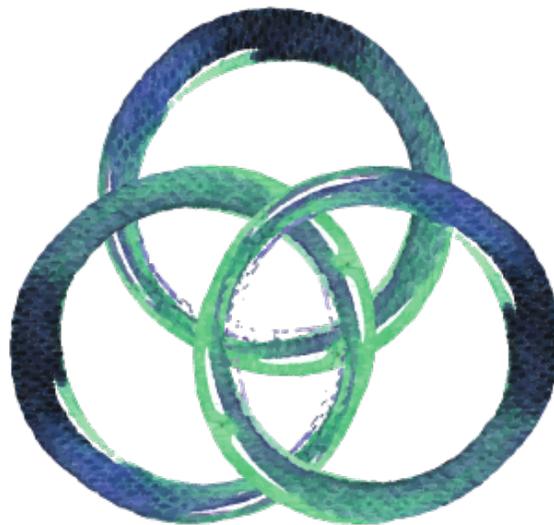


# Reclaiming Self-Regulation in the Montessori Classroom



*Chip DeLorenzo*

**POSITIVE DISCIPLINE**  
FOR MONTESSORI SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES

## **Transition Planning**

1. What roles will each of the adults have (dismissing, monitoring, etc.).
2. Where are the adults to be positioned, and when?
3. What time will the transition be?
4. How will children be dismissed?
5. Which children need extra support? What support do they need? Who will provide the support (teacher, child, etc.)?
6. What is expected of the children (Grace and Courtesy, logistics)?
7. What adults need to be communicated with when a transition needs to change?

## Suggestions for Smooth Transitions

- Give yourself time to prepare for transitions *before* the transition, so you can be fully present. Children feel secure when adults are fully present, and they do better when they feel secure. As you plan for transitions, be sure to plan a few minutes for you to prepare yourself for the transition. Finish up what you're doing, go to the restroom, clean up your lesson, etc.
- Prepare those students who need a little lead-time for the transition. Some children, who are still developing self-regulation, need a little time to prepare themselves for upcoming transitions. Otherwise, they will get frustrated. "Finn, we're going to be gathering for circle when I am done with my lesson. Do you want to start getting ready now, or wait for the bell to ring?"
- Consider alternatives to children lining up during transitions. Omit lining up wherever possible. Adults misbehave in lines! Why do we expect children to wait in lines without misbehaving? Sometimes lining up is necessary for safety. However, sometimes we line children up because we haven't considered other alternatives. For instance, instead of lining up to go outside, have one adult already outside, and the other to monitor children inside. When children are ready to go outside, then they can simply walk outside (obviously every school set up is different, and safety needs to be the priority). Or, simply walk as a group, and teach children the grace and courtesy skill of walking on the right side of the hallway, stairwell, or sidewalk.
- Omit transition circles wherever possible (especially in the primary classroom). For example, instead of bringing everyone to circle before moving as a group, simply tap children on the shoulder and let them know it's time to move to the next activity. Be sure to involve older children in helping younger children in the transitions in Primary classrooms (buddy system or specific jobs for older children).
- Watch out for abrupt transitions. Coming in from the playground, and going right to circle is an abrupt transition, as children are transitioning from excited, gross motor activity and independent play, and, sometimes, social conflict, right into a setting that requires immediate self-control. Before whole group activities, like class meetings, circle activities, or specialist instruction, consider preceding it with quiet independent time.

## Brain in the Palm of Your Hand Activity

1. Ask your students if they've ever been so upset if felt like they were not in control. Let them share about this.
2. Explain that when we are angry, hurt or upset we really can't control what we say or do.
3. Tell the children you are going to explain how the brain works by making a model of the brain with your hand.
4. Ask the children to replicate what you do with your hand.
5. Hold up your open hand with your fingers and thumb extended.
6. Fold your thumb so that it is touching your palm. Explain that your thumb represents the midbrain where your most important memories, feelings and fears are stored. "It is our feeling brain."
7. Touch the top and front of your fingers. Explain that this is the cortex. "This is our thinking brain. This is the part of the brain that helps you solve problems with your friends or family."
8. Explain that brain scientists have found that when we are hurt, angry or really upset, the signals between the feeling brain and the thinking brain stop. "The thinking brain does not work when we are really upset."
9. Open up your hand again and extend your fingers, leaving your thumb folded into your palm. Say, "So, if our thinking brain isn't working when we are really upset, what part of our brain is in charge? Yes, our feeling brain. And when our feeling brain is in charge everything feels very big and scary."
10. Explain that when our thinking brain is not working, it's like someone took the feeling brain's hat off. Some people call a hat, a lid. When someone is really upset, it's called flipping your lid.
11. Explain to your students that it takes time to cool down after we've flipped your lid. "But, when we cool down, signals start going to the thinking brain, and we feel better. Our lid is back on. We can solve problems again."
12. Introduce the *Positive Time-Out Area*.

## Positive Time-Out: How it Works

We use the term *Positive-Time Out* in the Positive Discipline literature to clearly distinguish the difference between punitive and empowering time-out. As we have said over and over, “children do better when they feel better”. Since most adults associate the term “time-out” with a punishment, the children’s book, *Jared’s Cool-Out Space*, by Jane Nelsen and Bill Schorr helps adults and children understand how to use *Positive Time-Out*, and to find inspiration to create their own positive time out area.

The *Positive Time-Out* area is created with the help of the whole classroom community. Once the children understand how and why *Positive Time-Out* works, the students participate in designing or decorating the space. The class might choose a theme, or simply choose items for the area that will help them cool down and feel better. Obviously, the objects and design elements should be appropriate for school. Ideas might include stuffed animals, puzzles, a CD player with headphones, books, a beanbag chair, pillows, etc. (No electronics.) Invite the children to give their area a special name. Having their own name for their *Positive Time Out* area increases the sense of ownership. Following are some ideas that students have come up with: Cool-Down Space, Happy Place, Peace Area, Calming Space, etc.

Sarah’s classroom decided to have a “beautiful day” theme. The children created clouds from pillow stuffing, and hung them from the ceiling with fishing line, and created a sun from construction paper and tacked it to the wall. They put in green throw pillows in the *Positive Time-Out* area to represent grass and added a few stuffed animals.

Children are never sent to *Positive Time-Out*. Teachers can always ask a student if the time out area would be helpful, but the choice belongs to the child. A teacher might offer two choices: “What would help you the most right now: our Positive Time Out area or to put this challenge on the *Class Meeting* agenda. (Teach children that putting an item on the agenda is a way to allow for “cooling off” time.

*Positive Time-Out* is restorative and connective. Its purpose is to help reconnect the child with the community, and to facilitate self-regulation and problem-solving skills. Punitive time-out is exclusionary. It separates students from their community and causes them to feel disconnected. When they feel disconnected, they become discouraged, and then their behavior gets worse. Children often emerge from a punitive time-out angrier than they were before they were sent. While a safety issue may require a child to be removed from the environment, from time-to-time, punitive time-outs should be avoided at every turn. If adults send children to time-outs children will see a *Positive Time-Out* as punishment.

There are two *Positive Time-Out* practices, used by teachers, that might seem counterintuitive. The first is that many teachers do not limit the time that children can spend in the *Positive Time-Out* area. They find it is counterproductive because a child might need more time to cool down than the time limit allows for. For example, what might happen if there is a five-minute time limit on using the *Positive Time-Out* area, and an angry child must come out before she is ready?

(Remember, on average, it takes the brain 20 minutes to calm down after the fight, flight or freeze response.) When children are given the freedom to decide when they come out of the *Positive Time-Out* area, they have the opportunity to practice self-regulation and self-awareness.

The second practice is that some teachers allow children to have a *Positive Time-Out* buddy. After "buddy training", students are allowed to invite their buddy into the *Positive Time-Out* area with them to help them feel better. When a child is comforted by a friend, they experience a sense of closeness and connection. This promotes both reintegration of the brain and reintegration of the child into the community.

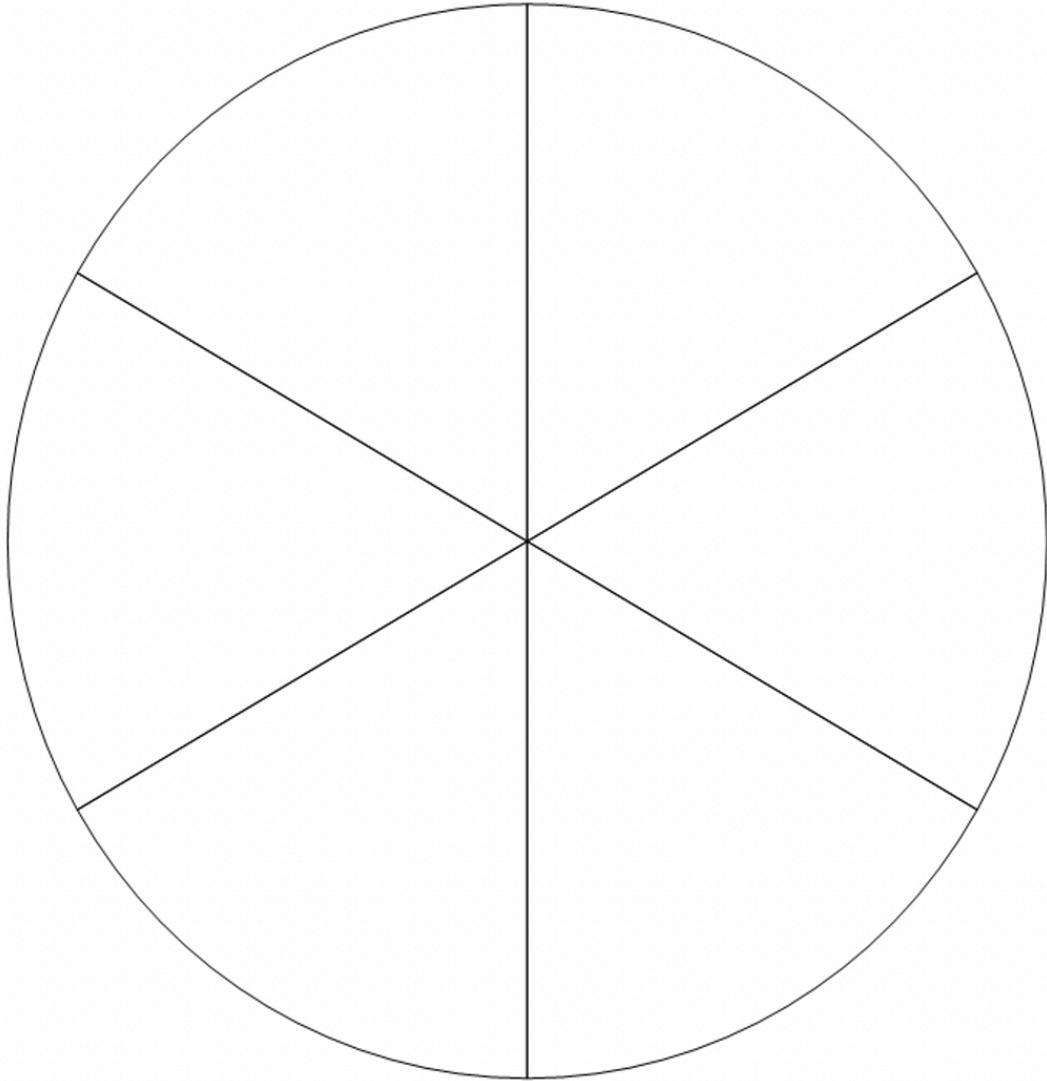
Both the practice of not limiting time in the *Positive Time-Out* area and using a cool down buddy bring up legitimate questions. What if a child stays in the area too long? What if another child needs to go in there? What if a child uses the area to avoid work? What if the buddies are misbehaving? Don't try to answer these questions yourself! When problems occur, put them on the *Class Meeting* agenda and ask them, "What can we do together if to solve these problems?". Creating *Positive Time-Out* guidelines and responses to problems, together, will help foster an environment of mutual responsibility where everyone helps in setting limits.

After creating a *Positive Time-Out* area with her students, Sarah shared: "Using *Positive Time-Out* changed the way I related to the children. I used to feel responsible for fixing their problems when they were upset. But, I wound up creating a lot more problems than I fixed, and I was creating a cycle of dependency. Creating *Positive-Time Out* area made sense to me as a Montessori teacher, because it focused on preparing the environment to empower the children. Now, I can clearly see and maintain my role as a guide for the children as they learn to solve problems for themselves. They are so much more independent."

## Wheel of Choice

*"The child has a mind able to absorb knowledge. He has the power to teach himself." ~ Maria Montessori*

*"The educator must believe in the potential power of his pupil, and he must employ all his art in seeking to bring his pupil to experience this power." ~ Alfred Adler*



## Teaching Grace and Courtesy Skills

Children aren't born with social skills. While some children are naturally more socially aware, all children need modeling and teaching of Grace and Courtesy skills, or social skills, to help them find a sense of belonging and significance in their communities. In Chapter 5, of *Positive Discipline in the Montessori Classroom*, there is a list of Grace and Courtesy Skills that are helpful for students to learn as they make friends and build relationships in the classroom community. Consider using the following format to teach Grace and Courtesy skills at the *Class Meeting*. (Note: steps 3 and 4 are designed for children, ages 5 and older).

1. Introduce and demonstrate the skill.

*"I would like to show you a way to respectfully interrupt someone so that they are more likely to give you their attention, positively, when they have finished speaking to someone else."* The teacher places her hand gently on someone else's shoulder; removes it and waits patiently.

2. Ask students what someone might do if they didn't know this social skill?

*"What might someone do who didn't know how to interrupt respectfully?"*

*"What would that look like?"*

3. Ask for volunteers, and have students role-play a situation where a student did not have the Grace and Courtesy skill.

4. Ask what each role-player was thinking, feeling and deciding. Ask others to share.

*"Miranda, when you were interrupted by Francis, and she just started talking over you, what were you feeling? What were you thinking and deciding?"*

*"Francis, what were you feeling when Miranda walked away from you? What were you thinking and deciding?"*

*"Would anyone else like to share their observations?"*

5. Ask the volunteers to re-re-roleplay the situation where the student has learned the Grace and Courtesy skill.

6. Ask what each role-player was thinking, feeling and deciding. Ask others to share.

*"Miranda, when you were interrupted by Francis, and she placed her hand on your shoulder, what were you feeling? What were you thinking and deciding?"*

*"Francis, what were you feeling when Miranda responded to you? What were you thinking and deciding?"*

*"Would anyone else like to share their observations?"*

Students love to role-play, even adolescents. Giving students an experience with Grace and Courtesy skills enables them to understand why these social skills are effective.

*"I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand." ~ Confucius*

## Introducing the Wheel of Choice

Here is the activity to use with students to create the *Wheel of Choice*.

1. Explain to the children that you are going to create a list of problems they might have with a friend that would cause them to feel mad or sad.
2. Create a list of these common social problems, together (6 to 8 is sufficient).
3. Ask the children, "How many of you have had some of these problems before?"
4. Explain that we all make mistakes, and we all have problems with our friends, sometimes. Let them know that you are going to work together to create some ideas to solve these problems.
5. Starting with the first problem on the list, ask, "What could someone do if they \_\_\_\_\_ (were hit by a friend, teased, etc.)?"
6. Write down the brainstormed solutions so everyone can see them (white board, easel paper, etc.)
7. Continue this process with each of the brainstormed problems. Some solutions will be repetitive. For instance, "Tell them to stop.", might come up as a solution for a few of the problems. That's OK. It demonstrates that some solutions work for many problems.
8. Add the solutions to the wheel, and create the *Wheel of Choice* together using card stock, lamination and posterboard.
9. Post the *Wheel of Choice* in the classroom for students to use. Some teachers create two. One to be displayed in the classroom, and one for students to use in the *Positive Time-Out* area.
10. Practice using solutions from the *Wheel of Choice* in *Class Meetings*. Have the children role-play the problems they brainstormed, and then have them practice some of the solutions (social and life skills).

## Maintaining Limits with the Power of Silence

*"The best instruction is that which uses the least words sufficient for the task." - Maria Montessori*

*"Nothing can be conveyed to a child by means of words at a time of conflict." - Rudolf Dreikurs*

When it's time to maintain previously set limits, use few or no words, and follow through with presence, warmth and silence (PWS).

1. Act without talking. For example, quietly put out your hand, if the child takes it, lead the child away from the situation.
2. Smile, point to the object you want them to notice, wait patiently.
3. Quietly smile, motion for them to follow you, lead them to what you want them to notice.
4. Use a signal or a note
5. Use one word
6. Give a limited choice. "Would you like to pick up the paper now or before recess?" "Would you like to put this on the class meeting agenda, or shall I?" "Would you like to tidy this on your own or would you like some assistance?" "Would you like to choose a rug or a table for your work?"
7. Make a reasonable request in 10 words or less. Wait for the child's response.
8. Give information. "This is work time." "Your friend is reading right now."
9. Describe what you see. "I notice your math is off of the rug." "I notice you aren't wearing your shoes." "I notice your marker is on the floor."
10. Say how you feel using: "I feel \_\_\_\_\_ when \_\_\_\_\_ and I wish \_\_\_\_\_."

## About

Chip DeLorenzo has been a Montessori educator since 1995. He is the former Head of School of the Damariscotta Montessori School, where he spent 20 years as a teacher and head of school. Chip is the co-author, with Jane Nelsen, of *Positive Discipline in the Montessori Classroom*. He holds Early Childhood, Lower and Upper Elementary AMS certifications, and has worked extensively with Montessori Adolescent students. Chip is the father of five Montessori children, and he and his wife, Kathy, live in Jefferson, Maine.

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