

Children Under Three: Some Thoughts About the Song Circle and Storytelling

• **Christine Christiansen**

One of the pitfalls when establishing a group for children under three, whether as part of a kindergarten for one- to six-year-olds, or as a separate group, can be that of taking kindergarten life and transferring it directly to the under-three group. The important thing to remember is that there isn't a formula, and that we are still at the stage of observing and deepening our knowledge (through continual study) of the young child. Our observations can help us to formulate questions so that we can work consciously to create child-care that meets the needs of the children.

Observing how the child moves in relation to the adult, and how the adult moves in relation to the child, was my starting point when thinking about whether to incorporate the song-circle and storytelling in our daily rhythm. The one-year-old, for example, doesn't move far from the adult. As the adult washes up, irons, or cleans the windows, the child is nearby—playing at her feet, crawling or walking away, and then moving back again. She “circles” round the adult, moving out into the world and back again. And if the child moves too far the adult will move towards the child, so that they are “connected” again. (Compare this with the six-year-old who plays on the periphery of the permitted area, often out of the immediate sight of the adult.) The two-year-old ventures a little further, and can look up from the sandpit and connect with the adult visually, and then at three can call across the garden “Look at me.”

This one-to-one contact is fundamental, particularly in the first years of life, and though we care for children in groups it is important to be conscious of this, when considering the size of a group, for example. The young child moves individually in circles round the adult—so for children under three it is important not to force the form of the traditional song circle, but rather to transform it. Where does the circle arise naturally?

For us, this is in the mornings, at nine o'clock, after the parents have left. We gather in the cloakroom to get ready to go into the garden. After we are in our

outdoor clothes, and while we are still sitting on the floor, we sing the song that starts every morning. Then we sing two or three finger games, appropriate to the season or festival, and end with the song “Come, let us go into the garden.” Our little gathering never lasts for more than ten minutes, most often less.

Songs are part of our day before we eat our meal, when we put the children down for their nap, and in a less formal way throughout the day: when a child is having her diaper changed, or sitting on my lap for “Ride a cock horse. . .” Such traditional rhymes and songs nurture the relationship between the child and adult, and thus the child's sense of self.

For the same reason, storytelling is first appropriate when children are over three.

By setting the children in a group around herself to tell a story the adult distances herself from each child, separates herself—sometimes even physically by arranging a story table with dolls. This interrupts the flow of togetherness between the child and adult, where the adult should be engaged in the tasks of everyday life like baking, hanging out the washing, sweeping the garden path, while the child is next to her or playing and exploring nearby.

In our group we have picture books. Sometimes nearly-three-year-old Selma, who is the last to be put down for her nap, will sit next to me on the sofa and “read” a book. We look at the pictures together, sharing. The physical back and forth in the garden transforms into a conversation, with Selma pointing to a dog or asking what the little cat is called. It is important to cherish this one-to-oneness with each child in the toddler group, and not force it into the group circle form.

And then, when the child is three, a huge transformation happens. The child, who has both literally and metaphorically held the hand of the adult, can reach out with his other hand and take the hand of the child standing next to him and be part of the song circle. Though he has said “I” for many months, this is a further sign of the child's “centredness,” for it is only

when we have integrated something in ourselves that we can express it in a physical way. The period of “circling” around the adult, the games of running round and round objects (a tree, the dining table)—all these activities and more have nurtured the child’s sense of self. And with this comes the sense of the other, and the first steps into social life.

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