

*Waldorf Day Care Conference
Forum Kreuzburg, Berlin, November, 1995
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The purpose of this weekend was to discuss Waldorf day care for children under three, arising out of an Anthroposophical understanding of the child's true nature and its development in the first three years in the context of present social conditions.

A few such centers already exist, notably in Denmark, which traditionally has had a long history of daycare for the children of working mothers. In East Germany, early day care has been the tradition since World War II, and in Holland it has been growing in the past five years.

There were representatives from Denmark, Holland, Germany, and England. The core group has been set up as a working-party for the International Vereinigung (IV) in order to explore the many issues that arise from this theme (the statutes of the IV include the child from birth to seven years).

The following points formed a focus for discussion:

1. The most frequently expressed fear is that we may be damaging the child at this sensitive time in its development by encouraging parents to place children in such centers, away from the home environment. The group's response was that, given that many parents will, and generally must, do this in any case, could we actually be minimizing damage by providing an environment that takes into account an understanding of the child's needs and development in the first three years?

2. Is the Waldorf kindergarten movement being confronted with a new threshold, a call to provide new forms to meet the demands of the next millennium?

3. Contemporary social conditions - single parenthood, financial difficulties, absence of the extended family - give rise to the question, "Are we the new extended family?" The Waldorf kindergarten and its extensions - parent and toddler groups, home groups, day care centers, etc. - may be the closest experience of this for many parents and children.

4. Steiner expressed the significance of imitation and example in the early years. Are children being presented with the right images to imitate – domestic activity, older children playing, adult work? In extending our protective, welcoming gesture, to the children younger than the traditional three year old kindergarten entry age, we may be able to provide these nourishing images.

5. We need to explore the possibility of slowing down or reversing the damaging trends by providing support and information in the hope that some of the problems may be alleviated or eliminated, e.g., parenting courses, support groups. We need to find new ways, and the courage, to share what we know and to reach parents before they come to the kindergarten. The need to work with parents is now crucial.

6. Throughout the International Waldorf movement we now hear of the need for real therapeutic skills in our responses to difficult children. (*The Kessel Curative course for kindergarten teachers in Germany is*

offering important support in this direction. We are now taking steps to bring this course to England in Summer 1997. Details in the Fall 1996 newsletter.)

7. We have the possibility of providing a protective substitute 'home' environment in place of the institutional environment that may be the only alternative.

8. Waldorf kindergarten training seminars will need to offer a deep study of the first three years, emphasizing the damaging influences currently in the child's environment and exploring in an objective, inquiring way a variety of responses to this growing need - parent-toddler groups, day care, home groups, etc.

9. Waldorf parent-toddler groups have significantly increased in number in recent years. We need to go more deeply into this work and to become more conscious and responsible for what we do there. These groups have enormous potential as a meeting-point between home and Waldorf education but this opportunity is often undermined by "chatter and gossip," through which children become restless. The group leader can set an example and parenting skills may be strengthened as parents observe our way of being with the children. What makes a Waldorf parent-toddler group different from other parent-toddler groups?

10. We could transform the traditional babysitter situation. Home-groups arising out of Anthroposophy could offer an alternative to day care. These groups could be offered in the home by trained Waldorf early childhood teachers. The child would be welcomed into a smaller, family-like group, in a home environment. These groups may be less institutional than day care facilities.

11. The needs of certain social groups are now calling for attention from the Waldorf community: single parents, children without siblings, working parents (in need of day care as well as holiday and after school care). In certain countries unemployed parents can only receive benefit payments if the child is in a day care center. This is taken to be proof that the parent is available for work.

12. A constant theme throughout the three-day meeting, and one being echoed increasingly at conferences, is the need to make contact with parents as early as possible, perhaps as early as childbirth preparation. Cooperation with Anthroposophical doctors and midwives could produce prenatal classes and birthing situations, and postnatal support could be given in parenting courses.

13. If a network of home care/day care groups emerges within our movement they must not find themselves isolated. We could welcome them into our teacher's meetings, study groups, offer representation in our various associations and there could be clear connections with the nearest Waldorf kindergarten.

14. Students in our training courses should be encouraged to visit childcare facilities in their area, gaining an overview of current social trends and the situations in which children now find themselves.

15. If we extend our work into these new forms we will need to stand firmly upon an Anthroposophical understanding of these early years, to ask the question, "How should we be with the little child?"

16. In Holland, the traditional day care movement has expressed an interest in the Waldorf approach to the young child. The Dutch Education Association has responded to this interest and organized a conference in which Waldorf teachers shared their insights. Here is an opportunity to offer example for imitation - children everywhere will benefit from these generous and open gestures from our movement.

If we extend our concept of a mixed-aged group downwards to include the child under three, there appears to be a number of grouping possibilities, all of which need to be approached with a combination of openness, consciousness, and a sense of responsibility. These might include:

1 to 3 year olds in separate groups
(home groups or in day care groups linked to kindergartens)

+3 to 6 year olds in mixed-age groups

or

1 to 2 year olds in separate groups (as above)

3 year olds in nursery groups

4 to 6 year olds in mixed-age groups

or

1 to 6 year olds in the same mixed-age group, staying together all day or separating into two groups for part of the day, e.g., mealtimes, storytimes, or when special needs are evident.

The question arises: given that our pedagogy supports one teacher for the eight years of the middle school experience, how is it for the even younger child to have as many as three teachers before reaching first grade - day care, nursery, kindergarten teachers?

If you are interested in this work, articles from Anthroposophical Day Care Centers can be obtained from: DieArbeitsgruppe Kleinstkindbetreuung, The Secretary, Judith Dausend, Internationale Vereinigung, D-70188 Stuttgart, Heubergstrasse 11, Germany. A Waldorf conference on early years education is planned for November 1 - 2 in Rotterdam (further information from above address).
