

The Afternoon Program: Working on Inner Quiet and Other Benefits of This Work

— Aniko Gereb



The active and full morning hours of the kindergarten are naturally followed by a quiet, rest-oriented, intimate time. This creates a warm, home-like atmosphere where the children can digest the sensory, physical, social and emotional events of the day, a place to relax in a warm, safe environment filled with love and acceptance. The main focus is on helping the children achieve and maintain inner quiet through being in a reverent and safe space held for them by the caregiver. Falling asleep may be the end result of this state.

The setting in the room must be different from the morning time. The children enter into a new “dimension.” The curtains are drawn, the lights are dimmed, the room is warm but freshly aired, and mats are set out in a circular pattern. This new scene inspires a slower and quieter pace. Young children like to have clear routines

and rituals around rest time so they can relax into the experience. The time before nap-time is important. There are no surprises, choices, or changes, and no competitions.

Ideally, the children have a long outside playtime before lunch and rest. It is important for them to play as freely as possible in the natural world. Susan R. Johnson, in "Sleep Article II," reports Dr. Michaela Glöckler's explanation that "[h]ow we live our waking life determines the quality and depth of our sleep. It also determines our ability to be nurtured by the cosmos during our sleep . . . Just as we need to fully exhale in order to fully inhale . . . we also need to be fully conscious (awake) to the events of our day in order to have a deeper and more restful sleep." The children are fully awake after the rich experience of a wonderful and busy kindergarten morning with a lot of time in nature. Our deeply ingrained transition song brings the children into the transformed classroom. Outdoor clothes and shoes are removed and placed just so to create a routine that educates the will and keeps the room in order.

A quiet and friendly lunchtime follows. Finger games and songs with music from the kinderharp support this mood. When lunch is finished, the children are dismissed one by one to their beds.

As mentioned above, the beds are set in a circle. It is important that the children rest in the same, special place each time. They lie with their heads towards the center and feet at the periphery. A beautiful image is created: the children of the Sun, each of them being a sunbeam, shining from the center to the periphery. The caregiver tucks them in and recites a little verse: "The moon is round, the moon is round, it has two eyes, one nose, but no sound." This can also be personalized for each child using the color of their eyes. This is very soothing for most children. But if a child does not like it, perhaps instead a gentle pat on the shoulder or a foot rub will be welcomed. Quiet singing of a lullaby can proceed, or a story that was not told earlier. Then the gentle playing of the harp can take over. This can be a simple tone in the mood



of the fifth, preferably the small lemniscate.

All this time the caregiver is on the rug at the children's level. If the caregiver can really feel restful at this time, this significantly helps children go to sleep. A caregiver who is restless or preoccupied with other thoughts will impede the children's ability to feel relaxed. Now is a good moment for the caregiver to take the time and rest her thoughts on each child with interest and warmth. Picture some great moment captured from that child that very morning, or maybe openly picture the behavior problem they may have presented and let the partnership be formed with the child's angel. These can be the most profound and intimate problem-solving moments, but the caregiver has to be fully present for that to happen.

Lisa Gromicko, in "Toward Human Development: The Physiological Basis for Sleep," quotes both Rudolf Steiner and Waldorf teacher Audrey McAllen in stressing the importance of sleep to healthy development.

"Before age nine, the most important thing is for children to learn how to properly sleep" (Steiner). Audrey McAllen describes sleeping as a "breathing rhythm between the soul-spirit and the earthly body." She adds that learning to sleep and learning to eat, "to take in substance and transform it, an action of the



ego” are the two most “important educational factors” in the life of the young child. As we have seen, the transformation of substance, whether it is through the digestion of food or sensory impressions occurs on the physiologic level by way of the liver metabolism during sleep. How do we teach children to sleep properly? The breathing image given by Audrey McAllen is the key. Learning to sleep is learning to breathe. Without rest, the human being is continually breathing in. We are really speaking about a rhythmic function. Rhythm is living, breathing, life giving, never exactly the same, but regular. The young child’s rhythmic (cardiovascular) system is not yet developed, but the health and building up of the entire physiology depends upon rhythm. Rhythm must be imprinted in the early years from without

(from *The Developing Child: The First Seven Years*, edited by Susan Howard).

The child learns how to sleep by living around adults who appreciate the importance of sleep. For some children, we need to invest significantly more effort to help them learn these rhythms and to balance and overcome restlessness. Citing Norbert Glas, Gromicko also notes that “Although some may not sleep, all children including non-sleepers benefit from an enforced rest-time. Being able to pause (to be

still and quiet) is a skill that eludes even many adults. Children need desperately to learn this... the quality of sense impressions that are ingested during the day also have a tremendous influence on the child’s ability to sleep or rest” (ibid.). We have plenty of reasons not to give up on any children by labeling them as non-sleepers or letting them do something other than rest. As always, a fair amount of firm, inner conviction is required of the caregiver to secure for the child what he needs. The conditions in a Waldorf School may not always be ideal to run a quiet time in the afternoon. The “school being” is still very

lively around 1:00 to 1:30. It is very important for the caregiver who is holding the group to be comfortable with this. It totally depends on her reactions to any outside noises (recess, colleagues’ or parents’ voices, other class activities such as eurythmy, strings, singing, or movement) for the group to stay calm and peaceful and not react. As we always say, “You are the one who makes the weather.” The children will completely follow every single inner reaction or mood of the teacher. Therefore, we are able to create whatever we wish for the group. Usually, it is not necessary to fix our surroundings in order to have ideal conditions; it needs to come from our inner self. It is always helpful to eliminate any extreme disturbances but never try to mute “the crickets in the meadow.” The children will get used to the existing conditions.

The psychologist Daria M. Brezinski has said: “An essential key to creative intelligence is to be allowed to go to quiet places or quiet time and just BE or allow the mind to drift off, staring into space. When a child appears to have a blank stare or the gaze seems empty, the blank or ‘far off’ look is the brain synapses getting in touch with creative intelligence, making important connections. It is connecting synapses and discordant thoughts into a whole, putting the puzzle



pieces together . . . Allow time for a child's quiet space . . . When a child is calm, they become more sensitive to the finer qualities of life."

Our role is to teach children to breathe, to be quiet and peaceful, to learn to feel good and secure in their physical body, to feel that the world is a good and safe place, where they can relax and open themselves to everything that may come, letting their soul and spirit breathe and connect. If we are able to put this into practice, then we really have accomplished our job in respect to the incarnating child.

Sleep will follow from this quiet place as a response of the healthy physical body, in a perfectly predictable rhythm and routine. As Rudolf Steiner said in *A Modern Art of Education*, "In our modern civilization, where all eyes concentrate on outer, material things, no attention is given to the state of sleep, although man devotes to it one third of his daily life. Never should it be thought that man is inactive while he sleeps. He is inactive only in so far as the outer external world is concerned but as regards to the health of his body, and more especially in the health of his soul and spirit, sleep is all important. True education can provide for a right life of sleep, for whatever activities belong to a man's waking hours are carried over into the condition of sleep."

As we all know, the early growth years are crucial, and the only time physical growth occurs is during sleep time. Sleep is the only time that the body restores and renews its forces from the demands of the day. During the busy mornings in the kindergarten we are working continually on the development of the four lower senses. What the children receive through the senses during sleep will be literally digested through the metabolism and will become the child's physical body, forming the organs, brain-nerve-sense pathways, endocrine system, circulatory-rhythmic system, digestion and the entire physical construction. This occurs under the direction of the ego through the etheric (life) forces. The etheric forces give life, form, energy, and health to the body, working strongly with the immune system and contributing to all growth and repair processes. The primary organ of the etheric body is the liver, the organ of the will. The liver's vitalizing, restorative, growth-related processes occur in deep sleep. It is only during sleep that the

nervous system can rest, repair, and rebuild itself. During waking hours there is no possibility for cell growth. According to Rudolf Steiner, “although the overall time spent in sleep is shorter, the evolution of the sleep life is more significant in many respects than that of waking life” (*Understanding Young Children*).

According to Dr. Michaela Glöckler, “in school, children tend to be alert in the morning, but then are all tired out between 1:00 and 2:30 pm when they experience a sharp decline in their physiologic activity. In the later afternoon there is a second peak when they are happy and like to be active, and then a second decline before the later evening when they want to sleep” (*The Developing Child* at 60-61).

Lisa Gromicko’s research further finds:

Naps are extremely beneficial. ‘Long naps occurring at the right times make the child feel rested. . . A missed nap is sleep lost forever’ (citing Marc Weissbluth). Children do not make up their naps at night... Children who do not nap have elevated stress hormones that also cause increased alertness and irritability. The nap should last for at least thirty minutes (an hour is better) and is best spent in a stationary place (not in a car, rocking chair, etc.). Afternoon naps need to end by 2:30 or 3:00 p.m. at the latest... for children, the more regular sleep that they get, the easier it is to fall asleep. ‘Children who are not overtired sleep much better and more quietly at night’ (citing Norbert Glas)... Children ages three to six still need a nap of one to three hours (The Developing Child at 61-62).

Dr. Rebecca Spencer, associate professor of psychology and neuroscience at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, recently published a study of the importance of afternoon naps in preschoolers, which was reported by Alice Park in *Time Magazine* online. Dr. Spencer observed: “a lot is happening in the brain of a slumbering preschooler, including processing and storing memories that are the foundation for learning.” Dr. Spencer also strongly encourages nap opportunities in kindergarten, since her study demonstrates how naps boost cognitive performances in preschoolers. Nap is when neural connections are strengthened, thus cementing abilities acquired during the day. Sleep is imperative for a healthy life, because in the dream state problems are worked out and information is filed away for future reference.

Also important is the rhythm and routine that



follows the nap. The sleep-wake rhythm supports human growth and consciousness. Rhythm is the balance between life processes of rest and movement. The primary organ of the rhythmic system is the heart. Friedrich Husemann and Otto Wolff observed, “In the human heart the earthly and the cosmic are intimately united The human ego experience can develop in freedom experienced within.” As Steiner was known to have advised, “rhythm truly is the carrier of life,” and the reinstatement of rhythm after rest time is critical in the afternoon program and must be done in a natural, gentle and predictable manner. In order to achieve this, the caregiver has to create a transitioning scene and mood by slowly engaging in quiet tidying and domestic activities such as arranging toys, crayons, and dishes, dusting, and the like. At 2:30 pm the caregiver opens the curtains or shutters and gently sings the familiar wake-up song while doing exactly the same activity every day, such as sweeping gently, wiping the tables, or

whatever other activities come naturally with slow and gentle movements, humming or singing, smiling and greeting each awakening child with her eyes.

With gentle hand gestures, the children will know when to join the teacher in the tidying process by folding their own bedding (with help from the teacher or an older child as needed). This is the perfect time to engage the children in quiet chores like watering plants, putting away mats, or using the carpet sweeper. Or someone can simply play the kinderharp, then wrap it and put it safely away.

All these activities entrain behavior through imitation. It takes time to teach children these skills. In our busy, packed, and rushed world parents find little time to teach children properly by modeling these skills and to allow them time to help.

The afternoon continues with some fine-motor activities, a light snack, and further outside play. During this time spent outdoors, the children's energy levels peak, which manifests itself in happy and engaged play until it is time to go home.

The afternoon is the most sacred time of the day in my work with the little ones and their angels, a time when we truly bond as a second family. This is why I want to bring so much consciousness to how this program is carried out and the reasons behind it. ♦

Aniko Gereb is a kindergarten teacher at the Halton Waldorf School in Ontario, Canada. She holds a Bachelor's degree and Masters degree in Applied Science from the Transylvania University of Brasov, Romania, where she also completed psychology and pedagogy courses. In 2012, she completed the Foundation Studies in Anthroposophy at the Rudolf Steiner Center in Toronto and went on to complete her Early Childhood Education teacher training in 2014. She first encountered Waldorf education in 1995 when her firstborn child attended a Waldorf kindergarten in Europe, and since then her family has carried on this spirit. She is devoted to her family, the culinary arts, camping, being outdoors, hiking, canoeing, and taking long and peaceful walks.

Resources:

- Daria M. Brezinski, PhD, "Toys That Develop Creativity and Intelligence" (http://www.naturalnews.com/042901_childhood_development_play_toys_intelligence.html, visited February 13, 2017)
- Norbert Glas, *Conception, Birth, & Early Childhood* (Spring Valley, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1983)
- Susan Howard, ed., *The Developing Child: The First Seven Years* (Spring Valley, NY: WECAN, 2012)
- Friedrich Husemann and Otto Wolff, *The Anthroposophical Approach to Medicine, Vol. 2* (Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1982)
- Susan R. Johnson, MD, *You and Your Child's Health*. <http://www.youandyourchildshealth.org/youandyourchildshealth/articles.html>, visited February 13, 2017
- Audrey E. McAllen, *Sleep* (Gloucestershire, UK: Hawthorne Press, 1981)
- Alice Park, "The Secret to Smarter Kids: Naps" (*Time Magazine*, <http://healthland.time.com/2013/09/23/the-secret-to-smarter-kids-naps/>, visited February 13, 2017)
- Rudolf Steiner, *A Modern Art of Education* (Great Barrington: Steiner Books, 2004)
- Rudolf Steiner, *Understanding Young Children* (Silver Spring: Waldorf Kindergarten Association, 1994)
- Marc Weissbluth, *Healthy Sleep Habits, Happy Child* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1999)

