

Working and Living with So-Called Difficult Children

2008 East Coast Waldorf Early Childhood Conference

Nancy Blanning

The following highlights come from three keynote addresses given by Dr. Gerald Karnow at the February 2008 East Coast Waldorf Early Childhood Conference in Spring Valley, NY. Topics from the book, Difficult Children: There is No Such Thing by Henning Köhler, gave the conference its theme. Dr. Karnow is an anthroposophic physician in the Fellowship Community and also school doctor to the Rudolf Steiner School in NYC and Green Meadow Waldorf School.

A second article arising out of the conference, on the topic of coming to understand the child through observation of the threefold organism, is in process. Look for it in a future issue of Gateways.

The theme of this conference acknowledges that there are growing numbers of children who challenge us. Dr. Karnow asked what methods we employ to understand the “difficult child”? What are our criteria for what is normal? If we provide age-appropriate content, then the children should, within a certain spectrum, be able to accommodate what the teacher brings. This assumes that we are bringing age-appropriate, Waldorf-inspired content, which permits the maturation of the child’s individuality through the lower senses (touch, life, self-movement, and balance). This builds a physicality that will provide the framework for a healthy development of the higher senses (hearing, word, thought, and ego). The careful working to build health in lower sense activity will provide the right foundation for later, more subtle, soul-spiritual development. The early childhood educator helps prepare the child in his body for grade school and the experience of the middle senses (smell, taste, sight, and warmth), and for the high school where the area of experience is the upper senses. The early childhood domain is the lower senses, the body, the will.

As we begin to consider “difficult” children, Dr. Karnow emphasized that it is essential to understand that all experiences we bring to the child through education affect physical development.

This was illustrated by the example of Otto Specht, Rudolf Steiner’s first student, which can serve as an archetype for our work as educators. Otto Specht was a hydrocephalic boy whose case was considered hopeless. To educate him was thought impossible. Nonetheless, the mother of this boy had trust in Rudolf Steiner and asked him to take on the boy’s education. Steiner required that he alone would decide everything done with the boy, to which the mother agreed. He very closely structured the curriculum given to Otto and guided the movement of his limbs in very specific ways. Through these activities, the size of Otto’s head shrank. He not only improved physically but completed his education and became a medical doctor. In this situation, Steiner was a young man educating a difficult child. This child could not learn and was essentially deformed. But through the education Steiner developed, the child not only improved his intellectual capacities and completed his education, but his physical body changed as well. Each child wants to incarnate into the physical world and bring “the latest news from the spiritual world.” The question for us is, does today’s education create a body that the spiritual being of the child can inhabit? “Difficult” children are confronting a struggle in finding home in an earthly body.

Dr. Karnow described that in the first period of life, the child is all body, and all experiences affect body development. Everything we do affects the totality of the whole being, even through chemical and morphological changes that occur in the body. Not only the soul life — emotional, intellectual, and psychological — is affected. In other words, everything we do with the young child affects his physicality, his physical body. Pedagogical activities work upon the physical, while the medical activities work on the etheric. What we present in the pedagogy is received through the senses and works deeply into the body. Regarding the “difficult” child, the physical body can be the bridge through which we can foster healthy development through the educational experiences we bring.

The physical body can also be the vehicle through which we can come to understand the “difficult” child. The ability to observe is key in approaching perplexing children. Dr. Karnow remarked that when he goes to a school as physician, he does so with anxiety. He is asked to observe, and he follows Rudolf Steiner’s guidelines as to what to do – just look. One has to empty oneself of anxiety, having trust that some insight will come. Something catches our attention toward that child, perhaps a heavy ear lobe that does not tell anything by itself. It has to connect to something else, a movement, perhaps. Dr. Karnow quoted from the first chapter of *Fundamentals of Therapy*: “It is of the utmost importance to know that the human being’s ordinary forces of thinking are refined form and growth forces. A spiritual element reveals itself in the forming and growing of the human organism. And this spiritual element then appears during the course of later life as the spiritual power of thought.” When we observe soul behavior, such as speech, movement, movement of thoughts, forgetting, and so on, we will only find the answer to why the behavior is occurring by looking back at the body itself. This is where the physician is a helpful colleague to the educator. The teacher looks at the soul and describes the soul manifested in the child’s behavior. The doctor lives in relation to the body. The doctor is asked to give a reason for why the child is unable to behave differently. Up to about age twenty-one, we see organically driven behavior and we want to understand its cause. Early childhood teachers are dealing with organ-driven behavior, determined by the child’s physicality.

There needs to be a dialogue between doctor and teacher. How can we understand behaviors that stir our interest, or that annoy? We understand behavior is organically driven. So what are we to do about it? Otto Specht’s behavior was organically determined. His physical condition did not allow him to participate in a normal school. So Rudolf Steiner saw he had to evoke a change in the organism. If we want to evoke a change in behavior, we have to evoke a change in the organism. We usually come up with things in the child’s environment to account for difficult behaviors – media, diet, family life – but the true answer lies in the physical body of the child.

Yet how can we come to truly observe the child

so that we can gain a sense for what to do to evoke a beneficial change? Dr. Karnow spoke of times past when human beings had active converse with the gods in mystery centers, the sources of spiritually revealed knowledge in ancient times. Rudolf Steiner states in Volume Six of *Karmic Relationships* that whatever originates in medicine today is fundamentally an aftermath from insights shared by the ancient Mercury gods. But things have run dry in our times. Humanity must rediscover how to have new conversation with divine beings. To help us do that is the mission of Anthroposophy. If we think of our work as a process of entering the spiritual world and being guided by the beings who live in it, this gives meaning to our work that transcends the moment and deepens our task. Every Waldorf school is a mystery center, but only if we realize it and act accordingly. This we can do through the gifts given by Rudolf Steiner through Anthroposophy.

In his *Difficult Children* book, Henning Köhler speaks of our coming into relationship with the “difficult” child as a path of initiation, a conscious entry into relation to the spiritual world. How can one undergo this initiation? One needs to create a posture of creative “not-knowing.” We want to go into a situation not knowing anything and thereby create an organ of “not-knowing” receptivity. This needs intense participation. The observer enters into a situation where the being of the contemplated child actually melts into oneself; observer and the one observed become one. This is an act of emptying out and becoming selfless, of not being burdened by ideas, preconceptions, or expectations, but of being open. The nose or ear or hands or feet or movement or tone of voice could capture our attention. To become one with another, the observer has to become empty, still, quiet, and warm. If one does that, the inspiration of what needs to happen will come. Steiner calls this a “thinking-feeling” into the other. Then the observer will be “thought” by the being of the child as act of creative identification. I become one with you. This is a turning around of the activity of an educator or observer from what is customary. It is a nonlabeling approach. It is totally open, and one does not know what is going to happen. True communication, true dialogue can happen when this emptying has occurred.

To achieve this emptying requires enormous inner work on the part of the educator. Labeling a child as “difficult” points to something in ourselves rather than the child. We admit we cannot handle this child in the context of the other children. This child explodes the bubble in which we want our children to be contained. We want the children to do just what we want. Dr. Karnow referred to Köhler’s observation that one of the biggest impediments to our moving forward is our addiction to contentment. In our classrooms, we want everything to be harmonious and nice. When we are led by this desire to be comfortable, we are not open to hearing the true child speak.

The point stands out from Köhler’s book that we need a new artistic mode of educational thinking and observing. When we look at something artistically, the form we perceive becomes an expression of what created that form. Through the form, we can begin to see the invisible aspects of the human being. To do this, we have to learn to grow wings. The visible is a kind of darkness, an abyss. This is what we see when we just look at the outer physicality. We need to develop wings to penetrate through the darkness and see the light and spark and be able to bring it to birth, to save it.

Throughout the lectures, Dr. Karnow made repeated reference to his pedagogical “bibles” — *The Study of Man/Foundations of Human Experience*) and *Education for Special Needs*. These two are courses in “wing development.” The answers to all our questions lie in these two books. He urged teachers to commit dedicated study to these volumes. We can grow wings by taking up spiritual ideas about the nature of the human being. To appreciate the threefold nature of humanity, which these lectures describe, gives us eyes to see with and wings to fly over the chasm that separates us from an understanding of the child. Especially when we meet together in a circle, sharing our different perspectives, we can perceive and become participants in creative forces that give us tools for understanding and tools for working.

Dr. Karnow reminded us that life is structured in time. Human development is a process in time. Our society is one that expects quick answers and solutions, so this process puts us at odds with modern expectations. As educators, we have to understand that what is done with a child now will

have its results in the future, in later life. As helping companions to the child, we must also have patience that the dialogue with the true spiritual being of the child will not happen instantly. The processes of emptying, looking, listening, and sensing require time and patience. We must be able to withstand the discomfort we feel in not being able to come up with an answer right away. We have to wait to permit the world to imprint itself into us so we can realize the meaning of what we see. This requires patience and tolerance to live with the frustration of not having a quick answer.

In his opening remarks, Dr. Karnow shared a verse given by Rudolf Steiner to Dr. Ita Wegman on December 21, 1921, which pictures the theme through the three days of lectures:

*The human being is a bridge
Between the past and future existence.
The present is a moment; moment as bridge.
Spirit grown to soul in matter’s husk
Comes from the past.
Soul growing to spirit as seed encased
Journeys toward the future.
Grasp future things through past ones
Hope for evolving things through what has evolved.
So grasp existence in evolving growth;
So grasp what will be in what exists.*

This verse is spoken at the faculty meetings of the Otto Specht School, a new therapeutic endeavor in the Fellowship Community. It was begun to offer another program to carry “difficult” children whom the regular classroom cannot embrace. The program’s existence points squarely to questions we teachers carry: Is Waldorf education here for all children? Can this education meet every child’s needs? Dr. Karnow answered this. Yes, we are here for all children, but there may be circumstances where we cannot meet all the children’s needs. If a child is asked to leave, we must be honest and clear as to why. Is it because we are addicted to contentment, or because it is truly impossible? There are situations where a child is carried despite difficulties and where, through time, a transformation has occurred. We must keep in mind the time element.

We can also remind ourselves that Waldorf education is confined not only to a nice classroom.

The world is a classroom, as it is a mystery temple. Waldorf education can happen everywhere, and some children require this wider vista. Every situation of daily life can become curriculum for Waldorf education. An attempt to realize this is being made at the Otto Specht School, which has the benefit of being situated in a community for the elderly. It is surrounded by woods and streams, large gardens, greenhouses, an orchard, and a dairy farm with sheep and chickens, all permitting creative educational efforts.

To conclude, Dr. Karnow returned to Henning Köhler's statement that difficult children do not exist. Children with difficult behaviors do. We need to develop a knowing-understanding through an "emptying-out" attitude, where we do not label, we do not react. The children need us to say "yes" to them, which will be our virtue development because they require us to be on a path of inner development. We can picture ourselves as musicians

who "lift" our musicianship to a soul capacity where we can bring about social harmony and create music in social situations. The children who experience this lifting into selfless, social skills will be affected in their bodies. We affect the children's bodies by who we are and what we do. This fundamental transformation of attitude – saying "yes" to the child – is what is required.

The final keynote address ended with these words: Yes, Waldorf education is for every child. No, we cannot always meet the needs of every child. Yes, life is difficult. Life is beautiful.

Nancy Blanning presently serves as a therapeutic and remedial teacher at the Denver Waldorf School. Her special focus is on developing movement enrichment for young children. With her colleague, Laurie Clark, she has co-authored the book Movement Journeys and Circle Adventures. She also does consulting work with Waldorf schools in North America, teacher training and mentoring.