

Inspiring Imitation: Real Activity with Real People in Real Time

— Nancy Blanning

Young children learn through imitation. This was one of the first insights shared by Rudolf Steiner in his 1907 lecture—“Education of the Child in the Light of Spiritual Science”—where he gave the outline for what would develop into Waldorf education more than a decade later. If we have been astonished by the accuracy, beauty, and charm of how young children imitate back to us what they have experienced through their senses, we may now be perplexed, disappointed, and dismayed that children are outwardly imitating

less and less. To “teach” young children through imitation and example is a foundational tenet of our pedagogy. What is going on?

Along with noting the powerful influence of stress, rushed lives, and technology and media in our modern age, we may ask what models for imitation are present in the child’s environment today. We know that for young children to achieve uprightness and walking, speaking, and the beginnings of thinking, there must be a live human being in the child’s environment who



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demonstrates, who models these human capacities. An active, in-the-flesh human being as model is essential. Children begin their human unfolding by imitating other human beings. They imitate what they see and hear, how others move, how human models make their way through life.

What do children see now? Not much. In fact, one could be so bold as to say ADULTS ARE BORING. Adults today seldom offer children imitative pathways to help them develop as confident, physically competent individuals who can stand securely in the world.

The new WECAN publication “Speech Development in the Digital Age” presents a compelling explanation that acquiring speech and thinking—and all that grows from them on a developmental pyramid, including academic skills—depend first on full-body movement. Young children need full freedom for self-initiated movement, without adult interruption or intrusion, in infancy and toddlerhood, as the Pikler birth-to-three wisdom articulates so clearly. From then on, children need to see and hear adults actively moving in purposeful ways to serve our human needs,

the needs of our environment, and the needs of dear Mother Earth. *They need to see real activity by real human beings in real time.* If they see nothing that awakens their birth-given imitative capacities, they will have nothing to imitate.

Children do, however, still need to move. When they are offered nothing interesting around them to imitatively awaken their movement, they will begin to “discharge” in erratic, dysregulated ways. Erratic, dysregulated, erupting, and exploding behaviors are signs of distress, calling to us to offer more real, big-enough-to-be-seen, purposeful movement.

Outdoor-oriented programs have obvious advantages in this regard. Lifting and carrying heavy things, digging, and raking are easier to provide in an outdoor setting. All children are delighted by these activities, especially if there is a purposeful intention in gardening, building a fire, and so on. Urban children need these activities and movements as well. Urban educators need to be resourceful, to envisioning how to create similar opportunities in city schools. And even outdoor program children need chances to clean and care for an indoor environment. How can we wash play cloths and towels big enough to be wrung out and hung out to dry, iron items big enough to take some effort, mop the floor with a heavy mop, and polish a silver teapot that is really used every day, not just as a showpiece or to provide busy work?

Children are looking to adults to provide purposeful activity that they can imitate. Having real work and movement to imitate in the larger environment stimulates and opens the door for imitation in circle time and play. That is the goal we are striving toward for the children’s sake. Joep Eikenboom, author of the book *Foundations of the Extra Lesson*, stated that children are always imitating. If they are imitating nothing, they must be witnessing “nothing” as a model. The children are looking for real activity that is purposeful and bold, not boring. ♦

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