

## The Waldorf early childhood teacher and the task of preparing for a healthy future generation<sup>1</sup>

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### Education in our time

It is the task of the educator to understand our time, to understand childhood in today's world, to protect the health of young children from harmful influences and to work together with parents on the conditions for health in raising today's generation of young children.

In addition to all that was said already, this presentation will focus on the development of healthy thinking in children in the first part and then focus on the self-development of the teacher/parent in the second part.

### What happens to the development of thinking, feeling and will in the modern child?

Today we meet many children who seem to be ahead of developmental benchmarks in their thinking already when very young. However, many children are only ahead intellectually, but not emotionally or in the mastering of their will forces. One observes acceleration of the intellect on the one hand and undeveloped abilities in the areas of movement and will activity on the other.

With respect to the first seven years of life we observe major hindrances for the development of balance between thinking and will in young children caused by missing opportunities for real life discovery, for learning in their own pace without being rushed and using their own means in finding out how things work., - a situation caused by the lack of opportunity for free play in which such self-directed exploring of the child could take place.

Here the educator is needed as facilitator for creating opportunities every day for children to explore on a daily basis, teaching themselves in real life situations.

The educator needs

- To observe the individual child and recognize what environment and materials need to be provided so that the child can play well and thus educate himself;
- To understand the intentions and potential which the child may have brought with her into life;
- To discriminate what is essential for the education of the young child now and in the future, and what is not.
- To base one's pedagogy on the principle that young children must take charge of their play in order to develop health in body and soul.

Why is it so essential for health of young children to be able to 'take charge' in play, or in Steiner's words: being given "free reign" in play? Why is this individual element and the real-life exploration so important in the education of young children?

Much has been said about the increasing influence of electronic media in the lives of young children and its consequences. Most of us are using the products of this electronic age and most of us use products of which we have no idea how they were invented, how they exactly work and why they

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a lecture held at the Second China Waldorf Early Childhood Education Conference, which took place in October 2016 in Dezhou, China. The conference theme was: The E-generation children and Waldorf Early Childhood Education

work as they do. This is a regrettable, disempowering situation for us users, and yet, most times we don't think about it because these devices have become an indispensable part of our daily lives.

Older people (like me) have most likely played unsupervised outside as children, created things of which we knew exactly through trial and error how to create them, what works and what not. In other words, we have had the beginnings of our learning in a situation where we were in charge of the process of creating and of the resulting product. We had no 'push the button' toys. This was when TV was not so readily available and the PC was not yet invented. Now they are everywhere and we educators have to work hard in order to make the experience possible for the child that process and result belong together.

An example of this are the 'forest kindergartens' or 'bush kindergartens'. Why are they so popular? Because in contrast to using readymade toys or devices the child has to go right back to the basics, has to go through the process of inventing and creating for themselves what they want to use in play. No finished toys or devices are available. Children are invigorated by this outdoor creative play and even the most difficult and civilization-damaged children settle down and begin to play again.

Merely following the instructions of how to drive a device has an impact on the human ability to think, be it adult or child. Exactly one hundred years ago Steiner predicted that the ability to think for oneself would diminish in the majority of people<sup>2</sup> and would be replaced by processes comparable to "shifting" already existing thoughts from one place to the other. Being an adult educator I was reminded of the widely used "cut and paste" method in assignments of High School and University students. But at any age just following given lines of thought diminishes the need to think, to work something out for oneself. I am talking here about the majority of human beings, not about the few highly gifted ones who are inventors.

Moreover, I am talking about the foundations for thinking laid in early childhood. Here children need the teacher as facilitator of experiences which only later will become the foundation for knowledge and independent judgment. First one needs time to observe, compare, experience for an entire phase of life, namely childhood, without being taught the "right" result or – even worse- just being given the information about the process of how it all works without the live experience. I am not suggesting science experiments in kindergartens, because the watching child – in accordance with developmental facts – cannot make a judgment about the processes they observe, because at kindergarten age the child has not understood the process himself. He would just repeat what the teacher explains.

In contrast, when a child builds a bridge with blocks and observes what makes it collapse and what not, then the child has the full experience of process and product. Steiner says about this: the child develops thinking – vivid, alive thinking - in meeting the world of things rather than the world of images.<sup>3</sup> Especially in the digital age it will be more and more important that the human has experienced – not as yet understood - the natural world in childhood, for example the seasons, the rhythms such as day and night or the year, plants, animals, rhythms of human social life (festivals) so that this world can resound in the soul of the child before the time of intellectual understanding.

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<sup>2</sup> R. Steiner, Lecture in Berlin, given on April 4<sup>th</sup>, 1916. Lecture 4 in the volume of collected works titled: The Present and the Future Development of the Human Spirit.

<sup>3</sup> Steiner says about play: "The child experiments with objects in order to find out whether or not these objects respond to the child's own activity.... Thus the child learns from life." Quoted from "On the Play of the Child" Ed. F. Jaffke. WECAN Publications. New York/Spring Valley 2004.

It is the task of educators of young children to provide the opportunity for the child to experience these lawful rhythms of life in the soul. If these experiences are there as the foundation for the development of thinking, then thinking will not be isolated from the other soul forces but develop together with the feeling life and will, thus becoming alive rather than rigid and abstract. Narrowing the spectrum of experiences in the formative phase of brain development will restrict the options for new neural pathways which otherwise would be developed in natural life environments. Electronic devices - products of the intellect and addressing merely the intellect of the human being - do not develop the full breadth and depth of thinking in the young child. <sup>4</sup>

### **The young child's need for gratification**

However, not only the thinking, but all three soul forces - thinking, feeling and will - are endangered in their healthy development and need to be closely monitored by the educator. This is especially needed in our time when young children have to share parental attention with parents' work commitments and leisure time interests. As feelings of guilt towards their children arise in many working parents, they become more likely to give in to children's demands for screen time in a wish to make up for long absences.

Desires are strongly expressed by children as of the third year of life. That desire nature of the child from the third year onwards makes children vulnerable to being targeted as consumers. This has certainly exacerbated the emergence of the "Me-generation" marked by increased childhood egotism, increased need for gratification, and emotional outbursts. Children are on high alert levels, 'on the edge' and thus get out of balance easily.

There is also a tendency towards anxiety and fear, little tolerance for a delay of gratification and easy frustration. Social faculties are naturally not enough developed at this time of life in order to self-regulate desire and frustration. As many parents wish to boost the intellectual orientation in their children, the pressure to perform and become an early achiever adds to the stresses in the parent-child relationship.

### **The young child's need for images**

In this electronic age another challenge for the health of thinking and feeling of young children has arisen which prevents these soul faculties of the child to develop in a fully human way. Teachers and parents are losing the role of being the example on which the child orientates himself. Today the teacher's task is widely reduced to the implementation of prescribed teaching content and methods. Teachers of children as young as pre-school age are under pressure to produce results in children's learning, according to the benchmarks set in these programs. Even at home parents hand over part of their direct contact time with the child to media based programs and interactions. Children do not question the information given in these programs as they would not question their parents' or teachers' advice and they follow directives of such programs with trust.

In the world of modern media the images presented to children are often overpowering with respect to colour, design and distortion of human features and the speed of changing images. Such visual images are powerful means of captivating a child's attention and feeling, creating fear in many children. Although young children have always suffered from fear, this tendency has worsened. Many

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Nitze, global operations director at an aircraft and automotive company speaks about his elementary education where 'if you've had the experience of binding a book, knitting a sock, playing the recorder, then you feel that you can build a rocket ship...In contrast, children trained from the earliest ages to expect that they will need computers for even the most elementary lessons may experience learning as a manipulation of random facts stored in an electronic box outside themselves. Such children receive a debilitating message... Quoted from R. Long-Breipohl, Computers for children – a jump start for the future? In: The Rattler, issue 56, Sydney 2000

children have problems going to sleep and they suffer from night mares, restless sleep and irregular waking periods during the night. Furthermore, the child is flooded by images which are not part of his own experience and which occupy the child's thoughts and work powerfully on her emotions.

We do observe an increase in deeply concerning symptoms of emotional stress such as:

- **Hypersensitivity:** fearfulness with a great need for security, sleep problems;
- **Hyperactivity:** impulse driven behaviour, caused by sensory overstimulation and often leading to aggressive behaviour.
- **Introversion:** shyness, dreaminess, lack of interest in things, social difficulties
- **Dependency on stimulation** and de-activation of the child's own inner resources.

While the increasing media exposure of children is not the only cause for these problems, it certainly contributes to these.

### The teacher as a 'health worker'

These phenomena of modern childhood demand that the early childhood teacher should be concerned with the physical and emotional health of young children and should promote ways of how children learn naturally, that is, how children learn without draining their life forces.

The most important factor are the adults who care for young children. They are the child's gateway to the world of things and the world of the living. This is most obvious in the way in which the child learns, namely through imitation. Young children are naturally accepting the ways in which parents and the kindergarten teacher interact with them and care for them. The child trusts these human beings out of a natural deep devotion, which resonates in the child right down into the organs of the body. Blood circulation, breathing and digestion are deeply influenced by the sense impressions which the child absorbs readily out of a devotional attitude towards the environment, and especially towards human beings to whom the child is attached.

### Recent research on resonance

Imitation is a two-way process, and it starts with the new born child calling forth a reaction, a 'resonance' within the mother. As of day one, there is a mutual inward resonance between adult and child; for example the mother reacts joyfully to the gaze of the child, and in turn the child responds, 'mirrors', what radiates from the mother. The imprint in the brain of this mutual relating is called 'resonance' and it can be detected with the appropriate instruments in the fine structure of the brain as formation of new neural pathways. Only positive reactions of the adult stimulate new synapses and with this new positive learning. Negative reactions of human beings to the child do not contribute to new learning in the sense of forming relationships and do not positively influence the child's exploring of the world. The child "freezes" inwardly.<sup>5</sup>

Steiner speaks about the soul-spiritual being of the child which lives still more in the circumference within other human beings rather than within the body only. Therefore, the young child is much more open to the environment; the child is like a "sense organ", with sense impressions having an effect on the entire body.

Before the age of 3 the child resonates most with the inner being of those adults who are close to him. Between three and six years the young child resonates more with the activity of the adult. This is usually called learning by imitation, although in a different way the child imitates as of day one of

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<sup>5</sup> I am referring here to the summary of research into resonance presented by Prof. Joachim Bauer in Chapter 6 of: *Das Gedächtnis des Körpers* (The memory of the body). Frankfurt/Germany 2005

his life. Imitation in the child from 6 to 9 years is related to the soul qualities behind the actions of the adult. At this stage the focus of imitation becomes more inward again before imitation recedes altogether.

During this entire time a one-sidedly intellectual education creates an imbalance within the child which can have physical manifestations such as irregularities in the breathing process and in sleep, or, if the teacher imposes his intentions too strongly on the child, this may affect the child's digestive system and lead to a lifelong weakness of the digestive organs. During the early childhood years the teacher should work with the child more indirectly through example rather than demands or admonition. The child's thinking should be nurtured through images which at the same time nurture the feeling life of the child.

How does the child develop thinking, if it is not approached directly? Thinking is learned through the child's exploration of the world of things in play, not through teaching concepts. Thinking needs the sense impressions in order to develop healthily, it needs real world experiences.

### **What can be done to support a healthy development of thinking?**

- Supportive relationships free from pressure to perform
- Human beings who surrounds the child with warmth
- A rhythmical time structure which supports the unhurried activity of the child
- A rich and ordered environment which invites the child to explore
- Spaces which invite the child to take initiative in play and create in accordance with their own intentions

### **The Teacher as media-educator<sup>6</sup>**

We cannot go back in time. We are and must be educators in a world in which life and learning happen more and more under the influence of a virtual reality, including the social experiences. The images presented in a whole range of media are impacting on everybody, including children. They prevent children and also often adults from creating their own inner images and thus hinder the genuine inner activity of the human being.

In this situation teachers have the following tasks:

- To keep the kindergarten/child care a media free zone from the arrival of the first child to the last child leaving.
- To prepare oneself possibly through special training to become a "media-educator for parents" and via the parents for the children as well. Without including the parents the effects of modern media on young children will not be alleviated.
- To work towards the aim of 'media maturity' for oneself and others.

The following aspects need to be considered:

#### **1. The teacher's own "media biography" as a step of becoming 'media mature' oneself**

Especially younger teachers will have a history of media use.

It is important to self-reflect on where one stands and ponder one's own experiences with personal media up to this day.

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<sup>6</sup> I am referring in the following passage to a project on media education for parents which was recently developed by Prof. Paula Bleckmann in Germany and is currently on trial. The topic of the project: "Accompanying youngsters on the path to media maturity instead of media addiction." A summary of this project was published in the Magazine, "Medical-Pedagogical Conference" (Medizinisch-Paedagogische Konferenz), Issue 78, 2016, pages 80 – 101.

### **Useful Questions:**

#### **The personal media history:**

At what age did I first come into contact with media: books, audio- cassettes, DVDs, TV, PC, mobile phone, surfing the web, and using social media sites? What were the impacts on me?

#### **What are my current habits regarding electronic devices?**

How often per day do I visit social media sites or check my email?

Am I currently in control of the devices which I use or am I controlled by them

Am I in control of the time I spend on these devices and on websites?

#### **What do I know about the current state of media research regarding:**

- Economic interests behind the marketing of electronic devices for young children
- Manipulative techniques of getting children interested in for example in I-pads
- The effects of media on the play of the child and the memory of the child
- The issue of media-addiction
- Ways of promoting health in children and working towards media maturity
- What do I know regarding research about parents' influence on screen time?
- The effects of background TV on the child, (such as: verbal communication as a family, verbal and non-verbal interaction of parent and child.<sup>7</sup>
- Long-term effects on older children used to regular screen time<sup>8</sup>

Prof. Paula Bleckmann poses the question of what a teacher would need to do in order to be a helpful advisor to parents in matters of media use.<sup>9</sup>

**The aim which Prof. Bleckmann promotes as achievable in the current situation is “media maturity”,** which is defined by the age of children, their physical and social stage of development and the age appropriate level of experiences and capacities already achieved in the real world.

Bleckmann has developed sets of questions for each age group (roughly defined as under 6, primary school age and high school age) which parents can answer and then evaluate according to criteria and a point system, thus enabling parents to make an informed decision regarding allowing their child media use and its possible dangers, which will be based on an indication of the ‘media maturity’ of their child.

There are three levels in this media-maturity test:

- Readiness to listen to CDs and Cassettes;
- Readiness to watch DVDs, TV or Videos;
- Readiness for using a PC;

Mobile phones are not considered in this study, but would belong to PC readiness.

The aim is to enable parents to be media educators for their children and to work with a step by step process towards ‘media maturity’ of the child. Media maturity will be helped to develop through this process of staged media use in childhood. Media maturity can be achieved earliest in adolescence, however, not for everybody at the same age. Some will take longer.

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<sup>7</sup> Bleckmann: Research on effects of mother using her smart phone during feeding time once: there is less attention given to the child, less eye contact and tuning into the child; every third child older than 2 was jealous of the smartphone of the mother.

<sup>8</sup>Bleckmann: More than 60% of 9-10 year old children are not able to occupy themselves for longer than 30 minutes without using the screen – TV or PC.

<sup>9</sup> Detailed suggestions can be found in Medizinisch-Paedagogische Konferenz 78/2016

### Media maturity means:

- The adolescent uses only devices which he/she fully understands in function and consequences;
- The adolescent is able to self-control the amount of time spent with devices, including mobile phones;
- The adolescent makes responsible choices regarding suitable content and programs.

The aim of helping parents to become 'media educators' cannot be achieved just by running an informative parent evening on the topic of media addiction and its consequences. Bleckmann suggests ongoing contact and one-to-one work with parents as well as the availability of practical assistance in changing media habits in children such as:

- Offer assistance – provide an expert – who can help installing time limits and filter software on children's smart phones or TV; encourage parents to bring the device to parent night and have it fixed
- Offer a free half hour consultation over the phone
- Encourage parents to ring
- Inform parents about the problem of using screen time as a reward.
- Inform about the problem of giving the child a 'pedagogical' game to play on the computer as a "reward".<sup>10</sup>
- Speak about media withdrawal as punishment (no TV today) being a precursor to media addiction

Schools and therapists can become valuable allies in this parent education work:

- Schools can place a stronger focus on life skill training and social competence development for older children, rather than putting children and teachers under performance pressure
- Therapists can provide aid /counselling after traumatic media experiences
- As a teacher one can speak to individual parents about the importance of positive real life relationships given the research results about the importance of resonance for overall social development and for brain development, which includes the essential need for real life communication.
- As teacher one can provide opportunities for the young child to activate the will and thinking in explorative play in order to counteract the deterioration of thinking caused by media dependency.

### The Inner development of the educator

The teacher needs understanding of what is health in body, soul and spirit, and of the conditions for healthy development in children. If we don't have these, we don't know what we are aiming for. In Steiner education we find guidance through the images of health and healthy development which Steiner has given to teachers and parents, such as:

### The qualities of the four aspects of the human being:

- *The picture of the I-organisation:* striving to integrate, to create wholeness. In the child the I-organisation is hidden within the bodily functions; later the I-organisation becomes

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<sup>10</sup> The experience showed that such a reward system does not work: the younger children just get fascinated with the funny characters of the game, the older children are not interested in pedagogical games and prefer to go to social media websites rather than spending time to play the game.

the carrier of life intentions. It is the task of the teacher to think about the still dormant deeper intentions of each child in one's care;

- *The astral body*: the polarity of sympathy and antipathy, which becomes visible around the age of 3 in the strong expressions of likes and dislikes, often on the physical level. At this time the child does not have the ability to establish a balance between the two. The teacher can help by supporting the child's ability to do things by himself as much as possible, thus avoiding confrontation and outbursts of anger which can overwhelm the child.
- *The etheric body*: The life forces in childhood need to be nurtured by the teacher through rhythmical processes and careful planning of the kindergarten day/week as well as by giving the child the space and time to play undisturbed.
- *The physical body*: in the young child the etheric and astral body as well as the I-organisation are working within the physical body. The physical body makes sense experience possible. Here care needs to be taken to provide sensory experiences which are real and true with respect to the materials and design of toys and equipment. Wholesome nutrition is needed for the health of the physical body, and so is the right balance between movement/activity and rest/sleep.

### What is essential with respect to living in relationship with other human beings?

It is the foremost task of human beings to learn to live with each other in harmony. We can learn this only through real world relationships with other human beings. Contact via social media does not help develop this human faculty of relating and cannot satisfy the human need for meeting each other on a deeper soul level.

We need the experience of being loved so that we become able to love.

Within the evolution of humanity we are at the point of taking the step from self-centeredness or family-centeredness to experiencing ourselves in relation to ever larger groups of human beings. We are on the way to develop a consciousness of being part of humanity as a whole, of finding oneself in the other human being rather than just within one's own inner being. For a short while after birth we have this ability of finding oneself in the other naturally in the symbiotic mother-child relationship, but then this is lost and we have to regain the experience of oneness with the other human beings on a higher, conscious level in our learning through life. This is the task for the future and it can only be achieved through the real life experience of oneself and the other. We have to do whatever we can to help children form real life friendships, develop love for the other human being which rests upon a real life experience, not upon virtual experiences.

### What we can give to young children

Regarding the educator-child relationship we are acutely aware that our inner life, the work on ourselves, has a deep impact on the children we work with. What we may strive for can be summarized as follows:

The inner life of the educator	The gifts of the educator to the child
<b>On the level of the I</b> : Finding one's centre and inner strength;	Through our inner strength, <b>trust</b> and confidence arises in children;
<b>On the level of the astral body</b> : Inner calm, gratitude;	Feelings of security, <b>peace and joy</b> arise in children;
<b>On the level of the etheric body</b> : Develop imagination in teaching	The child experiences <b>truthfulness</b> in the images and stories given by the teacher

<p><b>On the level of the physical body:</b> Devotion to one's task; care for children with warmth of heart; The teacher will also strive for:</p> <p><u>A deeper understanding of children:</u> this is not easy: the individuality of the child may be hidden, covered up what was learned already through life circumstances;</p> <p><u>Self- observation and review of one's own life-experiences</u> in order to serve the children better; Clarity regarding what is essential and what not;</p> <p><u>Trust in the good</u> even in difficult times:</p> <p><u>Inner courage</u></p>	<p>The child experiences <b>morality</b>; The child experiences the loving intention of the adult;</p> <p><u>The child feels understood</u>, there is a foundation for relationship on a deeper level.</p> <p>This prevents that we burden the children with our own problems. The child will experience firm ground in everyday life</p> <p>The child will feel that the <u>world is fundamentally good</u>;</p> <p>The child can experience in the attitude of the teacher that <u>there is hope in the world and a future to go towards</u>;</p>
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It depends on the experience of these qualities in human beings whether the child can develop healthily in body and soul. These are qualities and attitudes which Steiner expected of teachers. The benefit for children is backed today by research into the conditions for developing resilience.

These qualities can be summarized as the striving for inner balance, inner strength and inner certainty: the qualities of the I. This the child needs to experience through the example of human beings so that the child becomes able to develop this I-quality within himself. This happens first and foremost through imitation, through absorbing human values from his parents and teachers. In contrast, experiences in the virtual world push human beings, especially the young ones, out of their centre and contribute through the overwhelming amount of information and entertainment to losing direction in life. Such confusion bears the seeds for illness. Balance in body and soul creates the conditions for health. It develops in children only through the model of human beings, who strive in their everyday life to live together well and humanely.

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