

Nancy Lechner, AMI trainer:

“No, it's not your option!”

Nancy Lechner, AMI trainer: You should trust the potential of the child

You should work towards the child's potential.

The workshop given by Nancy Lechner, an AMI trainer from California, took three days and was filled with amazing stories from the lives of children with special needs.

Nancy is sparkling with optimism; she is an enthusiast of the Montessori method and a true professional. Nancy gives parents and teachers theory, shows charts, quotes Maria Montessori, but her own personal stories are the most impressive, they are from that kind of life stories that are remembered for a long time, or even forever.

Nancy is sure that new technologies will help people with disabilities more and more. Wonderful programs and gadgets have already appeared. Nancy recalls that she recently communicated with a deaf and blind woman. They talked for a few hours at the party! How was it possible?! Deaf and blind lady typed in Braille, the text was instantly transformed and Nancy received a message in English. Nancy typed the answer, and the lady read it in Braille.

When the workshop was over Nancy kindly agreed to give an interview, we discussed the story about the deaf and blind lady once again. I must say that the continuation of the story turned out to be no less fantastic than its beginning.

But the most amazing stories that Nancy shares are of course about Patrick, her son. Patrick has a severe cerebral palsy and he cannot walk. But he can crawl.

- I did not allow him to take the attitude: "I am weak, I can not do it!" always telling him: “No, is not an option!”

Then Nancy tells a story about the way her children, Angela and Patrick, washed the dishes together. Angela - the older sister - did not want to do all the work herself. Patrick decided to help. But how? And they figured out the way. Angela washed the plate and gave it to Patrick, who dried the plate with a tea towel, sitting at her sister's feet, and put the plate into a special cabinet located just above the floor where Patrick could reach.

At this moment tall and big-boned Nancy who is wearing black pants gets on all fours. She begins to crawl, pushing the saucer in front of her and it slides on the marble floor.

- This is the way Patrick helped to set the table. He pushed the dishes to the table, and then put them on the surface. I figured out a better way quickly and gave Patrick a basket so he could bring several items at once.

Nancy gets up and brushes her pants:

- No, this is not your option! This is one of Patrick's rules.

Patrick went to a Montessori school with ordinary children. They did sports and went on hikes together. By the time of the graduation Nancy's son has tried a lot of sports – he did snorkeling, canoeing and kayaking, mountain climbing, skateboarding together with his friend and even horseback riding! Not every healthy adult would dare to try them.

— I'm against hyper protection, - says Nancy. Parents should remember that every child is born with a great potential. We should develop the child's potential and work towards it but not try to correct the things the child cannot do.

We talked with Nancy Lechner after the workshop:

Nancy, why is the Montessori method good for children with special needs?

Firstly, in Montessori classes we have children of mixed ages. The older the child, the more information he is willing to share with his younger classmate. It gives the younger child strength.

Secondly, we use individual approach. Every child works at his or her own pace. There is no average time for accomplishing a task. Thirdly, functionality. Children learn better when they have real materials, not toys. Compare a wooden banana and a real fruit. Fourthly, independence as a purpose. The children are taught to make a choice and be responsible for it. Fifthly, we go from concrete to abstract. Sixthly, the use of the multisensorial materials. You can not only see them but hear and touch them. Seventhly, the respectful attitude. Nowadays the world lacks respect we need to care about little things. For example, you can say a lot about a person by the way he or she moves a chair when leaving the table.

At this moment Nancy stands up and takes the back of the chair. First she moves it quietly and nicely. Then moves it with effort and a lot of noise.

- Is there any difference? – Nancy laughs. Montessori is a rich and universal system and traditional system treats all the alike.

You remarked that the world lacks respect. Why do you think so?

People stare at their gadgets, children play those horrible games, people stopped communicating with each other. The world of politics in many countries does not consider such a category as respect. The approach “divide and conquer” is more relevant. Montessori spoke a lot about the future of our world. She also said that the child is the father of the man. She dreamed about the party of peace. She spoke about unification instead of separation. When she was asked: “What race do you belong to?” She answered “Human”. Then she was asked: “Where were you born?” She answered “On the planet Earth.” And the pace of life is so fast that people just do not think about the most simple things like moving a chair quietly or greet each other courteously.

Do you think it’s a good idea to include the children with special needs into traditional schools or kindergartens?

Of course yes!

What experience do children receive when communicating with children with special needs?

The children forgive and accept other people easily. The earlier they find themselves in such a situation the more probable they will become understanding adults. The children who used to attend the Montessori school together with my son say: “He is just like us, he is normal, he just cannot walk”. Communicating with this child helped other children to be more accepting and wiser.

How should we work with the parents of ordinary children so they are not afraid and even willing to send their children to inclusive classrooms?

To tell the truth I do not have such experience. I never had to speak to parents about it. But the parents of children who used to go to school with Patrick thanked me for the opportunity to study with my son very often. When I worked in a Montessori school, both my children attended it free of charge. Then the rules changed and only one child could attend it for free. So the parents decided to share the cost and pay for Patrick and they had been paying for his studies for several years. When computers appeared, the parents bought a computer for Patrick. These people really wanted Patrick to stay at school.

You mentioned several times during your workshop that there appear more people with special needs. Why do you think so?

Medical technologies are developing really fast. Now it is possible to save the babies born premature. Not long ago a baby was considered viable if she was born after 28 week. Now the term reduced to 24 weeks. There is no great hope that all the organs and systems will be developed normally and such children will probably have problems with health.

Nancy, do you want to write a book about your experience?

I will probably leave the writing part to my son. Now he is working on the autobiography of a person with special needs who grew up among ordinary children. He e-mails with writers all around the world and even helps them to edit their books.

You told a story about your communication with blind and deaf woman. I wonder what were you talking about?

(Nancy thinks for a second and then laughs).

We were talking about sailing and about gardening. We met at a party at the sailing club.

Does that mean that a blind and deaf woman sails?

Oh, she has a wonderful husband! He owns a big yacht. She told me what she feels when they go into the ocean, how she feels the force of nature.

And she grows flowers in her garden, right?

Yes, she does her best.

I know you are very fond of sailing. What is your greatest achievement in this sphere?

Once I was hired as part of the crew of a 40-meter yacht which was sailing around the world. I sailed from the Hawaii to San Francisco. It was more than 3700 kilometers.

The USA and the countries of the former Soviet Union are two different planets in my opinion. Do you hope the seeds you sow now will germinate well?

We should hope! I need to say that things are not that well in my country. For example, president Trump and his team tried to cut the budget of the International Special Olympics. They met bitter resistance of the public and Trump had to cancel that initiative. The head of the Special Olympics was on TV saying that they are as important for the people of special needs as the inclusion at school.

Nancy, how in your opinion will the children with special needs live in a hundred years?

I'm sure we will not degrade. There will be new activists, the so called advocates of the childhood. New technologies are meant to make the lives of the people with special needs easier. They already do wonders.

And finally the most important question: where can the parents draw strength?

Oh, that is very simple! Listen attentively: you need to take care of the caregiver first before he starts give care. You should take care of your physical and emotional health. Think about yourself in the first place. It's like on the plane: you put the oxygen mask on before helping the child. Not the other way round!

We need to tell the parents that they should take care of their well-being so they can help the child. Because we need to give the best to the child.

Yanina Zheltok