
Reimagining the Practical in Caregiver-and-Child Work

~ Anjum Mir

"I am the rest between two notes which are somehow always in discord."

— Rainer Maria Rilke

At a time when life is tangled and full, our birth-to-three offerings can be the very pause that our families need during their busy days. We can shape simple spaces for children, their parents, and those who care for them—spaces clear of the clutter that gets in the way of truly seeing the young child and facilitating open-hearted observation.

We need only notice the hands of a toddler to know how to hold space that encourages development. Their hands dance—not the perfunctory movement of a practiced routine, nor the deliberately free dance of a grown adult, but moving instinctively, with a purpose that the child discovers only as it unfolds. I can remember many such dances in the classroom, in the play yard, in the woods, on the shores of the Pacific, where little ones with curling, flying fingers gathered blocks and balls, leaves and dirt, and sand and water. Filling bowls, baskets, and buckets to carry and then dump out only to start again. So much fledgling play is filling and emptying. Out of natural wisdom, infants and toddlers know that to have sustained activity and growth, they must start a task repeatedly. They have to empty the vessel to keep filling it. It is through observing the children that we can know best how to nurture them and how to shape space for their self-teaching nature.

For adults, emptying is often an act of letting go. To make true space for children in our birth-to-three programs, we need to release the trickled-down expectations of kindergarten and nursery and rebuild our programs, from the ground up, upon the unique needs of this age group. We will have to rethink our offerings and rhythms—letting go of complex snacks, circles, stories, crafts, music, and instead moving forward with a renewed commitment: It is not about the experience that we form for the child but about the space we hold for the child to experience and form themselves. Said differently: we don't form the experience, we hold the space so they can form their own experience.

The value for children under three is not in doing our planned activities but in enabling them to initiate and engage in their own. Knowing this, the activity that matters most is free play time—the rest of the rhythm should be there to support this. This means that a caregiver-and-child class rhythm may consist only of play time, especially when the children are under the age of two. It is hard to let go of the activities that have become a part of the Waldorf early childhood identity, particularly when they appeal to parents and inspire them to enroll. But to meet the children and the families of today, we have to renew our practices and even remove those that are not serving the children, or worse, pushing them into movement and skills for which they are not physically, socially, or emotionally primed.

Of course, the beautiful rhythmic activities that we know and love can continue to have a place in our program when we observe readiness in the child's own doing. Snack comes as an option when children can make their way to it, and progresses as children develop the movement, interest, and focus to participate. Similarly, circles and stories can arise out of the growing relationships in a group, mirroring what the child can already do by way of movement and imitation. Participation should always be self-initiated, and activities should breathe slowly and be simple and short. Attentiveness and will are not developed through length and complexity, but rather through consistent, self-originated, and achieved successes that build a child's initiative, interest, and commitment. Too much too soon only creates developmental stress, and that diminishes healthy will. Through on-going research into this developmental stage and the wisdom of pedagogues like Emmi Pikler, we know with certainty that the doers in birth-to-three environments should be the children, while the rest of us have the gift and responsibility of being observers and stewards of their autonomy during these years.

Physical space matters as well. While infants and toddlers might be small in body, their capacity to take in the environment is vast, even more than that of the older child, because it is unfiltered. Sensory overwhelm can distract from children's instinctive knowledge of what they need and how they need to move for their healthy development. This wisdom can be supported by spaces that have infant- and toddler-focused equipment and play objects that meet the child's development-specific need for free gross- and fine-motor exploration. This need is not supported by spaces furnished with inherited kindergarten furniture and toys meant for children of an entirely different size and developmental stage.

A healthy environment also has ample and inviting space for movement. Too much equipment and too many toys and bodies are restrictive. A child cannot move with freedom in a space that is overfilled with adult bodies that are there to meet an enrollment quota. Choosing class sizes that facilitate healthy movement in the appointed space, while providing children and adults with nourishing social opportunities, can be a part of the care we provide. A developmentally conscious space with the optimal number of participants can be a source of warmth, safety, and comfort, and can enable children to explore and adults to give them space to do so.

In this past fall's Birth-to-Three conference, focused on the importance of self-initiated play, there was ample discourse about play's importance, its developmental progression, ways to encourage it, and ways to bring it to the consciousness of parents and educators. Exploring the work of Emmi Pikler as a pedagogical companion to Steiner's indications, we were further sensitized to the distinctiveness of the birth-to-three child. To continue building our consciousness for this work, we must keep asking important questions that guide us, and recognize that names and details matter and can help shape our work. What do we call our caregiver-and-child settings and those who hold them? Are they classes or playgroups? Are we teachers or holders of space? Are we leaders or facilitators? How do we organize the settings—by age or movement? How do we know what to bring and when? What is our responsibility towards the adults and towards the relationships they have with their children? What do we have to learn or refine in our practice to open spaces that serve the children and adults today?

Sometimes the curated beauty and outward practices of our education get in the way of what is needed. Just as we are learning to peel away the layers of our curriculum to discover the essential kernels of our pedagogy for inclusivity, we have to draw out the essential ethos of our early childhood education so that it is the values and spirit of our teaching and the character and qualities of those who stand before the children, not our traditional practices, that distinguish our Waldorf caregiver-and-child settings from all others. Our work is imbued with something that is rare in the world of education: the recognition that a child is not just a physical, social, and emotional being, but first and foremost a spiritual being. We nurture this through warmth, truth, and beauty in our words and actions, holding the constant and deep awareness that our work is to help children grow into their bodies so that they can use them for spiritual expression.

If we have courage to meet the children and parents who are coming towards us, the caregiver-and-child experience can have new meaning. It can be a small, restful interlude, emptied and full of presence, where the children are doing their work and the parents and caregivers are invited to observe them, respect them, and let their wise nature take its course. It can be a place where children fill and empty their developing vessel over and over again with their own substance, until it is formed enough to receive what the world has to offer. ♦

"If you will stay close to nature, to its simplicity, to the small things hardly noticeable, those things can unexpectedly become great and immeasurable."

— Rainer Maria Rilke

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