

Love Melts Away Fear

by Henning Köhler

Translated by Ted Warren

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Whether a child obeys or not depends on the relationship.*

Does it speak for or against Waldorf education that people are gathered under its roof with extremely different relationships to key questions in education? Bernard Buebs *Lob der Disziplin [Praising Discipline]* is very much appreciated by some Waldorf educators. Others believe in *Kinderjahre [The Childhood Years]* by the Swiss pediatrician Remo Largo. How does that work?

In a “taz” interview Largo was asked: “Where does the renaissance of authoritarian educational thought come from?”

Largo: “Pure nostalgia. I am convinced. The age of authoritarianism is over.”

Interviewer: “But in the end children must receive some limitations.”

Largo: “A typical German attitude. I have a very different opinion. Children do not obey because parents discipline efficiently. Under these circumstances education would be a nightmare. Whether a child obeys or not depends on the relationship. The same is true for their motivation for learning. There are studies about this. It is not a feel-good pedagogy.”

Also Michael Winterhoff’s book *Warum unsere Kinder Tyrannen werden [Why Our Children Become Tyrants]* has found some reception in Waldorf circles. He gets very upset about children who do not immediately follow every command with no questions asked. His credo: From early on, train the child’s psyche with positive and negative reinforcement: praise and blame! Winterhoff is a “fear mogul” states Alex Rühle in the “Süddeutsche Zeitung.” Toni Feldner, who has two children just as Rühle does, confirms the judgment in his book, *Genug erzogen [Educated Enough]*: “It was hard for me to read the book; one becomes very sad.”

On the internet portal “We Parents,” Winterhoff proclaims that before the eighth year children do not have their own personality; before the fifteenth

or sixteenth year they have no insight. Largo proclaims the opposite, the individuality of the child should be respected from birth on. So thinks the brain researcher Gerald Huether, who is well-respected in Waldorf circles. Both take the side of fear-free relationships and autonomous learning. While Bueb and Winterhoff argue consequently on the level of power battles, Largo and Huether are convinced that in a good social climate, the question of power is overcome. Love melts away fear.

Miriam Gebhard writes in her book, *Die Angst vor dem kindlichen Tyrannen* [*The Fear of the Child Tyrant*]: “Whoever boldly proposes that children must learn discipline and obedience, who continually speaks of borders, must accept the fact that people remind them of the past: of all of the pope-like advisors that have contributed to German parents’ fear of their child tyrants.” The tyrant litany and the demand for dressage education are certainly not specific to the 20th century. They have a long and sad tradition.

Is it even meaningful to ask where Waldorf education stands historically concerning the painful themes: power, discipline and authoritarianism? Is it somewhere between the frontlines? I fear that is not possible. Mixing the colors, Bueb and Largo would give an indifferent gray-brown color, certainly not lilac. This is an invitation to debate.

