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Behind the Laundry Hamper

by Donna Bryant Goertz | Montessori Blog

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He was a sweet child with an angelic face, this new six year-old from another Montessori school. And he was so eager to please. How was I to know that he—during the very first week of school—would treat the parents at departure to the most spectacular display of temper I'd ever seen, complete with language I'd never in my life heard used against me, by anyone, much less a sweet child! And this reaction seemed to be triggered simply by my having indicated cheerfully that we sit on the bench until our car pulls up. I was shaken and determined to see that this never happened again in front of an audience of parents. A couple of older children smirked and a couple of younger ones cringed. "Uh oh, I thought, "I can't let him get cast in a role. Now the parents have seen him and the children have reacted strongly. Not such a good start for a new child." So, the next day, before going out to departure, I reminded the entire group that we stay on the bench for the ten-minute departure period. My experienced intuition told me that Sammy was eager and capable of cooperating. He just didn't like being caught off guard, caught making a mistake. My gut told me that he was somewhat of a perfectionist.

Then, a couple of days later, when one of us had to deliver a message of information to Sammy, we were treated to the same display. I knew I had to act decisively to establish our way of thinking about Sammy and his needs. "Children, turn away. Avert your eyes. Let Sammy have his privacy. We will protect his dignity. Come gather over here for a story," I said with a heart full of compassion and confidence. "Take no notice; let's spare Sammy embarrassment. Let him have time to recover himself. Soon he'll learn to handle frustration and anger without such a display."

The children were shocked. They had never heard anyone say these words, much less scream them, and certainly not at their Guide. They were ready to go in any number of directions—demonize Sammy to their parents, titter about him and call him *The Howler*, or just plain coldly avoid and exclude him. I had to steer them to adopt the most compassionate approach, one of supporting his best development over time.

"This is very hard on all of us. We don't like hearing the loud screaming or the vulgar and offensive words, but we can bear up under it. It's the hardest of all on Sammy. We'll do the best we can to help him find better ways of expressing his anger, but it may take a long time."

A little later after Sammy had recovered and spent time engaged in work, when he was free and in a good mood, I struck up a conversation with him as we checked to see which books needed to be returned to the library. I led into the subject delicately. "You didn't like being asked to let Rubin have his place back. When you sat down in that chair, you didn't even know Rubin had been sitting there before. That could be unsettling, or it could even be very embarrassing. But I'm not worried. I know we'll figure this out together." I let it go at that the first time.

The next time Sammy had an episode, the community and I responded in like manner, and in like manner, I found a way to spend time with Sammy later. "That was very upsetting to you. Getting that angry was very hard on you. Ya feeling okay now? Can you tell me about it so we can work together to make it go better next time?" Sammy told me he was okay and that he felt fine now. "Sammy, I know you and I will figure this out so that, in time, you can let me know how upset and angry you are in a strong but calm voice, with strong but respectful words. And I will never scream at you or call you names. "

Over time, I introduced other thoughts to Sammy. "The children will always turn away and give you privacy."

"I know how embarrassing it is to say those words about people, especially about me when we like each other so much. "

"The children care about how you feel. They feel sad and upset when they see how hard this is on you."

"Soon you'll be able to walk away and find a private place to be upset. Someday you'll be able to use a quieter voice so others don't have to hear those words."

One day when the episodes of temper display and emotional outbursts were diminishing in frequency and intensity, I could hear a harsh whispering almost like a stage-whisper version of yelling and screaming. I was walking across the room puzzled, when a child approached me saying, "Donna, don't go over there by the laundry hamper. Sammy is hiding back there and yelling in a whispering voice all those bad words."

"Yes," said another child, "see Donna, he's nice enough now that he doesn't want anybody to hear those words."

"Well, he still has to say them, but he doesn't have to scream them out loud any more. Now he knows how to whisper-yell them," added a third child.

"And he goes to the side of the room and hides behind the laundry hamper so the rest of us won't be bothered," the first child.

The next day, during a pleasant interlude, I acknowledged Sammy. "That was very considerate of you, Sammy, to go behind the laundry basket. Just imagine, you figured out how to be very, very upset and angry without bothering the other children. Pretty soon, you'll be able to be that upset and that angry without saying those words, especially about me. "

"Already, yesterday, I didn't say any of those words about you, Donna," Sammy said. "I just said them about nobody."

The second semester, Sammy already developed out of his emotional discharges and his temper displays. We were still careful with our approach to him, but all our efforts had paid off. The following year, we forgot all about it, so much so that I said a couple of words to Sammy at departure without thinking. I saw the look on his face and remembered. We looked at each other for a long moment, and then it passed. He put the gravel down and looked away from me. I sat beside him and put my arm around his shoulder. "Nobody likes being told what to do, huh, Sammy?" I asked. "I don't mind," he said in an emphatic, staccato and tense voice. Then a couple of minutes later, "Look, I'm still holding one piece. It's a crystal. See?" He looked at me and smiled. He was holding on to his dignity in his own way, and allowing himself an appropriate enough token rebellion against being in the wrong—a tiny crystal in place of a huge temper tantrum—what an exquisite exchange.



Donna Bryant Goertz, founder of [Austin Montessori School](#) in Austin, Texas, acts as a resource to schools around the world. Donna's book, *Children Who Are Not Yet Peaceful: Preventing Exclusion in the Early Elementary Classroom* draws on her thirty years of experience guiding a community of thirty-five six-to-nine year-olds. She received her Montessori elementary diploma from the [Fondazione Centro Internazionale Studi Montessoriani](#) in Bergamo, Italy, and her assistants to infancy diploma from [The Montessori Institute of Denver, Colorado](#).