

Learning for Life: a Waldorf Approach to the Young Child

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It is a privilege and joy to work with the young child. This work is inspired by the idea that the child comes into this earthly world from a spiritual realm with a purpose, an intense will to fulfill some destiny. And the child brings along with it part of the spiritual world. Wordsworth says it so beautifully:

*Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting;
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home:
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!*

(Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood)

Unlike the little mice that scurry about my house these days, and who are, within a few days of birth, able to forage for crumbs, climb into my compost and, in several weeks are able to reproduce their own kind, we humans need many years to develop our full potential.

It is said that we renew our physical bodies every seven years, that cells are renewed, (although I know that my brain cells are not!) What about the first seven years of life? The children are still making their bodies! What a lot of work! They are aided in this by what Rudolf Steiner (1865-1925), the founder of the Waldorf School Movement calls "formative life forces" or the "etheric body". These forces are the most creative, wondrous artists, sculpting, forming, shaping, enlivening the organs of the child. They help the child in the most remarkable events: standing, walking at about one, uttering, babbling, speaking whole sentences...the beginning of the mastery of language by two, and the beginnings of thought (recall back to our first memories) at three! A lot of learning.

These growth forces are, according to Steiner, gradually released, freed from their work forming the physical and become available as imagination, memory and intellect. An outward sign that they have partially completed their work of "body building" is the pushing down of the second teeth. These second teeth are the hardest, densest part of our bodies. So the change of teeth becomes a signpost (amongst others) of a readiness to now develop imagination, memory and intellect in school.

Recognizing this, Waldorf parents and teachers of the preschool child try to protect the natural unfolding of the child.

Our goal in the Waldorf Nursery-Kindergarten is not to coach children for first grade but to prepare them for life. We aim to help develop qualities that will flourish in their 20's, 30's, 40's... indeed will help to shape the whole of life.

What are the human qualities we most cherish? Which will best serve humanity, the earth? We all value different qualities but we could agree that we hope our children will become adults with a healthy physical constitution, sensitivity and warmth of feeling, clear and creative thinking, strength of will, and perseverance.

Rudolf Steiner, spoke of the young child before the age of seven as having a remarkable capacity for imitation. The very young child is like a sponge, absorbing, taking in everything that comes to it from its environment. He says that "the child 'prays' to its environment". It has an ability to take up, even within its physical organs, influences from its surroundings. He speaks of a young child's "unconscious participation in the world". The child cannot, as an adult can, be selective in this participation; it cannot choose which influences it allows to affect its being. This is where our responsibility as parents and educators is so awesome. Even the thoughts, the feelings of adults around the child can be sensed. In its incredible openness, the child, without discrimination, accepts and imitates what is offered.

Steiner points out:

"As long as the child is an imitative religious being, admonitions are of no avail. Words can only be listened to when the soul is to some extent emancipated, and can direct attention to itself. What does help us is what we ourselves do in the presence of the child....But our actions must contain a moral quality....The child sees these {moral qualities}even if only unconsciously, and we must see to it that in the presence of the child we not only do no actions which he should not imitate, but that we think no thoughts which should not have entry into the child's soul. This education through thinking is the most important thing of all during the first seven years of life, and we must not allow ourselves to think any impure, ugly or angry thoughts when we are with little children." (from The Roots of Education, Bern April 1924.)

Consequently, our main task is to provide an environment: gestures, sounds, deeds, thoughts, feelings, that are nurturing and worthy of imitation. Education for the first years of life should consist mainly in self education.

Most every mother, every father is filled with love for his or her child. This love, this joy is the gift the child needs most. It blends with the spiritual forces surrounding the child; it feeds the life forces.



In the Waldorf kindergarten, we pay particular attention to what the children experience through their senses. Thus we are attentive to the esthetic environment of the classroom with its warm, colors, orderly space, and playthings from natural materials. We acknowledge how deeply sounds enter the child's being, and we seek to keep our speech clear and our gestures harmonious.

We value the diversity, beauty, and nurturing qualities of the natural world: the earth with its textures, the forms of plant life, the changing manifestations of the seasons, the curling of a crisp autumn leaf, the soggy mud puddle. We want the children to experience this world as much as possible in its true and unadulterated state. So we offer outdoors experiences where children can sift the earth through their hands, play in leaves, gather acorns, observe a daddy long-legs creeping over a root, watch a snowflake land on a dark mitten, joyfully slosh in slush. We try not to point and direct, to explain, for then the focus is on our words and our intellectual perception of the world. We allow the child the space to see, to experience. We try to foster his or her natural sense of wonder.

Into the kindergarten classroom we bring aspects of the changing seasons. Our activities, stories, puppet plays, songs and verses, reflect what is happening outside. In the early autumn, we cherish the apple. What an abundance of applesauce we make! Then there is the grinding of grain, of wheat and corn, and kneading it into dough. Mother Earth is an important character. She gathers the seeds. The earth gnomes prepare the soil. And then King Winter, summons the snowflakes and the woodcutter tromps through the snow. In the spring, of course, the sleeping blossoms are awakened by the sun fairies. The shepherds pipe and we sing songs of sheep shearing and take up carding and spinning.

The child imitates, yes. And so, through the repetition of a pattern of activities, through rhythm, the child learns. This is the basis of memory at this age. What I did yesterday I do again today. In the kindergarten we begin with free play, household chores, some artistic activities. We tidy. We come to circle. We wash hands, say a verse, have snack, put on outside shoes, go to the toilet, put on coats, go outside, return, put on inside shoes, rest, have story, say good-by, all in a rhythmic order. The children know what comes next, and so discipline is really following the rhythm. Thus the child feels secure and safe within this order.

Within the framework of “the expected” and a safe and secure environment lies the most important activity of the kindergarten. This is free play. Children can take up materials, create environments, with great freedom. The materials are unstructured, unformed. They consist of: baskets of colored cotton cloths, chunks of wood, curved wooden boards, stools, tables, pine cones, corn cobs, shells, stones, simple soft dolls and animals. The children shape them, move them, build them into worlds of their own creation. Children work together, moving bridges, creating homes, shops, trains, and so develop their social sense. The child experiences “what I decide to do in this environment, I can achieve.” This builds a sense of self, and forges the will.

The children inspire each other. The teacher can facilitate by setting up little environments or by initiating play with them. But this free play is the child’s work. And we teachers are busy with our practical tasks: sewing, chopping vegetables, stirring the dough, grinding...practical activities that the children can freely engage in and imitate. My hands are busy, but all the while, my eyes are almost everywhere, observing what is going on, ready to avert danger, to dissipate a brewing conflict, to subtly encourage a child. We also allow the children to just “stop and stare”. It is a worthy activity. Children need the freedom to enter play in an organic way.

During free play, the children are imagining situations. They are exercising their ability of inner picturing. A curved chunk of wood becomes a telephone, a corn cob a baby's bottle or a sword. Steiner speaks of the importance of the simple doll:

"You can make a doll for a child by folding up an old napkin and painting eyes, nose, and mouth with blobs of ink.... if the child has before him the folded napkin, has to fill in with his own imagination all that is need to make it real and human. This work of the imagination molds and builds the forms of the brain. The brain unfolds as the muscles of the hands unfold as they do the work for which they are fitted. Give the child the so-called 'pretty' doll, and the brain has nothing more to do. Instead of unfolding, it becomes stunted and dried up."

[in *The Education of the Child*, Anthroposophic Press, New York].

In the modern family, we can make the same contrast of family story-telling with television as means of bringing experiences to the child. The story encourages the work of the child's imagination, while television provides a pre-assembled set of images, to which the child remains a passive consumer.

The nature of imaginative play varies with the age of the child. The two year old will become completely absorbed in a dreamlike way with surrounding objects. She will pick it up a spoon, move it, drop it, will be fascinated by the sounds, the weight, the texture. The three year old endows objects with qualities. A stick is transformed into a pet dog or a car. Already the four year olds begin to develop socially. Working together, they create environments: homes with bunk beds and babies, hairdressing shops, with hair rollers and barber chairs. The five year olds make quite complex plans, and will use the objects in the class to fulfill and carry out their inner picture of what they might create.

By the age of six, children can hold within them an inner picture without the aid of physical props. After this is when the child is ready for first grade.

Because of the critical importance of creative play in the first seven years, the Waldorf pedagogy reserves formal instruction for the grades.

In free play, each child creates, moves, relates to materials and others in a unique and entirely individual way. It is fascinating to watch each child's problem solving. Steiner speaks specifically of how the future thinking ability, indeed, the approach to life of the adult can be prefigured in the free play of the child before age seven. In a lecture in Basel in 1920, he said:

"The individual character of the child as shown in play up to the age of 7 reappears in the special character of its independent judgment after the 20th year... What I do now with the child will form the man beyond his 20th year, and you see from this that one must understand the whole, the complete course of life, not merely the age of childhood, if one wants to build up a real art of education."