

This was written several years ago by former CMS teacher Marnie Downs. Marnie taught at CMS in the primary level for 27 years and retired in June 2006. This past spring she published a book for parents titled: **Montessori A Gift for Your Child.** She currently resides in Asheville, North Carolina. We just wanted to share this with you— It's as true today as the day it was written.

A LETTER TO NEW PARENTS

Well, we made it through our first school orientation meeting of the year and as I was giving my yearly talk to new and not so new parents, I was struck by something. Every year I'm struck by something, either the excitement of the new year, or the enthusiasm of the parents heading up committees, or the shy intensity of something new and unknown about to begin. Every year, something. This year after many questions and explanations of the things to come, it struck me how very hard parents try and how intensely they want their children to be happy. There is so much effort and concern that is apparent on every parent's face, so much love and longing for their children. I had to come home and think about that. And then I asked a friend who has college-age children himself, "How long before parents stop being totally concerned about their children's happiness?" He paused and gazed out the window. I waited. "Oh, until they're about 30. Maybe."

So I thought I might address that very issue, this issue of happiness and our children, right away, before the year gets ahead of me and I'm too busy with my own quests and questions to respond to this one.

Every year the new parents of three and four year olds enter our school. Most often they have heard of Montessori by word of mouth, friends who have attended here at CMS, or perhaps they have read something and it sounded right. Whatever brought them here it is clear that they, each and every single one of them, are truly interested in the growth and well being of their children. They strongly want not only a "good education" for their children but also a healthy kind of learning environment that mirrors their own value systems, or at least approaches most of them. So now after much deliberation and often times much sacrifice (this is not inexpensive as we all know), they enter our school and have great expectations not only that their children will learn and grow and thrive but also that they will be HAPPY. This I put in capitals. And so it comes as a great shock and a huge disappointment when this is not the immediate forthcoming response of every little one. In fact, quite the opposite may be the case for a bit of time, especially at the beginning of school.

Now here you are, maybe a new parent with her first child leaving Mama's lap to go walking (unattended by you) down the sidewalk into a huge new world. You've investigated this world and found it pleasing, interesting, even fascinating and are thrilled that this wondrous new life is about to embrace your heart's delight. Alas. She comes out three hours later looking stunned (as if emerging from a bomb shelter perhaps), exhausted, thumb in mouth (she'd given that up months ago), whiney, argumentative, and demanding (she's always so compliant). WHAT THE HECK HAS HAPPENED? Why is she not throwing herself into your arms (sort of like one of those romantic adds on T.V.) all smiles with stories of new friends, her wonderful teacher, and all the things she's learned today?

Now I know you say this is not at all what you expect, that you are grown up and mature about your children and KNOW that beginnings are hard, new situations are scary, things take time. Yes, you KNOW these things. But the difference between KNOW and WANT, well, they live miles apart. So let's be realistic. The truth is you're somewhat a nervous wreck about her attending so young anyway, wonder just a huge little bit if you haven't abandoned her to the real world too soon, and suffer small boulders of guilt when she appears weary and worst of all, NOT HAPPY. Alas. What to do?

This is what I suggest, with a kind heart. Trust. I, too, worry about the children being happy. After all, I live in this culture too. My heart sinks when I watch a newcomer stand at the door, refuse to come near me, won't eat a cookie (who could refuse a cookie??) and goes home weepy and clutching their tattered blankie. But I'll tell you what. After 14 years of watching this process, this beginning of the year blues, this very vacillating three year old behavior and rapid mood swings, I have come to see that what eventually appears is a smiling and self confident child. I now trust that this will be the case with almost every child. I have had the wonderful experience of having a new three-year-old scream (not cry, scream) every morning for literally three weeks straight. The rest of the children were complaining and even the new children began to look at him as if he were crazy. He wasn't. He was angry. He finally quit this behavior and became one of the most calm, contented, enthusiastic children I've ever known. I ran into his mother last year at the Fun Fair and we laughed until we almost cried retelling the story of his horrendous first days of school. She wasn't laughing then I can tell you. But she trusted. Not an easy thing to do with your little ones, especially if they are your first to leave the sweetness of your arms. But trust is a good idea. Try and trust your choice. Try and trust this school. Try and trust what your friends have told you about this method of education. Try and trust this process. But most important of all, try and trust your child. Children take time to adjust to new surroundings. They are slow to acclimate. They watch absolutely everything and may do just a little for a while. They are each and every one of them unique and they are not their brother or sister. And they are each and every one of them a miracle, a new world waiting to begin, a fresh little bud, opening. Not in a hurry. Knowing (not in a mental way) that their own timing is the perfect timing and all things will come just exactly when they will and not one moment sooner. As a teacher my job is to present great, fun, and interesting lessons on absolutely everything. Then watch. Often wait. But the biggest of all, trust. It's hard. We're not taught this. We're taught to push and prod and make and insist. Rarely are we taught to trust, allow, wait. So let's try this. Beginnings are interesting to say the least. Try, just try, some morning when your little one appears at the car door weepy, fussy, and not her best self, to look into her face and say, "Hey sweetie, it's so wonderful to see you. I trust your day went as it should. If today was not a thrill for you, I know someday soon it will be. Let's have lunch."