

Sophia's Hearth Family Center Web Site

www.sophiashearth.org has an overview of who we are, schedules of upcoming events, and more! Come visit!

Summer 2007 Professional Development Offerings "The Child in the First Three Years"

Planning our professional development courses for the coming summer is underway. July 2007 begins a new cycle of our 13-month part-time training course for early childhood teachers, parent-toddler & parent-infant group leaders, childcare providers, parents and expectant parents. Auditors are warmly invited to join.

JULY 2007 FIVE-DAY COURSES

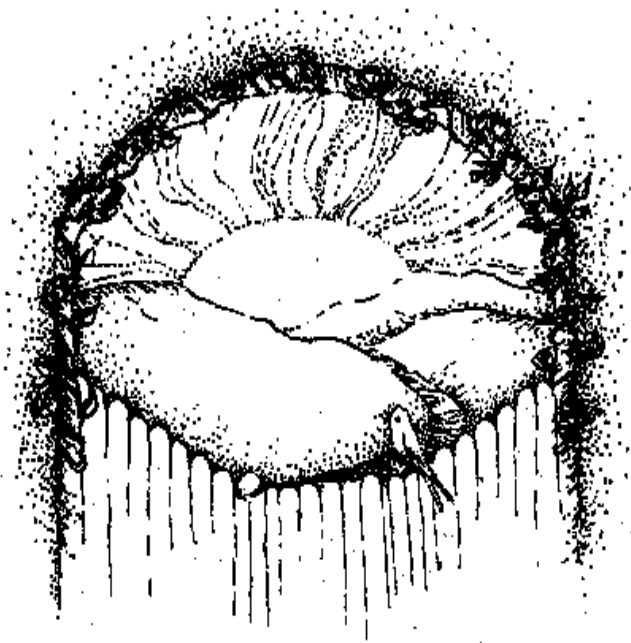
WEEK 1 July 2–6 "Nurturing the Young Child in the Early Years" with program co-directors Jane Swain and Susan Weber.

WEEK 2 July 9–13 Helle Heckman returns from Denmark for an advanced early childhood course including mentoring for participants' individual projects. Also this week "An Introduction to RIE (Resources for Infant Educators)". Instructor to be announced.

WEEK 3 July 16–20 "Advanced Insights from the Pikler Institute—An Experimental Course in Child Development" with Ute Strub from the Pikler Institute in Berlin, Germany. A physical therapist who works with the approach of Elfriede Hengstenberg, she specializes in movement education with children and teaches adults worldwide.

Full descriptions of all courses will be posted on the website as available; full brochures will be available in early 2007.

Join us in beautiful southern New Hampshire, land of lakes and mountains, as part of a joyous learning community that will inspire and transform your work! More details on our website, or call us to register at 603-357-3755.



the Garden Gate

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Sophia's Hearth Family Center is a national organization for education, research, study and observation. Our family center is a living model for community building. We nurture the holistic development of families and professionals in their care of the child from conception through age three.

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36 Carpenter Street, Keene, New Hampshire 03431.

603-357-3755 info@sophiashearth.org www.sophiashearth.org

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A letter from Susan Weber

Dear friends,

This issue brings a new and special focus on the work of our training course students. Each year, each student develops a personal research project that arises out of a personal wondering: a question that draws her interest, that yearns for time to be explored. Working from dialogue with Torin Finser's monograph, *Research*, their conversations get underway. Final projects are shared with fellow students and with summer course participants as well. Perhaps their new insights will inspire you with wonderings of your own.

A year ago we were reeling from the dark rain clouds that brought the devastation of severe flooding to northern New England and sent us to borrowed quarters for several months. As we found ourselves recreating the very ground on which we had stood, we were repeatedly awakened to the discovery of continued silver linings in that cloud.

In the year that followed, we made new friends from far and wide who came together to help us regain our footing. We moved forward in the months that followed to design a new facility, a permanent home that will remain high and dry even in the strongest rain. We have successfully received zoning (and by the time you read this, we anticipate also planning) board permission from the city of Keene to move forward with our project. The building is now designed and before long, the preliminary illustrations will be visible on our website. You will see spaces for the childcare of both infants and young children, a playroom/seminar room for parents and conferences, a gathering space around our hearth. All these elements are set in a natural environment of woods and fields, ready for gardening and exploration. We have new professional partners filled with interest and support. Enthusiasm for this project is streaming toward us from our local and wider communities. If the Greek definition of crisis—opportunity—was ever borne out, the past year is strong evidence that this is so. Do join us in celebrating this season and the renewal that comes with it.

I also stop for a moment to give warmest gratitude to our long time editor and contributor, Bruce Barlow. Bruce was indefatigable in his devotion to the *Garden Gate*, bringing his high standards as both writer and editor to its pages for many issues. We miss his careful touch, and wish him well as we bring you this present issue. A warm welcome and thank you to this issue's editor, Lisabeth Sewell McCann.

Warmly,

Susan Weber, Executive Director

Toddler Conflict: A Closer look

Trice Atchison

Parent-toddler teacher,

Great Barrington Rudolf Steiner School

Conflict is inherently distressing for all but the thickest-skinned among us, that subset of people who seem, in contrast, to be enlivened by conflict. Perhaps humanity can achieve a healthy balance—one that can be learned beginning in early childhood—in which conflict is neither eschewed nor ignited, but instead met with understanding and finesse. In this article, I hope to shed some light on this age-old challenge and, perhaps, offer some tools that may help us and our children more successfully deal with this inevitable aspect of life.

A typical progression: *We have a child, and our hearts are melted. We're vulnerable, and so is our newborn. We try our best to shelter that innocent little one, who grows fast and soon becomes a part of the wider world. We bring him to a playgroup, the park or a library read-along. The other new parents seem friendly enough, if also a little nervous, and the children happily observe and participate in the activities. This is healthy, this is good, this is peace, this is community.*

And then a little boy, not more than two and for no apparent reason, reaches out to pull a tuft of our own child's hair. Hard! Unprovoked! Our child yells in protest. We are shocked and dismayed. This is unacceptable. We want a perfect, conflict-free world for our deeply loved child. No hair pulling, no hitting, no teasing, no excluding! These thoughts cloud the present moment, and we lose all perspective.

New parents often seek a utopian experience for their child, and this can be especially true among parents drawn to Waldorf education. Many parents speak of the visceral reaction they had the first time they ever walked into a Waldorf early childhood classroom: the peach-blossom lazured walls, the simple cloth dolls and wooden toys, the fresh flowers on the seasonal table, and the smell of bread baking in the oven. Parents rejoice: *Yes, this is it! I've found a true paradise for my sweet child.*

I, too, was enthralled with the goodness and beauty I sensed the first time I walked into a Waldorf early childhood classroom, and knew that this was the setting I wanted for my child. I still hold these positive views about a form of education that is healing, inspiring, developmentally appropriate and joyful. The difference now is that I know from experience that conflict and struggle also occur within those pastel-colored walls.

As parents, we can strive to offer our children valuable experiences we may have enjoyed, or missed, as children, but we cannot always surround them with perfect harmony. Even if we could achieve this end, we would not be serving our child's best interests. As Barbara Ehrensaft says in *Spoiling Childhood: How Well-Meaning Parents Are Giving Children Too Much, But Not What They Need*, "In human relationships, the act of reparation, making good on

something that did not initially go well, is far better for character building than providing our children with a conflict-free, idyllic, 'perfect' childhood."¹ Sometimes there's trouble in paradise. What's more, this trouble is normal, and a valuable learning experience for all of us as we help children learn how to navigate their way through conflict. To do this, we must become more aware of the feelings and preconceptions we bring to conflicts that we and our children encounter, and strive to be more objective and present in regard to whatever manifests in the moment.

Certain trends in parenting can make this objectivity toward, and acceptance of, conflict all the more difficult to achieve: the blurring of boundaries between parent and child, especially common during the early years; an overzealous desire on the part of parents to offer their children an "optimal" childhood; and an overblown fear of conflict of any kind in the name of peace. In these ways, parents may be hampering their children in learning how to co-exist with others, as with the child, Richard, described here:

Pamela and Gordon believed that a crying child meant a failing parent. As a small baby, their son, Richard, was given a warm and enriched environment. He had two parents who anticipated his every need and quietly removed obstacles from his course before he ever knew they were in his way... He had a bucolic and blissful first couple of years... Richard smiled most of the time...

"But then it was time for Richard to attend preschool. Nirvana quickly turned to purgatory. Pamela and Gordon [had] failed to present their son with the 'gradual failures' that would allow him to function in the world. ... [Richard's] conflict-free home life existed in stark contrast to his new battlefield at school. Soon the battles were carried home... In the concerted effort to keep Richard satisfied and gratified, Richard was deprived of the basic tools that would help him cope in the world—patience, waiting his turn, dealing with frustration, problem solving, hoping for something better."²

The unhappy situation described above begins in infancy, with the parents quietly clearing Richard's path of all obstacles. He never has to experience frustration or exert himself to solve a problem on his own—even one as simple as retrieving a toy he has flung out of reach.

As teachers and parents, we can help children build character and important life skills by, ourselves, accepting conflict as a normal part of toddlerhood, childhood and adult life. The RIE (Resources for Infant Educarers) approach to young children is an example of a practice that embraces conflict by discouraging parents and caregivers from intervening too soon in a misguided effort to smooth a baby's path of obstacles. As RIE founder Magda Gerber writes in *Your Self-Confident Baby: How to encourage your child's natural abilities—from the very start*,

“To respect your child is to create a little distance so that you refrain from interfering with her experience of encountering life... RIE’s respectful approach encourages a child’s authenticity, or genuineness.”³ In this light, creating a frustration-free environment for a young child is a form of disrespect, and one that alienates the child from his or her truest self.

Waldorf early childhood teachers often use redirection as an approach to resolving conflicts among children. When Sally and Sammy are each insisting on using a child’s broom at the same time, the teacher might get the dustpan and brush and show one of the children how to sweep up the dirt, or she might see to it that there are multiples of popular toys. Or she may encourage Sammy to bake some muffins in the play kitchen. This occurs without a long speech about the importance of sharing, or a dictate that each child must take a turn of a certain length with the broom before switching. Sarah Baldwin, author of *Nurturing Children and Families: One Model of a Parent/Child Program in a Waldorf School*, specifically reminds parents to be aware that children this young often simply cannot share, and recommends that parents and teachers work together to redirect children.⁴

A strong, healthy daily rhythm can do much to help prevent or minimize conflicts by allowing the children to know what to expect, to transition smoothly from one activity to the next, and to avoid becoming over-stimulated or bored (conditions that can prompt conflict). Waldorf early childhood teacher Barbara Patterson, in *Beyond the Rainbow Bridge: Nurturing our children from birth to seven*, says, “Like a heartbeat or the rising and setting of the sun, our classroom rhythms hold children in a secure balance. Our outer activity comes to meet whatever wells up within the children as we move through repetitive daily and weekly rhythms.”⁵ Ronald G. Morrish, author of *Secrets of Discipline: 12 keys for raising responsible children*, supports this idea. He describes the need for children to have a healthy dose of rhythm and routine in their lives in order to avoid feeling off-balance and unharmonious: “These days, many [children] have to think their way through every part of the day. Many parents no longer stress routines and nothing is predictable. Children have to stay alert and deal with constant change... Too often, we forget that children struggle to get through days like this the same as we do. They also become agitated, irritable and unproductive.”⁶

Other wise strategies effective in minimizing conflicts include a hearty mid-morning snack (heading off problems that can arise from simple hunger), and encouraging early bedtimes and daily naps to help ensure that children are well-rested. It is up to us as adults to create an atmosphere that, as far as possible, fosters peace and purposefulness—and, of course, to model peace ourselves. A well-rested, well-fed, assured and engaged child will tend to play well by herself and co-exist well with others. But, as we know, even in such ideal circumstances, conflicts crop up. Children bring with them varying levels of coping skills from day to day; these can be

due to simple overtiredness or other temporary factors, constitutional differences, and issues children may be absorbing from their family life, such as parents’ marital difficulties or job pressures.

Patterson suggests various ways to deal with aggression and conflict in the classroom:

A child who bites can be given a large piece of apple or carrot and must sit beside the teacher to eat it. “We bite the carrot, not our friends.” For a child who scratches, bring out the healing basket and trim the child’s nails. “Kittens scratch, but not children.” A child who spits may be taken to the bathroom to spit into the toilet.⁷

Patterson also recommends listening carefully to children as they describe what happened in a conflict with another child, noting that a child who feels sincerely heard seems better able to let go of the conflict and move on. She also helps children struggling to enter social play in finding creative ways to become involved, increasing the chances that the other children will respond favorably to a new playmate. For example, a child might be encouraged to knock on a neighbor’s “door,” basket in hand, to say that she’s having visitors for tea and would like to borrow some dishes, as opposed to crashing in on the dish hoarders, accusing them of being unfair.⁸

RIE practitioners advocate more specifically and directly guiding children engaged in conflict. First, however, children must have a chance to work out conflicts on their own—with just enough adult help as is needed to lead them through an impasse. In this way (as with the infant trying to reach a toy on his own) children’s capabilities and competence are acknowledged as they gradually gain mastery in dealing with their physical world and social relationships. Gerber says:

*I believe in letting children struggle over a toy as long as neither one is getting hurt or hasn’t reached a point where he is past his limit of coping with the situation. Struggle is part of life, all aspects of life. There is a famous Hungarian stage play called The Tragedy of Man. In one scene God looks down and speaks to Adam and Eve, saying, “Struggle and keep hoping.”*⁹

Gerber’s quote brings to mind images of a woman laboring through childbirth, a chick pecking its way out of a shell, a sperm’s journey during conception—all examples of rich and meaningful struggle.

A RIE-based article by Denise Da Ros and Beverly Kovach, “Assisting Toddlers and Caregivers During Conflict Resolutions: Interactions That Promote Socialization,” offers specific guidelines for caregivers in dealing with toddler conflict and in exploring one’s own inner responses to conflict in terms of how they might influence the way a caregiver chooses to intervene.¹⁰ The first step is quiet observation, maintaining an open and nonjudgmental attitude. Moving in close to the conflict and remaining at the children’s eye level, the caregiver watches and waits, unless, of course, a child’s safety is at stake (all the while ready to intercept any hitting gesture). The caregiver may then describe to the children

what she sees (“I see that you have the sheep, Thomas, and that Sarah wants it, too.”). The caregiver, curbing her desire to quickly solve the problem out of a need to erase her own discomfort, waits to see whether the children, thus acknowledged, still need to struggle. She offers just enough involvement, if any, to help the children solve the problem themselves. Often the simple act of moving in close, or of simply stating to the children what is happening, is enough to dispel the conflict. The caregiver stays nearby until the conflict is resolved, remaining available to comfort either child, and modeling gentleness toward both the “aggressor” and the “victim.” The caregiver continues to verbalize what she sees happening until the toddlers disengage.¹¹ Da Ros and Kovach conclude that “Adults’ ways of relating and responding during toddler conflict will affect the immediate outcome of toddler problem-solving. When and how much adults should intervene, and the kinds of strategy they select, will affect the authenticity and competence of the toddlers who are in the adult’s care.”¹²

Sharifa Oppenheimer, in an article entitled, “Creating Your ‘Family Culture,’” has these recommendations for conflict resolution: “1) Use the same tone of voice you use for ‘here’s the towel.’ Simple, informative, clear. 2) Rarely is there a situation in which there is a true ‘victim’ and ‘aggressor.’ There are two sides to every child’s disagreement, and you need to know both. 3) Keep it simple. A few words used skillfully are far more effective than the best lecture on justice and equality.”¹³

But as Gerber, with her trademark common sense, states, “If either child’s emotions reach the boiling point and his behavior falls apart, or either child is intent on engaging in aggressively hurtful behavior like hitting or biting, you may decide to separate them. You can say, ‘I don’t want either of you to get hurt, and it looks like one of you might. I’m going to separate you now.’”¹⁴

The Da Ros and Kovach article was especially helpful to me in practically dealing with classroom conflicts that occurred during the parent-toddler classes I taught at the Great Barrington Rudolf Steiner School this past spring. The class consisted of eight to ten toddler-parent pairs each day, and the children were ages one-and-a-half to three. I practiced the steps outlined above, and also took a closer look at my own deep discomfort with conflict, and with the mistaken idea that, ideally, there *wouldn’t* be any in the classroom, or that a “good teacher” knows how to remove conflict in a snap. The insight to see conflicts as necessary and educational helped me to become more effective in assisting the children and the parents.

At the first signs of conflict, I would move in closer. When warranted, I “reported” to the children, in simple language, what I saw. I was amazed at how affirming and calming these steps could be for the children. At times, redirection still felt like the more appropriate response—but I also could more clearly observe how parents’ overly enthusiastic attempts at redirection often backfired and, indeed, did not adequately acknowledge the child’s feelings of frustration, inevitably leading to further frustration and conflict.

(Perhaps the child thinks, “Why is she asking me to make muffins? Can’t she see that I really want that broom?!”) With empathy, I also was able to observe how uncomfortable some of the parents were with conflict in the classroom, particularly when their own child was involved in it.

I began to tell “victims,” in a matter-of-fact manner, that they could say “No,” or “I don’t like that,” when another child was invading their space. Years ago, I read a magazine article by a rape survivor who wrote about having been raised to be a “good girl” who never said no or wished to hurt anybody’s feelings by refuting them, setting limits, or “making a stink.” These learned habits of so-called “niceness” were the conditions that led to her rape. This harkens back to Gerber’s goal of authenticity. It is simply false, unnatural and even dangerous to smile apologetically and remain accommodating when someone is violating your personal space.

I wrote a letter on the topic of toddler conflict to the parents, and gave them a copy of the Da Ros and Kovach article. Over the next weeks I saw the parents (and myself) develop greater comfort and skill in observing conflicts in process, allowing them some time to be resolved, and quietly acknowledging what was transpiring when a conflict was in effect. Of course, the children and parents were also by this time more familiar with me, each other, the classroom and the routine, but even considering these other factors, happy, peaceful play clearly increased as the weeks went on, in part due to the new awareness the adults were bringing to the classroom. Together we strived to refrain from distracting (redirecting) a child too soon or trying to make the children “happy” by swooping in with a ready solution. Parents made themselves ready to move in close, and respond or intervene as needed. Conflicts occurred less frequently in the final weeks, and there were no longer any full-blown struggles. A number of parents commented on how helpful they found the letter and article to be.

It’s interesting to note that when a parent who was less familiar with the recommended approach would occasionally accompany a child to class in place of the parent who came regularly, they would likely use the more typical approach to conflicts—trying to solve the problem for the child; seeing one child as the aggressor, the other as the victim; or trying to “jolly” the child out of her frustration. I believe this contrast was not example of differences in parenting styles, but indicated that we really had begun to change the general classroom culture, with occasional lapses into old patterns. In short, allowing the conflicts to occur with less parental and teacher discomfort and less quick intervention, and verbalizing problems as they occurred, had the effect of noticeably increasing peaceful play within the classroom over time.

This “sports-casting” to the children differs from the traditional Waldorf approach, in which the teacher is urged to speak less and model more, quietly and “behind the scenes” create a healing and peaceful environment, indirectly address certain themes through story-telling and puppetry, and show the children more acceptable

ways to interact. However, my own direct experience and observations with the RIE approach to toddler conflict, as well as the parents' positive remarks and follow through, convince me of its worth and appropriateness within the classroom, in addition to the more traditional, and deeply valuable, Waldorf approaches.

Kim Payne—a psychologist and former Waldorf teacher who lectures worldwide on parenting and education—is opening new areas of inquiry within Waldorf Schools by encouraging a more direct approach to conflicts among children of all ages. “As adults,” Payne said during a lecture entitled *When Push Comes to Love: How to Raise Civilized Children in an Uncivilized World*, “we need to get over our ‘harmony addiction’ and develop policies both at home and at school for dealing with conflict in a more straightforward way.”¹⁵ He, too, urges us to embrace conflict—not to immediately separate children when they are arguing, but to help them work it out so that they can develop a sense of who they are in relation to others.

My interest in how to handle toddler conflict has prompted me to begin studying the topic of conflict resolution more generally, and to engage in a more in-depth exploration of my own feelings about conflict. Toward this end, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*, by Marshall B. Rosenberg Ph.D., is a valuable book that could have remarkably healing effects on individuals, families and organizations taking up the practices it outlines. The language and communication skills described are meant to strengthen our ability to remain open, human, authentic and responsive even in challenging situations. He invites to compassionately work our way through conflicts by observing our feelings, realizing our needs and calmly making requests. His nonviolent communication process (NVC) has been used with much success in situations ranging from family and relationship problems, to community-wide conflicts, to political strife on a global scale.¹⁶

As Morrish wrote, “A few years from now, our children will be in charge of our country and our communities... They will be responsible for looking after the environment, preventing wars, and educating a new generation of children. How well our children do in the years to come will, to a great extent, be determined by how well we raise them now.”¹⁷

Like the children who have the potential to grow and learn through conflict, if we let them, we all can benefit from using the tools that lead to conflict resolution. With practice, we can become worthy examples to our own children, to the children in our classrooms and their parents, and to our communities—as we learn to make peace with conflict. 🌱

NOTES

¹Ehrensaft, Barbara (1997), *Spoiling Childhood: How Well-Meaning Parents Are Giving Children Too Much—But Not What They Need*, New York, NY: The Guilford Press, p. 238.

²Ibid, pp. 163–164.

³Gerber, Magda (1998), *Your Self-Confident Baby: How to encourage your child's natural abilities—from the very start*, New York, NY: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., pp. 3–4.

⁴Baldwin, Sarah (2004), *Nurturing Children and Families: One Model of a Parent/Child Program in a Waldorf School*, Spring Valley, NY: Waldorf Early Childhood Association of North America, p. 89.

⁵Patterson, Barbara, and Bradley, Pamela (2000), *Beyond the Rainbow Bridge: Nurturing our children from birth to seven*, Michaelmas Press, Amesbury, MA, p. 119.

⁶Morrish, Ronald G. (1999), *Secrets of Discipline for Parents and Teachers: 12 keys for raising responsible children*, Woodstream Publishing, Fonthill, Ontario, Canada, pp. 57–58.

⁷Patterson, 119.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Gerber, pp.188–189.

¹⁰Assisting Denise A. Da Ros and Beverly A. Kovach, “Assisting Toddlers and Caregivers During Conflict Resolutions: Interactions that Promote Socialization,” *Childhood Education*, Fall, 1998, p. 29.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid., p. 30.

¹³Oppenheimer, Sharifa (2005), “Creating Your ‘Family Culture’”, Steinerbooks Education Catalog 2005, p. 73.

¹⁴Gerber, p. 190.

¹⁵Website article, “When Push Comes to Love: How to Raise Civilized Children in an Uncivilized World, Kim Payne website: www.thechildtoday.org.

¹⁶Rosenberg, p. 8.

¹⁷Morrish, p. 141.

Festivals: 101

Molly Fair Badrawy

Michaelmas, Candlemas, Shmandelmas. I thought Helle Heckmann's seminar was going to be about festivals. Coming from the world where "Festival" means something like eating a piece of the world's largest apple pie, walking aimlessly through crowds, pushing a stroller with one hand and a diet coke in the other while picking-up literature about flooring, and considering indulging in a funnel-cake, I must admit that my expectations were quite different from reality as a participant in Sophia's Hearth Family Center's (SHFC) Summer 2006 Course.

The course was called, "Simplicity: A Guiding Ideal for Creating Festival Life with Young Children". I like simplicity. I have read large books on simplifying my life. And festivals, well, you've probably got the idea. In truth, I was looking for answers. As a new board member for Sophia's Hearth Family Center, I was looking for a better understanding of Sophia's Hearth Family Center outside of my own facilitated playgroup experience that had just come to an end when my daughter turned three.

The other major part of what SHFC does is offer courses for parents and educators. Since I was also looking for new ways to embellish upon family traditions and create new experiences that would enrich our family life, taking a summer course seemed like a good marriage. My daughter has a Betsy Lewin book called *So What's It Like to be a Cat?*. "I'm very glad you asked me that," answers the cat being interviewed. So, what's it like to attend a Sophia's Hearth Summer course?

For three weeks this July, Sophia's Hearth offered five courses; two different classes running simultaneously the 1st and 2nd weeks and one class running independently the third.

Students come from both the US and abroad for the SHFC trainings where they learn about early childhood education from the unique Sophia's Hearth perspective that integrates insights from the works of Rudolf Steiner, from Hungarian pediatrician Emmi Pikler, and from the work of Magda Gerber's Resources for Infant Educators. No one else integrates these unique perspectives and offers playgroups and coursework. SHFC really does offer something quite different and students are very excited about learning here. Many summer students were teachers, many in Waldorf or Waldorf-inspired programs, some were aspiring teachers, some were board members, and some were simply looking for more information about parenting. Classes lasted from morning until late afternoon. Each day began with the two classes meeting together for an hour, with the balance of the day devoted to the subject matter, complimented by a healthy, delicious lunch and good conversation.

It's always quite something to read a person's book and then meet her (or him). I had read "Nøkken: A Garden for Children" by Helle Heckmann, our course instructor, before taking her class,

but I must say that her photo in the book, which made her appear like a kindly grandmother was nothing like the very direct, Viking who looked unflinchingly in your eyes when asking questions. Our class was full of early childhood educators and Waldorf educated folks, except for me, the one who was soon to learn that these were festivals without funnel-cakes. Helle told me that my job in the class would be to ask questions, which was fine with me. She also set me straight on festivals. A festival may include a special holiday, however, a festival is actually the time leading up to a special celebration as well the days following in order to give both the time to anticipate as well as the time to reflect upon its meaning.

Although I did not realize it at the time, our days together were modeled after days at Nøkken, Helle's famous Copenhagen kindergarten. On our first day, Helle took us to a local cemetery to look for materials for weaving and for flowers with which to make tea. We quietly and obediently followed her into unknown territory and did what we saw her doing. The days that followed were different, but the same. We'd have a little talk about a festival and then go straight to the handwork that complimented it.

Helle's pedagogical perspective on handling festivals with simplicity really is simple. When planning festivals, instead of using a straight-line timeline for planning, which is often the case, she uses a circle. Using a circle not only gives purpose to the task but also gives the opportunity to see cause and effect. For example, when planning events leading up to the celebration of Michaelmas in the fall, you must also consider what the outcome of that festival will have on the opposite side of the circle at Easter. The wreath that you create for the Harvest can be used again at Advent with candles and greenery and again in the springtime with new flowers. In other words, the wheel doesn't need to be reinvented, it just needs to be recycled with purpose.

The beauty of taking a class with early childhood educators as an adult is that you get to experience learning and handwork from the perspective of an adult as well as a child. The adult in you experiences being a part of the planning and the organization, while the child in you enjoys the making, the doing, and the observing with a mix of amusement and amazement. Amidst the focus on the work was a sharing of ideas and questions, humming and laughing. It reminded me of being at home with my children, which I guess is what this whole experience was really about.

As a Japanese Ikebana teacher once told me regarding flower arrangement, "Use all of your materials." In essence, this is what Helle conveyed. With a few good tools at hand, available natural "materials", and a little imagination, simplicity can be at the heart of our celebrations. I didn't have that funnel cake, I didn't have to push a stroller through crowds and I didn't have a piece of the world's largest apple pie this time, but the heightened consciousness of living as well as greater understanding of Sophia's Hearth were certainly worth all of that, and much more. 🍎

The Gift of Observation

Chantal Lamothe

Chantal was a Waldorf class (elementary) teacher for many years before taking up work with the young children. Her professional goal is to work with mothers. Along with her training at Sophia's Hearth Family Center, she is pursuing a master's degree in social work in her native language, French.

"You have to be very patient, " the fox answered. "First you'll sit down a little ways away from me, over there, in the grass. I'll watch you out of the corner of my eye, and you won't say anything. Language is the source of misunderstandings. But day by day, you'll be able to sit a little closer..."

*... One sees clearly only with the heart. Anything essential is invisible to the eyes."*¹

The Little Prince, Antoine St-Exupéry

My research project looks in depth at observation as a tool in the context of a mother-child or parent-child relationship. I began my project with the question: Does the mother's observation abilities affect her connection with her child and, if so, how?

First I felt the need to look at the more theoretical aspects of observation. Then I wanted to experiment with observing as objectively as possible on a regular basis. Through that, I wanted to refine the use of the tool itself. In fact, I finally enjoyed pushing the process even further: observing myself observing.

Then, I questioned mothers who experimented with observing in the parent-infant program. And I worked with three mother-volunteers who agreed to do a daily observation exercise. Following these experiences, my question changed: Why is observation so important? What is hidden behind this process?

I will conclude with my reflections and discoveries about the process of observing and its importance, not only in the mother-child connection, but also about the insights that this tool can give us.

The theory

From the theoretical concepts I studied, I found that there are many ways to observe. In our context, mothers observing their children, three functions are relevant:

- The descriptive function: "we observe to describe a phenomenon". In this context, the phenomenon will mostly be the child's development.
- The formative function: "we observe to retroact" since observation can be used to adjust one's intervention toward a child.
- The evaluative function: "we observe to evaluate". Even if it is not the first goal, observing one's child with other children gives us the chance to evaluate or compare some aspects of personality.

Several more points seemed important to consider in the context of parents observing their children. First I wanted to consider *inference*, or what conclusions the observer deduces from what he sees. Secondly, I wanted to look at the *situation* as a significant part of observation. A situation can be natural or created, manipulated or free. Finally, it was worth noting how we choose to observe, and why. Postic and Ketele conclude this way:

"There are many possible ways to observe. The analysis of the research process, the many possible functions of observation, the many possible biases

linked to observation, the very diverse ways to observe, all that must prevent us from the preconceived idea that there would be a "good" way to observe. There is not right or wrong way: there are only more or less adequate ways according to different situations." (Free translation.)²

These theoretical ideas helped me shape my thoughts about observation.

Some answers

I found many answers by practicing my own daily observation. At first I wanted to observe people around me, particularly children. But Life took me on an unexpected path. My very sick mother was hospitalized while I was completing my school year and my practical training, and her severe condition brought me to her side every day. I chose her to be the subject of my daily observation.

Day after day I visited my mother and took care of her, washing her, dressing her, dressing her hair, helping her to the bathroom. And apart from that, I simply sat with her as she was half asleep, half awake.

Confronted with the general intensity of my life, I soon realized that each time I arrived at the hospital, I had to become centered, calm and peaceful. I would adjust my voice tone, the speed of my movements and my breathing. Even if I was in the hurry of the school year's end, whenever I entered her room I had to slow to another rhythm, her rhythm.

As her sleeping periods got longer, I had more time to observe her. One thought was always present: my mother is going to die. I felt it deeply in me. I lived many emotions because I had not seen this coming. It was so sudden and brutal. I decided to observe her intensely to discover what in her behavior or attitude made me think she was dying, since no diagnosis had been given. Here are some excerpts from my daily observations.

Day after day, I visit my mother at the Palliative Care Unit. Most of the time, she sleeps or half sleeps, and I am close to her. I generally observe her from the foot of her bed. I surrender to simply be with her. I feel that her life is leaving her physical body. But on what grounds do I conclude that? My observation process begins.

- *Her skin. Her skin no longer has the same color, the same life. Her skin seems thinner, more transparent and pale.*
- *Her breath. Her breath is more superficial and less regular. Sometimes it looks as if she is not breathing at all. Then suddenly, it seems a little better. Breathing in and out is clearly not easy.*
- *Her eyes. Her eyes are probably the most noticeable sign. The color of her eyes has changed. The white part is yellowish, and they are more fixed, less mobile. When she looks at something, her eyes are more rigid. Instead of moving her eyes, she turns her whole head, or even her whole body. When she sleeps, her eyes are not completely closed.*
- *Her body. She has lost a lot of weight and is now much thinner. Her entire skull is more apparent.*
- *Her movements. It is surprising to see how her movements are slow and carefully calculated. Each step, each movement is planned. The sequence of moves has to be decided and deliberate.*
- *Her bearing. My mother is getting shorter day after day. Is it really what is happening? I observe that when she is standing, her head goes down, as if it is too heavy for her to keep it straight. (Just as when a child is sad or moody. This posture makes her look so melancholic.) Her shoulders are rounded. When I wash her back, I can see this new curve in her shoulders.*

- *Her balance. It is fragile. She requires a lot of assistance when moving. We must watch her carefully and be on the alert for possible imbalance*

My observations give me the opportunity to be much closer to her, to see and understand these changes. The more I observe her, the more I am profoundly with her. A new communication appears: I need less language and less explanation. When I put together all the elements of my observation, I realize that her body is moving in the opposite direction from a developing baby: her body is contracting and returning to a fetal position. This image of a birth into another world becomes clear and beautiful. I feel it is a moment of deep truth. I am clear that she will be leaving soon for elsewhere.

This experience with my mother not only brought closure, but it also gave me clarity. I was able to describe “how” to observe: be calm and centered inside in order to be fully available, and then observe what is there. It also answered the “why”: to let her reveal herself to me, slowly, with simplicity.

The mothers and their children

I wanted to use this observation process in an experiment with some mothers. Three mothers accepted my invitation to observe their children on a regular daily basis for three weeks. The children were three boys: Mathis, 18 months, Émile; 14 months and Dorick, also 14 months. At first, they all had the same questions I had: What should we observe, in which way and why?

I purposely chose not to impose a precise frame, because I wanted to discover the answers with them. We decided together to leave the observation free for the first week. The only rule was to observe for five minutes each day and to write down the results. Here are some of the elements that appeared most important:

- **The questioning of the mothers: what, how and why do I observe?** Depending on the reason I observe, I will not observe in the same way.
- **The inference issue.**

Frequently the mothers would interpret their children’s behaviors. When I asked them how they had come to this or that conclusion, they were surprised to notice that they were indeed inferring, without even noticing it.

- **The mothers became aware of the acuteness of their observation.** “I now specifically observe my child apart from the specified daily five minutes; I am generally more watchful.”

Even if it seemed difficult for the mothers to do the exercise regularly, each realized that she was more and more aware of the moments when she was observing her child. After the three weeks, they all had enjoyed the experience and were happy to discover characteristics of their child that they had not noticed before.

More mothers

To deepen the scope of my question, I put together the comments from ten mothers concerning their observation experiences at Sophia’s Family Center. I was surprised to see how much they deeply benefited from their observation time during the parent-infant program. Their comments reminded me of the theoretical answers that Magda Gerber and Emmi Pikler give about the “How” and “Why” to observe. [Editor’s note: Emmi Pikler was a Hungarian pediatrician who founded the Pikler Institute in Budapest in the 1940’s; Magda Gerber as her colleague who brought their insights to California through RIE™.]

How?

“Observation is a state of quiet and focused attention that cannot occur when the mind is in motion. The less you do, the more you observe... To observe means to be open and

detached so that you can see the situation more clearly... As you observe your baby, relax and focus on what you see and hear. Look at your child. Look at her face, her arms, her legs. What is her body language saying? See what she responds to. See what holds her interest. See what bothers her. The process becomes easier as your child grows because she gives clearer signals and you get better at reading them.”³

Why?

“As you carefully observe your newborn, you will discover her unique personality. You will see your real child as she is rather than the “imaginary child” of your own creation. You observe her so that in time, you will understand her likes and dislikes, moods and abilities. And understanding these things will help you to better care for her, communicate with her, and improve your relationship.”⁴

Dr. Pikler writes in *Peaceful Babies-Contented Mothers*: “What is essential is to observe. Get to know your child. If you really recognize what your child needs, if you feel what is causing him grief, feel what she needs, then you will respond in the right way. You will guide and bring up your child well.”⁵

“Human beings tend to project their own feelings upon other people, including their children. For instance, if a parent is hungry, he may project or assume that his crying child is also hungry. This is where observation is important. Instead of projecting or assuming, why not observe your child for the answer? Over time you will understand her needs.”⁶

Conclusion

If I come back to my original question “Does the mother’s observation abilities affect her connection with her child and if so how?”, the answer now seems obvious. By observing her child, a mother learns to answer to the needs of her child in a profound way. The connection is based on mutual confidence. All the mothers that answered the questionnaire said it in their own words.

But this answer is not enough. The observation process is more than a way to know how to respond to someone’s needs, a child’s for example. I think there is something more fundamental. Behind this process is hidden the question: Who are you? And asking this question means understanding and accepting that this being is truly different and unique. It means to make ourselves fully available for this encounter, so that a young child has the chance to become who she is, and that we stay who we are. Observation brings us to the most authentic meeting, the true meeting described by Saint-Exupéry: “One sees clearly only with the heart. Anything essential is invisible to the eyes.”⁷ 🐼

NOTES

- ¹ Saint-Exupéry, Antoine, *The Little Prince*, translated by, R. Howard, Florida, A Harvest Book Harcourt, Inc. (1ère édition 1943), 2000, p.60–63
- ² Postic, Marcel et Jean-Marie De Ketele, *Observer les situations éducatives*, pédagogie d’aujourd’hui, 1ère édition, Paris :Presses universitaires de France, c1988, p. 77
- ³ Gerber, Magda and Allison, *Your Self-Confident Baby*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1ère édition, 605 Third Avenue, New York, N.Y., 1998, p.26
- ⁴ Ibid, p.26
- ⁵ Ibid, p.26
- ⁶ Ibid, p.84
- ⁷ Saint-Exupéry, p. 63

The Dads' Corner: Dust Motes and Patience

Bruce Barlow

*To see a world in a grain of sand
And Heaven in a Wild Flower.
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.*

"Auguries of Innocence" – William Blake

I can still see Evan, age 2 or so, crouching and bending over on the sidewalk, intently examining a dust mote. He would be rapt for a half hour, never touching it, but giving it his full attention and being without distraction.

I can also remember his mother, Victoria, later complaining of the crushing boredom, watching this child-made-of-stone as he stared at seemingly nothing. But she let him take all the time he wanted with that dust mote. They were on a walk around the block, and in between the times she had to carry him ("Mommy! Uppy! Uppy!" with outstretched arms), he spent much of his time with nose practically to the sidewalk, examining every mote, clod of dirt, petrified bubble gum, and bug in his path. She was a saint, with time, inclination, and patience, realizing that these examinations were incredibly important to him, no matter how boring to her. She learned to bring handwork.

Fast forward to almost fourteen years later. I have just finished teaching a photography workshop to adults, who professed passion for the medium. Curiously, though, three days passed, and only one student asked a question. No one worked very hard at making photographs, and everyone believed that every image captured without sweat and effort was comparable to Ansel Adams. My job was to teach. When I tried, I was actually rebuffed with a snarl. The first night, I told them that they should be aggressive learners—pestering the instructors with questions and problems to solve. Nothing. They were deadened. In the critiques we did of pictures they brought, the deadness was evident in their work. I was frustrated and angry with them. Good photographers are alive in a deep sense, with a curiosity about their world and, quite simply, about how things look when photographed. Their subjects are their dust motes. These students weren't alive in that sense.

I came home from that workshop to be greeted by a tall young man of almost 16. He is an accomplished jazz cellist, experienced SCUBA diver, and ferocious paintball competitor. He has clocked himself at 85 mph skiing down a double-black-diamond slope at Breckenridge, played varsity tennis during his freshman year, and he runs varsity cross-country now in his second year. He is a Photoshop wizard, computer genius, pretty decent photographer, and the best video editor I've ever worked with. He is a strong student, a whimsical, funny, touching writer, whose frustration at

the moment is that he answers the third-order question before the teacher has asked it, if she gets to it at all. He is a gentle, caring, kind, loving, warm human being. I'm not even nervous about his learning to drive.

He is not average. My workshop students are.

How much of this wonderful young man has come from those tedious hours while he studied dust motes uninterrupted? I grant that some came from eleven years of Waldorf education (a shameless plug and recommendation for those who yet need convincing). But I also deeply believe that Victoria gave him opportunities to learn, and let him learn what he needed at his own pace in his own way, and those early experiences have resulted in a versatile, inquisitive, curious young man.

At lunch today, sitting on a park bench with Victoria, trying to eat a sandwich that wanted to spill in my lap instead, I watched a young mother with a two-year-old boy get out of a car and come for some playtime in the park. He had a balloon, and wanted to spend some time banging it against himself instead of walking into the park. Mom, finally, in her impatience, picked him up and carried him into the park. It occurred to me that she was training him to be average.

Have patience. Learn patience. There are many dust motes in the universe. 🌱

Catching a Glimmer on the Path of Parenting

Beth Dunn-Fox

Beth is an eurythmist working with Eurythmy Spring Valley, teaching in the eurythmy school there, and serving organizations with her development skills, alongside caring for her daughter Sophia.

It is said that the gods don't allow us to know what we are truly taking on when becoming parents. While we do get an inkling of the joys ahead, who could know that we would have to learn to walk through fire or that we will gaze directly into the fabric of existence through the eyes of our children? There is no greater mirror, stunning view into life or more persistently challenging riddle, than our children. This is a look at our slow awakening to this path of development.

Our life took shape as a family on December 3rd, 2000, when my husband, Leo, held our daughter, Sophia, in his arms for the first time. Jet lagged, excited and completely out of his element, Leo had joined others in the conference room at the Nanjing Grand Hotel to be united with our daughter. He was prepared that this could be a very difficult transition for Sophia and was ready for anything. Surprisingly, when the moment arrived, it was as though nothing was more natural than being together. Without a backward glance they proceeded to happily travel through China for two weeks gathering all the papers needed to return to New York.

Long before that trip, on October 2nd, we had received the FedEx envelope with Sophia's picture, our first glimpse of life ahead. Sitting on a park bench, we opened the envelope and saw... the Buddha. Staring back at us was not a diminutive little baby girl, but a formidable human being with a visible well of strength filling her gaze, and eyes that held an open question. It was both thrilling and awakening to look at her picture.

When Leo and Sophia arrived at JFK airport on December 14th, we each had to step through a new threshold.

Imagine encountering the kinds of changes Sophia had to meet in a very short span of time: moving from China to America, from an institution to a home, and from a multitude of children and caregivers to a family of three. Every one of her senses was encountering a revolution, much like a second birth, as were ours.

And so life began...

Leo and I felt that the companion to our transition into the world of family was... the earth... literally, the ground. As adults we tend to lose touch with this great equalizer, but Sophia drew us down onto the floor or into the grass to rediscover this world where every rock, leaf or bug became an entire afternoon's journey.

In this timeless world colors emerge in human relationships that are allowed the time to ripen. Our children begin to tell us their story, just as we tell them ours. We all learn to read the soul gestures that will mold our "family culture."

Slowly, out of the myriad of qualities, we saw Sophia's "voice" develop. Taking shape in our daughter was a soul of undaunted courage, a highly capable force of will, a wonderful sense of delight and joy, and a deep well of natural reserve. Over time we observed that each capacity was evolving into both a strength and a weakness and our true parenting questions began to emerge.

Fortunately, there is no way to miss our lessons as parents since they come sprinkled throughout each day. Through experiencing the daily "passages" that were difficult for Sophia, the question emerged, "How does one help a child of such strength and determination find balance without squashing them?"

The companion to that question is, "Can we see our children as exquisitely whole, while at the same time holding an awareness of their strengths and weaknesses?" And, following that, "How do I discern when my child is having a "normal" developmental difficulty or, rather, needs strengthening through a therapeutic modality to take the next step?"

Taking up these questions reminds me of a story I heard the other day from a wonderful kindergarten teacher. She had worked years ago in a facility for children with special needs. At the time, a child came there every day who was severely autistic. Each morning he would arrive in the most beautiful outfits, something akin to what you would wear to Grandma's on Sunday. At the end of each day his clothes would be stained, covered in food, and often torn. The caregivers couldn't understand why the mother would dress the child this way knowing what the result would be.

When asked why, she responded, "I have a beautiful son, and I couldn't love him more than I do, even though I work daily with his difficulties. I dress him this way because he is magnificent and I can do no less." Her comment changed my friend's life and approach.

That story is a picture of what I am trying to learn in life as a parent. The greatest challenge I find is that as we get to know our children and the inner places where they encounter difficulties, it is very easy to slip into picturing their challenges as defects. Seeing the magnificence of each person, most especially my daughter, while facing with clear eyes our individual and associative difficulties, has become my work.

I have discovered a few signposts that have been invaluable on this map-less journey:

- The first has been learning more about child development. Without gaining some foothold into the developmental tasks and milestones for each age, I wouldn't have caught the moments when Sophia needed strengthening therapeutically. It also gave me greater patience and understanding for Sophia's pacing and process.
- It was through this inquiry into how children grow that I came to the second great helper in my life, finding new approaches for observing Sophia. A very inspiring look at the path of inner work for a parent can be found in the two books by Henning Köhler, a teacher of children with special needs in Wolfschlugen, Germany. The first is, *Working with Anxious, Nervous and Depressed Children—A Spiritual Perspective to Guide Parents*. The second book is called, *Difficult Children—there is no such thing*. Both books speak to the role of observation in healthfully accompanying our children through their unique process of development. (Don't be put off by the titles, the insights he brings are true for every parent.)
- My third signpost has been learning the art of collaboration as a parent. This past year Sophia went to her one and only year of kindergarten. It was through this experience that I realized how much can take place for the child if parents, teachers, doctors and therapists develop a working circle. Through working with all of Sophia's caregivers, some important passages were able to be navigated, that strengthened her potential in the future. I have to say that this past year changed my view of kindergarten teachers entirely. They are without question, warriors. At one of the most dynamic moments in a child's development, stepping into life through the doorway of school, they hold up a daily light for the child to follow.

Sophia will always remember the wonderful way that her teacher ended each day. Holding both hands, Mrs. Barton would help the child to jump upward saying, "Thank you for sharing such a good morning!" And with each child she said goodbye to, she meant it.

So, each day I keep my eyes open to catch the magnificence of my daughter and get ready to engage in the next lesson that lies just around the corner. Some days I am a quicker study than others... But, isn't it the greatest gift to have the privilege of being a "work in process" parent? 🍎