



John Schoenwalter

The Magical Years

SOME WALDORF INDICATIONS FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD

Rahima Baldwin

Rudolf Steiner, an Austrian scientist and educator of remarkable vision, developed Waldorf education in 1919 in response to the complexities confronting humanity in the modern age. Steiner at the same time laid the foundations for a body of knowledge about the preschool child which can be of great value to parents who are concerned with the development of their whole child—in body, mind, emotions and spirit.

Steiner based his indications for the nurturing of young children on the recognition that birth is only one step in the ongoing process of incarnation.

It takes years for the human being to fully participate in this earthly life. Just as the child's body does not have the same proportions as the adult's, the child's consciousness is not that of a "little adult." Understanding the development of consciousness is as important for parents and educators as knowing about the child's physical development.

Steiner's understanding of nature's innate timetable for inner and outer growth and his respect for its unfolding within each individual led to his emphasis on a child's full development within each stage. Today scien-

tists have shown the threat to later coordination and mental ability posed by skipping phases of developmental movement such as crawling. Steiner's special contribution is in showing that similar dangers exist from by-passing or foreshortening periods in the child's emotional and mental growth. One of the things that sets Waldorf education and indications for early childhood apart from common educational practice today is the active protection of the first magical dream-like phases of consciousness which are natural to the child until around the age of seven. This runs contrary to the

majority of programs and influences acting on the child today which try to prematurely "awaken" the child to adult conceptions of time, space and cognitive thought. An understanding of the child's unfolding consciousness can help parents to further the experience of early childhood rather than hurry their children through it, with unanticipated negative results.

IMITATION

It is inherent in the nature of the child to imitate, and imitation is the predominate level of learning in the young child. Sitting, walking and talking are learned through imitation, which is also manifested in the toddler's love of doing everything the parents do (stir the cake batter, sweep the floor, hammer a nail, etc.). Parents don't need to "teach" things like walking and talking, or even using the toilet, nor do they need to go out of their way to provide "stimulus-rich" environments. The normal healthy interactions of family life are all a child needs as model for imitation. Infant seats, baby walkers and the like actually limit the child's natural movements and are best avoided. And costly programs like "baby gymnastics," while providing parents with an excuse for closeness and touching, are certainly not necessary for proper development!

Walking and talking are the main developmental tasks of the first two years of life, and thinking begins in the third year when the child is able to separate himself or herself from the rest of the world enough to say "I" instead of "Ryan" or "Heather." Play during this time tends to reflect the child's growing relationship with her or his body: jumping, climbing, dropping spoons off the high chair to experience gravity, the peek-a-boo game of discovering one is really here.

Understanding the imitative nature of the preschool child is the key to teaching and discipline. Rather than reasoning with the child or focussing on the mistake, saying, "We do it this way," together with your actual movements (rather than just words) provide the child with a positive

"THE NORMAL HEALTHY INTERACTIONS OF FAMILY LIFE ARE ALL A CHILD NEEDS AS MODEL FOR IMITATION."

model to copy. Because the urge to imitate dominates young children, everything they perceive goes very deeply into them and will come out again, unconsciously, in imitative movement. This makes it the parents' task to be especially attentive to their own behavior and all the influences surrounding children in the first seven years. You may be sure that everything you do and are, for better or worse, will be mirrored in your child!

IMAGINATIVE PLAY

Around the age of three, imaginative play starts to arise along with the large-motor and imitative play of the toddler. The imaginative world of young children is seen most clearly when a wooden spoon or a stick magically transforms itself from one thing to another in their hands. To give this capacity an opportunity to thrive, Waldorf preschools use simple toys that are "unfinished," suggesting a person or object, but engaging the child's imagination in providing details of expression, mood, and so on. Dolls with eyes but no other facial details leave the child free to "live into" the toy and have it be anyone he chooses, expressing a myriad of emotions. When such simple toys are made of natural materials such as wool, cotton or wood, the child also receives a positive sensory experience and a connection with the living world.

Before the age of five the child tends to be completely immersed in his or her imagination. Increased maturity then provides some distance between children and their creations, and they are able to plan things in a "let's pretend" mode. Indeed, as social interaction begins to dominate in kindergarten-aged children, planning who will be *what* may be more of the game than the "actual" play. Costumes, large objects suggesting houses, boats, etc., and simple dolls

or puppets provide valuable arenas for play in which children from three to six will imitate adult life and the activities and relationships of the world around them. In a Waldorf preschool, 1-1½ hours each morning are set aside for such imaginative free play since it is through play that children work their way into earthly life in a health-giving way.

Fingerplays and circle games have remained popular throughout the centuries because they combine the elements of imitation and imagination. Fingerplays, in addition to being whimsical delights, are very helpful in bringing consciousness all the way into the fingertips, and such dexterity of movement is related to the development of mental dexterity. Circle games reflect for children the cosmic whole from which they have recently come, and such movements as "in and out the windows" or "stand and face your true love" provide a picture of the soul's journey into this life. The elements of rhythm, repetition, imitation and movement found in such games are essential elements of early childhood.

THE FAIRY TALE WORLD

The magical world of fairy tales is especially suited to the dream-like world of the young child. The archetypal characters and situations in fairy tales express the inner qualities and dilemmas which each person must work through. Some adults are concerned about the strong images contained in fairy tales. But if the stories are told in a matter-of-fact way, rather than dramatized with emotion and marked inflection of voice, the child is not frightened by these images, but feels the rightness of the resolution of the story for all the characters involved. According to Steiner, fairy tales are a description of images once seen by all mankind. But as human beings developed to dif-



ferent levels of consciousness, only a few, the storytellers, remained able to see them. The young child is very close to this no-longer-conscious, imaginative world, and thus fairy tales are particularly appropriate through age seven.

Simple fairy tales and stories like "The Three Bears" are favorites of young children, who insist on hearing them over and over. As children become older, they are nourished by the more complex tales collected by Grimm, Lang and others. Ideally stories would be told rather than read so nothing comes between the "aliveness" of the storyteller, the images which she or he weaves, and the imagination of the child. Although this demands extra effort at first, it becomes increasingly easy with practice.

In a Waldorf preschool the same fairy tale is often told for two or three weeks, allowing the children to enter deeply into its images. Then the children might act it out with simple costumes in a circle game with songs made up by the teacher. Or there might be a puppet play with standup felt puppets or silk marionettes. The archetypal character of the puppets and the flowing quality of the silk combine to form images which work very deeply in the young child.

The need for fairy tales which nourish the child's inner, imaginative life should not be underestimated in today's world with its plethora of preformed cartoon and electronic images. A story which is told demands that the child be inwardly active in

order to understand and later reenact it in free play. The images of the cartoon, aside from being unaesthetic, are impressed upon the child in a passive way and the child imitates the gesture or movement of the character in a mechanical way in play—usually by uncontrolled running around. The quality of the play is very different, depending upon the images to which the child is exposed.

ARTISTIC DEVELOPMENT

There is a great deal parents and teachers can do to encourage the natural artistic ability of their children in the area of arts and crafts. The same creativity which fires a young child's play is also present for artistic activity. Rudolf Steiner encouraged parents to provide children with natural materials and to allow free color experimentation rather than emphasizing form. In a Waldorf preschool children use translucent water colors in a wet-on-wet technique. This lets the three primary colors blend on their papers, and the results contrast markedly with the flat colors achieved by tempera paints.

A color experience is similarly emphasized in crayon drawing by giving the children large block-shaped crayons made of beeswax. Colored beeswax in another form can be used for modeling in place of chemical compounds or clay. The adult's understanding of a child's artistic expression is more important than the materials used.



COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

We have seen that the young child is most at home in the imaginative, artistic world of color, movement, repetition, imitation and fairy tale images. Many things commonly found in homes and preschools today work against the normal growth of the child. One of the most destructive is excessive exposure to television. The hours spent in front of the television are an assault on the child's developing sense and can destroy imaginative free play. Its hypnotic influence leaves children sitting passively when they should be moving and actively creating their own play (up to

six hours a day in one national study of preschoolers). Many Waldorf homes eliminate TV altogether for young children.

Use of workbooks, almost universal in kindergartens and many preschools, is another activity which is out of place in early childhood. It confines the young child to sitting still and demands eye-hand coordination that strains the child's natural abilities. Children at this age don't learn concepts from workbooks; they learn how to circle items and waste time that would be better spend in movement and play.

Another common practice, teaching reading and math to kindergartners, awakens children prematurely and deprives them of the last valuable year (or even two!) of early childhood. While it is possible to teach some four year olds to read and write, such early gains are easily matched by the child who waits until age seven, and what is lost is the imaginative, magical element of the young child. Indeed, according to Steiner, the awakening and hardening influence of cognitive work before the age of seven directly influences a child's developing organs and can result in various illnesses in later life.

The best way to assure the gaining of cognitive skills is to work on them indirectly in early childhood through motor skills and imaginative development. Studies by Piaget and others have demonstrated that a wide, rich imaginative life is the foundation for language skills in the next stage of development.

That next stage naturally occurs when the child of six or seven begins to awaken to the world of time and space. Thus the teaching of reading and writing, which is even being pushed into the crib by some programs is delayed in Waldorf schools until first grade. The bright children rapidly catch up with children who learned to read early, and the average and slow children are spared the frustration and "learning difficulties" so common in schools today. And children of all abilities benefit by being allowed to spend that last remaining time in the magical world of early

childhood.

In a desire to have their children "get ahead" in today's world, parents and educators try to have children read earlier, use computers at age three, and learn the difference between "up" and "down" through educational television instead of through life. There is tremendous pressure to hasten children's entry into the adult world. But an understanding of the process of development and a trust in its unfoldment in their individual child can give parents confidence to resist hurrying their child and to enjoy him or her at each stage. The result will be better balanced human beings in whom the creative and emotional sides can humanize and balance the high technology which they will learn later in their educations and work with in later life.

FURTHER INFORMATION ON WALDORF PRINCIPLES

Further information on the Waldorf approach to early childhood is available from *Informed Birth & Parenting*, 501 Berkley Av., Ann Arbor, MI 48103. IBP carries many of the books listed below and will be sponsoring a national conference on "The Magical Years" July 27-31 (see "Tidbits" Section).

The Kingdom of Childhood by Rudolf Steiner

The Recovery of Man in Childhood by A.C. Harwood

Children at Play by Heidi Britz-Crecelius

The Hurried Child by David Elkin
School Can Wait by Raymond and Dorothy Moore

Waldorf materials for artistic and imaginative play are available from *Hearth Song*, 2211 Blucher Valley Road, Sebastopol, California 95472.

Rahima Baldwin is the author of Special Delivery and founder of Informed Birth and Parenting. She teaches kindergarten at the Rudolf Steiner School of Ann Arbor, Michigan. Rahima's family includes Seth (10), Faith (8) and Jasmine (4). Her husband, Agaf, is also a Waldorf educator. They live in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

DON'T BE LEFT BEHIND. . .



THE COMPANION CARRIER

- Exceptional Balance & Handling
- Protective Foot Guards
- Easy Mounting
- Enjoyable
- Intimate
- Safe

Agnes 2-5

Money Back Guarantee
Available At Your Local Bike Store
KSK, P.O. Box 2665, Eugene, Oregon 97402

100% COTTON CLOTHING FOR CHILDREN

at affordable prices!

SEND FOR FREE CATALOG



COTTON TOGS NORTH
Box 2180 - M6
Dixmont, Maine 04932

the authentic

Bach Flower Remedies

Directly From England

- Excellent for stabilizing emotions throughout pregnancy & post-partum.
- A completely safe, gentle, & non-toxic way to calm both you & your child.

Depend on 50 years of Miracles Healing Growth



ELLON (BACH USA), INC.
Box 320,
Woodmere, NY 11598
(516) 825-2229

for you & your child

WOODEN NAME PUZZLES



These puzzles are individually handmade from your order. Names are painted in rainbow sequenced upper and lower case letters. Capital letters are 3" high. Size varies according to number of letters. Minimum size 4 1/2" x 9 1/2".

First 6 letters \$7.00
Each additional letter \$1.00
Shipping: Add \$2.50 for one puzzle and \$1.00 for each additional puzzle.

RAINBOW COAT RACKS



A colorful rainbow floats above white clouds on this 1/2" birch coat rack which is highlighted with the name of your choice. Names are cut from 1/4" birch and painted Red, Yellow or Blue (please specify). The Shaker pegs are Red, Yellow and Blue. Mounting screws are included.

Rack \$12.00
75¢ per letter for name (please specify).
Shipping: Add \$3.50

Write for our Free '83/'84 Color Catalog
Gil & Karen's Toy Box
3975 Kim Court / Sebastopol, CA 95472
Designers & Manufacturers of Handcrafted Puzzles, Toys, Educational Materials, Children's Furniture