

The Child's Relationship to the Doll

• Bernadette Raichle

In 1995, Bernadette Raichle began Awhina Day Nursery and Kindergarten in New Zealand, which has been a model and inspiration for many others seeking to provide anthroposophically-based out-of-home care for young children. In her book, Creating a Home for Body, Soul, and Spirit: A New Approach to Childcare (WECAN, 2008) Bernadette explores in loving detail the many aspects of making a true "home away from home" for children. These excerpts from Chapters 12 and 13 give a few of her insights.

There is nothing more sacred than making a doll for a beloved child. The creating, which may be experienced as an "ensouling," begins with the first piece of fleece that is taken to begin rolling the head, organically building up, little by little, each layer of wool . . . a gesture of enfolding, of wrapping, until you have before you a beautiful sphere. For the young child, this sphere, which is later to become the head of the dolly, resonates of cosmic memories.

The loving gestures we use will "sing" to the child, who experiences them in every fold and every nuance of the dolly. The soul life of the very young child lives between two worlds, the spiritual and the earthly world, with the little child and his day-dreaming still passing lightly to and fro from one paradise to another — heaven and earth are one.

The Child's First Doll

The little child's first doll — I call it the sleeping dolly — is but a reflection of this cosmic realm and supports the little one as mediator between these two realms. The sleeping dolly, the simplest of dolls, accompanies the little child as she "sleeps" her way into earthly life.

One has only to watch the little baby having recently woken and at just six months able to take hold of her little sleeping dolly. First the baby's

hand comes to rest on something that is already becoming a part of her. The little hand closes around the soft, wooly bundle and immediately lifts this to the mouth and nose, literally "tasting" the dolly and then holding it slightly away and simply breathing her in. I have spent many a moment in awe of the special quality of this moment. The baby of six months is "here" in that she is awake (from her sleep) but in her "dreaming" oblivious to anything in her nursery other than her dolly, which is simply a bundle of fleece and wool, lovingly fashioned in a simple way to imbue the qualities of the human being.

The Sleeping Dolly

Just as the young child lives in transition between the world of spirit and the earthly realm, it is the sleeping dolly who supports the daily transition from home to the day nursery and from day nursery to home again. Just as the child and family become a part of the day nursery environment so too does the sleeping dolly become part of the child's home.

In the early days of the day nursery, we found that many children liked to bring an array of soft toys with them. We simply asked that home toys stay at home and introduced the sleeping dolly, which was for sleep time only and which would go home with the child each day.

These dollies are very simple. However, to make a soft dolly with the child in mind carries with it certain responsibilities. We need to carry an inner picture of the "uprightness" of the human being, as well as an outer observation of the healthy physical being.

The sleeping dolly is made in what has been described as a "meditation in doing," carrying an inner picture of the child. It is with this attention to detail that the sleeping dolly is ensouled, and which enables the child to so readily take hold of this dolly. The quality of a harmonious whole is

reflected in the composition of the dolly, made from just one piece of fabric, and this in turn accompanies the child, who lives in a state of consciousness described as a “sleeping” or “mono-consciousness,” which expresses the child’s “at-oneness” with his environment.

Making a dolly is one of the greatest gifts we can offer the child, for it is in crafting the soft toy, with care and in a right process, that we ensoul the dolly with an inner gesture. It is this soul gesture that the child connects with. The dolly is imbued with dried lavender, surrounding the child with a quality of harmony and peace. Where possible, Awhina dollies are made from natural fabrics and materials that have been salvaged or recycled. This provides an “enduring” soul quality to the finished doll.

In the morning, the parent with the child carefully places sleeping dolly in the child’s cot (for the baby) or the basket in the playroom (for the older child).

Occasionally parents are reminded that the gesture of respect and care that they give to the sleeping dolly will also be reflected in the gestures of the child. Parents are asked not to underestimate the significance of this special dolly to the child, which offers a unique bond that links the day nursery and home. When the parent handles this dolly with a genuine warmth and love, the child too is warmed by this loving gesture.

The sleeping dolly is for that sacred time of the day and night when the child reconnects with her spiritual origins. Dolly is there when the child drifts into sleep and dolly is there when the child reawakens to the world. It is just that, a dolly for sleeping. There are other dolls that the child has for play. This dolly, however, has a particular role in the child’s soul life.

Doll Play for Older Children

Daniel Udo De Haes describes the little child as not yet having any conscious picture of the human being, but says that in his soul this concept lives as a foundation of his development. The child’s soul continues to be vividly animated by an archetypal idea of humanity, and from it he begins and continues to fashion his life (De Haes, 25).

Little children, in their play, practice themselves into life. They re-enact the adult world

of relationships in miniature. They learn little by little to become social, mainly by imitating those adults who are around them the most. Children come to an experience of “self” in their relationship with others — surrounded by adults, sharing healthy and loving relationships. It is natural for the child to imitate warmth expressed by the other. The outpouring of love is intensely felt in the whole being of the child — a two-year-old will, without any apparent motive, approach another, enfolding this child in her embrace. The joy experienced by all is so very tangible. The “need” to nurture the dolly, which arises primarily out of imitation, is also somehow an innate instinct in the healthy child and yet another reason to support children being in mixed-age groups.

At Awhina, play and dolls and the day in the life of the child are one. An environment where dolls are loved and respectfully cared for has very consciously been developed. Each dolly has a cradle with its own blankets and one or two even have little sleeping dollies. The dolls have become a part of the life of the children.

No house built would be complete without one or two (sometimes more) “babies” to care for. Often a highchair will be brought to the morning tea table — complete with a bib and a drinking cup — not for one of our Awhina toddlers, but for a dolly! The child does not distinguish between what is play and what is real, because they are one and the same. The child totally, and with his whole being, embraces the dolly and cares for it, his soul experiencing the image of the human being. With this unconscious yet profound experience, the child’s journey into life and further development is strengthened and deepened.

Above all, the doll provides the possibility for the child to be supported in his need to become, to enter the world of relationship that begins with mother and father, brother and sister. The doll has the potential to become the child’s first special friend because hidden from the unseeing eye of the adult are archetypal mysteries, so tangible to the child and his dreaming world of heaven and earth.

The Awhina dolls have been created with this cosmic picture in mind. On the one hand, the doll, a representative of the human being displaying

healthy human qualities, supports the little child into the upright. It goes without saying that in making the doll we carry in mind a picture of the healthy human being with well-proportioned features. On the other hand, the doll imbues the child with cosmic memories, leaving him dreamily “absorbed” in the spiritual origin of mankind. These memories and recollections naturally live unconsciously in the little child, but manifest outwardly as a sense of comfort and security.

When making a doll, we need to learn to observe and in our own development learn to be self-critical. We must aspire to the best for our young children and sometimes this will mean re-doing again and again and maybe even again, remembering that the child will love and respect his doll as much as we love and respect his doll.



The Puppet Play for Little Children

The very first story that the child hears comes from the mother, and may be in the form of a lullaby. The sound of mother’s voice gently awakens the child and yet still allows for the child to experience the wholeness, the sense of oneness that is so much a picture of the little child and his environment. In the day nursery, we support this at-oneness or “sleeping consciousness,” this quality of wholeness, in a number of ways.

We do this by using the third person voice (I refer to myself by using my name rather than using ‘I’ and I address the child by using her name rather than using ‘you’), by not raising our voice to the child, and by means of the stories we bring to the child. These will be simple little stories about the child’s day, or they may be in the form of a puppet play.

At Awhina we bring the same beloved puppet plays year after year. In doing so, the children come to know, love, and anticipate them. The puppet play accompanies the children for around three weeks, sometimes longer. They carry a simple story line that bears within it a symbolic picture — for instance, “The Giant Turnip,” where good human qualities exist. Most of the puppet plays we bring have a repetitive quality with a sung refrain, which especially appeals to young children.

The puppet play is prepared by a co-worker for

some time before it is shown to the children. The key to bringing the children with you right into the puppet play is preparation. The puppeteer’s role is that of moving the puppets and of telling the story. The puppeteer’s consciousness breathes into the puppet play and travels as far as the periphery of the cloth or veil. Beyond this point is the concern or realm of the other co-workers.

To maintain a sense of oneness, we need to ensure that the cloths are wrinkle-free and are of colors that support the story. There is a vast difference in the experience of a beautifully ironed cloth and one that is taken out of the basket and used as is. The puppeteer endeavors also to be wearing a color that simply becomes part of the scenery, allowing for the child to become one with the mood of the moment.

How the puppets are moved will have a profound effect on the children, as they will take the story back into their own playing. Is the puppet bumped along, or is it moved along as a picture of the human qualities of walking? Whatever we present to the children must be brought with truth and not in any way be caricatured or misrepresented. Just as important is how we handle the puppet. We take hold of the shoulders of the puppet rather than the head, for the head is a sacred part of the human body and should be respected as such.

For the very young child, the best stage for the puppet play is the body or the floor. In using our body we offer something of ourselves, and sometimes this is not easy. The floor is a wonderful stage. It provides much scope. The children are one with you and can participate easily, and it is natural that creative play should develop from this. Children are often on the floor, and you can be anywhere and everywhere.

References

De Haes, Daniel Udo. *The Young Child: Creative Living with Two to Four Year Olds*. Edinburgh: Floris Books, 1986

Bernadette Raichle is now devoting her time to bringing what was developed at Awhina out into the world, writing, lecturing, and teaching internationally. She lives in New Zealand.