Insights and Suggestions from AMI Teachers

~**Create an environment that is enticing for the senses and movement.** The young brain develops these two areas first- first the senses and then movement. Among other things, avoid using devices that inhibit mobility (e.g. crib, high chair, playpen, swing and activity saucer) because of the importance of independence and movement in the developing brain. The newborn brain has one hundred billion neurons. If linked back-to-back, these would span two million miles making the newborn brain the most complex natural or artificial structure on earth. Fundamentally, neurons dictate an individual’s cognitive abilities and potential. Genes determine the placement of neurons, but experience determines how neurons connect to each other. In the first six years, the brain is efficient at eliminating neurons that are not in use, thus making the richness of the early learning environment critical to a child’s development.

~**Set up a nursery that optimizes early learning.** Remember the importance of consistency and structure in your child’s early life and plan the room accordingly to accommodate your child for a whole year. Start the process of creating a nursery by sitting on the floor and observing the space from the child’s perspective- note the sounds, lighting and aesthetics of the room. If you paint the room, choose a soothing color. Instead of opting for murals and wallpaper, place small pictures and paintings at your infant’s eye level. Try to avoid clutter and objects that can result in over-stimulation. At early ages, also try to avoid fantasy characters and cartoons. They only serve to cause confusion since children at this age do not possess the ability to distinguish between what is real and what is not. Ideally, your child’s room would have four areas: sleeping, activity, feeding and changing.

1. **A sleeping area** with a floor bed (i.e., mattress or futon on the floor with or without a frame) promotes visual stimulation (i.e., visual access to the whole room) and an opportunity for early movement (i.e., slithering in the first few months).
2. **An activity area** including a mat or rug adjacent to a wall displaying a 2 feet tall by 3 feet wide child-safe mirror near the ground. A mobile hung above the mat will provide visual stimulation for your child- newborns can see about 8-10 inches. Due to your child’s limited vision, provide mobiles that have contrasting colors (e.g., black and white). When your child develops enough motor coordination to bat the mobile, then elevate it or replace it with a tactile mobile (e.g., a bell, rattle or other small object safe for a child’s mouth attached to a string or ribbon). Possibly include a few tactile objects in a basket near the mat. It is important to avoid clutter and an oberabundance of materials. The activity area may be in another room if space is limited.
3. **A feeding area** with a rocking chair for breastfeeding or bottle feeding and a table for needed adult provisions such as water.
4. **A changing area** with a 4 feet tall armoire or cabinet containing clothes with a changing pad on top.

~**Understand the developmental stages of childhood.** Dr. Montessori described the construction of the human being as growing and maturing planes of development that are six years in length (I.e., 0-6 years, 6-12 years, and 12-18 years). Every plane is divided into two sub-planes three years in length (e.g., 0-3 and 3-6 in the 0-6 year plane). In each of the planes and sub-planes a child has his own particular needs, characteristics and styles of learning. Parents need to be prepared for these differences and adjust their child-rearing techniques with them in mind.

From Zero-6 months

~**Focus on creating a warm and enriching home environment to optimize your child’s potential.** This period is characterized by self-creation and self-determination. Your infant is programmed to absorb all of his surroundings (e.g., physical, emotional, etc.) without conscious effort. During your child’s first few years of life, he will go through critical periods of development for all of his cognitive skills and attributes. The windows of opportunity for developing some of these will be narrow (e.g., social attachment, vision, and emotional control) while others will be wide (e.g., language, math and motor development). Experiences during these early years will permanently shape the circuitry of the child’s brain and affect his long-term abilities.

~**Develop consistent daily routines and structure.** This will allow your child to make sense of his new and complicated world. His security in the predictability of the day-to-day routine (e.g., feeding, sleeping, changing, bathing, etc.) will give your child trust in himself and his surroundings. Honor your child’s internal rhythms. In particular, try to not wake your sleeping baby. Sleep at this age is very important to the development of the mind and body.

~**Aid in self-soothing so that your child can be independent and gain confidence in his own skills.** Your child’s ability to self-soothe is particularly important at bedtime- when he is attempting to go to sleep on his own. It is also important when he awakens at night and must return to sleep (around 18 months of age children experience sleep disruptions caused by spurts of brain activity). Have your child go to bed when he is tired but not asleep. If your child cries when you leave the room, respond immediately but try to promote your child’s internal resources and avoid becoming an emotional crutch. If the crying and discomfort are not related to hunger or wetness, try least intrusive techniques first. Progress through actions of greater involvement if the crying does not stop- make your presence known in his visual field, then talk softly to him, then gently stroke him, and finally pick him up. Through keen observations, you will come to recognize the meaning of different cries and how to best respond.

~**Use caution in introducing pacifiers because they are habit-forming and may not be readily accessible when needed.** A child’s dependency on an object that is habitually in the mouth may inhibit language development and keep your child inwardly focused. Guide your child to his thumb or fingers instead.

~**Build a secure and loving relationship with your baby by handling him gently, talking to him as you move through the day, and responding to his cries in a timely manner.** Repeated interactions between you and your child become “remembered”. Behavior, emotions, perceptions, sensations and models of others are engrained by these early experiences in life. The young child absorbs your way of not only interfacing with him, but how to operate in the world. Your kind, caring community-oriented, courteous behavior will forever shape the emotional intelligence of your child.

~**If at all possible, breastfeed.** Children benefit from the close, tactile, emotional bond created by breastfeeding. It is important that you make your child the priority during this time. Turn off the television and telephone and be consistent about the place of feeding. The connection you develop during feeding will provide your child with optimism and trust in the world. Breasfeeding also serves to strengthen your child’s immunity system.

~**Provide ‘tummy time’ for your child twice daily for 15-20 minutes.** Place your child on a comfortable surface and help him roll onto his stomach. This will strengthen his back, arms and core muscles in preparation for future movement. (I.e., crawling and walking). It will also provide your child with another visual perspective of his surroundings.

Six to Twelve Months

~**Buy toys that are made of natural materials and aid in sensorial and motor development such as those that stack, assemble and require interaction (versus just allow passive observation).** It is best to avoid toys with lights and music because the brain of a young child cannot process more than one sensory experience at a time. Also, avoid mixing musical instruments with the toys. They should be placed together in their own area or small basket. Children at this age develop rapidly. As such, provide toys that stimulate further curiosity and can grow with the child. When a child is able to start using his hands, then integrate rattles, small balls, and other safe, small objects that can fit into the hands and can be explored and manipulated. Fill shallow baskets with objects that can be opened and closed, mystery items, and common household products that can be sorted by room. As your child shows an interested in moving, integrate items that entice movement such as a ball or walker wagon. Use a ballet bar or steady furniture (e.g., an ottoman) to help your child’s balance. These allow your child to have the aid needed for his growing motor skills while maintaining his need to be independent. Try to avoid activity saucers. The muscular development in your child’s feet and body may not be able to support this activity thereby causing him potential harm. Acitivty saucers also inhibit independence or movement and may overstimulate your child’s senses due to all of the bells and whistles.

~**Provide a rich language environment.** Talk in a clear, kind tone with your child as you interact throughout the day. It is important that you look at your child when talking. When your child begins to babble, it is important to be responsive to his language but please refrain from using baby talk. Babies with parents who are linguistically responsive to their children’s babbling keep talking. They become more confident and exercise their language skills. Studies show babies with unresponsive parents or caregivers limit their attempts at communication. Babies benefit from singing, early reading (board books), and playing games that resemble the give and take of conversations such as peek-a-boo. Labeling objects in the environment by referencing them by name is also important to your child’s growing understanding of the world and language. It is best for an object to be labeled in the environment before introducing a picture of the object in a book as the picture is merely another symbol the child needs to decode.

~**Expose your child to several languages.** A baby’s brain is constructed to learn all 10,000+ of the world’s languages in order to adapt to his birth place. After your baby is born, his brain will begin ridding itself of this overabundance of language potential so as to dedicate more resources to other needed functions. This neurological paring process is in full swing during the first seven years of life- the critical period for language development. During this time, your child can learn languages much more readily than at any other time in his life. What he absorbs will also have a lasting influence on his future linguistic abilities. Second languages enhance cognitive development by making the linguistic area of the brain more efficient and better developed. When introducing your child to another language: (a) have parents, caretaker, teachers and others speak in their mother tongue and maintain consistency in doing so (i.e., not mix speech between languages); (b) teach the language orally and in the same manner as the first language (i.e., based on everyday communication); and (c) do not insist that your child learn the rules of grammar. Learning a second language should be useful, fun and natural- not a stressful exercise. A note of caution: if your child has linguistic deficits (i.e., he is behind in reaching language milestones), wait until your child has made substantial progress in his native tongue before introducing other languages.

~**Provide a small chair, preferably a low slatted or cube chair, and a table for eating when your child is able to sit up.** Eating at the table is one of the first steps of independence and the start of the ritual of family meals. Provide only nutritious food options. Children are born with internal regulation regarding daily food intake which may be negatively impacted by coercive efforts. Take a caring and respectful approach to your child’s eating choices (i.e., how he eats and what he eats).

Twelve to Eighteen Months:

~**Avoid interrupting your child when he is focused.** Interruptions teach a child to be distracted. Your child’s internal thoughts will cultivate self-discipline, creativity, and positive perceptions about self and work. During these periods, your child is beginning to develop knowledge about himself.

~**Create a new level of independence in the home when your child begins to walk.** Enable your child to car for his own needs by showing him in detail how to dress himself, brush his teeth, comb his hair, bathe himself and set the table. This aids in the development of the will (later resulting in passion and compassion), self-esteem, and confidence. When learned, these skills also relieve the parent of a bigger work load. It is important that certain aspects of the following rooms be accessible to the child: bedroom, kitchen, play area, and bathroom.

1. In the **bedroom**, keep clothes in a small armoire or cabinet with easy to open doors. Separate clothes by dividers or shoeboxes labeled with pictures. Include only a few seasonal selections in every category of clothing (e.g., pants, shirts, sweaters, underwear and socks) so that your child is not inundated with too many choices. Try to have clothes that are easy to put on, such as pants with elastic waistbands (zippers require more advanced skill), tops without buttons, and shoes with large Velcro straps). When making purchases, see if your child can manipulate the items on his own and test the item to assure that it does not restrict mobility. Hang coat hooks at the child’s level. Tie a loop of ribbon around the labels of your child’s sweaters and coats so he can hang items on his own. Also, teach your child to put on his own jacket by the ‘tags to toes’ technique- lay the coat on the floor in front of the child with his toes next to the tag/label of the jacket and show your child how to bend over and slide his arms into sleeves then swing the jacket over his head. Your child may enjoy having a mirror to see his outfit. A small hamper is helpful for dirty clothes.
2. In the **kitchen**, have a low drawer where your child may keep his child-sized cutlery, plates, bowls, cups, pitcher and placemats that shows placement of objects. Try to avoid plastic items. Put stools by all sinks. One way to help teache your child cold from hot is to place red and blue rubber bands on faucet handles.
3. Be cautious about the number of toys in the **play area.** Organize items where they are visible and accessible. Refrain from using toy boxes because external order will lead to your child’s internal order. A low bookshelf is a good way to display toys in small baskets or trays. At this age, your child will habituate quickly to toys, so rotate the toys every few weeks to keep your child interested and engaged. Try to use your child’s interest in novelty to teach him about objects and the world around him.
4. In the **bathrooms**, place stools by the sinks and again use rubber bands to signify water temperatures. Have a child-sized potty. It would also be helpful to make the toilet accessible to your child by putting a stool in front of the toilet and having a potty ring on the toilet seat to narrow its opening. Have small towels for bathing on hooks at your child’s height. A small bowl, cup or basket near the sink is a good way to store the toothbrush and toothpaste.

~**Offer your child a potty when he starts walking.** Keeping detailed notes of urination times may help you guide your child to the potty when needed. Other than the bathroom, you may want to have a potty in a central location where your child spends the most time (e.g., the family room). Be aware that it may be easier for your child to pull down cotton underwear than a diaper when attempting to use the potty. Diapers also whisk away moisture so your child may not be aware when he is wet. Avoid rewards (e.g., gold stars, candy, etc.) and punishments when potty training. Your child will use the potty when he is ready if it is easily accessible. This independence will add to his growing self-confidence.

~**Stop your child’s disorderly behavior and redirect his energy whenever it arises.** It is important that this be handled firmly but kindly. Do not shame or humiliate your child. At this age, this can often be done by distracting the child and diverting his attention to other matters. When your child is having a conflict with another child, verbalize the issue in a simple, short, non-judgmental fashion to help resolve it.

Eighteen Months to Three Years:

~**Slow down and work at your child’s pace.** Do not overschedule the day. Permit your child to fully absorb and reflect upon his activities.

~**Understand that your child may prefer to play alone or parallel play (i.e., play in the same area with another child but directly interface).**  Your child may prefer to interact with an adult instead of other children. Be aware that older siblings/children may be frustrated by this orientation.

~**Provide limits and structure for your child.** For your child to feel secure, he must experience clear, consistent and appropriate expectations, guidelines, feedback, and enforcement/follow-through. It is important that parents agree on these and the rules that they establish. In addition, the rules should be consistent with the parents’ values so the enforcement of the rules will not be problematic. A child should be presented with advanced warning of changes, either to limits or circumstances, which may lead to an act of parental enforcement. When not adhering to established limits, a child should be given choices regarding how to proceed and a firm but kind stance in the enforcement procedure.

~**Limit television watching, even in the background.** The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children two and under should not be exposed to television. Television viewing may be harmful to language development, motor development (because of lack of physical exercise), nutrition (due to advertisements that promote food without nutritional value), focus/concentration (due to the fast-paced nature of the programming), social intelligence, creativity, and internal motivation. Recent research has indicated that young brains have ‘mirror neurons’ which cause a child to ‘experience’ actions and emotions that are witnessed. In the instance of TV viewing, a child’s brain may be literally experiencing the situations and emotions conveyed (e.g., violence and aggression). When exposed, this experience is being absorbed during your child’s most vulnerable period of development. Television programs and commercials may also create a sense of envy for status and material possessions. Television may cause difficulty for your child to discern the difference between his wants and needs.

~**Honor your child’s work, ability to focus on details, and growing concentration by not correcting or interrupting him.** Doing otherwise creates a dependence on adults and a loss of confidence in his abilities. For instance, refrain from commenting on unmatched clothes, inside-out shirts, shoes on the wrong feet, and the like. Instead, ask if your child is comfortable and offer help if necessary.

~**Have your child share in the household work.** This may include activities such as wshing dishes, cooking, dusting, sweeping the floor, folding clothes, and watering plants. Showing your child how to participate as a productive member of the family and community sends an important message about his value and importance of his contributions. Make sure cleaning supplies are non-toxic (e.g., vinegar and water for washing windows). Use child-sized items when possible including brooms, mops, dust pans, whisk brooms, watering cans, buckets, sponges and towels. In the kitchen make available a cutting board, knife (use only under adult supervision), colander, vegetable peeler, mini grater, juicer, etc.

~**Have a designated place for everything used by the child and teach your child to return items when his tasks are completed.** Remember, external order promotes internal order. Have small baskets and trays to display toys tools, and work with just a few small items per basket. Simplify and store extra toys in the closet to be rotated every two weeks.

~**Promote language and emotional development by engaging in meaningful conversation using specific accurate speech and precise vocabulary.** Be sure to listen and elaborate on what your child is saying. Other important ways to promote language development is through eating meals together and exploring nature together.

~**Set up a reading area.** Have 4 or 5 nicely illustrated, well-written non-fiction books displayed with covers facing your child (children have a hard time recognizing books by their spines). Incorporate reading time into an everyday routine. Let everyone have a chance to read. If your child is not reading, ask him if he wants to tell a story from a book he knows.

~**Have an arts and crafts area where there is a low table and accessible art supplies.** Art activities promote creativity as well as the development of fine motor skills, perceptual organization, sequencing and analytic thinking. Organize the art area with only a few choices per medium (e.g., paper sorted by color, colored pencils, clay, glue, scissors, collage materials, beads with big holes, etc.). An outdoor art easel may also be good for painting with fingers or brushes. Have your child get in the habit of wearing an apron. This not only protects the clothes, but signifies the importance of the activity and denotes a start and a finish to it.

~**Have an area for developing large motor skills.** You may want to consider the following: obstacle courses, balance beams, tricycles, scooters, small trampolines with handles, etc. Outdoor play structures are also good.

~**Dedicate an area to music.** Your child will love to make his own music and listen and dance to CDs. It would be best if the CD player was operable by your child.

~**Enjoy nature together.** At this age, your child can walk up to two miles (usually a child can walk his age in miles). Spend time outdoors exploring plants, insects and rocks. Your child will be fascinated by what the world has to offer. Please follow your child’s pace.

~**Do not explain things in too much detail.** Your child is in the sensorial period of learning so his learning is optimized by hands-on experiences.

Three to Six Years:

~**Enroll your child in school.** Your child is gaining a much better understanding of himself and his surroundings. Building a community outside of the family is important for your child’s growing sense of self and development of his social skills. He is curious and constantly asking ‘what’ in an effort to label things in the environment. This is a good time for your child to be exposed to classroom materials addressing language, mathematics, culture, practical life, and sensory experiences. When choosing a school, you may want to consider: (a) the school’s philosophy on building academic skills; (b) whether the environment promotes multi-sensory learning as your child is still in his sensorial-based learning phase (the multi-sensory approach refines neural pathways and leads to greater depth of taste, sight, smell, hearing and touch for life), (c) the classroom setting and whether there is freedom to move around (movement remains important at this age to brain development); (d0 block scheduling and the nature of any interruptions to work times (allowing a child to remain focused in his efforts is still important at this age and free choice in work promotes early decision-making skills); and (e) the type of role models that the teachers will be to your child (e.g., their kindness and courtesy, leadership style, community orientation, etc.).

~**Support your child’s classroom experience by volunteering at the school, communicating with the teacher, and attending parent education nights.** These efforts will model for your child the value of education and community involvement.

~**Encourage home activities that strengthen the hand for writing.** Puzzles, sewing, gardening, molding clay, cleaning and finger painting all help in this endeavor.

~**Teach your child about numbers.** There are several ways you can expose your child to the nature of numbers in everyday life: (a) count out loud during your activities (e.g., as you walk up steps, fold shirts, stack dishes, slice apples, etc.) (b) frequently use numbers in your observations and conversations (e.g., There are four ducks in the road.”) and (c) play sorting games. Regarding the latter, a simple exercise is to fill a big bowl with an item like buttons, beads or shells and then have your child sort them by their properties such as shape, size or color.

~**Introduce your child to language sounds by playing rhyming and I-Spy games (e.g., “I spy with my little eye something that begins with the sound ‘buh’”).** You and your child should both use phonetic sounds to describe letters until your child is older and has a good grasp of the alphabet. This helps eliminate confusion in the learning process. For example, when talking about the letter ‘B’, say “buh” instead of “bee”.

~**Show your child your interest and curiosity in the world.** Your questions will stimulate your child’s own thoughts, ideas and choices.

~**Be a model of courtesy, acceptance and kindness towards others.** Participate in community service projects particularly when children can be involved. Teach your child about other cultures by introducing him to other countries through books, products, cooking, literature, people, celebrations, and rituals. For example, pick one country and study the culture, the people and the societal norms for a week or more. Interest and knowledge about another country and culture will foster acceptance, peace and harmony in regard to cultural and ethnic differences.

~**Tailor your parenting approaches to the unique temperament traits of your child.** Temperament is the way that a child responds and interacts with people, materials, and situations in his world. Temperamental differences between babies can be seen when they are as early as four months old. Although research indicates that an individual’s temperament traits may only vary modestly throughout life, parents can help their children to adapt their temperaments to their surroundings. Thomas and Chess (1963, 1996) were the original researchers in this field and classified people into nine categories based on the following: activity level, approach-withdrawal, mood, rhythmicity, persistence, attention span, adaptability, threshold, intensity and distractibility. In addition to understanding these, assess whether your child has an introverted or extroverted personality. The personality type also influences how your child learns and copes with the world.

~**Understand that sibling rivalry is natural, especially when you are integrating a new baby into the family.** Please do not compare your children. It is important to see each child as a unique person with his own personality, strengths, and challenges. Attempt to create alone time with each child every day. Teach your children to collaborate. Stop any aggressive behavior immediately, but do not assume that you know who is at fault when a disagreement arises. Talk your children through conflicts so that they can begin to understand how to ask for their own space, take turns, and talk about hurt feelings. These acts will also provide your children with words to label their feelings and to help define their inner realities. Invite your children to work on solving their own problems and coming up with their own solutions.

~**Provide unconditional love and avoid rewards and punishments.** Your child’s self-esteem will benefit from your expressions of gratitude and appreciation for his productive behavior, activities and work (e.g., saying thank you for setting the table or waiting patiently). Your child will also learn from comments about the natural consequences of his actions (i.e., things that happen without parental intervention such as “If you throw your food on the floor, you may not have anything left on the plate that you like to eat”). Be careful not to talk to others in his presence as though he is not there. Furthermore, allow your child to answer the questions that are presented to him by others as well as questions concerning your child that are asked in his presence (assuming they address matters that he is able to answer). Believe in your child’s own process.

~**Continue to provide limits and structure for your child.** As previously noted a child must experience clear, consistent and appropriate expectations, guidelines, feedback and enforcement/follow-through in order to feel secure. Be sure to present the child with advanced warnings regarding changes that may lead to acts of parental enforcement. When not adhering to established limits, a child should be given limited choices regarding how to proceed, and you should take a firm but kind stance in the enforcement procedure. For example, if you are dropping off your four-year-old son at school, be consistent in how you approach the drop off process. You may want to give a warning that you will soon be at school so that he can prepare himself for the transition. When you arrive, let him know that it is time to leave the car and go to class. If he does not comply with the routine, give him a choice- he can get out of the car on his own or with assistance. If you or another adult help him, please try to be patient and gentle. After school, talk to your child about the issue and have him think of solutions for the future. Expect your child to test the limits and try not to take it personally. As your child develops, have the rules and limits reflect these changes.

~**Offer more freedom with more responsibility.** As your child’s motor skills grow and allow for greater participation in your daily life, slowly offer him more freedom. For example, when your child appears ready for an activity like flower arranging, show him in detail the activity and explain the limits (e.g., “The pruning scissors are used only for cutting the flowers”). Watch in a controlled environment as your child completes the work. Note that with new work comes new responsibility. Make your child aware of this. If your child is disorderly in the work, put it away until you determine that the child is ready (this may be weeks or months). When given freedom, a child is faced with making choices. This is important in the formation of the intellect.

~**Treat errors kindly.** Mistakes and accidents are usually signs that your child is practicing new skills or testing his limits. Being understanding towards their errors encourages a child to keep trying.

~**Learn to observe your child.** It is important that you and your home environment change with each stage of your child’s development. Observe your child. Take a few minutes every day to notice the small details of your child’s life (e.g. how he uses language, how he chooses a snack from the refrigerator, etc.). You may want to journal and discuss your observations with your partner. Your reflections on matters such as your child’s emotional development, physical needs, changing eating habits, academic interests, likes and dislikes, friends, activities around the house, and sibling dynamics will prepare you to support your child’s constant development. Among other things, they will enable you to rethink freedoms and responsibilities, limits and structure and materials and activities in the home.

~**When you are providing feedback about your child’s work and skills, please comment on the process and details of the effort, not the end product.** For example, use phrases like “I like the way you use the color green in your drawing” rather than “What a beautiful picture.” This will help your child stay focused on his work and develop his skills instead of just thinking about results. Be cautious about using rewards for once learning is externally motivated, a child’s process can lose creativity, focus and passion. Please remember to not interrupt your child when he is focused.

~**Continue to encourage and allow your child to participate in age-appropriate household jobs so that he will develop a sense of confidence and feel like he is a contributing member of your family.**

~**Continue to enjoy nature together- plant a garden, go for walks, look for insects and explore.** This will aid in the development of respect for all living things and facilitate a better understanding of the physical world.

~**Promote lifelong learning by searching for knowledge and scientific truths with your child.** Visit libraries, museums, aquariums, and science centers. Take tours of bakeries, fire stations, candy factories or whatever is of interest.

~**Include storytelling in your family’s daily routine.** Your child will love to hear stories about your childhood, your family’s origin, and your daily events. These discussions will help develop your child’s writing skills by modeling the narrative process and the creation and organization of content. They also aid a child’s ability to visualize and create mental pictures. Spatial organization skills like these are important to future math and science skills.

~**Establish family times and family rituals.** Meals together are important to the social fabric of your family and establishing healthy eating habits. Limit television viewing and try not to incorporate it into your family rituals or daily schedules.

~**Assure that your child has some quiet, unscheduled uninterrupted time.** This allows your child to establish his own internal world and develop his own stream of consciousness. Due to your child’s growing understanding of himself and the world around him, he is able to reflect on activities and events of the day with depth and focus.