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# “Collecting Our Children” in Waldorf Schools: Introducing Dr. Gordon Neufeld’s Relational Developmental Approach

~ Gail Nielsen, MA, RP

Perhaps the most commonly cited concept of psychologist Dr. Gordon Neufeld’s approach to caring for children is his call to “collect before you direct.” In a school setting, children must be emotionally attached to their teachers in order to learn and grow, and it is adults who are responsible for creating the right conditions for students to form healthy attachments. If a child falls out of attachment, the teacher must re-establish this by “collecting” the child back into the safe womb of the attachment before any change in behavior can be requested—or expected—as it is only from within this safe connection that a child’s heart opens enough to be guided. Attachment’s opposite, “separation” (including perceived separation), always activates one of three core mammalian emotions: *alarm*, *frustration* or the *pursuit of proximity*. Most challenging behaviors in the classroom are a result of the child being moved by one of these emotions.

Dr. Neufeld points out that an adult can bring a child to emotional rest by collecting his “eyes, a nod and a smile,” thus, anchoring the relationship back into place using these basic connecting devices. That is, the adult should move to make eye contact (unless the child is averse to eye contact), to connect over a shared point of levity with the aim to light up a child’s genuine smile, and to engage the student in something that brings the child into agreement with a nod of the head. These gestures activate the natural “attachment instincts” and bring a child to emotional rest. Attachment is the preeminent protective measure for maturation and has its source deep in the physiology of the child. This was intuitively understood and acted out in ages past. Such attachment activity must take place with a higher level of consciousness in our times.

Physical separation between adult and child can also be “bridged” so that child and teacher

*“It is undoubtedly this act of collecting a child that sets the master teacher apart from all the others.”*

~ Gordon Neufeld & Gabor Maté

remain “attached while apart.” For example, a main lesson teacher might take time to affirm at the end of the school year that he looks forward to seeing his students when autumn comes and will perhaps speak about a point of common interest to revisit when they are reunited; another might give a child a token for safekeeping over a holiday or remind a child that even though she has treated another student harshly (out of frustration), the student-teacher relationship is still strong. Anything that emphasizes a future point of contact or brings to mind the enduring quality of the relationship, rather than the sense of disconnection, creates an attachment bridge over the separation.

Attachment should never be taken for granted or presumed to be operating simply because the teacher cares for the child and things appear to function well enough, e.g. the child appears agreeable, the relationship seems established, child and teacher have known each other for a certain length of time, etc. A child’s experiences of separation can occur on a regular basis. Tenuous attachments can be broken in an instant and must be consciously re-established. Collecting and bridging may be required to maintain safe attachments on a day-to-day or even an hour-to-hour basis.

Waldorf education has always placed great importance on human relationships. Relevant examples of this include encouraging later enrollment in early schooling and the ideal scenario that a single main lesson teacher remain with a class through its elementary years. The approach also places a high value on regular connection between students and teachers, including a warmth of emotional connection and practices such as “taking a child into sleep”; strengthening attachment through choral speaking; the study of mythology and folk tales that support

an understanding of human relating; and rituals and rhythms that cultivate a sense of togetherness. The common daily ritual of greeting a child at the door of the classroom each morning stresses the intention of teacher to see and truly embrace a student. Using naturally-sourced materials results in a healthy attachment to the natural world. Consensus models for decision-making help to cultivate human connection at the faculty and board levels.

It is critical to note, however, that all of these examples are based on forms of closeness that can exist *outside* the womb of human attachment. That is, all of these activities and many more that are aimed at closeness can be part of everyday experiences in a school, while the key relational attachments can be nonexistent, weak, or injured. In fact, well-intentioned activities, even those based in a sound curriculum, may actually be working against the natural order required for the students' flourishing. Then, relationships and the class and school climate all suffer. This can leave a teacher at a loss if she believes herself to be present and attentive to students' needs, executing the pedagogy impeccably or "doing all the right things," and yet students continue to exhibit academic or behavior challenges. In Neufeld's words, "Children were never meant to take direction from those to whom they are not attached" (see Neufeld and Maté, *Hold On to Your Kids*, Chapter 6).

Love between students and teachers and the familiarity of one's community are hallmarks of the Waldorf model. Yet few points call for more emphasis than Neufeld's assertion that genuine feelings of love as well as physical proximity are *not* synonymous with safe attachment. Attending to a child by remaining physically close, even coupled with a teacher's genuine feelings of love for a student, does not guarantee that critical attachments take hold. Winning a child's heart requires that a child's attachment instincts are activated and satiated in the right ways, according to nature. Nor is it enough to meet a range of otherwise essential needs, including those addressed through the inherently therapeutic measures of Waldorf pedagogy.

## The Four Basic Steps to Spark a Child's Attachment Instincts

The following must always be done before making any attempt to change, lead, or direct a child's behavior or attention. (See Neufeld and Maté, page 179ff.)

### #1 "Collect" the child's eyes, smiles, and nods.

We move into the child's space in a friendly way. The objective of "collecting" is to attract the child's eyes, evoke a smile and if possible elicit a nod. A sparkle in our eye, a warm or funny comment to draw out a smile, and referring to something with which the child can come into agreement take very little time, but serve to open the child's heart. All three of these factors elicit the attachment response and prepare a child to follow our adult lead. Collecting before we direct is the primary missing ingredient in most disciplinary approaches. After a child is collected, we can "come alongside" the child and invite the desired behavior.

### #2 Provide something which the child can hold onto.

We remind the child that we, the adults, hold the unbreakable tether. We articulate to the child our attention, interest and enjoyment, and no matter what the behavior, we follow this with unwavering emotional warmth, gestures, affirmative words, symbols, transitional objects, etc. We bridge all separations as soon as they occur, including anything that might cause students to perceive that they are not in our good graces; we bridge beyond negative behavior episodes, over recess, over weekends and holidays, and always affirm the relationship is "okay."

### #3 Invite dependence, rather than push for independence.

We don't need to push a flower to grow and we don't need to push a child to mature or behave independently. This is nature's job. When we perceive that children should be more independent than they are, we may be taking on too much of the burden of getting them to be independent. Children do well when they are ready; until then, we, the adults to whom they are entrusted, must compensate for them in all areas. This allows emotional rest and growth to occur at nature's command, not ours.

#### #4 Act as the child's compass point.

We orient the children in our care and take advantage of any “orientating void” they might experience, inserting ourselves into the situation and taking up the role of guide. We are the “alpha” or leader in the relationship hierarchy, and children who experience this come to a place of the psychological rest required for organic growth at all levels. This “provider” stance reactivates attachment instincts and moves children to remain close, feel protected and to follow our lead.

When he offered his indications regarding education, Steiner could presume healthy working attachments to a greater degree than we typically can nowadays; they were a more dominant binding force of the cultural fabric in which he lived. As such, the act of collecting children occurred more naturally and an intuitive sense of this binding force was more alive. Today, Waldorf education is not exempt from the common need for a more conscious undertaking of attachment-building in order to win, keep and guide children's hearts.

For Steiner, a child's educational life depends on sound pedagogy, and such a pedagogy aims to support the whole child to develop into full personhood. For Neufeld, everything depends on sound attachments, including whether or not a child can truly engage with a teacher and remain receptive to adult guidance, and whether key aspects of the pedagogy can have their intended influence. His offerings can also be viewed as essential for spiritual growth, which is critical for enlivening the senses and otherwise supporting every child's development at the deepest levels.

Neufeld reminds us that according to nature's plan, it is *right relationships* and *soft hearts* that allow children to achieve their full potential and to become “more human and humane.”

Misunderstanding what constitutes genuinely healthy relational attachments has resulted in perhaps the greatest sin of omission in modern education, even when parents and educators truly value connection. At the same time, Waldorf schools are in an ideal position to play a central role in advancing nature's

vital relational practices, as offered to us by Gordon Neufeld. One hundred years after the birth of Waldorf Education, deliberately cultivating school cultures that are “attachment-conscious” may not only be timely, but may be essential for the future of the movement. Doing so allows parents and teachers to fully assume their rightful roles as the proud protectors of children's hearts. ♦

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#### Resources:

- Hartmut Rosa, translated by James Wagner, Neufeld, Gordon and Maté, Gabor. *Hold On to Your Kids - Why Parents Need to Matter More Than Peers* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2013).

To find out more about the work of the renowned developmental psychologist and speaker Dr. Gordon Neufeld, visit [neufeldinstitute.org](http://neufeldinstitute.org)

#### **Gail Nielsen MA, RP, CTACC, BFRP**

*is a Psychotherapist, Performance Coach, parent coach, writer and education consultant, specializing in Waldorf communities. Harmonizing the work of Rudolf Steiner with the relational-developmental approach of Canadian Clinical Psychologist Dr. Gordon Neufeld, she supports Waldorf faculty and parents in understanding the art and science of emotion and the central role relational attachments play in healthy child development and learning. She also offers a course entitled Waldorf Parenting for the Twenty-first Century.*