

Creating a Meadow for Childhood

Education for a New Millennium
What do Young Children Need Today?

by

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A five year-old on parental knee with opened book: "Wait, I haven't seen the picture properly."¹

Another child of the same age is alone in front of a video and, as the pictures race by, accepts the situation silently, passively.

Example and Love

Love and good example are the greatest tools we have as parents and early years' educators. The young child is defenseless, trusting, without judgment or discrimination. Yet this is the time of greatest learning. By three the child has learned the particularly human qualities of walking, talking, and first thinking, and taken the first step in consciousness. "I'm taller than my neck," a three-year-old was heard to say.

What do we offer the child under seven to learn when he can absorb so much so fast? The delicate sense organs are all-embracing; the child absorbs willy-nilly the world around, recreating it through the divine gift of imitation in play, speech, and behavior.

Many children today have had to close themselves off from a world with which they cannot cope by forming a hard, protective shell around their souls. One sees pale, defined faces, almost lumpy. Gone are many true children's faces, soft, round, and rosy with bright eyes shining into the world. Why? What is lacking (or too pervasive) that this has become so?

Children in all strata of society are at risk: poverty and discrimination as well as affluence and over-stimulation create an environment in which children cannot thrive. Urban living exacerbates the effects. All parts of their development are attacked by the harmful influences and images around them. Many children are drowning in a bog of commercialism and media. Speed and greed rule. Uncertainty and confusion abound. One blinks and it's all changed, accelerating so fast that we are left gasping. Too much, too often, too early—strength is sapped.

Do we uphold the need for a proper childhood? Or do we dress children as little adults and plunge them into the realms of adult emotions and intellect in the hope that they will become clever and knowledgeable as early as possible? To what detriment? Research finds that those given early schooling do no better than those starting later. Does entrance into an early childhood curriculum lead them to access information they really need, or would their needs best met by providing a stimulating wholesome environment? Children are our future. How can we help them to face the world today?

Moral Life

Every child has an individual spiritual nature as well as an earthly one; it is up to us to nourish both. Then s/he will be able to stand in the world with courage and responsibility. Working with festivals has a healing quality and deepens children's moral understanding. It helps counteract

the breakdown of traditions and out-of-season peculiarities (e.g., strawberries in winter at the supermarket). Festivals cover every aspect of learning with their preparation and celebration, bringing a magical depth of spiritual and soul experience to both child and parent alike, and adds healing to our world of untruths, cons, and hype. A foundation is laid to help the child withstand later pressures of prestige and temptations such as drugs, smoking, and alcohol. The Waldorf school's daily rituals such as the nondenominational verse and candle lighting at break give the children a sense of occasion and continuity. Celebrating each child's birthday kindles self-respect.

Religious feeling is at the heart of the 0-7-year-old's learning. I am not, of course, linking this with any form of creed or organized religion. Wonder is the basis of their search for knowledge. This quality is disappearing, often replaced by only factual and even useless information, and yet wonder is also vital to the adult. As a six-year-old said, "Heaven is more higher than space." The true scientist must, next to clear analysis, also be a creative wonderer with reverence for life. We must not be gulled into answering all the children's questions! but can be silent and leave space for their own answers, as, for instance with the seven year-old who said: "How can a pyjama case walk? . . . (pause) . . . You mean . . . magic?"

Precocious, hardened children become softened and their senses are opened through our education. We care for the room and garden. Even sawdust goes on the compost heap, as well as apple maggots to finish eating, and we rescue lost worms for the flower bed. Listen to this: four-to-six-year-olds weeding around the bonfire, finding worms:

"There are three under here."

"This one is so fat, he's eaten a lot of bonfire."

"This one is so small, it was only born last week."

"This one was only born this morning."

"This tiny one just now while we were having break!"

"I'm going to make a bed under that bush for this one."

What a wealth of "Desirable Outcomes"²—all at once!

We care not to waste anything, even water; the future of the planet is at stake, but it is also a picture of caring for each other. We collect just four or five frogs' eggs, wait for their metamorphosis and carry the tiny frogs back to the pond. The Waldorf approach is very practical—out of life and living itself, and relevant to everything the child should be learning at this age. The child needs this living integral experience to accumulate knowledge, for s/he lives in the moment. In winter a candle or two illumine the room instead of electricity—this is both cozy and real.

Home Life

A six-year-old: "I've got to go to afternoon care because it's booked and paid for."

A five-year-old in afternoon care: "Mummy and Daddy aren't working! They're always going in bed."

Many children suffer from the breakdown of family life and the vanishing of the extended family. Their parents love them but are stressed; television and computer may replace their care. When a mother returns to work soon after the baby's birth, the child feels lost, however loving the caregivers are. Single parents struggle to cope on their own; in many families both parents are working and do not have enough time for their children. Routines are haphazard. In today's hustle and bustle many are not allowed the time to recover properly from illness. Violence, neglect and abuse are increasing. Domestic work may be replaced by appliances, and meals are not taken together, often merely hurried affairs in the microwave.

In the kindergarten we work closely with parents and caregivers, inviting them to experience a morning, our festivals, and regular evenings as a group when we share developmental aspects of childhood: helping and supporting each other. We visit the children at home, not to pry but to strengthen trust and gain insight into the children's needs. Parents often need and ask for help.

Social Life

We share a nutritious break mid-morning, prepared with the children, beginning with a grace and ending with thanks. They help of their own accord with the cooking or spreading, baking or chopping, serving, laying tables, and washing up. It is a social occasion as well as a nourishing one. A single apple or apricot brought by a child for me is always shared between us all. What a wonder! There are other domestic activities for them to do such as polishing, sweeping, mending (vital to counteract the throw-away mentality but also to give a picture of caring), crafts, washing napkins, woodwork, sewing and gardening. They become deft and able, all this activity in support of later thinking capacity.

A new Israeli four year-old to mother (in Hebrew):

"Why don't Jane and Sarah understand when I speak?"

"Sally doesn't either."

"Yes, she does, she understands everything."

(—actually very little! but gestures speak louder than words!)

Communication has increased, yet racism, ethnic cleansing, violence and war thrive. What a paradox! Increased loneliness brings new problems. Children need to be shown love and compassion, and then they will copy it. Christmas and Whitsun are particularly relevant times for giving a sense of inclusiveness, celebrating the diverse nature of humanity with songs in other languages; but it can happen on a daily basis as well. For example, I learn a song in many languages and there are red, brown, black, and yellow dolls as well as white.

*"All right, you can come in our game," said a six year-old, "but you are allowed **not** to play if you want(!)"*

Children are egoistic but have a growing sense of sociability particularly when six years old; because they are under no schooling pressure, they have space for love to help the younger children and organize each other! Their emotions are gently stimulated through love, music, color, and warmth. The images created through the repeated telling of a nature story or fairy tale support the moral and emotional life. Sometimes one needs to show beautiful illustrations as well, to counteract the ugly, frightening images many children carry, absorbed from the media, and so forth.

Modern Life

Technology has brought us many wonderful things; yet along with its advances we need human qualities and especially human warmth. This is most relevant for the child under seven. Our environment is less and less child-friendly. Children are adaptable and resilient but this comes at a cost because they become stressed in their souls. Their delicate nerve-sense systems may be flooded with impressions through harsh colors, news, image-covered clothing, traffic, background music, advertisements, story tapes, electronic sounds, poor and ugly (often too many) toys and books. Barbie, Aliens, Bugs, Transformers, and so forth, leave precious little room for fantasy. Are Disneyland, Toy Story, and so forth, “treats?” Do processed foods, pollution, and the excessive and often unnecessary use of immunization and antibiotics undermine their health and weaken their immune systems? Computer games can give the child an experience of a series of violent images with neither context nor resolution, leading to confusion and resulting in fear. Children cannot cope and lapse into lethargy, poor concentration or bad behavior. Some are stimulated to early sexual awakenings. “Bored” children are actually simply so over-saturated that they cannot absorb any more. Poor sleep may be caused by exhaustion from too many sensations and the absence of any quiet space. Mystery and

wonder are frequently distorted. One even intrudes into the life of the unborn child with prenatal education resulting in unknown consequences. Much of the growth of these phenomena is new since my own childhood. Not that there is anything wrong with electricity or machines! But where and when is the right or wrong place or time? The child-under-seven's consciousness does not separate him from the world; he lives in complete sympathy with it, as the following demonstrate.

A five-year-old, about a dream: *"But you know, you were in it."*

A four-year-old: *"I'm a real rabbit."*

Another four-year-old, watching a eurythmy performance:

"Are they puppets?"

Children catapulted into workbooks, tests and computers are torn away from their real world and forced into a foreign one. This, together with a stressful environment can have harmful consequences. This is a tragedy. For the older a child is, the harder it is to put things right. Worse still, so often this environment is seen as beneficial, and certainly "normal." The good guys and bad guys are often portrayed in equal measure by ugly characters. A website for 2–12-year-olds "protects them from unsuitable material on the Internet," but gives them access to a cold intellectual medium devoid of the wonder intrinsic to their being and still provides questionable material. "Action toys" turn children into passive players. They "soak up" these characters and imitate their behavior, speech, and movement. The bright ideas of the commercial world to rake in money render the children as pawns in their games. One disrespects children in a mistaken assumption that they need to be entertained. Many media images of "beauty," "strength," and "desirability" can lead to anorexia, inadequacy and violence. The same can be said of many toys.

Rhythmic Life

There are many damaged children today who find it a relief to come to the Kindergarten. The rhythmic structuring of the day, week, month, and season helps to stabilize uncertainties and lack of boundaries. Children's natural activity finds many harmonious, constructive, and strengthening outlets. The teacher consciously creates a balance between play and rest, "chaos" and calm, noise and quiet, group and individual activity, humor and seriousness, being inside and outside. How they love fun and laughter. Some arrive pale and go home rosy; some begin to sleep better. Rhythms also bring about good habits.

"Where are the toys?" children sometimes ask at interview.

Day 1: Story.

Day 2: "Oh, not that story again!"

Day 3: Story, child silent.

Day 4: "Can we have that story again?"

This is a recurring incidence with new children.

Children soon warm to unformed playthings of natural materials, just as to the daily repetition of a story. Especially today, the child's inner need for "again!" must be satisfied. We have bricks and logs which in the child's mind can be ships, mobile phones, cheese, fences, or . . . logs. Soft dolls with only an indication of a face are not confined to one emotion. Clothes' horses, planks, and cloths may make dog kennels, castles, shops, kitchens, spaceships, houses. Shells, bark, and pine cones form patterns, money, food, plates . . .

Their creativity knows no bounds. We give them the space and time for unguided play. Goals are their own, not ours. Time flows on; the chimes are the rhythms: waxing and waning, ebbing and flowing. Tidy-up time

begins when I take a cloth and fold it; nothing disturbs their concentrated activity: they gradually notice and follow suit.

Thinking and Consciousness

Two six-year-olds in conversation:

"Let's finish the house now."

"But it's time to tidy up."

"Then, why did you spend all that time playing? If you hadn't spent all that time playing, we could have built the house."

A five-year-old: *"I don't want to play; I'm doing a puppet show."*

What is play? What is not? In this active dream world they lay the foundations of clear philosophical thinking. They find solutions to problems and help each other. Arguments are sorted out amicably, often only through my walking nearby or watching from a distance, inwardly supporting but leaving them free. Alongside mathematics and language, physical and imaginative development are fostered. Warm and peaceful simplicity in which they can flourish surrounds them: plain colored cloths and gifts of nature in ordered baskets, a few beautiful pictures. Patterns and rhythms hold them. They enjoy beeswax modeling, watercolor painting, lyre playing, beeswax crayon drawing, song, poetry and dance.

How can we expect them to work with the 3Rs and testing when they are still at the following stage of consciousness.

Five-year-old: *"Did you build this school?"*

Another, the same age: *"Sally, who are you going to marry when you grow up?"*

Every child will play with ready-made games, but the depth of learning is not equal to that of games created by themselves, nor of self-motivated activities: “I can do it by myself on my own,” asserted a 3 ½-year-old, sharing out spoons at break. Learning in Waldorf kindergartens is integrated, not compartmentalized. Each of our activities covers most, if not all Early Learning Goals.³ Children grow at their own individual pace. As their thinking and judgment are in seed-form, we take care not to overburden it, rather concentrating on their innate “busy-ness.” Forcing the intellect at this age is to the detriment of other faculties. Making choices and decisions throws them back on themselves prematurely. They can do it but at a cost. We are gentle with awakening self-consciousness. “My voice sounds different from everyone else’s!” mused a nearly six-year-old. When I do plays with the children, I put out on stands several costumes for each character. Maybe one day we’ll have four Snow Whites, and the next day, five. This not only precludes disappointment, it suits their stage of consciousness. While they are still one with the world till 6 or 7, we believe it is not appropriate to make them self-aware or give feelings of pride, guilt or competition. For this reason also we do not display their work, which is quickly forgotten anyway. The importance of the “result” begins only after kindergarten. All this provides a firm basis for enthusiasm and joy in learning.

Movement

Every Tuesday I take the children on an expedition. Well-equipped, with a freshly prepared picnic of muesli and a thermos of herb tea, we set off—to fields, woods, stream, mud, sun, frost, rain, fallen branches, brambly tunnels, older children building huts, story, magic, joy, and mystery await us. We go where the mood takes us. I would do it in a town park or grassy space too! This feeds their senses and understanding of the world around, while strengthening courage and stamina. Many children’s movement is too restricted today by over-use of “convenient” baby slings, seats, and buggies (the head hanging sideways and the back crooked with limbs

wedged in), little play outside, much car travel. Physical development under seven years is the basis for intellectual and emotional development, and we place great emphasis on free movement, self initiated and imitative, not directed. What about television and the “mouse?” What does it really signify when the child’s report says he has “poor mouse control?” We prepare an endless stream of gestures in songs and poems for imitation in circle time⁴ and eurythmy. Children also need to explore and take normal risks.

Future

The modern child needs to develop courage, self-discipline and powers of discrimination to meet the growing problems of the world. Increasing violence, ethical issues, such as gene manipulation, declining health of the planet, a nightmarish number of options, increasing invasion of privacy, untruths in adverts. . . . And yet many are born now with particular qualities of sociability and initiative to care for others and for the earth. Children need to learn adaptability and compassion and to develop intuition through being given a proper childhood with a secure foundation, enough time for truly creative play, artistic work and humor. The real magic and wonder of childhood will help them to become inwardly free. We hold the children close in our thoughts; this is part of our work. We must have the imagination and courage to be ourselves and to teach from the heart as well as the head. Education becomes alive and is true for the children when the teachers do what they believe in; they should not teach just what they are supposed to. They must eradicate personal stress and not be bound by fear. They must be full of joy and initiative—the children will imitate it! One must find the balance between protection and freedom: create a “meadow” in which children can freely exercise their boundless creativity. And some final food for thought:

A girl of six in my class to her parents: “Do you know why I’m gooder in the Kindergarten than at home? It’s because there’s magic there.”

Footnotes:

1. The anecdotes quoted are from children in my kindergarten. For some of these I am indebted to parents.
2. Governmental (Great Britain) expectations for preschool children.
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4. Imitated movement to songs and poems.

About the Author:

Sally Schweizer, mother of four between 26 and 32, taught in both state and independent schools in London and Switzerland before discovering Waldorf education. Now remarried, (previously Longe) she was herself a single parent for 13 years. Of 19 years as a Waldorf Kindergarten teacher the last 15 have been at Michael Hall in Forest Row, Sussex, England. Her present group consists of 25 children each day of 4 to 6½ years of whom (typically) 11 are partly or wholly not English.