

# *The Dignity of the Small Child*

• Kimberley Lewis

## **Introduction**

Eighteen years ago the question of the care of the small child emerged as a topic distinct from the work of Waldorf kindergartens. Now we find ourselves at a re-birthing of the birth-to-three movement, a challenging task because it must take into account varied ideas and views, scientific findings, current practices, and public and private regulation.

The Dignity of the Small Child conferences began in 1999. The fourth conference was held at the Goetheanum in Dornach, Switzerland in June, 2010. About 700 participants attended from over thirty countries. Eight educators came from North America. Pedagogues from around the world offered twenty-six workshops on all aspects of the care of the young child. The next Dignity of the Small Child conference will be held at the Goetheanum in 2013.

The Medical Section of the Goetheanum organized the conference in cooperation with the Worldwide Initiative for Early Childhood Care and the German Association of Waldorf Kindergartens. Michaela Glöckler, of the Medical Section, has been the guardian angel of the Dignity of the Small Child conferences.

## **Questions and Themes**

The main questions of the conference were, “What is it that keeps the young child healthy? What does Rudolf Steiner’s salutogenic (health giving) approach to infant pedagogy look like in practice, and how can it be further developed today?”

Participants were also asked to work with the following questions: How can the child’s environment be fashioned to give sufficient scope for developing autonomy (movement, will, learning to walk)? How can we support and nurture the child’s autonomy and will, so that personality can grow through trust and security (speech development, learning to communicate)? How should the young child’s surroundings be structured to allow the child to experience himself both alone and in relationship

to his environment (learning to think)?

Other questions and themes raised during the course of the conference were: Why has the young child moved into focus now? How do parents become competent and what support can we offer them? How do we meet the small child with respect and dignity? What does the young child ask of us? What are the standards, and are we meeting them? The following are summaries of some of the lectures given during the four-day conference.

## **The Dignity of Destiny and the Arrival on Earth**

*Christoph Meineke and Michaela Glöckler*

Waldorf education is taking on the first three years by examining societal “necessities” such as day care for the young child. Sir Richard Bowlby (John Bowlby’s son) describes outcomes for children in early care: Babies and children are getting ill more often. Their immune systems are suppressed. They have too many infections such as meningitis. They have language and social disturbances. The insecurities in their relationships extend into three generations. They have hearing difficulties because of the excessive noise in day care settings. The stress hormone cortisone is weakening their defense systems and decreasing brain activity, which causes frustration, intolerance, and other psychological ailments. Boys suffer more than girls. No wonder that care outside the home was frowned upon by early Waldorf educators.

In general, we are finding that very young children are better off in family-style care with a secondary attachment figure, rather than in institutional settings. If there is no ready alternative to institutional care, how can it be structured so that it provides at least some of the benefits of home? We are finding that an important task for centers is not to endanger the child’s connection to parents. We must work with the parents to keep the parent-child connection strong.

We try to perceive genuinely what each child in its particular destiny needs from us. It helps enormously to work with parents, guiding them to look at the essence of the child—this will enable them to come to a decision about what is best. We also need to respect that the child has a field of experience from earlier lives.

Steiner says that people have many lives behind them. There is the possibility of breaking the shell of forgetting and bring forth what has been learned in the spiritual worlds before birth. But we can only remove the obstacles to remembering past lives if the adult looks at the child as a riddle to solve, so that what has been put there by the gods can be found. In this way we help the child to access his higher knowledge and fulfill his destiny.

During pregnancy, when the child is carried, we have before us the archetypal image of trust. This act of being held communicates to the child, “You are meant to be here; you are wanted,” and it instills what eventually becomes the forces of self-confidence. The transformation from trust to self-confidence happens gradually as the child moves into the world. We must let it happen at the child’s pace, allowing the right experiences at the right time.

When the child comes to earth, it must arrive well in three homes.

1. The **bodily home** is the physical body where higher forces can unfold. This is the theme of early childhood and the place of the four lower senses.
2. The **home “place”**—the surroundings, culture, town, country. At first it is simply a safe home; in time the circle of “place” expands. This is the place of the four middle senses.
3. A **social home**—the child’s relationships and social connections. This is the place of the four higher senses.

Above them all is a fourth, our spiritual home—a link to our source.

As caregivers we are responsible for shaping these homes so that the child has positive, nurturing experiences. Forming a primary relationship with an adult, usually the mother, within the first few months of life is vital to the health of the child. Loss of the primary attachment figure in the early years is stressful and fear-inducing and impairs the child’s

willingness to attach again to another.

We need to be present with the child through our touch, gaze and speaking. Research shows that if our thoughts are elsewhere while we care for a child, the child will display symptoms of stress. We must “beam” at the child. The child becomes healthier when the cheerful forces of our beaming are experienced.

When we care for a child, we need to tell the child what we are doing—not explain, but tell. Telling establishes a relationship. But don’t tell the child that you are trying to prevent something—a rash, for example. We want to reinforce that the world is a good place for the child, so don’t mention negative possibilities.

The spiritual forces that lead to the three essential achievements (walking, speaking and thinking) are gifts that we receive before birth from the archai, angels, and archangels. Each of these gifts needs a human example for its fulfillment. Walking requires space, freedom and love. Speaking requires truthfulness and authenticity of the adult. Thinking requires clarity in the adult.

As the adult, I stand opposite the child. I create a space and enter into a conversation. I ask myself: “What does the child want me to do? How do I listen? How do I speak?” The child and I both listen into the space. The child wants to know, “Does someone perceive me? Who is there for me? Who are you?”

The child has a will, an inkling of the later “I.” It is our own being and attitude that will help the child to become an “I am.” If I take the path of self-knowledge seriously, I will be able to meet the child authentically and directly, surrendering my uncertainties, insecurities, and prior planning.

Sensitive observation and perception of the being of the child is what is needed. How can the adult gain this capacity to truly perceive, and only then decide what to do? The Goethean approach is helpful: observe until the thing itself speaks to me. It requires attentive practice, perseverance, a protected space, and a genuine interest. It leads to practical things.

Babies cannot easily distance themselves from the adverse conditions of their lives (negative looks, responses or impoverished surroundings). With great effort the child has to work against impediments, and there is damage to the will if that effort is interrupted.

When working with little children, we must avoid distractions and interruptions (from cell phones

for example). Observe how you are thrown off and lose yourself in annoyance and thought when you are interrupted. You have to calm yourself before returning to equilibrium and conscious attention.