

Meetings With Parents on the Topic of Discipline

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Here is a sample of one of the excellent articles that will be available this summer in a new WECAN publication. Entitled You're Not the Boss of Me, this publication will enrich the work of kindergarten teachers who are striving to understand the many challenging and joyful shifts that occur in young children when they go through the change of teeth.

Among the challenges facing parents today, none is more difficult than setting and enforcing limits, creating and holding boundaries, and guiding children with loving discipline. Many parents, feeling that their own parents were too strict, give their children free rein. Others, knowing their children to be creative, bright beings, follow their child's lead, feeling that to do otherwise would infringe on the child's freedom and creativity. Still other parents, spending little time with their children during the day, don't want any unpleasantness in the little time they do spend together and therefore avoid any kind of conflict with their children. All of these situations are unhealthy ones for the child and the parent.

The young child instinctively expects guidance and when it is not forthcoming, the child tends to feel insecure and frightened. Growing up without guidance, without boundaries, often translates into being left alone to flounder in a world that the child is not experienced enough to understand. Constantly being consulted by adults about what the

child wants is not only bewildering, but can create an egotist, unprepared for the world awaiting him or her. Many parents believe that choices strengthen their child but, on the contrary, too many choices can undermine the child.

Because parents are so close to their children they have many valuable observations to offer teachers. Parents can also benefit from the teacher's objectivity. I always hasten to reassure parents that being a teacher is ever so much easier than being a parent. Guiding a class with clarity, firmness, and consistency is what we do every day and there is much we can share with parents, either in our parent-teacher conferences, phone conversations, or class meetings.

Our class meetings are a wonderful opportunity to build community among the parents in the class and can serve as a forum to share ideas, questions, and thoughts. It is also an opportunity for us to share our expertise, giving parents the support and guidance that we often wish we had experienced ourselves when we were parenting young children. But how can we bring a topic as complex and as personal as discipline? Can we offer our thoughts in such a way that we empower others with deeper understandings? Can we inspire understandings that can guide parents under a myriad of situations with their children? The following are a few of the ways I have worked with this topic in my class meetings. These are, of course, not menus to be followed

exactly, but rather some ideas that may inspire you to create endless possibilities of experiences and conversations with the parents in your class.

One meeting, for example, may start out with me asking the parents to divide up into pairs, separating couples (it is best to do this part way through the school year when the parents already know and feel comfortable with each other). Choosing a partner myself, I then show the parents how to do a form of wrestling. Yes, that's right, wrestling! Facing each other, my partner and I put our right feet together in front of us, sides touching, and we touch our four hands in front of us, palm to palm. The purpose of the game is to move in such a way that the other person is forced off balance and must move their right foot. The left foot can move but the hands and the right foot of each one must always be in contact. It is not the type of wrestling that is aggressive or fast; on the contrary, each one slowly follows the subtle pressure of the hands of the other. First one person takes the lead, applying pressure with both hands and bending forward or backward, up or down, to force the other off balance. As soon as you feel yourself losing balance, you then take the lead and, exerting pressure with both hands, try to force the other to lose balance, using the same type of movements. And so it goes, listening with the hands and taking turns leading or following as your sense of balance calls for it. You can squat down and swivel from side to side, just so long as the right feet are always immobile. Try it at home with your family to get a sense of how this exercise works. Once they have been shown how to do it, the pairs wrestle for 5-10 minutes, then change partners and do it again for another 5 minutes or so. Much laughing and many strange positions follow, and it is usually a very fun exercise. When we have finished, we sit in a circle and I ask what the experience was like for them. Believing as I do that a large part of discipline consists of careful, wakeful listening, I ask them about whether they were able to "hear" the other's intentions and to communicate, physically, who was leading. What was the experience like, I ask them, when it was unclear who was leading? What was it like to have no resistance meet your hands? What if the touch of the other was overbearing? Could you make yourself heard? Can you identify, I wonder, what made you lose your balance? As you can imagine, the conversation and the discoveries

parents make are most interesting; quickly they come to the conclusion that without meeting resistance, they lose their balance and that too much resistance makes them feel helpless. Getting mixed messages from your partner leads to feeling very insecure and frustrated. We then speak about these experiences in the context of discipline, and it is through their discoveries that they themselves come to the conclusion that meeting resistance helps them discover where they are; that clear communication and consistency gives security, etc. They can also get a sense of what their own style is as they find themselves overpowering or shrinking from their partner. Getting in touch with our own styles is another interesting conversation.

One of my goals in my parent evenings is to lead the parents to discover what they already know and allow them to uncover their own common sense and wisdom. This is in keeping with the age in which we all live: the consciousness soul age. In this time, no longer are we, as individuals, willing to take someone else's word for it. It is only through individual questioning and the striving of our own efforts that we truly know something. I try to make my class meetings experiential in nature, setting up certain possibilities and then guiding the parents in a conversation that may uncover the knowledge that lives within them. I always feel that a really successful class meeting is one in which, part way through, I could quietly walk out the door and never be missed. The experience to be avoided in our class meetings is when parents leave feeling that they have done everything wrong with their children. My goal in my meetings is to have parents leave feeling more confident in themselves as parents and proud of all the good things they have done for their children. For those of us who host evening meetings, we welcome parents at a time of day when we are all tired. So let's make our class meetings dynamic, artistic and fun so that we can all leave feeling enlivened by our time together. As a parent in a Waldorf school for 14 years, I have experienced some wonderful, thought-provoking meetings, and I have sat through my share of dull, boring ones, too.

Another way of working with the question of discipline is to ask parents what the first word that comes to mind is when they hear the word "discipline." I write down what they say without commenting on it (often even they are surprised by

what comes out of their mouths!) I then ask them to break into groups of three or four people (again trying to keep couples in different groups) and ask them to think of a person they knew when they were quite young, before seven. I ask them not to choose their parents – though it could be another family member, such as an uncle or a grandparent – and it should be someone with whom they felt completely at ease and true to themselves. I ask them to describe this person to each other, focusing more on the attributes of that person and less on the relationship they had with them. Each person has about five minutes to speak. I am not part of these groups but stay in the room going from group to group helping them to stick to the topic. Again, this is a wonderful way for parents to get to know each other and to build a community within the class. When each person has had the opportunity to speak, we all join the circle again and I ask everyone to speak about the common threads in the descriptions of these people from our past. Every time I have done this, the comments have been the same: someone who has time for the child, who is generally quiet and never lecturing or moralizing, who loves them with no ulterior motives, and who accepts them just as they are. Very often it is a grandparent or an older neighbor, and often people mention that, as children, they would *do* things with this person: bake cookies, go fishing, walk in the woods, thread their sewing needles, etc. After everyone has had time to contribute to the picture of this type of person, I then ask them if these attributes they have all mentioned are still important to them now that they are adults. Taking it further, I then ask how do these attributes live in them as parents? This always leads to an interesting discussion, especially when I read back to them their words associated with the word “discipline.” We can then go on to talk about the root of the word “discipline” – disciple – and how that can fit into a rightful understanding of discipline. Slowly we begin to uncover an understanding of discipline as an inner attitude as well as a manifestation of outer deeds. We can also go on to speak about our own relationship to discipline. I often share with the parents my own struggles with self-discipline, citing the wonderful lesson taught to me by my youngest son.

At the time when my son was a young teen,

and a very rebellious one, we had an experience together that was a teaching moment for me. I can’t remember what it was that set me off with him. I do, however, remember working up a real head of steam and saying things that I knew I shouldn’t say to him, but was unable to stop myself. At first he was contrite and a bit abashed, but as the harangue continued, with me yelling at him and wagging my finger in his face, his body posture changed. He relaxed and sat back with a rather smug, superior look on his face. He was no longer listening; instead he was watching me, in awe with just how out of control I was. I do remember uttering the words, at the top of my lungs, that it was about time, young man, he learn some responsibility and some discipline. His sudden laugh stopped me short. “If you could only see yourself now, Mom,” he quietly said, and walked away shaking his head, disappointed with yet another adult who cannot practice what she preaches.

When I tell the parents this story we all have a good laugh at the image of our children sitting back and watching the show. But then we can go on to have a discussion about the inner work we as parents and teachers must do as our children grow and change, adapting our boundaries as our children’s ages change. I share with them the image that serves me so well, both at home and in the classroom, of being the rock for my children, always there, always available to provide resistance, always solid and still and grounded. Or of the farmer who periodically walks his or her fields, kicking the fence posts to see if they can still be counted on. We are those fence posts and our children push at them to find out if they can still be trusted. Are they solid? Can I lean on this one and be secure? Often we can then speak about our willingness to sometimes be disliked by our children and what that means for them and for us. We struggle to clarify the boundaries between who we are and the experiences that have formed us, and who our children are. “What are your children asking you to develop?” I often ask, and we go on to talk about parenting as a schooling for us in mindfulness, observation, flexibility, and deepening understanding. We talk about our task of not just embracing the act of parenting but transforming it into the art of parenting.

Gudrun Davy, in her wonderful articles in the first *Lifeways* book (which I recommend all parents

read), likens the journey through parenting to three stages: for the first seven years it is like being in a small boat, taking a long journey. Sometimes the waters are calm, but often they are choppy and we are alone, guiding ourselves and our small children with no land in sight and no signposts along the way. The second stage (from 7 to 14) she compares to a journey through a rich countryside of trees, rivers, forest, villages, and cities. We are once again on dry land but now, through our children, we move into a broader social landscape. Suddenly we find ourselves centrally responsible for directing a large and complex drama with, as Gudrun points out, an extensive and varied cast and an elaborate plot unfolding from day to day. And the last stage of parenting is compared to climbing into the high mountains, a journey fraught with dangers and challenges but also full of excitement as our horizons broaden and the world spreads before our feet. Here the going is steeper and when we have finally conquered one peak, a still higher one looms in the distance. The joys arise when we look up and get glimpses of a high, ideal world, raying down on us with sudden moments of bright sunshine.

It is important to share these impressions from those wise elders who have gone before us in their parenting. When our children are small it

is hard for us to realize that we are preparing the foundation for their future life. We can feel as if it will always be sleepless nights, battles over food and brushing teeth, and constant surveillance to ensure physical and emotional safety. But if we can look at our efforts to discipline our little children as the laying down of the framework of their future self-discipline during the teenage years, it can give us the perspective we need to strengthen our resolve to hold those boundaries as an act of love for our children.

I wish you great joy and fulfillment in your preparations for meeting parents. Teachers have much to gain by sharing the wisdom that our work with early childhood bestows. Joining wholeheartedly with parents as colleagues in this ever challenging, ever wondrous journey towards becoming truly human benefits parent, child, and teacher.

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