

Alliance for Childhood: “Right to Childhood - A Bridge for the Future”
Diane David

From the mid 1980's to the late 1990's, in the country of Belgium, a man named Marc Dutroux committed horrific crimes against children. He gained worldwide attention not only because of the nature of his crimes but also because of the negligence and amateurism of police and government officials involved in the investigation. The Dutroux case caused such outrage among Belgium's citizens that it caused a shake-up of the Belgium government including resignations and dismissals of several government officials, and prompted one of the largest peacetime demonstrations since World War II. “Something needs to be done” was the cry of the people.

This event and the sentiments around it as well as the acknowledgement that Brussels is the seat of the European Parliament, were the main reasons that Brussels was selected to be the venue for the first major international conference of the Alliance for Childhood: “Right to Childhood - A Bridge for the Future”, held October 11 - 14, 2000.

The Alliance, barely two years old, is a forum where individuals and organizations can network and build communities out of respect for childhood and in a worldwide effort to improve children's lives. Already offices are located in Germany, Belgium, Brazil, Sweden, Switzerland, Thailand, the U.K. and the U.S.A. Waldorf education has a strong presence in the Alliance and most of the approximately 250 attendees from 29 countries at the Conference were associated with Waldorf/Steiner education. The speakers, however, were varied in their professions and in their associations, but united in their desires to ensure that all children are given a good foundation for their future life. Among the presenters were Dr. Marilyn Benoit, a prominent American child and adolescent psychiatrist, three early childhood professors from England - Cathy Nutbrown, Wendy Scott, Mary Jane Drummond, Anna Tardos, director of the Pikler Institute in Hungary, Lt. Col. Dave Grossman, retired army psychologist from the U.S.A. and Craig Kielburger who at age 12 (he is now 17) started “Free the Children” based in Canada which now has 100,000 young members around the world. Among those mightily representing the Waldorf movement were Jürgen Flinspach, Joan Almon, Dr. Michaela Glöckler, Felicitas Vogt, Dr. Rainer Patzlaff, Christopher Clouder and Sally Jenkinson. While the Waldorf contingent represented but half the presenters, their knowledge, practical experience and depth of understanding of child development accounted for the real substance of the conference.

A special note - many of the European speakers talked about the UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child, which was adopted unanimously in 1959. Somalia and the United States are the only countries who have not recognized it. And yet the Declaration was referred to frequently by the European speakers as guiding principles in their work for children. While the conference started out mildly amidst the awkward handling of headphones, like any good conference by the end it had reached a crescendo. Nine major speeches were given, twenty round table discussions were held (though one could only attend four of them), and a lively youth circus from a Waldorf high school in Antwerp rounded out the four day program. Headsets were in constant use as English, German, Dutch and French were all in translation.

Some of the highlights of the speeches and round tables are as follows. Jürgen Flinspach, from the International Waldorf Kindergarten Association noted that without our investment in children our social problems cannot be solved. He called upon mankind to change its consciousness for a new childhood to develop. Marilyn Benoit expressed the need to form communities of caring.

Children learn what they live and adults must model. Therefore we must look at our moral commitment to each other and detoxify the children from our culture of greed.

During a lively and thoughtful round table discussion on the development of language, Dr. Rainer Patzlaff from the Waldorf movement in Germany, who has closely studied the media's effect on children, noted that through listening we can show a living interest in the other. All language starts in silence - the major awe in the material world. Today we have narrowed down language to the intellect. Rather we must recognize that language is gesture, music etc.; it is a connection to the person who speaks it. Through language we become more human and indeed language can actually physiologically form us. Fairy tales were duly noted as being rich and powerful in language, full of images.

"How do we educate children for a lifetime of learning?" formed the basis for the second round table discussion that I attended. Christopher Clouder, who is chair of the European Council of Steiner/Waldorf Schools, keyed into the answer when he asked the question - what is this mobility and restlessness that brings us here? Mobility is part of learning; we adults must be creative which children are naturally because they are so open. But so many things close childhood in, taking away the child's natural openness, mobility and creativeness. Computers and media were given as examples. Children must be allowed to be open to the world and trustful of themselves. Then we have conditions for life-long learning. On the other hand we as adults have to work on a conscious openness, to set limits and develop judgment. We need to make the children's activities conscious.

Dr. Michaela Glöckler gave us a beautiful treatise on education in freedom and love. When love becomes spiritual, then it is freedom. We need to lose the outside world in order to build our inner world and find the freedom within ourselves. Love without freedom is not love.

Abuse, addiction and violence were each tough topics handled in separate round table discussions. I attended the one on abuse; the discussion was broad, the issues difficult to face and the answers multi-faceted. Dr. Jenny Josephson, an anthroposophical doctor from the U.K., noted that, "All our guidelines are tumbling, our traditions crumbling. We are all capable of abusing if stressed enough. We need to encourage courage and not the silence of fear. " There was a call to break generational patterns of abuse with specific intervention. In Europe there is a paradigm shift from the protection of the children to the work with parents that includes less legal intervention. Healthy bonding on all levels was cited as a protective measure. Education needs to start in the high schools through classes in child development. Parents need to have the necessary information from conception so that they can enter into a right relationship with their child. Bonding must include grandparents and all who are part of the child's network in our changing family dynamics. Finally, we need to recognize the evil in ourselves, then we can have tolerance. We must take seriously our own inner self-development.

The Conference members were able to experience a bit of the stereotyped charismatic southern preacher in Lt. Col. Dave Grossman who strutted the stage, raising our adrenaline for action. He spoke with passion on the effect of media on children's violent behavior and his speech sparkled with the exactness of his facts, the powerfulness of his examples and the inevitability of the conclusions. Want to hear more from him? Find out where he's speaking or buy one of his books - *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, and *Stop Teaching Our Kids to Kill: A Call To Action Against TV, Movie and Video Game Violence*.

As the Conference began to wind down and we began to look ahead to future action, the last series of talks focused on play, a theme dear to any Waldorf teacher's heart. Fred Donaldson gave

us a picture of playfulness therapy. Joan Almon stated that play was vital to a child's development and accompanied her presentation with specific pictures of each stage of a young child's play from the two year old to the seven year old, from fantasy play to the birth of the imagination and the beginning of creative thinking. The aim is to cultivate an idealistic thinking that embraces the world from many points of view. However, "if we give children a dry education they will close up and wither." Play is the lost art of childhood and if you cut off play, you cut off creative thinking. What today is interfering with creative play? Certainly TV and its images are. Joan mentioned the work of Jane Healy who writes about today's children who have difficulty forming their own ideas. How can the child do this when his mind is so filled with the ideas of other's? Joan also mentioned other educators and psychologists who support the importance of creative play, correlating the child's ability to play with the acquisition of later skills including sociability and the integration of new ideas.

One young man who took a new idea and acted on it was Craig Kielburger who at the age of twelve was moved by the plight of child labor. Consequently he, along with 10 of his classmates, started "Free the Children". He is now 17 years old and travels the world teaching youth about heroes, conflict resolution and ways to make positive change possible. "If everyone had the heart of a street child, there would be no violence and we would be able to listen to the message of sharing."

The ideas of the Conference must be taken up among our communities of parents and colleagues and in solidarity with the worldwide community. These are not Waldorf kindergarten issues; these are universal issues that must propel us to work both locally and globally. Check out the website www.allianceforchildhood.net; start up your own local chapter of Alliance for Childhood. Contact the Alliance at P.O. Box 444, College Park, MD 20741, (301)513-1777 or at usalliance@starpower.net.

An excellent book, The Future of Childhood, has been prepared with articles by many of the main presenters at the Brussels conference. It gives the flavor of the conference and covers a range of concerns that were addressed there. Edited by Christopher Clouder, Sally Jenkinson and Martin Large, it is published by Hawthorn Press and will soon be available through the WECAN office, as well as through Rudolf Steiner College bookstore.

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