibility to the whole.

Morning Gathering: At the start of the morning, the students come together as a community to make and hear announcements and to share any news that affects the community.

Evening Meetings: The Evening meetings that happen during each of the living in community experiences (Odyssey, Bike Trip, and other events) may be the single most powerful force in the creation of community. The students and staff meet at the end of each day to celebrate what went well that day and what was enjoyed, to reflect on our challenges and things we need to work on, and to compliment each other, thank each other, and recognize acts of leadership.

Community Meetings: The weekly community meetings at school are an extension of the elementary class meetings. The meetings are student- run and focus on topics that affect the community as a whole; students and teachers participate as equals. The emphasis is on mutual respect, taking care of the social environment, on being good neighbors and citizen leaders who share the responsibility for a healthy community of young people and adults.

Recreation Evenings: The students may organize dances and recreation evenings during the year that are chaperoned by St. John's staff.

Lunch and Recess: Lunch is a community affair in the Middle School. We have a relaxed social lunch. During recess they may choose to go outside or to remain in the Middle School.

Student Support

The school offers a variety of support services to students new to the Middle School and to students who have particular struggles with organization or academics. Our goal is to provide a safety net without undermining the independence of any student. Struggle is one of the characteristics of the age and our goal is to help the students in this time of profound self-discovery without masking their challenges or enabling them to avoid the process of growing into adulthood.

Every student experiences **Mentoring** and **Advisory Groups** and participates in the **Academic Orientation**. Our goal is not to make sure that no child ever forgets a follow on task, but to offer support to those students who have a particular need for it. Most students no longer need the extra organizational support in their second year in the Middle School. Each student responds to challenge differently; the set of skills they are acquiring at this level may not be mastered until high school or college.

Mentoring: Each student is mentored throughout the year by one of the core staff members. At the beginning of the year the student meets weekly with his or her mentor; the frequency of these meetings may increase or decrease depending on the needs of the student.

Advisory Groups: Each student is part of a staff-led advisory group. Advisory groups meet every week to talk about accomplishments and concerns, individual and community-wide, social and academic.

Academic Orientation: At the beginning of the academic year, staff members focus on one or more aspect of being an effective student within the context of their class. Topics include note taking, outlining, how to compose a bibliography, how to study, how to research, and how to plan for a project.