
The Child Learns To Be Human from Other Human Beings

~ Laurie Clark

"We all have a longing to grow into our truest selves so that we can become revolutionaries of tenderness."

~ Gregory Boyle

While I was standing in line at the grocery store, I observed a little child somewhere around 18 months old with his mama. I smiled at him, and he looked back at me with the sweetest of smiles. I clapped my hands and he clapped his hands. I waved good-bye, and he waved good-bye back while his mama was busy at the counter paying for her groceries. Without words, we both had an uplifting conversation to carry into our day. This precious little boy, with absolute unconditional trust, mirrored everything that I did.

Young children do what they see being done around them. They even perceive the deeper parts of us. We become transparent to the young child in our thoughts and feelings, and they are even able to sense how we "do life."

Imitation is a spiritual capacity. Every human being has a guardian angel that escorts us when we become active on another's behalf and when we reach out to become our truest self. Young children imitate unconsciously from the heart, with uninhibited, unfiltered faith in what they see, not yet separated from the realm of the angels. Adults work out of a more conscious imitation of higher beings when they reach out with love and selflessness towards another human being.

When we read an inspiring story or hear of a courageous act, we may feel that we long to imitate what another person has done. We may ask ourselves, out of a deep feeling, "Would I have been brave enough to do that?" How wonderful it is to hear about seemingly impossible deeds that our fellow human beings have accomplished. Something in our soul is moved with the longing to imitate such deeds.

Mainstream psychology has come to the understanding that little children learn and perceive through imitation. Albert Bandura (1925-2021) made contributions in the fields of psychology and

education, and created what he called Social Learning Theory (SLT). Bandura states that social behavior is learned by watching the behavior of others, and that the young child models this. Bandura describes three key concepts about how the child learns. First children observe, then imitate what they observed, and then they model it and do what they have experienced.

When we take a closer look at these three concepts, it opens the door to better understand the idea of imitation.

1. Observation means to pay full attention to something. This is the foundational building block for imitation. Children pull all that they see, hear and experience directly into themselves, just as a magnet pulls in iron filings.
2. Imitation is when the child inwardly replicates what has been presented. Imitation means not only copying something, like another's behavior, but also replicating another person's motivation.
3. Model: The word model means to fashion and shape a person or thing that serves as a pattern for the one who is observing and inwardly imitating. The child will figure out how to spontaneously do what they have experienced.

Imitation proceeds by first paying full attention to something, then inwardly replicating it, and finally following the pattern and modeling it.

Today, teachers are experiencing that there are many children who do not imitate. It is not that they cannot imitate, but there is something blocking this natural ability. Often this blockage comes out looking like challenging behavior. Every behavior is a communication to the teacher, so we must ask, what is the child trying to tell us?

With these children, it is essential that the teacher make an extra effort to become ever more sensitive, with empathy and understanding for the

child's situation. A child will resist a teacher who is not sensitive to them. Warmth of heart is ever more important so that the child feels safe and cared for. Those very children who demand the most from us are the ones who can help us build new potentials in ourselves. Building tolerance, acceptance and patience with these children already has a healing effect.

We do our best in presenting a circle, and then there are some children that are not imitating the movements and singing the songs. Perhaps a child is feeling very uncomfortable in their body, the socks are slipping down their ankles, or the child next to them is holding their hand too tightly. This kind of tactile sensitivity can be expressed as frustration, and the child might display all kinds of unpleasant behaviors. It may be helpful to check in before circle time. Maybe a rhyme with some firm, loving touch down the arms to the fingertips might help. This only takes a few minutes, and could make all the difference for a child who is having this difficulty. Keeping this child close and holding the teacher's hand might be helpful.

Another child may not have had breakfast and their blood sugar is dropping, causing everything to feel irritating. If the child has not eaten anything or not enough and the teacher is wanting their attention and participation during circle, there is little chance the child will not have some kind of breakdown. Offering some raisins and almonds some other quick snack with protein in it before the circle can be of great benefit.

There may be children who are slow in trying to figure out how to move their bodies the way the teacher is showing them. An example would be the movements of a carpenter making a house. This kind of child will just be beginning to hammer while the rest of the group is moving on to the next part of the circle. The child can feel disoriented, and a challenging behavior is bound to happen. Repetition of the movements is important for this child, giving them the time they need to stay with the group.

Another child may be unable to imitate the movements during circle time because they have been in front of a screen and are overwhelmed by images which are hard to process. Because the young child is so open without filters, images from screen time run round and round in their mind like a recording that cannot stop. This makes it difficult to pay attention to what is happening in the circle. Sometimes it may help if before circle time there has been some big movement. If one takes an adventure walk before circle and runs, skips, and jumps, this can get what is stuck in the mind

moving in the body, and loosen up the images. Also, including strong imaginations in the circle with little unexpected surprises may help loosen up the screen images and pull this child's attention back.

There are also children who carry deep anxiety for different unknown reasons. Some are always worried about what might happen next and not what is happening in the present. They constantly ask the teacher what will happen after we do this activity and what happens after that. This kind of worry is called anticipatory anxiety. Its makes it difficult to be present to what is happening in the moment. If the teacher can find a way to preview the morning routine, this can be of great benefit for the child who carries such apprehension. Making some felt pictures that show how the morning will go can be helpful, or some other way of representing the day in images can put the child at ease.

These are just some examples of how to work with these children. There are many ways help children through the blockage that is keeping them from their natural ability of imitation.

It is interesting that Albert Bandura calls his theory a *social* learning theory. This means one way we learn to be a human being is to observe, imitate, and model the way we see other human beings treat one another.

The word social comes from the Latin (*socius*) which means an allied friend, a companion. A teacher can become an allied companion who stands by the children's side as they learn how life on earth works. Our task as pedagogues is to create worthy patterns that create a path for the child to follow. The child is enthusiastic and wants to know how to *do* life, not to hear explanations about life. Being a living example is a big responsibility and requires commitment and intensive generosity. We can ask ourselves a question here: "How are my relationships with my colleagues, my friends and family, am I creating worthy patterns for the child to follow?"

Our work with Waldorf pedagogy centers around the young child's natural ability to not only emulate what the teacher brings to the classroom. It is the teacher's privilege to model what it truly means to be a human being. What we think and feel is transparent to the little child and they inwardly imitate it. We are not perfect human beings, and sometimes things don't go as well as we would hope. In the book *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds* by Rudolf Steiner, he implores us to not lose faith in ourselves and to press on when we have made mistakes. He asks us never to despair

over failure, but to keep trying and remain steadfast. Our wellspring of strength is inexhaustible when we are spiritually striving.

It is a virtue to get up again after falling in the midst of difficulties and challenges and begin anew. The children sense this in their teacher and inwardly imitate this. It gives them courage with their own struggles. That thought may help to keep us going on a challenging path, with persistent determination and willingness to stretch and widen our hearts. ♦

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