
Focus—Play and Imitation

The Laws of Childhood

~ Dr. Helmut von Kgelgen

Childhood is governed by sublime laws, and demands humanity and selflessness from the adult world. For this reason, the small child poses a great challenge to our intellectual modern consciousness. Should the realm of childhood be protected from the “experts,” whose thoughts are not born of love and perceptivity? Should the invasive experimentation, which alters and thereby affronts human destiny, be forbidden? Should it not still be our duty to our children to think ahead in reverence before daring to demand something of them—or before withdrawing and leaving them to their own devices? No matter how we act, we form children in our own image: it is not their consciousness, or even the soul, which has not yet spread its wings to take flight, but the convolutions of the brain, the fine vibrations of the glands, liver, circulatory system that we affect.

As a result, the first law of childhood is that the small child’s whole body is a sense organ, open to any and every impression. The child is extremely sensitive to the immediate surroundings. A smile, an expression of love, a tender word (unequaled sources of warmth and strength), colors, shapes, arrangement of things, and the positive thoughts of the people in the surroundings—all shape and form the child, as do nervousness, senseless acts, and outbursts of temper.

It is thus not so much heredity that is responsible for the similarity between parents and child; rather, small children are not yet consciously able to shield themselves from outside influences. These impressions penetrate right to the marrow of their bones—their reactions can be seen, for example, in changes in skin color or in digestive problems. The first days of a child’s life, as more and more psychologists are discovering, have a lasting influence because the initial impressions grow with the child’s body, as scars or as healthy tissue do.

The second law is one born of love, a sacred habit that every individual brings along: learning takes place through imitation, which incorporates the impressions

made on children by their surroundings. An act of love, even if it was merely an act of sexual intercourse, summoned the child’s being and prepared a body as a physical abode. From the loving spiritual world of the unborn, the child brings over a feeling of unbounded trust in the goodness of our world. Thus, there is the desire to imitate everything, and everything becomes part of the child through imitation: gestures, inner attitudes, outward conduct, language we use and the thoughts we think. “Imitation” is the magic word in the child’s education until the age of nine or ten, when it is gradually replaced by other forms of learning. The child’s habit of imitating us—filled with great trust and equally great expectations—exhorts us to be worthy of that imitation. Not lectures, but meaningful actions mold a “brain” which is capable of thinking meaningful thoughts. Inconsistency has the opposite effect.

These considerations lead us to the third law, which remains of great importance for the first years of schooling—and which is still a painful experience for the student struggling during exams: the forces of growth and memory (visual representation) are identical. Burdened with pedantic knowledge, children are robbed of the formative forces necessary to develop and strengthen their growing bodies. This is the reason why most precocious children look pale and wan, and why children who play imaginative games have a healthy complexion. Why should young children be weighed down with the banalities of everyday life? They will learn soon enough to differentiate between thick and thin, round and square, or between the fireman and the policeman—and will have no trouble doing so. The most important thing for the first seven years of life is to stimulate the child’s creative imagination through play and actual doing.

For this age group more than for any other, the following holds true: *The child learns to be human from other human beings.* What happens if this fourth law is disregarded? If the parent or teacher replaces their own stories, games, efforts and failures with

books, learning materials, or even the television set, they deprive the child of the most important thing they can give: human contact. The perception of a personality behind the activities the child sees in turn awakens the child's own personality. For what good is knowledge and more knowledge if a person has no imagination and is incapable of forming judgments and acting responsibly on those insights?

There are three different kinds of "sustenance" that nourish children and become part of them: food, the air they breathe, and the sense impressions from the world around them. So, the fifth law is to pay attention to quality. Prepare meals lovingly, using as many wholesome fruits and vegetables of the season as possible. An attitude of thankfulness for "our daily bread" increases its value; indifference, indulgence, and lack of social graces reduce it. In the family, there should be an alternation between outside and inside activities, sleeping and waking, serious moments and times of joy, Sundays and workdays. All of these factors make an essential contribution to the quality of the sense impressions children take in from their surroundings. Should they have mechanical toys or the stones, shells, building blocks and pieces of cloth that stimulate the imagination? Should they have woolen underwear or synthetics? Is the instinctive feeling that small children do not belong in front of the television set (not even to watch programs made for children!) already dead? Strollers should be built so that children can see and be reassured by the adult's face, for exposure to a flood of impressions from the street that children cannot assimilate only serves to make them nervous. We should constantly remind ourselves that anything that children cannot digest or that is of poor quality only weakens them. Children challenge our adult world to critical reflection.

From their point of view, much could indeed be said about the quality of our cities, the daily rhythm of our outer lives and the richness of our inner lives. Children demand humanity from us.

At what age do they become our contemporaries? In the beginning, they still live in humanity's earlier, dream-like state of consciousness; later, they will most certainly overtake us, for it is their task to take up the torch of the new generation. At no time, however, are they miniature adults. They must be gradually strengthened for the tasks of our century and equipped to carry its burdens. This upbringing must proceed step by step. Giving children too little of what they need for their age—or giving it to them too early—creates problems right from the start.

That is why the sixth law under consideration here is: development takes time, each step being built upon the preceding one. In the first two to three years, this development proceeds by leaps and bounds. Children learn more during this time than later during job training or in the university. The will power to stand erect and to learn to walk is followed by the child's awakening to feelings that find their expression in the spoken word. Only thereafter is the first word that is thought, and not imitated, spoken: the word "I."

This three-fold development also holds true for the first seven years of child development. First, children must come to grips with gravity, testing their will with each step taken. Then, reaching beyond the outstretched hand in the form of words, they express the first stirrings of the soul. A dialogue with nature and the world of fairy tales and an exploration of the social and imaginative-artistic aspect of language has begun. Finally (between the ages of five and seven), uniting word and language gestures, the child forms the first thoughts, creates new words and philosophies as only a child can. This law is clearly shown again in the three seven-year periods leading up to adulthood. Up to school age, and somewhat beyond, children should do things in order to grasp them, learning through play and their own experience. Up to puberty, they should learn both through experiencing things and through discussions. What has been learned is no longer incorporated, instead, feelings slowly begin to

take wing. During puberty, lively interest in people's destinies, both near and far, should develop, expanding their horizon beyond their own country. Only now, on the basis of their own many varied experiences, can young people begin to form their own judgments. At this point, they have crossed the threshold from childhood to youth. A love of truth, science, and self-chosen responsibilities and obligations and an urge to act on their own insights, become strong, leading to career decisions and adulthood. Now the task is to think before one acts.

Willing and thinking—after a strengthening of their intermediary, feeling—have entered into a new relationship with one another.

What is already present in small children grows with them as they mature. So the final law is to protect childhood. Shield it from experimentation, from premature development, from floods of stimuli, from everything that serves to weaken the child's powers of imagination. Protect childhood as a source of physical well-being, of inner strength, of self-identity,

of social tolerance. If childhood is not filled with joy and warmth, imaginative games and meaningful experiences, many obstacles are placed in the path of sound development. ♦

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Helmut von Kügelgen spent thirty years as a teacher at the original Waldorfschool in Stuttgart and was the founder of the International Association of Waldorf Kindergartens (IASWECE). He also served as Director of the Waldorf Kindergarten Seminar in Stuttgart and edited a collection of booklets on the festivals and the inner life of Waldorf teachers, available in English as the Little Series. He crossed the threshold in 1998, and his work stands as an inspiration and confirmation that young children need time and protection in their first seven years so their healthy development can unfold.