

Non-Verbal Education: A Necessity in the Developmental Stages

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*It is not moral preaching and not reasoned instruction
that work on children in the right way: that which works is what
the adults in their surroundings do visibly before their eyes.*

— Rudolf Steiner

Typically, human beings never finish learning, and even when getting older they will keep adding new things to what has already been attained. At the same time, it is obvious that the degree and manner of learning changes during the course of life. Every stage of life is specially adapted to certain learning processes. This shows most significantly in the first twenty years where, along with bodily growth, the soul-spirit's ability to take things in and a readiness to learn are buoyant. With this sketch as background, we may focus our attention on the preschool years.

The Development of Learning Ability up to the Beginning of Adulthood

During the course of their development children learn in different ways. In the first years it happens through imitation: e.g., walking, talking,

thinking, the handling of objects, getting dressed and undressed, eating habits, shaking hands when meeting people, and much more. What lies behind this? Learning through imitation means teaching yourself according to a perceived role model. Without any explanations or pedagogical instruction being given, children absorb all the events happening around them, practicing out of their own inner drive until they have attained the corresponding skills. Children do not learn to speak through explanation, nor do they learn to walk through instructions on how to move. They learn these complicated and far reaching human capacities solely through their own inner drive, modeled on the pattern provided by adults. This concentrated, imitative learning of the child—an activity, which is kindled by the role model and tirelessly practiced—is here termed non-verbal learning, i.e., learning without words. Parents who endeavor to set an example for their children in this manner could, therefore, be called non-verbal educators. An example might make clear what this means. In a doctor's practice it often happens that when a mother and child come into the office a problem arises. The doctor has greeted the mother and then turns to the child who also holds out her hand. Often with little children it is not the right hand but the left. The mother who knows about non-verbal education will look on calmly while the child gives the doctor her left hand.

The doctor takes it in a friendly way, however, the mother who is not accustomed to this method of child-upbringing will immediately instruct the child to give the doctor the "proper" hand. Ashamed or disappointed, the child often will just withdraw her hand. The spontaneous readiness to greet has vanished; sometimes the hand sinks down listlessly or slips behind the back, and an awkward silence arises. How different it is for the child who shakes hands out of pure imitation, where it is left to the doctor to determine whether, after having taken the left hand and said, "Hello," he also does the same thing with the right hand, or simply leaves it at one

handshake, knowing full well that things will correct themselves between the ages of five and seven.

If people correct children verbally in the preschool years, their age-appropriate mode of learning is not supported, bringing an element into their education that is only applicable to a later stage of life. Since a preschool child is able to understand the meaning of an action intuitively and then imitate it, he or she is not ready to take on board explanations about the deed. The readiness for action—both the will and the physical motoric (i.e., its movement) is still bound to the sense experience. The eminent French developmental psychologist Jean Piaget identified this phase as sensory-motor intelligence (*senso* stands for sense experience; *motor* stands for organs of movement, i.e., the muscular system). Intelligence and meaning are not yet abstracted independently from the bodily experience, but work directly, intuitively through the senses so that the movement, dependent upon the senses, happens as one, unified, imitative process. In the most intelligent way, children can do what they see and repeat what they hear. Everything that they experience is understood immediately, even if they have no words or concepts for it. The whole sense world is experienced directly and “sensibly”—it instantly “makes sense!” This only changes when thinking becomes emancipated from the body at which point direct sense experience is lost. When this emancipation occurs, sense experience is accompanied more and more by thought. It is more conscious. This later mode of learning, grounded in thinking, is much harder to attain and goes much more slowly than the intuitive preschool mode.

It is therefore important not to shorten the imitative phase by developing abstract intelligence prematurely. However, this is exactly what happens when the little child is educated verbally, through explanations being offered. Moreover, this premature awakening of abstract intelligence lames the imitative faculty. Waldorf Kindergarten teachers experience this

often, for example, when a child of four is admitted who has already “enjoyed” this mode of verbal education. Such children are often seen standing apart or lolling around with their hands in their pockets watching what the others are doing. They have no inclination to enter into the games that are going on so uninhibitedly and imitatively. It usually takes six months or longer till they are ready to join in and, through seeing what the others are doing, become just as involved.

Why is it so important that preschool children have the opportunity to imitate as much as possible? This is because every activity, and especially every physical skill which arises through imitation, not only prepares abilities for later life but also gives impetus to the healthy development of physical functioning during those years. We must not forget that children are not only learning; day by day they are growing up. Learning and growing are inextricably bound together. So the question is: does every learning process also support the child’s physical development? It is obvious that physical development in children is best stimulated by copying and participating in activities that require skillful dexterity rather than by sitting still—as for instance in front of the television or playing with electronically controlled toys and games where a minimum of skillful movement is required. It is also good, where possible, to avoid being hemmed in within small apartments without any interesting things going on that stimulate imitation. Rather, give them the possibility to bring all their physical capacities into play (particularly their movement capability, sense of balance, and their fine and gross motor skills).

Every act of learning is at the same time an act of will. Learning requires effort. With preschool children, the will is still integrally bound to the sensory activity, without any intervening cognition. Uniquely, this gives the possibility for optimal learning in accordance with the functions of the sense organs and the interest with which the child uses his sense organs to take in the world. Some children have more interest, some less. There are

those with the possibility of wide-awake attention and those whose powers of attention are weak. The adults must know how they can awaken the children's interest and gain their attention. This happens when whatever needs to be done is undertaken joyfully and with enthusiasm. Something done with care and in a loving, enthusiastic manner evokes the child's interest much more than when you do things in a listless, disinterested or even grudging way. Something similar can be seen also with older children. For example, when it is a question of who should clear up after the meal, if someone jumps up and says, "I'll wash up today. Anyone coming to help?" and then disappears into the kitchen to make a start, others will now follow suit, rather than when everyone gets up quietly after the meal and tries to make himself invisible with the hope that someone else will do it. The more convinced an adult is about what he does, the more attractive it is for the imitative situation of the child. All this changes when school begins and the child's readiness to act becomes more independent of sense impressions. As motivation, he now needs his feelings to be stirred, for between the change of teeth and puberty the feeling life develops. The children now do not react primarily to what they see and experience, but to what they feel. They judge everything they experience according to feeling. Sympathy and antipathy play a big part in this. Which teacher they like, which clothes please them, which pupils in the class are "slow" (as some children put it)—all this is affirmed and discussed. What pleases them and what does not play a big role in all they do. The teacher must succeed in arousing feelings that give wings to their willingness to learn. However, with learning always being bound up with effort, it cannot only be a matter of the pupils learning what they enjoy learning. It is much more important that the pupils learn to love making an effort of will in the whole process of learning. They can achieve this when they come to like the adult concerned. Indeed, just at this age we meet the phenomenon of those pupils making good progress in the subjects where they like the teacher. For example, a child who has never

understood anything in mathematics suddenly becomes quite a successful pupil after a change of teachers, with the new one having an empathetic connection with the child.

At this age, naturally, verbal education is necessary. It is also appropriate because the intelligence of the child has become emancipated to the extent that she can retain in her memory what the teacher has said. She grasps the meaning that is contained in word and sentence independently of outer action. This ability appears towards the end of the Kindergarten, when it is time for elementary school to begin. You can recognize this in how children listen to a story. As long as they remain in the non-verbal mode of learning their memory is not yet independent. They love to hear the same stories again and again and to play the same games over and over. Grownups are often amazed that the children do not get bored. They do not because their memory has not yet reached this level of independence; the intelligence lives completely in activity. The children have, so to speak, a repetitive memory. In the repetition of an event or story they feel that they know it already. The pleasure of remembering only stirs while re-enacting the event or re-hearing the story, and not in the independent way that is later the case. This new mode of learning hops to the forefront between the sixth and eighth years. You first notice it when all of a sudden the child does not want her beloved bedtime story, but instead wants to hear something new. When she no longer lights up happily when mother says that it's time for *Snow White*, but objects: "I know that one so well already, I want a different one"—then this moment has come. As long as the children are glad to hear the same story repeated again and again they are still in the non-verbal phase in which intelligence is not accessible to them *in abstracto*.

After puberty, eagerness to act requires yet another motivation. Neither example nor feeling alone provides sufficient motivation. Young people must see for themselves what they have to do. It becomes more and

more evident that adolescents will only do what they understand, while acknowledging the reasons. Will and readiness for action have now become dependent on thinking and on insight. Young people do not want to carry out an action primarily to please an adult, but because they see some justification for it. If these different modes of learning in childhood and youth are taken into account, the task of education is made easier. If not, problems and conflicts arise which have to be overcome every single day and are deleterious for the climate of learning.

How does one learn to educate non-verbally?

We are often faced with the predicament—how do we react in the preschool years when the child refuses to do what we ask. How do we get the child to do what we want without a huge torrent of explanation and justification? Here one can learn a great deal in one of the Kindergartens where non-verbal education is practiced. In the Waldorf Kindergarten, for example, it works as follows. When the children are playing outside, walking on stilts or building little dens, and it is time to come indoors to eat, many of them get upset at the thought of their fun being curtailed. It is a great help, in such circumstances, if the meal is always at the same time and the children are accustomed to it. Habit is an important support for non-verbal education. It becomes self-evident that you follow the routine.

The Kindergarten teacher goes from group to group, singing the song that she sings every morning, signifying that they leave their treasured game and come in to eat. A few children are already following her. This extends into a little parade which affects and draws the others. More and more join in until the whole group goes inside. No scolding, no admonition, no telling off—simply going inside embraced by everyone.

A mother once said to me, “When I hear you speaking like this I find it all perfectly understandable; but then when I’m at home I always ask myself, why has my clarity disappeared? It does not work as I hoped it

would.” This is the kind of problem that confronts people who are embarking on non-verbal education. So why is it so difficult? Why is it hardly possible today for an adult to refrain from a whole rigmarole of explanations when he wants something from a child? He has to learn that instead of words he needs to act with concentration. One has to do something that usually does not happen today, unite oneself with what one wishes in such a way that one can perform it almost as a ritual, through one’s whole disposition, and then bring it to full expression. When I speak about something and simultaneously think about it, I am immediately distanced from it. I think “about” it. I talk “about” it. I am not it. I am not in it—I am not completely at one with it. It cannot speak out of me, or allow it to manifest through me.

This disconnected “talking about a thing” is rampant today. With one person you talk about something in one way and with another person you talk about it in another way; opinions have something relative about them; you do not want to tie yourself down. This is typical of the intellectual culture in which we live. One distances oneself; one does not take things seriously but remains “objective.” Seldom is it necessary to really throw yourself heart and soul into something. Many pupils are not used to taking seriously something that has been said by an adult. They think everything can be discussed and made negotiable—that ultimately it is not decisive. And then they are extremely surprised when they meet a grownup whose every word carries weight.

Today we have all been brought up in this rather hazy, noncommittal way of life. This means that a degree of uncertainty will have brushed off on us. Most people have inferiority complexes—they know they do not really understand a lot of what is going on in the world. This kind of uncertainty in judgment, resulting in being unable to form an opinion, is widespread. Also, relativity widespread, is the feeling that what one thinks has only limited value; everything could actually be quite different.

Openness and critical distance are naturally indispensable preconditions for a genuine and realistic striving after knowledge. But they are undermining for the phase of non-verbal education. At that age children simply want to experience the meaning in everything that confronts them. If the adult cannot give this meaning because he or she is not convinced, or is uncertain or experiences things as relative and only of limited importance, the child does not receive what she or he needs. They lose confidence, and through this many typical educational problems belonging to this age group ensue.

The rediscovery of body language

Nowadays there is a whole spectrum of psychotherapies—different schools ranging from sensitivity training to Gestalt therapy—which aim to convey to people what they think and feel inwardly, and how to relearn to express this in an honest way, through the body as well, and to show this in body language. It has been shown that many people become ill through unbearable tension arising between what they experience inwardly and the façade that they show to the world. It is not that I am recommending the above-named psychotherapeutic methods for learning how to educate non-verbally. I merely want to emphasize that the possibility of non-verbal education—that is, the ability to show through body language without words what one is thinking and what is meaningful—is something which is very foreign to many adults in our time, and symptoms of illnesses often appear as a consequence.

For learning how to educate in a non-verbal way I have two recommendations. First, eurythmy where in every movement something meaningful and entirely in correspondence with feeling and thinking is brought to expression—providing one practices diligently. Second, acting or drama, where one learns to move expressively and only to say what one really has to at a particular moment. It would be ideal if parents of pre-

school children would get together in groups, and act small scenes in mime in order to express thoughts and feelings, patterns of behavior, commands and taboos, as well as everyday problems in a non-verbal way. They should then exchange feedback about what they have experienced. It is fascinating to see how engaged children become when an adult makes an interesting movement or when his face has a meaningful expression that is inclined towards mimicry. They love this sort of thing. Not wanting to let him escape from them, they will do everything he wants. They love to provoke simple expressive reactions in adults and like it when their parents show their emotions.

In this connection, it often happens that children in the Kindergarten pick up all sorts of rude words and trot these out provocatively in one or another situation. A typical case might be as follows. A mother meets an acquaintance on the street and begins a conversation. Little Johnny stands there and begins using rude words: crap, shit, suck, and so forth. With interest he observes how the friend becomes uncomfortable and the mother becomes embarrassed. Meanwhile Johnny is relishing the scene. But if the grownups continue talking unperturbed and ignore his silly prattle as a sign that it does not cut any ice, the child will soon realize that the effort is not worth it.

How does it happen that children instinctively know either that they have succeeded with such provocation or that it is not worth their while? Had Johnny just been walking with his mother alone, in all probability he would not have come out with anything of the sort. Such words only came into his mind when his mother started talking to her friend.

Once again, in the non-verbal phase, children instantly absorb the meaning of all sensory experiences. They do not experience the sense experience separate from rational understanding. So it is possible for them intuitively to grasp the moral qualities in the soul life of the adult. That which occurs for us adults in later life only in special situations when, for

example, we sense that there is an “atmosphere” in a room we are entering, or when we notice that two people are in love with each other—this is a daily and ongoing occurrence for children. As soon as the mother meets her friend, the child feels that her interest has been deflected from him towards the other person. Through his provocative behavior he would like to bring it about that he is once again the center of her attention. However, he must learn that this cannot always be, and the mother achieves this when she is quite consistent in doing what she considers is right—in this case, continuing to talk to her friend. If she empathizes with the child, and understands how he feels a little forlorn, it will be easy for her, even while she’s talking, to keep casting a glance at him, or make some little movement so that he does not feel left high and dry. In this way she may pre-empt the child’s becoming provocative.

Conditions for free and responsible action

There is yet a third hindrance vis-a-vis non-verbal education—the wish of many parents to allow their child to be free, not to follow directions. Hence, in order that he is not alienated, the three-year-old is asked what he would like to eat or what clothes he would like to wear. Whoever realizes that children of this age learn through example and are prone to taking on board any uncertainty in the adult’s attitude (for example that he is indecisive about what he wants and therefore asks the child) will change his stance for the sake of the child. Freedom can only develop when one has achieved one’s own mature insight. Of course, there are preliminary stages in the development of freedom. In the non-verbal phase of education this consists in allowing the child to imitate what he sees unrestrictedly and without reserve. He must be allowed to move freely. The house should be so organized that one does not have to prohibit the children from this or that; rather their impulse towards activity should be allowed free rein. The example comes from the grownups, but the way in which the child responds

is freely experienced and freely formed. Similarly, later at school, when the children learn something because they like their teacher, the element of freedom plays an important role. Because the child likes doing something, she feels free, even if the impulse for the activity has originated from an adult and not from herself. If children have been allowed to develop through these preliminary stages, they will also be in the position after puberty when independent thinking and powers of judgment ripen, to act out of free, self-determined insight and personal understanding. Only then is true freedom possible.

To summarize: in the preschool era, the key is trust in adults and free play of movement; in the school years love and joy of doing; and in adulthood, recognition for what is true and right is the precondition for free and responsible action.

Adults who bring trust towards the children so that they will make use of their freedom at maturity will feel themselves, in the time up to then, like a proxy, merely replacing those capabilities over which the child has no sovereignty during the course of her education. They will hold back wherever the child has reached a sufficient degree of independence. Correspondingly, the child initially brings to the adult, and especially in the preschool years, deep trust that the teacher will do what is right. An infant lying with open arms and open eyes, his diaper changed, is at the same time an archetypal image of trust-filled bliss. She allows everything to happen to her. Something of this original trust persists through the whole preschool period, expressing itself also in the need to give herself over to imitation. The child regards everything that happens around her as worthy of imitation and trust. That is why it is so important that this trust is not betrayed. It is betrayed, however, when the child experiences that an adult does not know his own mind. Likewise, when the course of the day lacks regularity and rhythm and security. But, if good habits are installed in the form of a definite sleeping-waking rhythm, in regular meal times, and

regular alternation of play and rest, the child feels herself safe and protected, experiencing the course of such a day as something into which she may gladly enter.

Without such clear and well-formed structure in the daily rounds, the growing organs of the child will not get the start in life which they need. Foundations for good functioning of the organs are laid when there is a regular alternating between making that demand on the child and leaving her in peace. Many functional instabilities, in the sense of psychosomatic disorders in later life (automatic nervous system), have their roots in bad eating habits in early childhood. If children eat only according to fad and fancy, with no appetite at meal times because they have been constantly nibbling and snacking in-between, the digestive organs will fail to learn to work together strongly with regularity and then to relax.

As can be gathered from the above, it is straightforward to understand the principle of non- verbal education; the challenge is to put it into daily practice.

About the Author:

Michaela Glöckler is a pediatrician, school doctor and author of several books. She has received worldwide acclaim as a lecturer on a variety of themes related to anthroposophical medicine. Dr. Glöckler is the leader of the Medical Section of the School of Spiritual Science at the Goetheanum, Switzerland.