

Daily rhythm at home: Its lifelong relevance.

Notes taken at a talk in Mexico and published in the Cuernavaca Waldorf School Magazine in 2011. This is a useful article for Parents! Ed

As parents of little children, you are often very tired and get too little sleep. When you have too little sleep you also have too little energy and often you give in when you think you should not have done, or you get angry or irritated - so you are not present with the children. When you are not present you lose the children and you do not like yourself. To make it easier for you to be present in the daily life with your children there are three important considerations:

- To be flexible
- To set limits (boundaries) and
- To observe the same routine everyday

To become flexible is the result of objective inward observation. *You* may train your flexibility through inner work - where you learn about yourself. *You* have to decide what the limits are for your child in your house: time to go to bed, time to eat, what to eat, what language to use in the family and so on. *You* have to make up your mind about limits beforehand, so, instead of saying "no, no, no..." and becoming angry or frustrated, you simply do not allow the children to go beyond your limits - this is your decision. If you are ahead of the child and you see a certain situation unfold - with humour, the right gesture or word, you can move away from the situation. This is only possible if you train your flexibility. Knowing more about yourself will give you the possibility to be well prepared. And when you take hold of this tool you can start working with your children in a much freer way, because the limits are set.

The third recommendation, to make a routine which is the same every day, gives the child rhythm. All Waldorf families probably know how the daily life is in the kindergarten where children go through the day in alternate periods of concentration and expansion, as if in a breathing rhythm where there is inhaling and exhaling.

In the inhaling or breathing-in phase the child directs his attention to an activity that basically relates him to himself. For little children each breathing-in period (drawing, water painting, knitting, eating...) is very short because little children can only concentrate for short periods of time. In the exhaling or breathing-out period, the child relates mainly to the surrounding world (free play, free running etc.). For each breathing-in period the child needs a breathing-out period and so a pattern is established. This rhythm is something that you can bring into your home. You have to try

to find out when the children breathes-in and when they breathe-out. And when the children are in the breathing-in period, you have to make sure you are present, so the child feels *ah, here I feel my parents, they are there for me*. After that, for very short time, you can do what you have to do at home and you can tell your child *you have to wait because I need to do this*. And this will be all right because you know you have been present with the child.

As an example, look at what happens when parents pick up their children from the kindergarten: At the very moment you are picking up your child - does the cell phone ring and you answer? do you greet or engage in intense talk with friends? do you arrive late in a hurry. If yes, then you are not present for the child. For your child who has been gone for five hours and who really wants you... you are not there. So the child screams *I want an ice cream! I want this or that!* or he starts running around, or falling, or getting into little conflicts because he is confused, because he has not really met you. On the contrary, if you take the time (and it is five seconds perhaps), you bend down, give him a hug and then smell him (*so lovely!*) and really you are there, his eyes will tell you more than words, how his day was. He cannot tell you with words because he cannot remember, but his eyes will tell you everything. And then you take his hand and walk together (of course in a tempo that the child can follow), and this is really lovely because you are making a new nice situation, a "you and I situation". Now, if you need to greet people you can do it, very short, but together with the child because your child will feel *I am where I belong, with my parent*. This was a breathing-in situation where you were present.

Then you go to the car and go home (breathing-out) and it is probably time for eating which brings again a breathing-in situation. How do you eat? Do you sit down together with the child or is he sitting by himself and you are walking around talking on the telephone? If you give yourself the time and sit down with your child you will teach the child manners at the table by your example. Many of the children today do not sit with their parents and they do not learn to hold utensils appropriately. However, this is important, otherwise when they are seven years old they cannot hold a pencil and to learn it at this age is so difficult compared to when they were one or two years old. In addition, to sit at the table and to have a beginning, a process and an end, is important because this is how you should live the whole of



life. Everything has a beginning, a process and an end. It may take you only fifteen minutes to sit appropriately, to check how the child holds and drinks from a cup, eat everything you are given with mouth closed, and so on, being, in this way, an example for your child to follow.

More importantly, you have taken this short moment to make again a "*you and I situation*" and at the same time you also help the child to find a social form of *how we are when we eat together*. When you finish the meal you remind the children they need to help with the table so that they also learn that when they are a part of a social environment they take part in cleaning up. In this way you have created a situation where you have been present and now you can say to the child *go and play* (breathing-out) because you have been there, and then you can do what you need to do but you have to be visible to your child. This is so, because a little child cannot play by himself if the centre is not there and you are the most important person for the child. You are his centre, so if you leave the room the little child will follow you.



When you are doing your things, the situation may occur where children will say *I am bored*. In this case you, of course, don't turn on the television or music. When you are occupied with other things, you can tell your child *now you play by yourself*. If you know you have been present you can expect them to find something to do themselves. It is very important that you are not afraid of your children not knowing what to do or being bored. It is very important that you feel it is right: *I have been there with them, now they can be by themselves*.

Nowadays, parents are using media or adult-directed activities for their children, often because they are afraid of their children being bored and assume that they are not able to amuse themselves. This is a tricky situation because if you think you have to entertain your children all the time, with the media, after-school classes, or other adult-directed activities, then they do not learn how to play by themselves. They will not have a moment when they can be in a state of not knowing what to do and from there progress into a state of finding images inwardly and thus creating things from inside out. Being 'bored' represents the opportunity to go into this process of inner creativity.

If all the activities children do come from outside (electronic screens, video-games, adult-led etc.), then, not much happens in the sphere of inward creation. That's why in Waldorf kindergartens, teachers do not sit down and play with the children, but do real work from which the children draw inspiration to use in their own play. In these kindergartens you may find teachers sweeping, cooking, sawing, tending the vegetable patch, taking care of farm animals, cutting wood, and whatever the particular setting of each school allows to do. Equally, you, as parent, in the breathing-out phase, may do your work and with the children beside you doing their work (i.e. their own play). This is possible only when the children feel that they have met you in a previous breathing-in phase.

It is the same when children go to bed in the evening. What the child loves to hear are stories from your life. No books, no radio, no music, no film nor cartoon can make the same impact on the child as *you*. And to find your own story to tell means so much and it is, in addition, a tool with which you can change very stuck situations. It is so difficult for children to let go of you if they have not felt you present. But, if you have held your child, blown a little in the ear, told her a little story from the heart, so you have really been there, then you can kiss her and put her to bed and feel *I can leave because I have been there*. Then you can expect that your child is able to sleep by herself, which is healthy.

In Denmark, many parents at bedtime lie down and hold hands with the child, read 20 stories, sing 50 songs. All this takes one, one and a half, two hours and when finally they go quietly out of the bedroom they hear '*mum, water, mum!*' and then become annoyed. You can avoid this by setting limits and finding a comfortable way to leave because you have been present in different situations during the day. If the child has not been filled enough with your love or given the opportunities to do his own play, you cannot expect he will be able to sleep by himself.

There is an additional aspect I would like to draw attention to for the after-kindergarten time you have with your children. If you fill your child's time with extra-curricula activities or the media, you have less time with them. But children are small for a very short time, and this time goes so fast. By letting your child engage in his own play while you are around doing your own chores, and being really present in



those breathing-in situations, you build trust between your child and you. And this trust will be important when they get a little older - pre-puberty and puberty - because with this trust, they will come to you when they have problems and listen to you when you tell them what to do and what not to do. But they will only do it if they trust you, if you have been there for them. And that is why the first seven years are so important, because their whole trust, their belief in the world as good, is the basis of their future lives.

After that first seven years, it is their friends who become the focus. Their choice of friends has a lot to do with the morals you have shown them and built up through the first seven years. In addition, if children were given the opportunity to work inwardly, they will know themselves and then they will be able to say "no" when they meet something they do not like and "yes" to what they want. You can make a choice if you know yourself and a human being who can make a choice has healthy self-esteem.

In this context it is important how the kindergarten and the home relate to each other: there must be a bridge from one world to the other. In a way, it is a little hard for the families who choose Waldorf education for their children. You become different from the mainstream, but this is your choice. You cannot do both. Once you have taken the road of consciousness, you are concerned about their food, their upbringing, everything. So, to make the bridge from having the children in the Waldorf kindergarten and at your home is, of course, important so the child can see that everything fits. That is why it is incredibly important to build up trust between the kindergarten and the family, through which the kindergarten teacher is able to support the family's choice but also for the family to respect what is brought in the kindergarten. So you need to find a way together.

Interview with Helle

Helle told me she received her movement impulse from a social eurythmist called Anne Marie Erlich, who made a deep impression on her. Through her, she saw that the way to be with the young child should combine wisdom and knowledge, be conscious and filled with love.

'Simplicity' should be what we aim for. Homes today are not simple, so we must do our best as caretakers and 'gardeners' to fill our home environment with real life situations in a simple way - washing the windows or preparing the meals. This is real life work which can be imitated. All our doing must be penetrated with the knowledge of *how* I do the work properly, *how* I

penetrate my movements and be centred, how the child sees my inner gesture. If I am in my doing I am awake - awake in doing! If the child can see I am present in my doing, then the child feels safe.

We also need to be aware of our language, and how we speak. Do I use a normal voice, short sentences, and does what I say make sense? If I speak too much, use too many words, then the child thinks that the words are the bridge to the adult, not the gesture or action. So the gestures given by Anne, in social eurythmy, are to give and to receive. If you approach the child you have an open gesture of giving (open hand), then the child has the chance to react out of themselves. If you want the child to do something, you are in front of them with intention, you do not have to speak. You also have to think...am I giving them a choice or have I already decided? Where is the freedom? Speaking with children is important, but no explanations. If you want the child to do something, you first do the gesture, then say - 'take the plate'. The responsibility is the adults. What is the motive for your action? When you talk you are removing the consciousness from the action. Of course, the approach also depends on the situation, such as, how many children there are. That is why those who work with children also have to have so much self discipline, for personal development.

Childhood is a transition but also a stage in itself, it is from the past to the future...we should keep mixed ages in the groups. In Steiner education we have a longing to have a method, a manual - but with the child there should not be only one way. There is only the inner development and understanding of the adult, the capacity to want to be present, to have an overview, to hold back and develop our heart forces, not for ourselves but for humanity. We should be like the Sistine Madonna, beside and supporting the child, leaving them free to go into the future in their own way, but we can accompany them on their path, taking care of them.

In our work with the very small child today, we need to create a space for people to meet, to exchange and to develop this work consciously. In IASWECE we have the opportunity to do this internationally through the working group which is keeping an overview of what is happening around the small child worldwide. My greatest wish is that the Waldorf movement does not split up the ages of the children, but understands that childhood belongs together - we have to find the way to do it, wherever we are on the planet!

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