



Our Approach to Work at Cornerstone

“Work, work, work! We love the work we do...do you like work like we like the work we do?”

These lyrics are from a song written by a Montessori child many years ago and are a reminder to me – often – of what we strive to support for the children: an environment in which they are free to pursue the work they love!

We are striving for balanced, challenging, and productive work that is interest-driven and self-chosen. Montessori guides and support staff work tirelessly to inspire - and then protect - concentration! A while back a child at Cornerstone had been in deep concentration and was prompted to begin cleaning up for lunch – “What? Already?” he said. The teacher nodded and noted their time was up; with a wistful smile he continued, “Ohhhh... that was like a dream...” *This is the ideal.*

You may have heard of “Flow”; TED introduces the positive psychologist, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi as having “contributed pioneering work to our understanding of happiness, creativity, human fulfillment and the notion of ‘flow’ – a state of heightened focus and immersion in activities such as art, play, and work.” One of the most impactful aspects of a Montessori education is the many opportunities for children to enter the state of flow, or deep concentration.

You will certainly fall into routine and expectations around work with your child in the way that is most natural for you. To the extent that it is supportive or helpful, and that it creates continuity for your child, we offer these key ideas that guide us – at school - in supporting children to this ideal state of deep, satisfying, and happy learning.

What are your child’s **interests**? How can you support that interest being a component of the work? Ask your child – how can we embrace this interest of yours in the work at hand? Be creative! This is the fun part.

What is the **element of choice** in your child’s work? There must be choice for the children – here is a continuum of choice we see in our environments at Cornerstone:

1. **Child chooses independently** and is working contentedly and in deep concentration with no adult direction.
2. Child is not engaged independently and adult prompts, “**What will you choose?**” or “What has your interest today?” or “How would you like to start (continue) your day?” Child chooses an activity and is off...
3. Child is not engaged independently and adult prompts, as above. Child chooses ‘read’ for the third day in a row. Adult prompts, “Are you making sure to **balance your choices?**” Child responds, “...hmmm – not really. My book is so good! I’ll just finish this chapter and then work on fractions. I haven’t done those yet.”

4. Child can't or won't choose with an adult prompt such as the ones above; adult, with a smile, "Well, the one choice we don't have is to choose not to work. Right now, you can **choose between** _____ and _____. Let me know how it is going and when you are done you might be ready to make your own choice for your next work!"
5. Child can't or won't choose between narrowed choices, adult states, "Here is your work." Adult offers **choice of where** to do the work. "Will you do it at the kitchen table or on the rug near the plants?"
6. Child is struggling significantly to accept work and choice. Adult states, "here is your work and work place. **First** you will work for 20 minutes and **then you can choose** which [preferred] activity to do for 10 minutes before your next work."

Build the **intrinsic value** of hard work by what you say and don't say. Often children immediately seek adult approval: "Oh, good job!" "Oh, that's so beautiful!" "You got them all right – you are so smart." We instead want to emphasize the value of hard work and growth and an intrinsic sense of well-being from having worked hard.

- I noticed how long you concentrated. That must have felt so satisfying.
- You stuck with it even after you became frustrated; that kind of approach will take you so far.
- Your whole face is glowing – you must have really enjoyed that work – tell me about it.
- You really embraced that mistake as an opportunity to learn something new –
- That was a struggle. I struggled with my work today, too – we know we grow our brains every time we struggle. 😊 Let's take a break and come back to this with more energy.

Types of Work

- **Big Work** – interest-driven, usually self-chosen, usually project-based work that is on-going. Examples: an extensive air-plane study, planting their own indoor garden, building a Rube Goldberg machine, Minnesota to the World project (introduced by the guide with the element of choice, as we do when we are expanding the children's ideas for great work). Does your child like to sew? What about stitching and symbolizing a short poem – what an amazing month-long project to take up now and then!
- **Follow On Work** – this is work inspired by a presentation; it is expected that children practice what has been presented
- **Daily Practice work** – math fluency, spelling, handwriting, etc.
- **Standards-based, required work.** This can be big work, follow-on work, or daily practice. This is work the children must complete to meet the Minnesota state standards and there is a 'have-to' component.
- Last, but definitely not least is **Community Work** – the equivalent of this while children are at home is the work of the home the guides wrote about last week – taking part in the daily activities of living, food planning and preparation, laundry, special projects, helping a younger sibling, caring for a pet, working in the yard...

The corresponding responsibilities to the Freedom to Choose Work

1. Work Journal – child records all work choices in their work journal effectively documenting the use of time each day.

2. Child-Teacher Conferences – with the work journal and work in front of them, the guide and child engage in mini-conferences approximately bi-weekly (more or less depending on child's level of independence) to review work, balance, challenge, productivity, and necessary things to address.
3. Accountability to State Standards – the children know there are certain skills they simply have to practice and know.

Priorities During Distance Learning

The guides will be giving you general guidelines about how much time it is good to spend on these different types of work – to create balance. We all wanted you to know, however, that the priority is your child being engaged in something they find interesting that supports independent thinking and the use of their amazing reasoning minds. If your child is doing that, treasure those moments and carve out the time for 'flow'! The rest can be addressed on those days when your child needs a bit more structure.