

# Parent/Child Working Group

Nancy Foster

At the request of Susan Howard, Chair of WECAN, a working group has formed around the topic of Waldorf (or Waldorf-inspired) Parent/Child groups. A number of websites and chat rooms on this subject are quite busy, demonstrating widespread and active interest in such groups. WECAN wishes to explore how we can be of help to those already engaged in this work as well as those who would like to form a parent/child group (or playgroup, as they are often called).

Members of the WECAN working group are Susan Weber, director of Sophia's Hearth in Keene, New Hampshire; Sarah Baldwin, former parent/child group teacher at Ashwood School in Lincolnville, Maine and currently working on her master's thesis on the subject of parent/child programs; and Nancy Foster, parent/child group teacher at Acorn Hill Waldorf Kindergarten and Nursery in Silver Spring, Maryland. Our work has begun in the form of conference calls, exploring how we might best be of use.

Our conversations have been wide-ranging so far, as we share thoughts and questions about our experiences in working with parents and their infants, toddlers, and young children, as well as information about work other colleagues are doing. One fact quickly became quite clear: There are as many approaches to this work as there are schools and teachers engaged in it. How much easier our working group's task would be if there were one "model" for Waldorf parent/child work that we could outline and send out on the internet! But of course, the very richness and variety of work arising out of the needs and possibilities of each situation are just what provide the opportunity for life and growth in this field. It is not enough simply to put forth a schedule, a list of activities, and so forth; these are meaningless, not to mention open to misunderstanding, without a full context. We also realize that it is difficult, if not impossible,

to put in words the "flavor" of a particular program.

In this beginning stage of our working group's explorations, then, we would like just to introduce some of the thoughts we have encountered, focusing on the nature of particular approaches; the teacher/parent relationship; and the qualities of a teacher in parent/child work. By no means are these *conclusions*, much less *guidelines*—just thoughts that will stimulate our further conversations.

## **Approaches to parent/child work: Looking at motive**

"Approach" seems a good word to indicate the orientation of a parent/child program. One might also say "impulse." It is important to avoid the suggestion of a fixed "method" or "model." Rather, in seeking to describe a parent/child program, we must ask what the *motive* of the program is. The motive leads to the priorities, and thus the flavor, of that particular program. Some possible motives we identified (not mutually exclusive, and not listed in any particular order) included:

1. a tool for building enrollment for a school
2. providing committed and well-educated parents for the rest of the school
3. a "gentle" introduction to school for the younger children
4. social support to parents
5. help with parenting issues
6. teaching craft/handwork skills to parents
7. bodily care of the infant and young child
8. illustrating and encouraging the domestic arts in home life

The age of the infants/children involved, and the range of ages in a group, are important factors in the nature of a program. The physical space available—both size and configuration—will also help to determine what is possible. The qualities

and gifts of a particular teacher play an essential role, as well.

### ***Parent/teacher relationship***

Many parents are insecure and unsure of how best to live with infants and young children. We wish to offer warmth and empathy and be open to them in a non-judgmental way. At the same time, they need the “anchor” of guidance and clarity about their participation in the program—what is expected, what the goals are, etc.

Parents are more likely to be open to guidance and suggestion when an issue arises if they feel accepted, and if they are met by the teacher, not with pre-conceived ideas, but with the wish to look together at a situation and try to reach understanding on behalf of the child.

Since it is often not advisable to have discussions with parents when the children are close by, what are possible ways to work with the parents? Approaches might include: parent orientation before the class begins; parent evenings; phone calls; informal conversations during the class, indoors or outdoors; separating the parents and children for part of the time.

### ***Qualities of a parent/child group teacher***

Warmth, empathy, and commitment to the work were mentioned as important characteristics for this work. Temperament and level of experience will play a part in a teacher’s approach—wise counselor, firm authority, partner-in-seeking are all possible qualities of a teacher.

A newer, less experienced teacher may find the relatively simple “curriculum” of a parent/child group less of a strain than a full kindergarten program. On the other hand, such a teacher might find the parent work somewhat intimidating. A more experienced teacher may be ready to give up the more strenuous kindergarten work and offer her experience in the physically less demanding work with the parents; yet such a teacher may not have a background in work with the very young child.

Questions about teacher preparation: What would be the best way to prepare teachers for parent/child work? Should a specialized “training” be developed? Should some kind of “certification” be a goal? What resources are already

available for teachers? Can WECAN develop resources, and if so, what is the best way to make them available? What should be the role of the internet in this realm?

These are among the topics our working group has touched on. We are looking forward to further explorations and to coming to a focus that will serve this very important work. With this report, we are inaugurating a “column” which will appear in future issues of *Gateways*, bringing more detailed focus to particular aspects of parent/child work. Meanwhile, we are very much interested in hearing from others engaged in this work, or wishing to begin a program. In addition, we would like to be able to recognize and honor those “pioneers” who were among the first to begin this important work with parents and children. If you are one of these people, or are aware of who they are, please contact me at 7717 14<sup>th</sup> St., NW, Washington, DC 20012, or call me at (202) 829-2909. We will be most grateful.