

Building the Jungle Gym

— Bronwen David

One little boy with big round eyes seemed to pointedly exemplify the dilemma he faced. He was three years old, stocky, standing in the sand, and he could not move. As I observed him I could almost see the thoughts swirling around his head. He was just beginning to realize that he had knees and hands and feet. But he also lived in the world of “why” and his parents dutifully answered his many questions. His parents were often lovingly concerned about his emotions, giving them names, even colors, and were always helping him to cope with these feelings. At transitions in the morning, it was really hard when the mommies and the daddies had to leave.

Some mornings in the Nursery he just couldn't get his feet to move; in fact, this was little Freddy's dilemma nearly every morning. And if by chance he *could* get his feet to move, then he might trip or fall. If someone came too close, then he really might be in danger and have to move his arms, push someone away, or hit, no matter what.

That's what I observed with my student, Freddy, in my capacity as the Nursery teacher assistant at the San Francisco Waldorf School. Three mornings a week we started out the day in the school's playground—at an urban school with a play space of only 1900 square feet. All the other children in the school began inside with main lesson or play in the kindergarten. How was I going to help Freddy and other children who were



fearful of moving their bodies on their own? How could we help them get over their fears of being off-balance and having their space invaded? Some would literally get stuck in one place and not want to move up-or-down, backwards-or-forwards, side-to-side and certainly not around-and-around. Nope, they were not going to take any risks.



How was I going to help them? I decided to focus first on balance and looked around the play yard. I remembered loving to do obstacle courses as a child. It was also a favorite activity of our founding Nursery teacher. I also remembered that my lead teacher constantly reminded me, “The important part of a child gaining mastery over his or her body is that they do what is needed for themselves.”

In the schoolyard were about two dozen plastic milk crates stacked against the wall, and several wooden boards of all widths, thicknesses, and lengths. The grade school children would create structures with them during recess. I picked up four boards and three crates and made a ramp with a board going to the top of the thirteen-inch-high crate. Then I placed another board between this crate and another one, made a right turn, placed another crate and board, then another ramp going back into the sand.

I gently directed Freddy and placed him in front of the ramp. At first he refused to try it. But holding his hand, I helped him walk up the ramp, across the gang-plank between the two crates, turn right across the plank again, then down the ramp. Poor Freddy was quivering all the way, but with my help he did it and it was fun!

And so began a movement adventure. Freddy enjoyed it so much that he wanted to do it again, and so did his fifteen Nursery friends. Some needed hands held, some not, but each one enjoyed the challenge. We even made up a name for it: the jungle gym. After all had walked the last plank back to earth, we took the plank away. Now they had to jump down—a new challenge! Once that had been established for about two weeks, all the children were walking the jungle gym, most of them without holding the teacher’s hand. Then we made it two crates high.

Each time we were in the schoolyard we made the jungle gym. At first I would build it, first out of simple plastic milk crates (these can be bought at an office supply store), then adding wooden pieces in varied sizes and thickness of wood that were bought from a lumber supply. But soon the children wanted to build it too. This was ideal. They wanted to do it themselves! Of course, we worked with images—the spider web, the pirate’s boat—and each day each structure was different, with new challenges.

I began to work with dynamics as well as design. Some parts were good for running up and down, while other parts called for slow movement, as on a narrow bridge. Sometimes we crawled, at other times we jumped. Sometimes we had to observe and wait for a friend who might be coming from the opposite direction. This helped the children to notice the other and to practice impulse control. At the end of every morning, we all cleaned it up together, stacking the milk crates and the boards against the wall for the grade school children to use. The most important thing was that there was always a lot of laughter and joy.

Within a month or two the children were moving again! My lead teacher and I began to notice that in the morning the transitions with the parents were getting easier because the children couldn’t wait to go off and build the jungle gym. The children were taking hold of their physical bodies as a natural process; and there was less tripping or bumping into each other. They didn’t step on things, but noticed them

and stepped over. They didn’t need a hand when they went down stairs. On the other two days of the week when we went into the “forest” (Presidio National Park, six blocks away from our campus), the children joyfully ran from the teacher’s hands, balancing on logs, climbing trees, taking risks. When we returned to the classroom, we noticed less clumsiness, and the children could carry food and water without spilling. They could take their jackets on and off more easily and put on their own shoes.

When we focused on balance, our work with the other senses of self-movement and touch was also strengthened. More importantly, the children’s sense of life, the joy of being in their bodies, of sensing who they were, grew as well. Once confidence in the body took hold, the children were less in their heads and they could move forward to their next step in learning. The dilemma of whether or not to move was no longer a dilemma. Freedom and joy were what we saw on the children’s faces. ♦

Bronwen David, *herself a Waldorf graduate, is an early childhood teacher at the urban San Francisco Waldorf School. After assisting in the Kindergarten for seven years, she has now finished her second year of teaching in the Nursery. She wants to encourage free play that is creative and ever-changing and has discovered that you don’t need many materials to accomplish this.*