
Stepping Back

~ Trice Atchison

There's a simple children's rhyme that captures an important aspect of the classes for babies, toddlers and their parents I teach at the Great Barrington Rudolf Steiner School:

*The wise old owl, he
sat in an oak*

*The more he saw, the
less he spoke*

*The less he spoke, the
more he heard*

*Oh, why can't we be like
that wise old bird?*

Intentional, well-spoken words—with their rhythm, clarity and meaning—are, of course, important to children's language development, and every class includes nursery rhymes and singing, among other activities. But silence, too, is golden, at least some of the time. That's why, for a portion of each class, the adults quietly observe the children. Parents and caregivers respond to any needs that may arise, while also holding back enough to give the children a chance to become absorbed in an activity, object or interaction on their own. The children soak up this quietness and often play with particular focus during this time. It's interesting to see how some of the babies and toddlers who were vocal and chatty while the adults were talking become silent, while others who were previously quiet begin softly talking or singing. The children move about with a heightened sense of purpose as they create their own play and explore the surroundings, all while being bathed in the warmth and security of the adults' quiet interest.

When during this time a child initiates an exchange with an adult—bringing over a baby doll,

for example—we've discovered together that he can be deeply satisfied by a smile or similar wordless acknowledgment, such as looking at the doll and holding it close for a moment before handing it back. Children don't always need us to remark on how sweet the doll is, ask what color pajamas she's wearing, or wonder aloud whether she needs a blanket. This respite from adult talk seems to be a relief to the children. It's clearly a respite for the grown-ups, many of whom have said that they feel calmer and more connected to the children after slowing down and observing in this way. Some adults at first feel a bit awkward during the exercise, but in time they begin to relish it as they notice all the effective, natural, nonverbal ways in which children do communicate and become engrossed in their play, movement and development.

Sometimes a small conflict over a toy arises during the observation time, but this usually resolves quite easily without adult words (more easily than when we do use words, we've found). Often just moving in close while remaining aware of and available to the children is enough to help them figure out their own solution. Or gently inserting a hand in the air between a would-be grabber and a tuft of another child's hair gives a clear message.

We adults have often remarked that no one would believe that a roomful of babies or toddlers could be so active and yet so peaceful, or that merely watching with interest while the children play could be so engaging. Often I feel that I am watching a beautifully choreographed dance as the seeming chaos of a room full of very young children quickly organizes itself into a harmonious set of movements. Babies and toddlers move with exquisite competence and are wonderful (in the full sense of the word) to watch—something we all come to appreciate over the course of our class time together.

As parent educator Magda Gerber said, "The more we observe, the more we understand and appreciate the enormous amount and speed of learning that happens during the first two or three years of life. We become more humble." This healthy humility helps us understand that we can "instruct" less during these early years because the child herself knows what to do

and when, if given appropriate space and boundaries. This dovetails with the opinion among Waldorf early childhood educators that a powerful, innate wisdom is at work during the first years of life. Sometimes our well-meant commentaries and explanations hinder rather than help, because we can unwittingly layer our own assumptions, expectations and viewpoints over the child's own experience. But when we begin to appreciate the remarkable phenomenon of early childhood growth and development taking place before our eyes, we find ourselves wanting to step back from distracting the children from their self-initiated moving, creating, relating and exploring. We give them more chances to discover for themselves

who they are and what they can do. We live in a culture that fears a gap and over-values constant talk, as though we're all radio DJs who never can allow any "dead air." It can be a luxury, then, to take part in a living pause that lets us relax, observe and appreciate the wonder of a growing human being. ♦

Trice Atchison *leads the Parent Child Garden sessions at the Great Barrington Rudolf Steiner School in Massachusetts. She has taught parent-child classes for more than 10 years, and is a certified Simplicity Parenting group leader. She co-edited A Warm and Gentle Welcome (WECAN 2012). Trice also can be found singing jazz classics in and around the Berkshires.*