

A Look at Home Day Care and After Care
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I was very pleased to see the issue of day care and after care addressed in the Spring 1995 Newsletter. As the introductory article said, the question of day care is not new, but the urgency with which we are experiencing it is.

I had some thoughts out of my own experience as a kindergarten teacher who ran a home-nursery for 3 to 5 year olds in my own home for eight years after our daughter, who is now 10, was born. I left the kindergarten work at Hawthorne Valley School in order to adopt our baby daughter, our second child. Shortly after I returned from my sojourn to South America to find our baby, I was surprised by the number of parents who asked if I would start a little playgroup in my home. It seemed to me a delightful way to spend my time at home (the baby mostly slept while the children were there) and I welcomed the small income to help pay my son's tuition at Hawthorne Valley. The home-nursery grew each year until my neighbor and I (a Waldorf-trained teacher at home with her little girl) decided to accept more children and work together in my home.

The morning program evolved into afternoon and after school care as more and more of the mothers were finding it necessary to take jobs in order to supplement the family's income. Several were single working mothers.

At Hawthorne Valley, the assistant teachers and head teachers have mostly been responsible for providing care for the afternoon playgroup, as we have called it here. Financially, for the assistant teachers, it seems to work out, and for obvious reasons (their relationship with the children has been formed already, etc.), many other difficulties that may arise are automatically resolved. The playgroup occupies one of the two kindergarten rooms.

I have found that the children are tired after a busy morning in the Kindergarten and need to be held in a tender (non-physical) gesture by the afternoon teacher when most of the other children go home and they are left to stay for playgroup. They look forward to the time when we sit at the lunch table and eat a leisurely lunch together. Now important is this nourishment of talk and laughter with their friends and teacher, as well as the nourishment of their food which they have brought from home. Unfortunately, their lunches were packed early in the morning or perhaps the night before and are frequently mushy, crumbly, or just plain unappetizing by the time they eat them at 12:30 or so.

This is a dilemma and I have often wished it was possible to prepare a nice lunch (perhaps even a hot one) beforehand for the children who stay, or, at least have a refrigerator where lunches from home could be kept fresher than the lunch baskets do.

When their tummies are full, the children can obviously rest better. I have found that rest is so essential for these young children, some of whom have been awake since 5:30 a.m. and have traveled 45 minutes or more to school in the morning. It is not easy for them to "let go" when they lie down for rest. Keeping still, being quiet, in a state of rest, is almost impossible for our modern-day children. We can help them by maintaining an inner mood of rest and quiet, perhaps as we rock gently in our chair, singing softly to them at rest time, quietly knitting or just rocking, so they can begin to feel comfortable and safe in "the silence." So many of our children cannot bear silence, as noise is so much a part of their lives. Their morning in the kindergarten is so rich and full, a "taking-in" by the children of all that their teachers create and bring to them, so it feels like the afternoon should be more of a "breathing out" for them.

A friend shared with me how her 6-year old daughter, not exposed at all to media, was having nightmares about witches and goblins almost nightly. She attended her school's after care program and was being told or read a different story each afternoon. In her morning kindergarten class, the same story was repeated for a week, sometimes two. My friend spoke to the afternoon teacher who was surprised at the child's nightmares and the mother's explanation, but agreed not to read or tell stories in the afternoon. The child's nightmares soon stopped and she would happily tell her mother all about the story she had heard in kindergarten in the morning.

The images we give the children in the fairy tales we tell are very powerful and live so strongly in them. This is something we must be conscious of, and although we may be well-meaning in bringing different stories to the children in the afternoon program, it is wise to remember that with young children "less is more."

We have individual mats to be rolled out for the children onto the big rug in the kindergarten they bring a blanket and pillow from home. If possible, space and finances permitting, I think that little folding cots would help the children rest better. Perhaps dividers, with cloths or curtains between cots to enfold them could be used. Several of the children are able to sleep, especially in the fall and winter. Spring can be almost impossible!

I have tried to "listen" for what it is the children are asking for in the afternoon play group and what I have heard is their need to "breathe out." Within the structure and rhythm of the afternoon they want to relax into a time that is somewhat "their own" that is, like the time they would experience if they were at home after morning kindergarten with Mama or Papa (the ego presence) close by, but they in their own "play space," perhaps even playing out what they have taken in during the morning. We as teachers must be sensitive to the needs of children in order to step back and give them that space, rather than attempt to fill it with more activities or projects. I have found, in short, that food, rest, and play (walks into the woods or to the cow barn are included) are the activities that the children are asking for in the afternoon playgroup.

A Suggested Rhythm for the Afternoon:

- Transition Time from morning to afternoon program - 20 minute outdoor play
- Bathroom, wash hands, lunch
- Cleanup. Children take turns washing, rinsing, drying cups and silverware. Others may color a picture while they wait.
- Rest time. Roll up mats, put away pillows and blankets.
- Playtime indoors or out, depending upon the weather and/or walk, visit barn.
- Good-bye.

More and more of our children not only come to kindergarten in the morning and playgroup or after care in the afternoon, but also must go to a day care center or other child care arrangement until 5:30 or 6:00 p.m. until parents fetch them home to a quick dinner and bed so they can get up again at 6:00 a.m. the next day. What a long, long day for a young child!

After school care in a warm, loving home environment is another pressing need we are experiencing. The sense of continuity which these homes can provide to the children is very important for them. I have had children in my home for after school care for several years. It has been a rewarding and positive experience on the whole. The children come and are so grateful for a haven where they can relax, feel safe, and come "home" after a long day at school - to the smells of good food cooking and a blazing fire in the wood stove. They are so hungry and they are frequently very tired. I always try to serve hot food when they come in and then just allow them the time they need to "let go" of the long day behind them. (I

have found it works best if parents pay me extra for food, rather than send snacks for them. Then the children can eat a hot nourishing meal with my own children at our dining room table.)

One 6 year old boy would come after playgroup and immediately stretch out on the sofa. He would then be asleep within five minutes and sometimes sleep there until his mother arrived to pick him up at 6:00 p.m. Often, when he did not fall asleep, he would quietly lie on the sofa and watch the other children play. His teacher told me that he was one of the most active boys in the kindergarten and in the afternoon playgroup.

The children I have cared for after school in my home have become like an extended family for us. My three children have always had a grand time playing with the children who come. When parents have been delayed, we would just invite the children to sit for supper with our family, for which the children and parents are grateful.

The answer I give when asked, "What do you do in an after school home program?" is that a warm, homey environment with good, hot food and a quiet refuge as well as a welcoming play space (indoors or out) are the main ingredients. Paper and beeswax block crayons are always available for coloring. The children love to help bake cookies, pizza, or cut vegetables for the evening meal. Folding diapers, dusting, sweeping are all chores they love to help with. The older ones have helped me to card wool, make seasonal crafts, sew on buttons, or do embroidery on doll's clothes.

One of the difficulties I have experienced in doing day care and after care in my home is that a child who spends long hours each day in another family's home can become quite attached to that family, sometimes to the dismay of the parents. One mother whose child was spending 8 -10 hours daily in my home told me that she expected me to "be a surrogate mother" to her child. The child was quite attached to me and frequently did not want to go home with her mother, who was a single parent. She wanted to come and play with my daughter even on weekends, when she could be at home with her mother.

There was a 6-year old boy in our kindergarten who would be the first to arrive every day - 10 minutes before 8:00 a.m. - and school started at 8:30 a.m. He was a beautiful, large-headed boy with big dark-fringed blue eyes. A short time into the morning, almost every day, he would begin to act out, become quite stubborn and unmoving in his position, and demonstrate a false bravado to anyone who tried to reach him. Then suddenly, his big blue eyes would fill with tears and he would collapse and become a "wet dishrag." Finally, during a home visit, we learned that he had been in day care since he was three months old and now, after a full day at our school, he took a long bus ride to a day care center, where he was picked up at 6 p.m. His mother said that she had been searching unsuccessfully for a home care situation for him after school. I offered to take him home after school every day with me, since my son was just a year older and they could play together. Miraculously, within a few days, the boy's behavior in school improved dramatically, and he became lighter and happier.

On the second afternoon at my house, he drew a most beautiful picture of a house with many windows, the sun shining, and a little boy walking up the path to where a woman stood in the doorway with a bouquet of flowers in her hand! His parents noted the change in him immediately and were gracious and kind in their gratitude.