

# Reflections on Working with Parents

• Kimberly Lewis

For decades, pioneers in the field of parent education have been quietly creating exceptional methods of working with parents. Since having my own baby far from home at the age of twenty-three, I have made a life study of parent education. As a new mother in a small workers' community in the middle of the Saudi Arabian desert, I was fortunate to find La Leche League leaders who introduced me to the "mother-to-mother support" model. This blessing inspired me to learn what I could about parenting the very young child and to bring this knowledge to other parents.

Today, in the parent-child classes that I teach, I draw on my in-depth studies of the diverse disciplines of La Leche League, anthroposophy, Waldorf education, the work of Emmi Pikler in Hungary, and the work of Magda Gerber in Los Angeles. In an attempt to integrate and synthesize the best and most essential ingredients of each of these models, I have come up with a number of approaches that I use in my classes with good results. Here are some of them.

## **Be worthy of imitation.**

In my parent-child classes, I have discovered that, just like the children, parents can more easily internalize what I'm teaching when they have a model. So I try to model for them what I believe are the most important aspects of healthy childcare in the early years. I model optimal behaviors when I interact with the children, and perhaps more importantly, I also model them *when I interact with*

*the parents*. The parents get to feel the effects of these approaches first hand.

## **Offer unconditional acceptance.**

Parents often hold an image of their future child in their mind's eye and then become disappointed or embarrassed when their actual child doesn't match up to this image. So I try to teach unconditional acceptance of the actual child in the present moment. I believe the child is always right in doing what he or she is doing (I might not endorse it, but the child has a good reason for doing it). The same is true of parents. They are doing the best they can. I can't expect them to be different in that moment. Acceptance is the starting point for understanding. It allows me to ask the right questions and discover the root of the behavior so I may offer guidance and support.

## **Create joyful, one-on-one interactions.**

During snack, I try to model for the parents what it looks like to give 100% attention to the children during moments of care. I wash each child's hands slowly and gently, giving my full attention to the child and to the task. I offer each child just the amount of food he or she is willing to eat. The parents, too, need similar one-on-one time with me. To be seen completely by another person is one of life's great joys. I try to find a time during our morning when I can circulate among the parents and check in with each of them for a few minutes.

## **Keep them warm and well-nourished.**

For the children this means a warm room, warm clothing and wholesome, natural food. For the parents this means human warmth, deep respect and spiritual nourishment. By creating a safe and beautiful environment, the parents are nourished. We bring the wonders of nature into the classroom; we light a candle at snack time; and we honor the festivals of the year. These rituals and traditions are touching elements to the parents.

## **Allow them to progress at their own pace and in their own time.**

I teach the parents to give their children time to progress through each stage of development at their own pace—without being pushed or prodded. This goes for the parents as well. Every parent comes to class at a particular moment in his or her own life's journey, and this must be respected. Some parents know that Waldorf education is going to be a part of their family life even before the first day of class. Other parents warm to it gradually. Still others take what they find useful and then follow their path a separate way.

## **Give them the gift of uninterrupted free time.**

Just like children, parents love the time, space and freedom to do whatever they are moved to do without interruption. For parents, this usually means visiting with whomever and discussing whatever they'd like. I support them by making sure there is a time and place in our morning for open conversations. Even though it isn't a particularly long part of our morning (usually twenty minutes or so while we are outside), I think it's an essential ingredient.

## **Do less, observe more.**

While modeling purposeful work is ideal in the kindergarten, it needs to be re-examined for the youngest children. In my experience, sensitive observation is an equally important activity for parents of little children. At the beginning of each session, we do short periods of quiet observation (five minutes), and then very quickly we move into longer periods (at least twenty minutes). Most of our group discussions come out of these observation periods. Parents often try to accomplish too much when their children are little; what a blessing for them to discover they can simply sit, relax and be

with their children.

## **Don't put them into a position they can't get into themselves.**

Children as well as parents need to feel safe and at ease. With children, it has more to do with the physical positioning of their bodies. With parents it's mostly behavioral. The principle holds true for both. I don't put parents on the spot or ask them to do anything that might make them feel uncomfortable. And while I might give them homework to do over the week, it's always optional.

## **Allow them to do as much as they can themselves.**

The message I want the children to hear from their parents is, "You are capable. I'll stay close, but you can do it yourself." The same is true for the parents. For example, I'm not likely to try to soothe a crying child if the parent is right there doing his or her best. I offer my presence and that is enough. However, if the struggle is too great, I will step in and make a change.

## **Practice active listening and compassionate speaking.**

With the children, I do a practice called "reporting." Rather than praising or correcting the children, I model for the parents the simple act of reporting back what I see the children doing. The same goes for the parents. Instead of saying, "Don't do that," or "Try this instead," I simply report what I see and describe the situation. For example, I might report, "You've moved your baby onto her belly. She's having difficulty moving her head. Her arms and legs cannot move freely. When she was on her back, her movements were freer and more fluid."

These ideas and tips are some of what I've learned in my study and practice of parent education. I also co-moderate a Yahoo discussion group for families and teachers who work with children under four. It's called *waldorfbirthtofour* and can be found at [www.yahogroups.com](http://www.yahogroups.com). This group is a forum for sharing ideas, experiences and questions. Over the past year, I have been posting weekly musings on a variety of parenting topics to this group.

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