

Sophia House

Carol Cole

As I write this article, I am sitting next to Cindy's bed. She is asleep in the respite room having been sent home (to Sophia House) from school with a lip that won't stop bleeding. Cindy, nine-years-old, is our oldest child. Her sister is our youngest, nine months old.

Last night these beds were slept in by Ana and her three children, ages two, four, and six. Respite care is only planned for every other weekend, but sometimes it just does not work out like that. Ana has a brain virus that sometimes causes seizures. Yesterday afternoon, while waiting for us to bring her children to meet her, she collapsed in a public transportation terminal. The children watched in terror as their mother was taken away in an ambulance. They have nowhere to go. No friends. No family. Back at Sophia House, they settled down, played, had dinner and went to bed. At midnight, we picked up Ana from the hospital, made her something to eat, and then, she, too, went upstairs to sleep. This morning the family, joined the early childhood program for breakfast

and a morning of Waldorf early childhood work.

The early childhood work is our core program. On a daily basis, we have fourteen children who are here each weekday. Monthly, we see about thirty children. Four of the daily children are in public school. They join us for breakfast at 6:30 or 7:00 a.m. and stay for play and activities until 8:15 a.m., then we walk with them to school. Later, they join the afternoon program at 2:30 p.m. The other children participate all day in the Waldorf-based nursery program. They are all picked up about 6:30 in the evening.

All of our children are at high risk for homelessness. Some are homeless; most are from families striving for stability after having recently been homeless. The mothers and children are struggling with inner and outer poverty. Although most have housing, now they face severe obstacles. Their apartments are overcrowded, usually one room occupied by five or six people; the neighborhoods are dangerous; they struggle to have enough food, clothing, and money for transportation, heat

and electricity. Problems that contributed to their homelessness originally, such as domestic violence, mental and emotional instability, lack of employable skills, isolation, drugs, and alcohol, will arise again. We do all we can to assist in changing the outer circumstances, but our main focus is on building inner resources. Our children and mothers need to build the inner resources necessary to transform their inner life and build capacities to change their outer situation.

Though each child naturally has individual needs, there are qualities that they all share. Some of these qualities can be found in many small children, but in our children they are amplified. Some of these are:

1. Lack of relationships or wounded relationships:

The people in their environment are ever changing. Often relationships with neighbors are not safe relationships. Many of the children have been physically or sexually abused. Their mothers are under a lot of stress and often cannot meet their children's needs. The children have little opportunity to build relationships to the natural world, to art, or to story.

2. Fear: Intense fear narrows awareness. If you imagine a truck coming straight for you, you know that all of your awareness is focused on the truck and your situation. Our children have lived whole parts of their lives in such a state. They have had little opportunity to connect to goodness and beauty.

3. Isolation

4. Delayed/uneven development: This can happen for many reasons including poor prenatal care, lack of understanding of child development on the part of the mother, or environmental conditions, i.e., not allowing the baby to crawl because it is too crowded or too dirty.

5. Damaged sense of belonging: Alarmingly our children do not feel that they are a part of the world. Instead of feeling that the moon is following them as many young children do, they are more likely to feel that even the sun does not shine for them. It may be that the sun shines on everyone, but it is as if they feel they are not included, and if the sun shines on them it is just that they by chance were standing where it was shining on someone else. One

of our little girls who just turned four was looking at a bird singing in a tree. "Whose bird is that?" she asked. "Who is he singing for?" she puzzles. Then with a joyful smile she proclaims, "I know he is singing for everybody!" It has taken this child some time to believe that the bird's song is for her, too.

Those of us familiar with Waldorf early childhood education can clearly understand the depth of healing it can bring to these children. The transformation in the children is stunning and a constant source of joy and inspiration.

Many of these children are face to face with a particular kind of evil—violence, harshness, and abuse. In their lives, they are and will be in a position to transform this evil. To face this dragon they will need capacities and tools for transformation. Without these they may well be drawn into the fire, a fire that threatens all of us.

Waldorf education works through the anthroposophical view of the human being. That means each human being has great depth and height. Our feet are on the earth, our heads in the sky. And there is great breadth. We have come from the spirit through many incarnations. We are here now in this incarnation and will continue on into the future. The Waldorf kindergarten teacher receives the children from the spirit and guides them into the goodness of the earth. No children could need this more. As the children and their mothers recognize their own human dignity, fostered by the substance carried by the teachers and community, we all begin to know our true nature. It is of course a long journey and intense work.

By virtue of being human we all have the potential for an enriching relationship to color, form, music, story, the elements of earth, fire, water, and air, and the kingdoms of nature. All of this belongs to every human being regardless of economic standing. In Waldorf kindergartens we build these relationships consciously and with care through all of our daily work with the children.

Play and inner activity support the children in healing their wounds. Jessica, four-years-old, has come from a very abusive situation. Much of the trauma occurred at the dinner table. Day after day, she sets up the tea set and brings the dolls to sit at the table. She stands a bit closer each day, some-

times asking a teacher to stand with her; someday soon she will sit at the table, too.

We are often asked if we are just like other Waldorf kindergartens. In the most essential ways, we are. Yet meeting the needs of our children and families produces some differences such as the following. Like many other places, we have mixed ages, although birth to nine is not so usual. The children eat breakfast here, and we all have our main meal at lunchtime with the children. The staff and interns all live at Sophia House, thereby creating a home and community into which the children and mothers can enter. We have more books than most kindergartens. Our children are at high risk for illiteracy; in many of their homes there is not a single book. Most of our children need help with imagining; we often need to tell them the blue cloth is water, but when they get the idea of it, their imagination bursts forth.

The work with these children provides many opportunities to rejoice in their growing capacities and to share in their joy of discovery. It also presents many questions. Ongoing questions include those surrounding work with children whose astral bodies have been prematurely awakened through abuse and over exposure to sexuality. When is imitation the force to draw on and when is it necessary to draw on the response to authority or forces of learning that normally develop even later?

Which stories are healing for our children? Much of the substance of fairy tales deals with a soul journey, but for our children many parts of the stories have occurred on the physical level. For example, when a tale starts out telling of children who were poor with little to eat, one can see anxiety on the children's faces, sometimes too much anxiety perhaps to listen to the rest of the story. If the story resolves the original problem or condition in the soul world, is it still healing for a child who has experienced that same problem or condition in the physical world? These problems include not having a home, experiencing abuse at the hand of a family member, or having seen bloodshed and terrible violence. After hearing a story in which people were hungry, but in the end the good people had food forever, a child who is often without food at home asked if his mommy would have food, too. To a child who often

experiences hunger, a story in which good people have food (and bad people do not?) is not necessarily healing. The questions and answers are complex.

What do our children experience at the threshold of sleep? Is it influenced by the violence in the neighborhoods they live in? Many are initially afraid to go to sleep. Their mothers report they do not sleep well at home. After a few months, often their sleep at home improves, and they all sleep soundly at nap-time in Sophia House. At the beginning of their time with us, several children have expressed fear of the figures made of fleece. They have asked that they be covered up especially at nap-time. They say they are like ghosts. There is much at stake, and we must look carefully at what is best at each stage of their time with us.

Connecting to others doing this work with children in similar situations: WECAN has made funds available for Sophia Project to begin to compile a list of those working with children living in difficult conditions. If this applies to you or anyone you know, please contact us so that we can begin to look at questions we have in common.

Internships: The work of Sophia Project depends upon the interns who live and work at Sophia House for one year. The interns work directly with the children in the early childhood program. They are able to participate in the children's development and to marvel at their incredible capacity to heal given the appropriate conditions, conditions that the interns learn to create. In their time here interns learn what it means to accompany the families as they heal. They learn to be available, but not to push, to be respectful and to understand the intensity that may arise when the mothers are healing from the shame many of them carry. In addition to working with the children, the interns have program meetings including curriculum studies and other relevant topics, supervision meetings, and processing meetings with an outside counselor. We have an ongoing need for people wishing to serve in this capacity.

Sophia Project is located in West Oakland, California, serving children and families at risk for reoccurring homelessness through early childhood education, childcare, respite care, arts programs, child development classes, family support, and festival celebrations. Carol Cole is a WECAN Board Member. Her email address is sophiaproj@aol.com.