
What does “I’m bored” really mean?

~ Ruth Ker

As I write this, my granddaughter, Elanor, is sitting across from me, doing her fork knitting. “It stretches from the front door to the back door,” she tells me. Recently, she proclaimed to her parents, “I don’t want you to tell me what to do. I know what I want to do all by myself.” In my estimation, this six-and-a-half-year-old expression sounds an awful lot like “You’re not the Boss of Me”!

Observing Elanor has given me ample opportunity to confirm the validity of ten years of research with two different first grade readiness research groups, concentrating on the older child in the kindergarten and the age-span between five-and-a-half and seven. This period of life is very challenging for young children, a time when they are engaging with a second birth process, transforming on all levels. Having time to consolidate this vast make-over of the physical, emotional, social, and consciousness realms is a health-giving key which influences the whole rest of the young child’s life. Can we give our children this blessed gift of time?

My granddaughter is currently providing me another opportunity to learn about this transition. Elanor had developed strong capacities, and was due to turn six in December of her first year of school. Her parents contemplated long and hard about whether they would send her to kindergarten or to first grade. Both parents are teachers in public sector schools, and, after much research and pondering, they decided to send Elanor to kindergarten in the local Waldorf school. During this past year, she has gone through the usual body metamorphosis that happens during the birth of the formative forces—the second birth referred to above, also called the birth of the etheric, the birth of the life forces, second dentition, and the change-of-teeth. Elanor has stretched up in height, extended in her limbs, developed an arch in her back and her feet, had her rib cage tilt forward, and lost ample baby fat. The bony part of her body has become more obvious (knuckles, neck, wrists, knee caps, ankles), and she also has lost some of her baby teeth and is welcoming some new shiny adult teeth. And these are only the physical changes!

She’s also adapting to a variety of new friends in her world, learning how to play co-operatively and

developing in her ability to tolerate change, and is burgeoning with imaginative pictures. However, most intriguing are the changes in consciousness that have arisen. Her ability to have recall memory, independent of clues that trigger memory, is strengthening. Planning and causal thinking and a sense of time (if I do this, what will happen next) are more operative.

At the Waldorf school, she has had a glorious year of play and has taken a deep interest in the ample opportunities through circle, story, pretending stories, and conversation with friends and teachers to deepen her literacy skills and develop on all levels. She loves the fairy tales and the stories her Dad tells her. During play, she has made many signs, and many words are accumulating in her vocabulary. None of these acquisitions have come through instructional learning, but rather through imitation. Her parents show her letters when she asks. There is often a long wait in between requests for this information. Generally, she prefers to draw pictures representative of what she’s seeing in her mind’s eye. Recently, as well as playing animals, cooking, house-cleaning, doll dressing, fairies, and dancing, she loves to work in the garden and play school. She has a repertoire of five to eight words that make their way into all kinds of drawings and paintings.

Reflecting back to my time in the classroom, I remember the kindergarten children’s interest when I printed their names on their drawings, paintings and projects. Soon they would find a way to imitate this behavior, taking pleasure in playing at making their own signs, books with random letters, and notes to be delivered to other children’s houses. One sign was used in our classroom for weeks, a child’s version of OPEN. It read “NOPE.”

I’m reminded of an excerpt from Rudolf Steiner in *The Education of the Child*, where he speaks of children playing and making signs. This excerpt has been quoted a lot lately by those who are encouraging early kindergarten literacy training, a practice I do not favor myself. Unfortunately, the quote is not often given in its entirety. Reading the whole of the quote will help us to see that early explicit literacy training in early childhood before the consolidation of the birth of the etheric is not advised by Rudolf Steiner:

“Children who live in such an atmosphere of love and warmth and who have around them really good examples for imitating, are living in the right element. One should therefore strictly guard against anything being done in children’s presence that they must not imitate. One should do nothing of which one would then have to say to the child, ‘You must not do that.’ The strength of the child’s tendency to imitate can be recognized by observing how the child will paint and scribble written signs and letters long before they are understood. Indeed, it is good for the child to paint the letters by imitation first, and only later learn to understand their meaning. For imitation belongs to this period when the physical body is developing; while the meaning speaks to the etheric, and the etheric body should not be worked on till after the change of teeth, when the outer etheric envelope has fallen away. Especially, should all learning of speech in these years be through imitation. It is by hearing that the children will best learn to speak. No rules or artificial instruction of any kind can be of good effect.”

In the kindergarten, our aim is to provide worthy models for imitation, supporting the birth of the etheric, after which it will be time to engage with instructional content in the grades. In terms of literacy, Waldorf kindergartens weave together rich tapestries of oral tradition with stories, games, and circles. These carefully-chosen literary gems respond to the child’s need for repetitive deepening and orality, but also, when told or played out slowly in a child-digestible way, teach syntax, structure, and word order. They respond to the picture imaginations flooding the child’s mind’s eye and awaken a love for language, both much needed capacities for future enjoyment of reading.

The foremost thing to remember is that children between five-and-a-half and seven are still in the participating consciousness stage of life. They are interested in joining in with what those in their environment are doing, rather than preoccupied with what they are saying, so accompanying stories and circles with gestures is compelling for them. The variety of modalities encompassed in the Waldorf early childhood approach to orality and literacy serve the needs of many learning styles, through conversation, puppetry, pretending the story, imitation of the written word, picture imaginations created from oral presentation, movement and singing games, just to name a few. A wide variety of

sensory experiences are offered, among them visual, auditory and tactile explorations.

In the Waldorf early childhood environment, literacy is approached by offering heuristic learning, which means enabling someone to discover or learn something for themselves. This type of learning strengthens children’s belief in their own capacities and builds a strong foundation of knowledge required to later learn the nuances of the written language. Phonological awareness develops through repetition of rhymes, songs, and riddles, where children are encouraged to play with sounds and explore language.

Literacy is intertwined with other experiences, too. Accompanying our speech with three-dimensional presentations (while working with bread dough, for instance), and also drawing, handwork, and painting are compelling for the children. Children can also be given the opportunity to express knowledge, sharing narratives and ideas, during structured and unstructured times of the day. They benefit greatly by having the adults in their lives respond to their ideas by helping them manifest their plans.

We Waldorf early childhood educators can deepen our understanding of what it is like for the older child in the kindergarten by looking for what Freya Jaffke has described as the “crisis of will and imagination.” This is the time when children start to have a plan for what they want to happen that day, rather than entering spontaneously into play upon coming into the early childhood environment. It can be a confusing time for the children, who up to this point have easily united their own will with the play of others, often driven by an outer stimulus. Now, the stimulus is beginning to come from within in the form of picture imaginations and ideas. At this transition, behaviors like hesitating to enter into play, watching from the outside, and expressing boredom can be disconcerting for adults. It’s crucial for children to be given the opportunity to dwell in this state of consciousness in order to reap the benefits of engaging with evolving capacities within themselves.

This is, however, a time also when the older child in the kindergarten needs to be met with a rich, full curriculum. This includes regular experiences of stories deep in meaning, games where the children can build on their ability to practice “the rules of the land,” interesting circles that take up their imaginations, and educators who listen to them and are able to incorporate their wonderings. These engagements can

help the older child in the kindergarten to transition through the birth of the etheric with more grace.

As early childhood educators, we may experience pressure from parents' preferences for their child's individual needs, administrators who need to accommodate local mainstream expectations, and grade school colleagues, who may all want us to be more explicit and instructional. However, the greatest challenge arises when the young child expresses, "I'm bored." This is a statement that can elicit panic from adults. It is often misinterpreted, and then children are in danger of being inundated with all kinds of academic offerings that can take them away from solving the challenge of learning to play in a way that incorporates their newfound consciousness and their ability to plan and strategize. The older children in the kindergarten will often suggest ideas for circle content or play challenges. As mentioned above, listening and trying to incorporate their suggestions is a way to work dynamically with them.

Many children have given me valuable insights into this consciousness shift. Often these children would arrive at the kindergarten gate on particular mornings, after many months of diving into fantasy play, and suddenly did not know what to do. This was often followed by a period of watching from the periphery, and then, after focusing on some compelling game that others were playing, jumping into the midst of the play. I'm thinking in particular about Kelly, a single child from an artistic and expressive family, who told her parents one day on the way to school, "Mom, everything looks different. You look different and Dad too and even Harlequin, the cat, is different. And, Mom, I don't know how to play."

When the children experience such a "crisis of will and imagination" they will often say, "I'm bored." Another way to express this crisis might be: "How do I get people to join me when I plan my play, instead of just spontaneously playing?" Or, "Everything is changing and how do I find my way?" They need time to adapt to a new way of being.

In summary, deeply understanding the changes the older children in the kindergarten are experiencing will help us, as educators, to empathize with their journey through their second birth. We can then draw on the natural impulses of the child to imitate others and explore their environment. It's up to us as adults, whether parents or teachers, to give our children the rich opportunity and grace to explore their world

in a way that draws on what is streaming naturally through, them rather than pre-empting their heuristic learning with conceptual learning too early. This could mean preparing ourselves, as educators, to advocate for the older children in the kindergarten so that they can transition through their second birth without academic coaching before going into first grade.

As I write this, Elanor is over six-and-a-half years old. She just lost her fifth tooth and has grown two more inches so far this summer. Perhaps one of the most exciting and significant parts of the metamorphosis she has gone through is that she has fully engaged with recall memory. This means that she will be able to remember the story in first grade the day after it is told for the first time. She will have the experience of being able to respond accurately to her teacher's memory prompts.

I am often concerned about children who go into first grade before completing the birth of the etheric. For months, they can be living in a confusing state of change, before recall memory and other capacities arrive. I was such a child myself, and remember the impact it had on my own self-confidence and sense of social belonging.

Our children have many challenges to surmount and joyful experiences to have in their sacred journey in the Waldorf grade school. It is my hope that we can continue to help them to make this transition fortified with a healthy readiness. ♦

References

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