
Focus—Inviting Children Back into the Fullness of Life

The Healing Power of Nature

~ Vicki Kingsbury

All of nature begins to whisper its secrets to us through its sounds.

*Sounds that were previously incomprehensible to our soul
now become the meaningful language of nature.*

—Rudolf Steiner

Research has shown that the pandemic reduced the amount of time preschoolers spent with peers and time outdoors. “COVID-19 not only suspended normal childhood activities such as attending school, interacting with extended family and friends, playing outdoors, and exploring nature but also disrupted the consequent socio-emotional benefits that accrue from children’s engagement in these experiences” (Levickis, et al., 2022). As a result, there has been an increase in anxiety and dysregulation in the children and their caregivers. In my work as the lead teacher in Wonder Garden, a preschool class at Prairie Hill Waldorf School in Pewaukee, Wisconsin, I am observing more separation anxiety, more children needing sensory input (proprioceptive, oral, vestibular, etc.), and more children experiencing difficulties with transitions. Everyone has been traumatized to some degree by the pandemic. As a result, we early childhood teachers have been struggling to meet the growing needs of the children in our care.

As a response to the pandemic, and the longing to remain in person rather than virtual, Prairie Hill Waldorf School built outdoor classrooms. After 20 years of teaching in Waldorf early childhood programs, I observed how being outdoors in nature during the majority of the day helped reduce anxiety in the children and ultimately their caregivers. This extended experience of nature play and the teacher’s intentional use of language—consistent, positively-framed phrases, which create shared agreements as well as healthy boundaries and encourage children to connect with each other and play with minimal

intervention from adults—has helped to reduce anxiety and dysregulation in the preschool children in Wonder Garden.

There are hundreds of articles for parents/caregivers and teachers on how to cope with preschool anxiety, but practically no strategies for actually reducing it. So my goal has been to identify and compile some strategies, resources, and practices that are being used to reduce anxiety and dysregulation in preschoolers in my class, in hopes that it will help others.

The Challenges: Observations and Examples of Anxiety and Dysregulation

As part of my capstone project at Great Lakes Waldorf Institute, I surveyed and talked with a number of colleagues to learn what they are seeing with the children. A higher incidence of anxiety was reported, including an increase in support needed for transitions, the number of staff needed, and children needing more assistance working socially with one another. The study commissioned by the International Association of Steiner Waldorf Early Childhood Education (IASWECE), reported similar results in the book *Covid-19 Pandemic*. Increased general anxiety and vulnerability in Steiner kindergarten children were reported, along with speech and movement delays (Boland, 2023, p. 99). These findings are widely reported across the education sector and numerous non-Steiner studies are underway.

There have been many more incidents of separation anxiety since the pandemic, including more children reluctant to attend, arriving late, and unable to

independently transition. Children protest as they are handed over to us teachers to hold. Pandemic closeness to parents has made it more difficult to separate from them.

Our Wonder Garden class is outside about 75% of our day. Being outdoors seems to provide wider opportunities for a child who is looking for a safe and soothing place while experiencing anxiety. In addition to just sitting with a teacher on a swinging bench, children typically seek solace in the hammock, the spider swing, or the fort—all places where they seem to feel safe enough to express their feelings and emotions. And then when they're ready, teachers can help them to down-regulate. What is that?

Molly Maloney, a therapist, articulated the concept of down-regulation beautifully in my survey: "Great news! Our nervous systems are actually designed to respond to threats – and go into the fight or flight (sympathetic) nervous system. That's what's so amazing about the nervous system... it knows how to be activated AND it knows how to come down. The problem is that we live in a society that has forgotten and quite frankly doesn't leave space to down-regulate, so we become stuck in flight or flight and that stuck pattern causes anxiety, panic, and the other ills associated with living outside our 'resiliency zone' as we call it in therapy. To engage in 'rest and digest,' the parasympathetic nervous system needs space, unstructured time, co-regulation, self soothing, deep breaths, etc...to down-regulate. I don't believe we give enough of this to ourselves as mothers and as a result to our preschool aged children. So their little bodies don't learn how to down-regulate."

"Rest and digest" can be offered in many different forms, especially outside where there is plenty of space for children to find what they need; including playing in the sand, lying in the hammock, sitting by the fire, swinging, and climbing on or hiding in our stick fort. And we provide plenty of unstructured playtime in our daily rhythm for them to down-regulate without rushing them. Sometimes just a hug or time in our laps or by our sides (e.g., sweeping or doing a chore) can help them co-regulate, as long as we adults are feeling self-regulated.

The Gifts: Benefits of Being Outdoors

The benefits of being outside are well documented and widely known. These include reduction in stress and anxiety, improved motor development from active physical play, exposure to fresh air and sunshine, healthy eye development, supported risk-taking, improved cognition/executive functioning skills, more time and space to "be," improved emotional regulation and co-regulation, expanded sensory opportunities, growing appreciation for the land and environment, and taking time for caretaking the





Climbing. Photo courtesy of Vicki Kingsbury.

environment and its resources (Beaven, et al., 2023, p. 12).

In our school, we have always promoted daily, extended contact with the natural world. The seasons, discoveries, and transformations in nature are a healing balm to the young child. Children are able to form bonds with the earth, which later transform into stewardship (Cassidy et al., 2023, p. 6).

When children are outside, and in the elements, able to move, run, climb, shout, roll down hills, build sandcastles, etc, they are more easily engaged in their work, which is play. There is no substitute! And there is simply nothing more universal, more necessary, more unifying, than play (Hobson, 2027, p. 3). There are so many curative benefits, but one of the most impactful ones that I've observed is that it organically leads the children to be more fully in their bodies. And as a result of being fully in their bodies, they are fully present. And when a child (or anyone for that matter) is "present" they are not worrying about what comes next, or where they are, or where their parents/caregivers are, and so on. Why is this important? When children are fully present, they don't feel anxious. Rudolf Steiner captures the essence of this phenomena and the healthy result so exquisitely by stating: "If a child has been able in his play to give up his whole loving being to the world around him, he will be able, in the serious tasks of later life, to devote himself with confidence and power to the service of the world" (Steiner, 1988, p. 96).

Medical experts and the American Medical Association state that nature play boosts cognitive, social, and emotional skills, and concludes that children will be smarter, better able to get along with others, healthier, and happier when they have regular opportunities for free and unstructured play in the out-of-doors (Louv, 2005).

Therapist Molly Maloney points out that gross motor activities can support full nervous system integration and regulation. She explains, "What we forget is that somatically speaking, our nervous system wants to down-regulate and it knows how to down-regulate if left to its own inner wisdom. However for the nervous system's own inner wisdom to take over, it needs space, quiet, stillness—the nervous system cannot down-regulate in front of a TV, on a tablet or phone—the power of nature with children is that if we can create an environment that is soothing for them—the big blue sky—the inner wisdom of their nervous system can have space to remember its programming. However, if a young nervous system does not have this frequent opportunity, then it will unfortunately not learn how to down-regulate because it was never given the chance and that is where heightened levels of anxiety can carry on at burdening levels into childhood and beyond."

Amber Chavez, an early childhood educator and expert in trauma-informed care, shared her insights about being outdoors: “Overall, the space and sensory environment of outdoors is very helpful. The sky overhead, birds singing, wind blowing, these can all be very calming. What I like best about the outdoors is the freedom for big movement and big noises! There is a huge link between body systems and emotions—being able to get these body sensations out through movement and expression can reduce anxiety.” Places to build and experience controlled risk (such as logs), walking in nature, doing meaningful work, opportunities for heavy work (e.g., carrying logs to fire, moving wood chips) and digging in the sand pit provide lots of good sensory input and opportunities for creativity. Often by just observing the children, we can see what they need. Being outside can provide something truly therapeutic and healing.

The Interventions: How Language Can Reduce Anxiety

Another research question for this project was: “How does language use decrease anxiety and dysregulation in preschoolers and their caregivers?” Spending two snowy days with kindergarten teacher Monica Zamzow at Tamarack Waldorf School in Milwaukee allowed her to share her ability to protect the forces of childhood by refraining as much as possible from verbal instructions.

Rudolf Steiner discusses protection for the forces of childhood in *A Modern Art of Education*: “Although it is highly necessary that each person should be fully awake in later life, the child must be allowed to remain as long as possible in the peaceful, dreamlike condition of pictorial imagination in which his early years of life are passed” (Steiner, 2001). His wisdom allows for a child to play deeply, which is the child’s work, and in doing so, a child can be at one with their environment, not thinking about anything else other than what’s before them. A child can then become “present” in their body and in their world. One of our goals as Early Childhood teachers is to strive to keep the children present so they are not thinking or asking about what is next, which is what I’ve observed in many of the children who have anxiety. When they begin asking questions about what is next, my typical reply is to pause, look at them and say: “I wonder...” Most of the time, this is just what the child needs to hear. The pause, and the connection when I look at them, is important so they know that they are being heard

and seen. I try not to answer their question directly, as I know it will just bring on more questions, and prevent them from engaging in their work and play.

When observing Miss Monica on those two days, I did not hear the children ask a lot of questions. Instead I observed that this teacher employed four things that could in fact keep children in the peaceful, dreamlike condition of pictorial imagination that Steiner is referring to.

1. The teacher implemented a rich rhythm of the day, where the children were carried by the in-breaths and out-breaths and knew what to expect.
2. The teacher used gestures (non-verbal cues) as a model for the children’s imitation.
3. The teacher repeated specific phrases as a reminder of the expectations or shared agreements.
4. The teacher sang or played the lyre during transitions.

Over the years, I’ve curated a list of positively-framed Wonder Garden Phrases that we teachers use consistently as a common language base. These phrases help us cultivate healthy boundaries as well as encourage the children to connect with each other and play without a lot of interventions from adults. By practicing these phrases, we are all working out of a common language base to support children in connecting with their peers and building their social skills. These phrases model the positive action the situation calls for. Here are some examples:

- ☞ We use our hands for doing good work. (versus hitting, pinching, etc)
- ☞ Please use your inside voice. (when someone is yelling inside)
- ☞ Please use your walking feet. (when someone is running inside)
- ☞ We take good care of our things. (when they are being too rough with something)
- ☞ Watch out below! (to ensure the coast is clear before swinging, or moving something big)
- ☞ May I have a turn please? (when someone wants something that someone else has)
- ☞ Sure, when I’m done. (when someone is asked if they can have a turn next)

We start the year off by speaking these phrases. For example, if a child is arguing with another because s/he wants to get on the swing, we stand behind the child wanting to have a turn and suggest: “May I have a

turn please?” and magically the child mirrors not only our words, but the tone we use. As the child repeats what the teacher says, this reinforces the words and the gestures that we expect. Before you know it, the children are using these phrases and helping their friends use them as well because it becomes part of their habit life. It’s transformational for the children. It frees the teachers from speaking and helps our children self-regulate and “discipline” themselves.

Equally as effective has been to limit the amount of speaking that I do as a teacher. Instead, I strive to use nonverbal communication and sing as an alternative to speaking. There is a song for every transition in our day which provides an imagination rather than instruction. For example, when we have a fire drill, instead of providing verbal instructions, the children hear the song, “Come little bluebirds, I know you are there, come little bluebirds, come gather ’round here.” The children drop what they’re doing and join the teacher.

The absence of language—silence—is such a valuable tool for us as teachers, as it creates a calm environment which can help young children engage more deeply in their work. Silence also provides a soothing and peaceful atmosphere that supports children’s self-regulation and emotional well-being. We actually weave a few periods of silence into our daily rhythm, including “quiet chewing” for about 15 minutes at the lunch table, and when we do artistic activities, such as wet-on-wet painting, coloring, and wet-felting. I strive to speak only when necessary. Then when I do speak, it is more impactful.

Wonder Garden Strategies, Resources and Practices

The goal of this project was to identify and compile practical strategies, resources, and practices to help reduce anxiety and dysregulation in preschoolers to share with other early childhood teachers and their caregivers. In his book *Covid-19 Pandemic*, Dr Neil Boland recommends that a “detailed examination of the incidence of anxiety and vulnerability in Steiner kindergarten children is called for, including pathways to ameliorate this which have proven successful in practice” (Boland, p. 99).

These strategies have proven successful in practice in Wonder Garden:

1. Dressing for the weather and remaining outside as long and as much as possible.

2. Using positively-framed phrases to cultivate healthy boundaries and encourage the children to connect with each other and play without a lot of interventions from adults.
3. Paying attention to your body, and using a mindfulness practice if you get dysregulated. One of my favorites is *I’m a rock in a river*. Just pretend you’re a rock in the middle of a river, picturing yourself holding steady and let the water of emotion flow around you and over you. Feel yourself refreshed by the sounds of the water flowing, birds in trees, feel the warmth of the sun shining... Take a deep breath. Then another. If you can, close your eyes for a moment. You are a rock in a river. Now you can be more present for the children!
4. Observing each child without judgment and asking yourself: What is this child needing right now? Then offering something of support.
5. Partnering with the parents/caregivers to mutually share observations of their child’s gifts, challenges, and interventions that have been helpful.
6. Working with colleagues to support one another by sharing our experiences with the children and then sharing help and suggestions. (This is on our agenda in every department meeting.)
7. Inviting guest speakers and holding workshops on topics like trauma-informed caregiving, de-escalation strategies, or other workshops that offer tools to help with regulation of teachers and children.
8. Creating a Waving Window outside for the children to use if they want to run over and wave goodbye to their caregivers after drop-off time to help with separation anxiety.
9. Blowing kisses and well-wishes up into the sky to caregivers, and any friends who are absent from school that day. (This has helped with separation anxiety.)
10. Communicating the program’s tenets, procedures, and policies which communicates our boundaries with warmth and clarity in a written handbook.
11. Working with a verse (one that resonates with you) in all Department Meetings, Conferences with Caregivers, and Parent-Guardian Meetings.
12. Sharing articles with caregivers on the benefits of nature, and less talking, to help support keeping the children present. (We now have a database full of the best ones that we can access by topic.)



13. Singing during transitions, instead of providing instructions. Look for opportunities to sing or play the lyre during the times in the day when you observe children are needing to down-regulate.
14. Outdoor gems: going on meadow walks, rolling down the hill for sensory input, playing in unstructured places, visiting the “gnome home” and leaving gifts (e.g., shells) for the elementals, doing purposeful work like carrying logs, pushing wheelbarrows full of wood chips & raking them, rich sensory experiences like playing in the sand and mud kitchen.
15. Building obstacle courses with stumps, planks, mini-trampoline, tunnel, balance beam, etc.
16. Telling a pedagogical story about a magic gold ball at the beginning of the school year, and then using an actual brass ball whenever friends need to find the warmth in their heart and bring it into their hands. Their hands are then magically transformed from hurtful hands to helpful hands when they hold the magic gold—just like in the story! (An image of self-regulation)

Summary

There is enough evidence to suggest that the pandemic did indeed increase anxiety and dysregulation in preschool children and their caregivers; but even if the data is not yet conclusive, the fact remains that anything that we can do to help preschool children down-regulate will help support them therapeutically.

There’s so much Waldorf early childhood education can offer educators to help children and their caregivers reduce anxiety and dysregulation. This consideration has focused on *being outside* and *leveraging the power of language*. Being outside in nature counters the higher level of anxiety and collective trauma. There are fewer rules and interventions, and more opportunities for climbing, rolling, jumping, running, balancing, splashing, playing and working. And one of the most powerful and transformative practices that I have learned as a Waldorf teacher has been to reframe words and phrases so they are filled with love and positivity. ♦

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