

Child Care Report
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Wisconsin

What a summer and autumn! Starting with the June AWSNA conference in New Hampshire to the Anthroposophical Society conferences in Ann Arbor, Michigan in August to the NAEYC Conference in Wisconsin in October to The Endangered Years conference in Sacramento in late October, a consistent thread for me has been networking (forgive the computer language) with other individuals who are on fire for creating new impulses in child care and the work with birth-to-three and parenting.

We are off and running! The whole country, it seems, is riveted to the issues of child care, particularly from two vantage points, brain research and welfare reform. Our government realized it had created a big problem with welfare reform by initially overlooking the issue of child care as they prepared to send all these mothers into the work force. I think their "recovery" measures vary from state to state - in some places by lowering the standards for which programs could receive government funding for giving care to the children of the welfare moms. In my state, I know there was also an initial thrust to get day care centers to hire these mothers as they train them to become child caregivers. The few providers I spoke with were overwhelmed with the task. Many of the individuals they were being asked to hire did not have basic parenting skills, and now they were expected to hire them to care for the children in their centers. Of course, in the midst of it all, there are the occasional stories of individuals turning their lives around and taking up conscious parenting and care giving. As with most things, it is a mixed bag of success and failure. One thing I hope we will all do is keep these mothers and care providers in our hearts during this time of seemingly forced transformation.

In the meantime, we continue to be deluged with articles about the latest brain research. I'm sure it is not too late to order, for example, the Special Edition *Newsweek*, Spring/Summer 1997 that features the latest brain research and is full of facts that support what we have been saying about child development for decades. Some of the suggested applications are not what we would necessarily endorse, but many are. In the summer Waldorf teacher training program in Ann Arbor (WTDA) where I offer an early childhood course, I found it very helpful to do a comparative analysis of these articles with Rudolf Steiner's lecture excerpts in *Understanding Young Children*.

I also just received from Betty Staley some excerpts from Stanley Greenspan's book *The Growth of the Mind (And the Endangered Origins of Intelligence)* in which he brings to the forefront, among other things, that the architecture of the mind "depends on a series of critical but subtle emotional transactions between an infant and a devoted caregiver clearly formulating the elusive building blocks of creative and analytic thinking, and the sense of self."

Now the interesting thing is that one cultural reaction to all of this research is to encourage parents to begin staying at home with their children again. Some do this out of a scientific approach and others, like Dr. Laura of syndicated radio, use guilt. At this time, however, we are not experiencing droves of parents quitting their jobs and rushing back home. If we allow ourselves a fantasy moment wherein this does begin to happen, we come face to face with another facet of our work - parent support. Whether parents start staying home or not, this is still a large piece of our work as early childhood educators. Ask any kindergarten teacher or child care provider. After my workshop at the Endangered Years conference, a lovely young couple with a two-year-old child asked for a private consultation. Their first question: "How do we begin rhythm?"

How are we in the Waldorf Early Childhood Association dealing with these many levels of awakenings and needs? Here, I want to share a few snapshots of programs I have visited or heard about recently. From

a variety of sources, the interest in Parent-Child Playgroups, also called Parent-Tot and other names, has increased manifold. One basic structure seems to be a two-hour time slot one morning a week (someone told me they always do theirs on Saturday so fathers can come) for six to eight weeks wherein the children play while the parents work on a craft project and talk with one another and an early childhood educator. Often a second early childhood person watches over the children. Sometime within the course of the morning, there is a snack and the early childhood teacher also leads them in a simple circle activity and perhaps a little puppet play or simple story. Often there are handouts on thought-provoking subjects that the parents may then bring to their future conversations. Some of the programs have found it important to have one or two evenings for parents to first orient them to what they will be doing in the play group and later to review their experiences and hear more penetrating questions which they may have not been able to bring in the mornings.

At the Endangered Years conference in Sacramento I received a handout on an interactive circle created by Erica Carnay of the Portland Waldorf School. In this circle, the simple poems and songs bring the parent into direct interaction with their child, rather than the usual circle of both parent and child imitating the early childhood teacher. One lovely poem has the children coming together under a large silk rainbow cloth while two parents billow it over their heads. In the end, the cloth is brought down over the children for 2-3 seconds while the children make a wish.

This calls to mind another program I visited at the Prairie Hill Waldorf School called the Wonder Garden. This is a program for 2 1/2 to 3 1/2 year olds without their parents. Two care providers are with these little ones two mornings a week from 9:00 a.m. to noon. I also observed this covering of the children, only this time with a lovely wool blanket that they then come out from under and curl up on top of for rest time at the end of their simple circle time. Laura Cassidy, the head teacher, has told me that she is learning a lot about the difference between working with this age and working with slightly older 4-6 year olds. I have asked her to keep a journal and offer something to our newsletter in a future issue. Of course, some of you have been working with these young ones in your homes, and we would love to highlight some of your discoveries in future issues also.

In the meantime, I do receive an occasional call (not often) from a Waldorf school that is considering what it would take to open a child care center in connection with the school. I can only imagine what a tremendous service this would be to school families; however, most schools at this point in time do not feel they have the space, human resources or the will to go forward with such a project.

Currently, Rena Osmer and I are devoting almost full-time efforts into the research and development of future child care centers. Rena is working on a Family Life Center model, while I am working on Community Life Centers. Many of our components are shared (e.g., full-day child care with mixed-age family groupings, numerous parent enrichment offerings, pre-natal classes, potential retail businesses connected to the centers, etc.). A major focus at Antioch New England where Rena teaches is the development of the training for the care providers in such centers, while a major focus for me is the exploration of corporate child care center models and programs that include the elderly and youth. I am interested in hearing from individuals and organizations that might want to consider becoming involved with such endeavors.

In our recent trip to California, Rena and I linked into a group of educators who are focusing on birth to three years, many also still involved with the kindergarten age as well. The night before the Endangered Years conference, twelve of us gathered at the home of Marianne Alsop to prepare ourselves for the conference but also to hear one another speak of our work. We heard from Dr. Georg Kuhlewind and Joyce Reilly who have founded centers for abandoned children in Hungary and are currently developing a focus for their Logos Foundation in the U.S. Dr. Kuhlewind's interest is in psycho-linguistics and in human attentiveness and devotion with a particular emphasis on birth to three. Dr. Uwe Stave, an

anthroposophical pediatrician, mentioned his ongoing work with Nancy Poer every summer at Rudolf Steiner College, working with both parents and teachers of young children. He has also done some longitudinal studies on both healthy children and low birth weight children that we hope to see in print some day. Arline Monks and Marianne Alsop spoke enthusiastically about creating opportunities for parents to learn more about early childhood through a variety of venues. They, along with others, have planned a series of three conferences in Sacramento this year, with the Endangered Years being the first. They will also have Rahima Baldwin in February and Michael Reira in May. Rena and I, in representing our work, also mentioned three upcoming conferences - the East Coast Kindergarten conference in February with Dr. Bruno Callegaro, the conference with Helle Heckman from Copenhagen in Keene, N.H. April 17-20, and a WTDA (Waldorf Teacher Development Association) offering in early July in Ann Arbor that will be similar to the Endangered Years conference. Also present that evening were Erica Carnay of Portland, Janet Kellman of Rudolf Steiner College (RSC), Holly Koteen-Soule of Seattle and Ingun Schneider of RSC, all of whom gave wonderful workshops the next day at the conference. At the end of our time together, Nancy Poer, who was the keynote speaker for the Endangered Years, gathered us into a circle and spoke of her image of the new temple being the Temple of Childhood, and we are called upon to be the knights to protect this temple.

Perhaps you are beginning to pick up that this California trip was pretty phenomenal for both Rena and me. We also had the opportunity to visit Carol Cole at the Raphael House in San Francisco, a shelter for the homeless sponsored by the Eastern Orthodox Church with a distinctive influence of Waldorf education brought in by Carol, an experienced Waldorf kindergarten teacher. A bundle of pure energy, Carol is getting ready to launch a small day care program at the Raphael House in January wherein she will train parents for early childhood work as well as work with the children. In her work with families there she focuses on three major areas: imitation, wholeness (the relationship to nature and the seasons), and inner activity such as fantasy play. I would like to write a whole article about the wonderful things she said about these three areas, but it might be better coming directly from Carol. There are two things, however, that I feel are real images for us to hold in our hearts. Carol applied them specifically to working with parents in the homeless shelter, but I feel they apply elsewhere. The first is that we cannot teach these things through lectures, but out of doing them with the parents. The second, and perhaps more poignantly applied to the homeless families, is that she is teaching the parents how to help their children relate to those things that cannot be taken away from them - the stars, the moon, colors, sound.

Speaking of colors, we also had the chance to visit our beloved colleague Monique Grund at the San Francisco Waldorf School where we were bathed in the warmth of her multi-hued Kindergarten. In fact, all of the Kindergartens there were lovely. On November 20, the San Francisco school will honor Monique's 40 years of Waldorf teaching with a joyous celebration. I also spent some time visiting with Patty Townsend and observing the after care program at the S.F.W.S. She, with the help of others, is developing a healthy model for schools that want to offer care for children until 5:30 or 6:00 p.m. They are still working out a few kinks, but the children appeared to be healthy and well cared for.

Well, as I look over my voluminous notes on our journey and the ongoing meetings Rena and I have over the phone, I see a couple more things to mention before I close. The first is to encourage our kindergarten and other early childhood colleagues to be pro-active in their communities regarding ongoing parent and care provider education opportunities. Some examples that come to mind are things such as WOW wagons. There is a woman in Maine who traveled to child care centers with her WOW (Worlds of Wonder) wagons full of "good" toys demonstrating how to use them. When Rena visits a child care center, she always takes a basket of soft toys with her and sits and knits while she observes. She has noticed that the seemingly most needy children are usually the ones who find their way to her. Another example is taking simple puppets to children's hospital wards or being an occasional story-teller at your local bookstore or library. With all that we juggle as early childhood professionals, it may be that we don't

feel we can do such things ourselves. Perhaps there is someone in your community, however, who could be encouraged toward such endeavors.

We are also suggesting that you may want to link up with whatever early childhood professional organizations are in your area. (See the report on an NAEYC conference I attended in Milwaukee in October). The idea is that the more we become involved, the more opportunities may open up for us to share our ideals about child care. Think up workshops you could offer at your local affiliate. One of the things we are working on is developing the language that speaks about our work in such a way that the traditional child care world can understand. For example, if you tell someone that our work is based upon sensory integration, practical life skills that develop healthy neural pathways, and emergent language and grammar skills, then you are speaking more out of the language of the recent brain research; and you are also speaking about what we actually do, even though it is not all that we do.

Rena and I would like to hear from you regarding the kinds of things you want us to cover in potential workshops at the East Coast Kindergarten Conference in February and perhaps at other places. We are putting together a photo essay of the various places we are visiting, but our goal is to help you to network with others and to help you to get the message across to your community that your work is valid and necessary. If you have specific things you would like us to try to cover, please write to me at W2897 High Road, Elkhorn, WI 53121 or phone the Community Life Centers Initiative number at (414) 642-7153 or e-mail at aldinger@execpc.com.

Finally, I again want to thank those of you who have sent questions or written about your work. I would like to hear more from those of you who have child care in your homes. I'm almost at a place where I can begin to respond to you more personally, and I'm sorry it has taken so long. Good working to you all!