

# *The Dignity of the Small Child*

• Kimberley Lewis

## **Introduction**

Eighteen years ago the question of the care of the small child emerged as a topic distinct from the work of Waldorf kindergartens. Now we find ourselves at a re-birthing of the birth-to-three movement, a challenging task because it must take into account varied ideas and views, scientific findings, current practices, and public and private regulation.

The Dignity of the Small Child conferences began in 1999. The fourth conference was held at the Goetheanum in Dornach, Switzerland in June, 2010. About 700 participants attended from over thirty countries. Eight educators came from North America. Pedagogues from around the world offered twenty-six workshops on all aspects of the care of the young child. The next Dignity of the Small Child conference will be held at the Goetheanum in 2013.

The Medical Section of the Goetheanum organized the conference in cooperation with the Worldwide Initiative for Early Childhood Care and the German Association of Waldorf Kindergartens. Michaela Glöckler, of the Medical Section, has been the guardian angel of the Dignity of the Small Child conferences.

## **Questions and Themes**

The main questions of the conference were, “What is it that keeps the young child healthy? What does Rudolf Steiner’s salutogenic (health giving) approach to infant pedagogy look like in practice, and how can it be further developed today?”

Participants were also asked to work with the following questions: How can the child’s environment be fashioned to give sufficient scope for developing autonomy (movement, will, learning to walk)? How can we support and nurture the child’s autonomy and will, so that personality can grow through trust and security (speech development, learning to communicate)? How should the young child’s surroundings be structured to allow the child to experience himself both alone and in relationship

to his environment (learning to think)?

Other questions and themes raised during the course of the conference were: Why has the young child moved into focus now? How do parents become competent and what support can we offer them? How do we meet the small child with respect and dignity? What does the young child ask of us? What are the standards, and are we meeting them? The following are summaries of some of the lectures given during the four-day conference.

## **The Dignity of Destiny and the Arrival on Earth**

*Christoph Meineke and Michaela Glöckler*

Waldorf education is taking on the first three years by examining societal “necessities” such as day care for the young child. Sir Richard Bowlby (John Bowlby’s son) describes outcomes for children in early care: Babies and children are getting ill more often. Their immune systems are suppressed. They have too many infections such as meningitis. They have language and social disturbances. The insecurities in their relationships extend into three generations. They have hearing difficulties because of the excessive noise in day care settings. The stress hormone cortisone is weakening their defense systems and decreasing brain activity, which causes frustration, intolerance, and other psychological ailments. Boys suffer more than girls. No wonder that care outside the home was frowned upon by early Waldorf educators.

In general, we are finding that very young children are better off in family-style care with a secondary attachment figure, rather than in institutional settings. If there is no ready alternative to institutional care, how can it be structured so that it provides at least some of the benefits of home? We are finding that an important task for centers is not to endanger the child’s connection to parents. We must work with the parents to keep the parent-child connection strong.

We try to perceive genuinely what each child in its particular destiny needs from us. It helps enormously to work with parents, guiding them to look at the essence of the child—this will enable them to come to a decision about what is best. We also need to respect that the child has a field of experience from earlier lives.

Steiner says that people have many lives behind them. There is the possibility of breaking the shell of forgetting and bring forth what has been learned in the spiritual worlds before birth. But we can only remove the obstacles to remembering past lives if the adult looks at the child as a riddle to solve, so that what has been put there by the gods can be found. In this way we help the child to access his higher knowledge and fulfill his destiny.

During pregnancy, when the child is carried, we have before us the archetypal image of trust. This act of being held communicates to the child, “You are meant to be here; you are wanted,” and it instills what eventually becomes the forces of self-confidence. The transformation from trust to self-confidence happens gradually as the child moves into the world. We must let it happen at the child’s pace, allowing the right experiences at the right time.

When the child comes to earth, it must arrive well in three homes.

1. The **bodily home** is the physical body where higher forces can unfold. This is the theme of early childhood and the place of the four lower senses.
2. The **home “place”**—the surroundings, culture, town, country. At first it is simply a safe home; in time the circle of “place” expands. This is the place of the four middle senses.
3. A **social home**—the child’s relationships and social connections. This is the place of the four higher senses.

Above them all is a fourth, our spiritual home—a link to our source.

As caregivers we are responsible for shaping these homes so that the child has positive, nurturing experiences. Forming a primary relationship with an adult, usually the mother, within the first few months of life is vital to the health of the child. Loss of the primary attachment figure in the early years is stressful and fear-inducing and impairs the child’s

willingness to attach again to another.

We need to be present with the child through our touch, gaze and speaking. Research shows that if our thoughts are elsewhere while we care for a child, the child will display symptoms of stress. We must “beam” at the child. The child becomes healthier when the cheerful forces of our beaming are experienced.

When we care for a child, we need to tell the child what we are doing—not explain, but tell. Telling establishes a relationship. But don’t tell the child that you are trying to prevent something—a rash, for example. We want to reinforce that the world is a good place for the child, so don’t mention negative possibilities.

The spiritual forces that lead to the three essential achievements (walking, speaking and thinking) are gifts that we receive before birth from the archai, angels, and archangels. Each of these gifts needs a human example for its fulfillment. Walking requires space, freedom and love. Speaking requires truthfulness and authenticity of the adult. Thinking requires clarity in the adult.

As the adult, I stand opposite the child. I create a space and enter into a conversation. I ask myself: “What does the child want me to do? How do I listen? How do I speak?” The child and I both listen into the space. The child wants to know, “Does someone perceive me? Who is there for me? Who are you?”

The child has a will, an inkling of the later “I.” It is our own being and attitude that will help the child to become an “I am.” If I take the path of self-knowledge seriously, I will be able to meet the child authentically and directly, surrendering my uncertainties, insecurities, and prior planning.

Sensitive observation and perception of the being of the child is what is needed. How can the adult gain this capacity to truly perceive, and only then decide what to do? The Goethean approach is helpful: observe until the thing itself speaks to me. It requires attentive practice, perseverance, a protected space, and a genuine interest. It leads to practical things.

Babies cannot easily distance themselves from the adverse conditions of their lives (negative looks, responses or impoverished surroundings). With great effort the child has to work against impediments, and there is damage to the will if that effort is interrupted.

When working with little children, we must avoid distractions and interruptions (from cell phones

for example). Observe how you are thrown off and lose yourself in annoyance and thought when you are interrupted. You have to calm yourself before returning to equilibrium and conscious attention.

## **The Child's Autonomy—Walking**

*Michaela Glöckler and Claudia Grah-Wittich*

Autonomy is a dramatic development in the human being. While autonomy appears to be the ultimate form of freedom, it is subject to laws. Goethe says, "Only the condition of laws can give us the awareness of freedom." The highest form of autonomy in the adult is neither self-indulgent nor egocentric. Rather, it is being socially competent and doing deeds for a global purpose toward the dignity of other people.

There are three variations of autonomy.

1. The autonomy of the eyes: Deep eye gazing touches us etherically. We "feel" the gaze even from behind. It is an etheric penetration. On the waves of the etheric forces a mutual "looking" is woven. Learn to look at children with love. "I felt myself in your eyes," says Goethe.
2. Waking up and becoming aware: "I want to do it myself." We take away from others (adults or children) when we do for them what they would rather do for themselves. It is clearly patronizing when we do it to adults, and it is also patronizing with children. Children need space and time to do things themselves. On days when you have a conflicting need that rushes the process, you may say, "Today we have so little time." Letting the child know you are aware that you are interfering preserves autonomy in the child.
3. Dependence on the adult: When the umbilical cord is cut, the child's body is independent from the mother's, but the child isn't. Children need lots of help to learn how to help themselves. This is the great paradox of human life! One needs to work through dependency to become independent. We "help" children toward autonomy.

The five points (like a star) that support autonomy are:

1. Physical body: Give space.
2. Etheric body: Consciously shape processes and bring rhythm.
3. Astral body: Give space at a soul level. Be loving and open. Have empathy.
4. "I": Unlimited interest in the other and

intentional joy.

5. Spiritual: Deepest trust in the destiny and development of the other.

Movement is the foundation for acquiring autonomy. The core skills needed are strength, perseverance, and mobility. Behind strength and perseverance are capacities we cannot see. All we see is the practicing of movements and then the happiness with the breakthrough to a new skill. Our task is to simply observe, to let the child be, and not to interfere.

To stand and become upright is a precondition of truthfulness. There is a natural and archetypal sequence for coming into standing and walking, although each child is unique and individual in the way he or she finds uprightness and balance. The foundation for independence grows from learning to walk. Walking is the archetypal picture of independence: "I walk my own path." Being conscious of where you want to go brings health. Try taking twenty minutes a day to walk *where you want to go!*

So many people have dependencies, all of which are deficits in autonomy. Drug addiction is one example. Dependency affects one's stance in the world; drug dealers recognize the walk of an addict. If the development of movement and gesture is supported by autonomy, it will be the strongest immunization against drug addiction or other dependencies in later life.

There are three types of walking:

1. Swaggering, leaning, bent—too incarnated.
2. On toes, looking up, in a dream—not incarnated.
3. Walking from the center—properly incarnated.

A child's own movements are always autonomous. Be attentive to what the child *can* do in movement, rather than what the child cannot yet do. A young child knows in her feet, hands and whole body how to find balance and autonomy—especially without interruption, and only when the accompanying adults do not have fear. The greatest obstacle to the child's movements is the adult's fears. One can tell from the movements of a child's hands and feet whether or not the child feels secure. Parent/child classes can help remove this obstacle by alleviating parental fears.

Once in a while, during exploration, the child will look for the mother's gaze (that etheric connection)

to know that all is well. The mother nods. The etheric body is not cut off yet. We need this etheric umbilical cord. Please discourage knitting in parent/child groups. How can one be attentive while doing something else?

## **Relationship Culture—Speaking**

*Michaela Glöckler and Birgit Krohmer*

Speech is the metamorphosis of movement. The intelligence of language comes from movement patterns. Within bodily movement lies the whole language of gesture.

Language is only possible with air. Each word flies on air toward the listener. The etheric body gives language its life; the astral body gives language its feelings and emotions. These two bodies of the listener receive the words in air, and know, on a deep level, what the other is saying.

Air and breath are closely connected with feelings. Our innermost wishes, desires, feelings, motivations and thoughts can be expressed through language. Language comes from a longing to communicate and connect with another. As we enter into relationship through language, we become creators of culture.

There are three fundamental elements of relationship that protect young children and allow their personalities to grow.

1. Truthfulness: I can rely on what the other person says; the person means what he says. Confidence is built on this.
2. Loving understanding: Truth can be assertive and critical if it is within a loving relationship; hard truths are shared in a supportive and loving way.
3. Boundaries: Respecting the autonomy of the other person. This is the sphere of freedom; understanding the boundaries of the other.

The brain is the organ of relationship. It is shaped by a person's relationships, especially in the first three years. In neurobiology there is a new view of the brain. The concept of mirror neurons helps explain why we are able to perceive what another person does, feels and says. One person perceives another person's sadness, for instance, and mirrors it in his own brain. The brain records this information indelibly and is changed by it.

How something is said is imprinted at a soul

level. Children deeply take in language that is rejecting or aggressive. Asking kindly is the basis for peacefulness, but any language that isn't well-meaning is hurtful. Violence is so close to language that we speak of non-violent communication as a means of forming positive relationships. Aggression originates from disturbances in verbal development, a big challenge today. A person who cannot express himself freely becomes aggressive. Teenage criminals often have the language skills of a fourth grader.

"From my head to my feet, I am the image of God. From my heart into my hands, I feel God's breath," says Steiner. Say it with the children and learn it correctly. Imitation is at work in language so it is important that the adult's speech be grammatically correct, avoiding baby talk. Emmi Pikler said "Let us trust that the infant understands us when we speak in a natural way." How else will the child learn language? The wrong words (poor grammar) are damaging to the child's etheric body. The etheric body knows the entire wisdom and order of language. The etheric organism needs to be nourished by good words.

It is harmonizing when we speak *while* doing care activities. It helps the child organize herself. We speak purposefully with children in relation to an activity and also use the language of gestures. Hands are messengers in care situations. An open palm says, "May I have it?" We can ask for something silently.

The dialogue between mother and child starts very early. It is important that the child's signals are understood and accepted. The child then learns that she can influence and share in the care situation. It is so pleasant to be looked after this way. Discovering the gaze of the parent is for the little child like the sun is for the flowers! And we look into heaven when working with little children because the angels work with them. Both parent and child learn to be good for each other.

Even violent homes can result in healthy children when protective forces come in the form of a Goethean relationship (being truly seen by another). The child's healthy inner essence can be preserved through contact with one human being in whose eyes the child feels accepted. It does not have to be a parent. It could be a relative or a neighbor. A relationship like this is the strongest immunization against violence in later life.

## Awakening to Surroundings— Thinking

*Michaela Glöckler and Claudia Grah-Wittich*

Development requires an encounter. Autonomy and relationship, the topics covered so far in the conference, can only take place through encounter. Encounters also take place in the spaces we create. Encounters with our surroundings involve the mystery of consciousness. Anthroposophy is really “the consciousness of my humanity.” I can ask, “Where is my consciousness, my attention, now?” God created the human “I.” If I had no consciousness of this “I,” what would I be? Meister Eckhart says, “If I were a king and did not know it, I would not be a king.” To what does a child say “I”? This is the mystery of self-development.

How can education promote self-development and so much joy in the Self that one wants to bring it more and more into consciousness? For the little child, the loving gaze imparts a feeling of etheric safety and reconnects him once again to the wholeness of the environment. Education is always a shared experience between child and adult.

The active, autonomous, co-shaping child at some point around age three says “I” in response to self-activity. From the first “I” experience, the I-consciousness will always be there. We observe everything (our world, another person, oneself) out of our “I.” In my reflective thinking, I can put everything outside myself. I can look at the conditions of my life; I am not those conditions. “I” am the one who sees them.

Steiner researched the essence of life, and reported that rhythm carries life. We can begin to see how we shape ourselves out of the rhythms of life. We can see how a lack of rhythm brings stress and disease in the life sphere. In childhood, the forces of life shape the physical body according to the laws of the sense organs. When these etheric forces are freed from the activity of shaping the physical body, they become thought processes. The thinking forces in human beings are transformed etheric forces. They are reflected in the brain as thought competence.

Thinking is a powerful, body-free experience. Through thinking we can order everything. So how does a child manage powerful thinking? She does it through her own life, in the space where she can speak and listen to herself, in the space and time where she can reflect and form her own sentences. She needs time and space for her own unfolding Self.

Intellectual violence, such as making a child repeat the names of items in a book, is torture to a young child and can be as damaging as physical violence.

Aesthetics and order arise out of clear laws, and these laws are to be applied wherever children are cared for. The environment of the young child includes the outer environment, which in the Waldorf movement we achieve beautifully. It also includes the inner environment of the human being, which also needs to be aesthetic and beautiful. Our outer surroundings will be shaped according to the beauty and order of our inner space.

We need moments of inner peace and calm if we are to work well with children. Take a moment to feel yourself. Pay attention to your body’s sensations. Are you here? Are you present? These calm moments keep you from getting tired. Clean out an inner space like this, especially if someone has taken you where you didn’t want to be.

Our heart is built in such a way that it stops for a split second between beats. In those moments of standstill, the etheric forces can exit the body. No longer needed for self-healing, they are used for spiritual healing. Ask yourself, “What can I do? What is essential that I do; what is not essential?” When faced with adversity, these good forces can heal.

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