
Companioning Our Children: A Tribute and Thanks to Henning Köhler as Guide

— Nancy Blanning

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The world of Waldorf education recently marked the passing into the spiritual world of “the warm philosopher of childhood,” Henning Köhler. He was born in Germany in 1951 and first encountered the ideas of Rudolf Steiner during a one-year curative education internship at Haus Sonne (Saarland) while in his early twenties. He ultimately became a clinical therapeutic educator and counselor.

A tribute to Köhler from the German Anthroposophical newsletter described that he did not speak of weaknesses and problems, but rather of “new talent profiles” in children. “We want to help children bring out the strengths and beauties of their nature, even under adverse conditions, and integrate their weaknesses in such a way that they do not become an obstacle to their lives.”

He is best known to Waldorf education through his two books in English translation: *Working with Anxious, Nervous and Depressed Children and Difficult Children: There Is No Such Thing*.

These works have helped to open up a compassionate and non-judgmental path to understanding and working with challenging behaviors in children.

Working with Anxious, Nervous and Depressed Children (fondly referred to as the Pink Book), is a key to understanding the impact of the foundational senses on physical, social and moral development of the child. This book further reveals the profound impact that the quality of our observing attention has upon the child. Köhler also advises how to work with the child’s angel.

In his second book, *Difficult Children: There Is No Such Thing*, Köhler asks us to recognize that understanding another human being is a creative, artistic process and, further, to consider the idea of parenting and education as an initiatory experience. He introduces and describes in detail the four central concepts of this process: protecting, accompanying, comforting, and healing. He awakens anew the awe we feel in the presence of children who are bringing

us fresh messages from the spiritual world and are trusting us to help them solve the riddles of this earthly life.

When thinking upon these works, a word that immediately comes to mind is “companion.” The picture of accompanying the child into earthly life helps us to understand the intentions of Rudolf Steiner in forming Waldorf education and of Karl König in implementing Steiner’s insights regarding education for special needs through the Camphill communities.

This understanding affirms that each child, each human being, has come into physical life with the intention to experience, grow, and learn, both for the sake of individual development and to serve societal growth toward goodness, beauty, and truth. In our times, we see many children who have accepted coming into our world even if it means facing challenges and difficulties. The world is not conducive to healthy development, but these children want and need to be here now to help us liberate the earth and ourselves from rigid, cold, materialistic concepts and attitudes that dominate our thinking. They have come to us, choosing us to be their loving companions who will accompany them on this life’s journey.

Each child comes to tell us something important. It has been said that everything a child does, all behavior, is communication. Actions, moods, celebrations, and frustrations are also their means of speech. Our children come to us, trusting that we will accept and understand what they are wishing to tell us about their experience in being on this earth. This communication can come to us as uneasy signs of distress, often described as “challenging behavior.” If we are baffled and frustrated in these difficult times, our response may be to become firm, authoritarian, even harsh. Usually everyone ends up unhappy and isolated from each other.

Köhler offers a different path. Instead of seeing “misbehavior,” Köhler urges us to receive the child as a mystery-of-transformation struggling to unfold. All of us—adults as well as children—are in a process of becoming. A beautiful butterfly lies hidden within each of us. But the caterpillar in the crusty, drab brown

chrysalis has to turn into green “goop” before it can emerge as the glorious butterfly. It has to struggle out of its tight imprisonment by bursting the chrysalis open. This process cannot be forced or hurried but must be allowed to proceed according to its own pace and inherent wisdom. These seeming prohibitions can make us feel powerless, that we can do nothing.

But bearing witness, accompanying, comforting through silent caring, and patient waiting are also forms of doing that carry unacknowledged power. Köhler states that what matters is that we allow time for the mystery to unfold. “We must stand at the child’s side with a waiting attitude, simply be there, patient” (Köhler, *Difficult Children: There is No Such Thing*).

In his therapeutic educator role, parents came to Köhler for advice on how to change their child’s difficult behaviors. He gave lectures and advice in a surprising way. He counseled the parents upon how to change themselves. We can try to change a child according to our will. But the only change we can truly control is how we respond ourselves. We can work to change our perception of what we see and hear and how we respond. And how do we do that? “We must stand at the child’s side with a waiting attitude, simply be there, patient.” While he gave practical advice about how to meet hard situations, he directed parents, other caregivers, and teachers to work in spiritual contemplation and conversation with the child’s angel. Out of this effort can arise the inspirations that are the “gifts of the night.”

Countless children and families were blessed by Köhler’s warm, compassionate holding. His books give practical and subtle insight into children’s sensory development and how incomplete and unreliable sensing makes their behavior difficult to respond to. He locates the cause of challenging behavior in incomplete development and inefficient sensory functioning, as the responsibility of the child.

In the long term, Köhler counseled to open the heart to feel and hear, to be still. Practice patience. Companion. Accompany. Köhler encouraged parents and teachers to accept the mystery-of-the-other as the starting place. Then the door to understanding—perhaps only with the heart and maybe not with the head—can begin to open because the other feels accepted and companioned rather than judged.

Köhler affirmed that growth and development is a series of births. Sometimes this is tranquil and quietly happening without our conscious awareness. Sometimes the labor of this process is intense. The contractions are hard and painful. The transition stage of labor is usually the hardest to endure. The advice is “Keep breathing. It will pass.” Within each challenging moment a new being—thus far hidden or in disguise—is coming, a being who can be welcomed and celebrated as a miracle.

Henning Köhler was truly the “warm philosopher of childhood.” May his words continue to companion us all. ♦