

The Essentials of Parent Child Work in Waldorf Early Childhood Education

Waldorf early childhood teachers have created programs for parents and their children together both within Waldorf schools and outside them for many years, providing a welcoming place for families to come together in the time before their children step independently into a setting away from their homes. These programs were the initial opening of Waldorf settings for an early childhood experience that would speak to both parents and children together.

Over time, these programs have metamorphosed into various forms. Following these rich early experiences, many parents have continued on with their children into the full experience of a Waldorf education.

At this point in time, nearly every Waldorf school in North America offers some programming for parents together with younger children, in various configurations and with widely varying approaches. But as programs have proliferated and expanded, as early childhood teachers gain deeper experiences, many questions arise: what ought these programs to look like? What is their relationship to the larger work of Waldorf early childhood education or its specific expression in a particular school? What is the appropriate preparation for leading these groups?

The following is an effort to describe the essentials of parent-infant and parent-child programs. It is my hope that these essentials will spark a lively discussion within early childhood collegial circles.

A Warm and Gentle Welcome

First and foremost, the ideal of a parent-child program is to offer a safe, welcoming, and nurturing environment into which a parent with young children can come in the trust that her own voice and parenting style will be acknowledged and respected. A playgroup needs to be accepting, tolerant, and offer a space of equanimity in which a parent can find her way, step by step, without fear of judgment.

For the child, the playgroup is a setting in which he is free to explore the environment at his own pace, to find his timing for leaving his parent's lap or side. It is a place for the young child to discover who he is, perhaps for the first time in a setting outside the family home.

Building Community

A playgroup is a place for finding and creating community. This is a primary goal of any Waldorf or anthroposophical initiative: to be a place where human beings meet one another and in so doing, find themselves. Intentional community-creating taps into the potential of support that lives within the group. A sharing environment offers parents a place where they can bring forth experiences that are living within the group. The sharing itself can bring comfort and insight to each parent, which can then be digested and individualized for herself. It is a place where parents can practice finding their way to what they understand about their children and themselves, to hear their own voices in the process of developing their own insights and to build a pathway toward trusting their developing intuitions.

Modeling care of young children and interactions with them

A parent-child group is an ideal place where parents can observe the facilitating professional in engagement with children as she models caregiving, the power and value of imitation, the possibilities in providing healthy guidance for young children. Her pedagogical knowledge and experience can radiate throughout the group as she carries the group. The facilitator strives to be worthy of imitation *by the parents* and provides a model that may engage parents in questions, discussion, and study.

Providing a picture of Child Development in the Early Years

Many elements of the parent child group experience create a picture of the development of the infant and young child. The physical environment teaches without words in its many details. What is provided as play materials, what is created in the sensory environment speak volumes without words. What is present — and *not* present — will bring questions and observations from parents.

The form of the room – the mood and physical environment created for a group of young infants in contrast to a group for older toddlers and each development phase in between - will again provide a living picture for parents about the invitation that is offered to the children.

When observation skills are cultivated within the playgroup, parents gain another vehicle for gaining insight into their children and themselves. The art of observation enriches each relationship and gives parents invaluable insights into the development of young children.

Creating a picture of cultural life for families

Again, the design of the physical environment from the cubby area to the play area to the mealtime creates images for parents. In today's families, mealtime is a challenge that often begins in infancy with the first solid foods. The playgroup can provide a living experience for both parent and child of good nutrition, appropriate social expectations, the rhythm and mood of mealtime and the boundaries that accompany an inviting meal. The quality of respectful conversation, the setting of a table, the rituals – handwashing, hand cream, speaking or singing a grace — offer rich cultural possibilities for every family.

These foundation elements in parent child work will find expression in varied forms and myriad details. But when the environment and activity within the group arise out of age-appropriate experiences for infants, toddlers and possibly three year olds; when a respectful approach to the parents that is filled with warmth and interest in them as developing human beings, then a rich foundation for the experience of living Waldorf early childhood education is laid. The playgroup is *not* a mini-kindergarten. It is *not* a preparation for something else in any sense other than that every life experience has the potential to prepare us for what meets us later in life. It is an entity in and of itself, a program with experiences, qualities and needs all its own. When it is successful, parents feel warmly embraced, welcomed, respected and filled with the dignity of their tremendous tasks in welcoming young human beings onto the earth.

Susan Weber, October 2011