
Children Learning to Work: Privilege or Punishment?

— Barbara Klocek

As Waldorf kindergarten teachers, we strive to imbue our work in the classroom with reverence and meaning. Even simple tasks, such as washing off the tables, can be done in a loving, gentle manner or in a rough hurry. Through these tasks, we provide a model for the children as they learn to care for their world.

However, in my visits to many kindergartens as a mentor, I have sometimes found that when the children misbehave, work is given as a punishment. On the one hand, doing meaningful, purposeful, physical tasks has a centering and calming effect on both children and adults. However, when it is given to the children as a consequence of misbehaving, it takes on the quality of punishment and becomes something to be avoided. In one kindergarten, several of the children had grown to love the day that they “got” to help clean up after snack and help with the dishes. When some of the rowdy boys were kept in to help as punishment, their rebellious attitude spilled into the clean up and the experience of “chores” then became one that all the children wanted to avoid. Is work something to embrace with enthusiasm or is it punishment?

How can we bring work into the kindergarten that engenders the mood of cooperation and the joy of working together for a common good? We can begin with warm enthusiasm for the work itself and for the opportunity to learn new skills. The young child has a natural inclination to imitate, to want to help, and to learn about caring for the world. By providing opportunities for them to practice, with a friend or the group, as part of the daily rhythm, they develop skills and confidence in their part in creating a lovely space. For the younger children self-care, such as learning how to put on shoes, zipping up coats, and hanging up their hats is their first work. In September, one of my new students who had just turned five, put out her foot and proclaimed loudly, “Put on my shoes!” I told her that in kindergarten she gets to put on her own shoes, and took the time and opportunity to help her learn the steps. Within a short time she was quite proud of this new skill.

How can we bring the many tasks of caring for the kindergarten into a form in which the children willingly participate? Once again, the wise advice from

Rudolf Steiner that “rhythm replaces strength” comes to our aid. By placing into our rhythm designated times and ways of caring for the classroom, the children rotate through the tasks with a friend or two and learn the joy and satisfaction of working together.

The temptation is often to just do it ourselves. Initially this may be easier, but in the long run we are not teaching the children but doing for them. One of my main goals was not to do for the children what they could do for themselves. I wanted to teach them many skills that would be helpful, as well as build habits that would support them. This included putting on and tying shoes (the more skilled children can help the ones who can’t yet manage). It could also include pouring and carrying water, washing dishes, tidying up things, and washing and drying the tables. I also wanted them to practice overcoming their resistance to following the teacher’s direction. We know that this resistance is a part of a developmental stage, of being six years old and wanting to be the “boss.” It is very important to practice being part of a group, learning to listen to an adult’s directions and to go with the “flow.”

In the nursery and preschool, the flow of cleanup time can carry the children in an organic way. Often they can easily imitate the teacher’s gesture and participate in a dreamy manner. As the children move from five-and-a-half to seven, there may be a need to bring a different gesture of leading with enthusiasm and firmness. This “adolescence of childhood” engenders a sense of individuality that usually manifests as saying “no.” We know that this resistance is a part of being a six-year-old and wanting to be the “boss,” and we need to meet it with warmth and sometimes clear consequences.

How does this look in practice?

Every Monday morning after circle, I would sit at the table with all of the older children and we would fold the laundry for the week. This was a calming activity and allowed the younger children time to enter into play at their own pace. Other days, after circle, some children (who I could see needed some holding) were chosen to be bakers or to chop vegetables. Perhaps it was their turn to work on their sanding, finger knitting, or sewing.

During free play it is helpful to have tasks that are easily accessible, to bring a calming gesture to chaotic play. One classroom has several little bags filled with cloths to clean crayons, or polishing cloths for the chairs and tables. Perhaps the napkins need to be counted and folded or bowls brought to the table. One little boy had a hard time sustaining his play but he would be happy to spend a little time “dusting” as a time for him to calm down and focus. To be redirected in this way, when the chaos is first noticed, can defuse tense situations. Of course, the teacher also would help to resolve issues between children.

The most important quality with which to surround work is warmth: the warmth of our love for the children, the warmth of enthusiasm for the task as well as for teaching the skills to accomplish it, the warmth of our words.

Before cleanup time started, every day, I sang, “Six-year-olds.” The six-year-olds were all expected to come out of play and help carry the bowls, cups, spoons, napkins, spill towels, and pitchers of water to the table. This eased the transition out of play into cleanup time. Often the six-year-olds bring a resistance that needs to be consciously worked with rhythmically within the day, acknowledging their status as the “older children.” After the six-year-olds had done the “carrying for setting the table,” we gathered as I sat on a chair at the story rug and had our “house elves” or the “little ones” tell a little story about their adventures around the kindergarten when no one was there. This was a wonderful opportunity for spontaneous “pedagogical” stories. It created a pause in the day, when everyone was seated near me on the floor, which then led into cleanup time. Initially when I was teaching, this was the most chaotic time, with me urging the children to clean up wherever they were. Calling the children out of play to gather for a little story made the transition into helping to clean up much smoother.

My daily cleanup time was an integral part of learning to work together. I found that it worked best for me if everyone had a certain job they did for three to four weeks. I had chores for all of the children, often pairing an older and younger child, or two children I hoped would become friends. In this way I could help create a wonderful social weaving between the children.

Cleanup time included the chores of: putting away blocks (2 children), folding silks (2), folding big cloths/sheets (2), sweeping out the cubbies (2), filling the dish washing dish tubs (a great job for restless children to

help them learn to focus), tidying up the puppets (1-2), putting away the marble run (2), tidying up the children’s kitchen area (2), cleaning the indoor sand box (1-2), tidy the loft (1), tidy under the loft (2), other corners to tidy (2), pouring water from a pitcher into cups wjth another helper to carry the cups to each place (2). These last two would then both wipe up the drips and put a napkin at each place. I also had two cleaners who each day asked what was to be cleaned. In this way we rotated through the room and cleaned all the various areas: the loft, under the loft, the nature table, etc. One can create one’s own way of forming cleanup time, but often it is easiest if there is a consistency in how it is done.

When the children had finished their jobs, I had taught them to ask what they could do next. The younger children who finished their chores were sent to wash their hands and rest on the rug for a bit of quiet time. Some of the older children would help others or would ask to be scouts. They loved to “scout” the room for something out of place. This was a cherished job.

As we finished snack, a few children at a time were excused to wash their dishes using a dish tub, then a rinse tub and a tub for holding the bowls. A little song helped them remember the task, “Swish, swish and round about. Swish, swish and round about. Dip it once, dip it twice, turn it upside down, that’s nice.” This was a first wash, but it served as a daily practice of cleaning.

After snack we went out to recess. Two children were chosen to help wash the dishes again and two washed and dried the tables and set up the chairs for the next activity. This gave me an opportunity to work with a very small group, to encourage friendships between them or to keep them constructively involved while the other children were in the cubbies or finding their way into outside play. These helpers would then love to help with the setting up of the story time, the puppet show or the play. Again this gave me time to work in a more intimate way to develop my relationships with and between the children.

We had lunch after story time. Often some of the children would ask if they could help clean up the puppet show or play after they had finished eating. They were delighted to have this opportunity and in a few minutes, everything was back in its place. After lunch, several children would be chosen to help wash off the tables and put up the chairs. How quickly and easily the work could be done!

I realized, after many years of doing it myself, that the children could help pack away the classroom for the summer. They loved to be part of this process. I spent the last two weeks of school, having the children help me to pack up the kindergarten. We oiled all the wooden objects and carefully put them in boxes. We washed the windows and floor and all enjoyed shaking out the rugs and washing the baby doll clothes. It was music to my ears to hear them say enthusiastically, “I love to help.” ♦

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