

Working With the Will of the Child
One Practical Experience
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(All of the thoughts shared below come only because of insights and examples shared by Freya Jaffke and Joan Almon. Deepest thanks to them both.)

That the Waldorf kindergarten works to educate the will of the child through imitation is so basic to the pedagogy that one might say, "Of course!" Thus it was a shock, in thinking through remarks offered by Freya Jaffke, to realize that working with this wisdom was personally stalled on a superficial level. Circle time was purely imitative--the teacher moves, sings, gestures and the children watch and are free to imitate. But a question arose. What about the rest of the morning, the more mundane moments?

An objective observation of the morning flow began and revealed some startling things. First of all, we teachers spoke too much. Secondly, the children spoke with the teachers too much. And when the children became engaged in conversation, they (especially the older ones) began to think and their limbs froze. Some of them literally became unable to DO anything.

These observations led to new questions. If an objective is to help strengthen the child's will through doing, through being active in the limbs, how do we move toward that end? We realized that the first discipline was for the teacher to speak much less and to focus attention on the imitative example she provides. This is true for any activity--bread baking, grinding grain, sewing, painting, etc. Of course the teachers are responsive to the children and speak appropriately but try to avoid any "chitchatty" responses to the children, which do not carry the activity forward.

The biggest change this approach has made in the classroom is during cleanup time. Following the examples of other respected teachers, we began to simply begin the cleanup with no announcement. This may have been pedagogically sound but proved to be inefficient; few, if any, of the children began to imitate our example. So we began to question how to help the children to move.

The youngest children provided the key for us. As they cannot help imitating, we began by simply extending a hand to the child--which the child almost always grasps--to guide him or her to, for example, the wood basket. The teacher places a piece of wood in the basket and hands a piece of wood to the child. The teacher slowly places more pieces of wood in the basket until the child begins to do likewise. Then the teacher is free to move to another area of the room if necessary because the little child will nearly always continue until there is no more wood to pick up. All this is done without any conversation.

The really big breakthrough came when we realized how to apply this to working with our much more awake older children who love to engage the teachers in argument--"I didn't make that mess!" "I wasn't playing there!" With these children we began to employ the same approach. Without speaking we would hand the child something to help put away. When we got another, "I didn't make this mess" reply, we learned to not speak but to continue with our work, perhaps again handing the child a toy to be put away. We found that the older children responded as did the younger ones, eventually beginning to move and help with the task at hand.

Sometimes an older child raises the flag of challenge to the teacher and refuses to participate. The teacher has to decide what is in the best interest of the child--whether to let the child go to another activity or to bring the one at hand to a conclusion. When we do decide that a child needs to finish a task, two

approaches have been helpful. We do speak at this point and say something like, “I am a wood hauler too. We work together”.

If this fails and there is no graceful way out for either the child or the teacher, one can say, “This wood is waiting for your help.” And then without saying another word, we walk away, keeping an indirect eye on that corner of the room. Occasionally an offhand, “The wood is still waiting.” is needed, sometimes not, before the task is done.

This approach has also proved invaluable in dealing with some difficult disciplinary moments. If, for example, we want to help a child to move out of a disruptive situation, we extend a hand to guide the child away. If the child cannot or will not take the hand, we continue to stand quietly, continuing to gesture for the child to come along. It may take several minutes of the teacher’s quiet presence, but it is amazing how powerfully this quiet gesture speaks to the child. It has helped us more times than we could ever have predicted.

Obviously this approach does not help all the time. But we feel that this “quiet” revolution or revelation has brought the children and teachers much closer to an experience of what imitation and working with the will may mean.