
Learning How To Learn Through Play

~ Laurie Clark

Early childhood education as a distinct field originated in the early 19th century with the ideas of Friedrich Fröebel and Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, who emphasized a holistic, experiential, play-based approach. When the Waldorfskindergarten movement began in the 20th century, adding Rudolf Steiner's spiritual perspective to the physical and emotional understanding of the young child, it developed this play-based approach further.

The idea that early literacy for the young child should replace a play-based education began to take hold with the launching of the Russian space satellite Sputnik in 1957. A race began between Russia and the United States. Sputnik spurred the Passage of the National Defense Education Act in 1958. This Act provided federal funding to “improve” education in math, science and foreign languages in schools.

Suddenly, teaching academically in early childhood became an emergency. That is when the “curriculum

shove-down” began; what was taught in the first grade became the curriculum for preschool and kindergarten. Education became “a race to the top” rather than serving the young child’s natural development.

Rae Pica, an educational and movement specialist, has been working with young children for the last 40 years. In her book *What If Everybody Understood Child Development?* she states, “The belief that earlier is better has become deeply ingrained in our society—whether we’re talking about academics or athletics. Anxiety rises as children fail to meet their parents and teachers’ expectations. And here’s the punchline: child development cannot be accelerated.”

Early academic education has dramatically increased stress and anxiety for children. An American Psychological Association headline reports that “Studies Show Normal Children Today Report More Anxiety than Child Psychiatric Patients in the 1950’s.” Meanwhile, according to *Psychology Today*, the decline of play has contributed to a rise in children’s disorders.

Looking through the lens of anthroposophy at human development can help to understand why teaching academic concepts and literacy skills causes anxiety and stress for young children. Spiritual science describes that the human being not only has a physical body but also invisible subtle bodies that include the etheric, astral and the ‘I’/higher self. The etheric is the subtle body that carries our life forces, our vitality. For the first seven years, these life forces are used for growth, and over time become available for learning and memory.

In *The Education of the Child*, Rudolf Steiner states, “Life in its entirety is like a plant. It holds a future state within its hidden depths.” It is hard to imagine that when we look at a tiny sunflower seed, it has all the potential to grow into a giant six-foot flower. Concealed in this tiny seed is everything that it will need for its future. The substances and vital forces are all contained within it. When it is put into the garden and cared for by a good gardener along with the rain and sun, it rises up out of the earth towards the heavens. But before it can grow so tall, sometimes up to six feet or more, it needs to develop strong roots so it will not fall over. The life forces of the plant know just what to do, the sunflower transforms itself step by step so that it can eventually unfold into a magnificent golden blossom.

The young child is much like a sunflower. From birth to seven years old the average child will grow in

height somewhere between 30 to 35 inches! The etheric vital forces do their work in a formative way to build and sculpt the child’s body. Rudolf Steiner describes a kind of protective “etheric envelope” that is invisibly around the child during the first seven years of life. The etheric body nourishes and provides the child’s physical body with the life forces that it needs to grow, swaddled by this “etheric envelope.” The sunflower seed is also encased in a shell that protects the inner kernel until it is ready to open and grow strong roots into the soil.

As teachers, we can provide a garden-like environment with awareness of this delicate “etheric envelope” so that the roots that are trying to grow, the very life forces that are shaping the organs, have the opportunity to build the foundation for a healthy body for the whole of life. Teachers can tend the “Garden of Children” by providing a strong, predictable rhythm, imaginative movement, circles and stories, and sprinkling all of this with lots of time for creative play. The warmth of heart that the teacher gives lovingly to the children in their care is like the reflection of the sun’s light that shines on the growing plants.

Being respectful to these forces that are invisibly working in the child will sustain them. Just like the sunflower that grows on the stem, unfolding leaf by leaf, the child also develops step by step. If the roots of the sunflower are not strong and developed, it will topple over and not be able to hold the weight of the beautiful blossom. This holds true with the child’s delicate unfolding of their life forces as well.

The young child learns about life implicitly. When we ask more of them in an explicit way, through presenting concepts and giving instruction, we are asking them to take those forces out of the “protective envelope” and into the head to explicitly think. We are taking the very forces that are needed for the building and shaping of their body that will be freed up around age seven. Play is the young child’s work, this is the way they learn how to learn.

It so happens that the latest brain research matches what Rudolf Steiner described over a century ago. In a 2014 story on NPR’s Morning Edition, Sergio Pellis, a professor and researcher at the Canadian Centre for Behavioral Neuroscience stated, “Play is what prepares a young brain for life, love and even school work. But to produce this sort of brain development, children need to engage in plenty of so-called free play, no coaches, no umpires, no rule books.”

In a report titled “The Power of Play,” The Academy of Pediatrics advocates that self-directed, creative play regulates the body’s stress response and is a basis for successful executive functioning. “Play is voluntary and often has no extrinsic goals; it is fun and often spontaneous. Children are often seen actively engaged in and passionately engrossed in play; this builds executive functioning skills and contributes to school readiness.”

Executive functioning engages the *process* of learning *how* to learn, rather than instructing with content. EF takes place in the prefrontal lobes of the brain, which are involved with developing empathy and emotional intelligence. This part of the brain is sometimes called the seat of consciousness.

We are not born with Executive Functioning skills, and they do not develop automatically through maturation; they need to be practiced, and continue to develop from early childhood all the way into the mid-twenties. Stress is one thing that “freezes” children’s ability to apply executive functions appropriately. Chronic stress and anxiety are the biggest risk factors for executive dysfunction throughout the life span, particularly in children, for whom the executive functions that help us to manage stress have not yet matured. Meanwhile, as the experts have stated, play is the developmentally appropriate way for young children to develop these functions.

There are ample opportunities to practice executive function in the Waldorf early childhood classroom, through enriching activities and a warm, calming atmosphere. Executive functioning abilities that include flexible ideas, self-regulation, and working memory, all happen through the beauty of the Waldorf curriculum and through the open-ended, creative opportunities to play.

The frontal lobes extend down to the motor cortex, which coordinates movement, the young child’s preferred way of learning. In a Waldorf early childhood setting all kinds of movement opportunities can be available to play with: a rocking horse, rocking boat, scooter boards, swings, slide, bars to hang on and trees to climb. Movement helps neurological connections to be made.

Circle time is a stupendous opportunity to include integrative, gross motor movement that weaves through an imaginative story with rich language and song. Playful movement that might include spatial orientation, proprioception, vestibular, and bilateral movement can be experienced.

Lots of fine motor opportunities are offered that involve small, precise movements with the hands and fingers. In a Waldorf setting this is experienced with crayon drawing, painting, finger plays, finger-knitting, and sewing. The older children in the class love to do weaving and more complicated sewing.

Working memory is the ability to hold onto information while busy doing another task. With young children, this kind of memory is practiced in a natural way through imaginative play. When children are playing together, they have props that represent various items that they remember as they create the scenario. A piece of wood may be a loaf of bread, a child-size broom may be a horse; they hold onto that information as they create imaginative story scenes.

Working memory is not the same thing as developing long term memory. Long term memory begins to emerge around seven years old. During a first-grade screening, questions can be asked to observe if long term memory is starting to develop, such as, “Can you tell me about the story your teacher has been telling you?” Until this developmental landmark, a young child does not hold memories yet in time sequence. I was visiting a class on a Monday morning and at snack time the teacher asked the children what they did during the weekend. A five-year-old child in all earnestness said, “I stacked a lot of bowls together, then I built a crow’s nest in the top one and I flew away!” He wanted to participate in the conversation, but sequential memory was still gestating in the “etheric envelope.”

Stories such as “The Little Round Bun” where the bun runs away from the grandfather, then the rabbit, and so on, adding one character after the next, develop the beginning roots for sequential memory. Children’s games such as “Farmer in the Dell” and “Sally Go Round the Sun” are the most exquisite way to practice imaginatively, sequential working memory with movement.

Creative play is an opportunity to practice what executive functioning calls flexibility in thinking, but for the young child, it is more about flexibility in imaginative ideas. Children engaging in play with each other will often shift roles in their play and find various ways to come to solutions when they disagree. A child may want to join in play that is already in progress. It takes some stretching and sometimes compromise to make the change.

When two children are playing together and one wants to change the scenario of the play, it takes flexibility on the part of the other child and sometimes requires negotiation. I once heard a child suggest to the other, "Let's say, you were going to see if I was asleep in my bed, but I was outside flying, ok?" After a few moments of silently looking at the friend who made this suggestion, he agreed, but only if he could fly out too!

Self-regulation, sometimes called impulse control, takes a whole lifetime to learn. How do we react to others? Can we hold back and listen to another person? Playtime gives abundant opportunities to experience practicing how to self-regulate. Spontaneous speaking during play is a kind of self-regulating language, which helps the child feel in control and manage stress. As adults, we self-regulate when we silently speak to ourselves to surmount obstacles and manage our emotions.

Circle time holds many imaginative ways to create movement experiences that promote self-regulation. For example, movement polarities, such as galloping fast on ponies and suddenly pulling back on the reins: "Whoa, pony, whoa!" Taking giant steps and switching suddenly to fairy steps and back again, or speaking in loud and then "whispering" voices are other effective ways to practice adjusting to sudden changes.

Acquiring the ability to hold oneself back and wait for others during handwashing, not eating snack until after a verse is sung, and waiting for one's turn to talk to the teacher when the teacher is talking with another child are all good regulating practice.

Executive function and imagination go hand in hand. Children have the natural ability to imagine all of the "what ifs" in open-ended play, and there are myriad ways that pretend play can go. Even in adulthood, when there is a problem that needs to be solved, we say, "Let me 'play' with that idea." We consider and ponder, trying to think "outside the box" and come up with possibilities. Einstein discovered the theory of relativity by imagining himself riding on a ray of light. When Barbra McClintock, a Nobel prize winning scientist who discovered the property of genes, was asked how she did this, she explained that she imagined herself into the chromosome.

Rudolf Steiner describes all that is active, living and growing has an etheric body. The human being has an etheric body in common with the animals and plants. The word etheric comes from the word ethereal

which originates from the Greek verb *aithein*, meaning "to ignite." The word paints a picture of someone lighting a fire that is glowing with intense brightness. The young child is eager, carrying a bright, inner fire of enthusiasm to imitate all that is being done around them so they can learn about life. It is interesting that *aithein* is a verb, which is active and dynamic. Young children are "verbing" most of the time; they live in activity, and prefer not to have explanations and instructions about life. They want to do life! They are open and place complete trust in those who care for them, replicating much of what they see others doing.

As we meet the questions that are now arising, "Is the Waldorf education that was founded by Rudolf Steiner almost 100 years ago still a good fit for the children of today?" and in the Waldorf early childhood education world, "Should we begin to teach literacy/pre-literacy skills so the children will be successful in first grade?" we should be mindful of that fire of enthusiasm. We must take care not to quench it through well-meaning, but developmentally inappropriate treatment. The living force at work in young children will transform into the faculty for school learning and other higher brain functions, when the time is ripe. We can best support it by placing the child's need for imaginative play at the center of our work, as those who truly understand the needs of young children have always done. ♦

References

- Rae Pica, *What If Everybody Understood Child Development?* (Corwin, 2015).
- Rudolf Steiner, *The Education of the Child and Early Lectures on Education* (SteinerBooks, 1996).

Laurie Clark has been involved in Waldorf early childhood teaching for over four decades and is a prominent teacher trainer, author, workshop and conference presenter, and mentor. She and Nancy Blanning co-authored *Movement Journeys and Circle Adventures*, vol. 1 & 2. Laurie is presently enjoying assisting with her daughter in a home program for two-to-four-year-olds, which she loves.