

Adult Activity In the Parents and Tots Program
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Since the initiation three years ago of a parents and tots program at our Waldorf School in London, Ontario, the focus of the adult activity in the room has evolved. We have gradually expanded the scope of parent work to better meet the needs of a growing number of families per session and a larger space. We have also attempted to work with the Waldorf early childhood principles of imitation and rhythm more fully by surrounding the children with meaningful, rhythmical and understandable work endeavors.

We began with five families in a small and intimate space first at the school and later in my home. During this early experience parents began working each morning on a craft project while the children either played, sat beside a parent to help or participated with me in preparing the snack. Because the space and numbers were small the children felt comfortably connected with their parents and easily moved closer to them or away as the inclination arose.

Parents appreciated this opportunity to learn how to make a simple toy for their child and in some cases how to knit and hand stitch. Perhaps just as important as the handwork project was the chance to chat with each other and share parenting concerns and discoveries.

Last September we were fortunate to have a large room at our new school and to have a second teacher to help with the increased number of participating families, which reached nine in each of two groups. The morning activity, time began as it had evolved over previous years. I sat at the craft table with parents while Susan worked with the children, usually preparing a snack. One morning, however, I noticed that most of the parents were sitting around the craft table with me as well as many of the children while the rest of our large room was quite empty. The children were not particularly well engaged in the stitching project which wasn't suited for the help of so many little hands. They were reluctant to explore possibilities elsewhere in the room and were demanding attention. I realized then that the children wanted to feel close to and involved with their parents and that this large space and group did not provide the intimacy of the smaller situation to which I had been accustomed. I realized also that having everyone crowded around one table was not practical. We began to change the focus of our activity time.

To encourage parents to be present in all areas of the room, and more involved with the overall program and hence their children, we suggested that they engage themselves in at least one domestic task per morning. The selection of chores included sweeping, washing place mats on a scrub board, ironing, grinding grain with the stone grinder, helping with the baking, cleaning cupboards, setting the table for snack, repairing a toy, sanding wood, etc.

We spoke with parents incidentally at opportune moments and at a parent evening about the value of providing children with a worthy example to imitate. We also strove as teachers to model as much focus, care and attention to the gesture of the task at hand as possible. The focus on the domestic chore came to be considered an exercise in bringing consciousness to the present moment. There was an attempt also to be aware of the activity of at least one child while doing our work.

Because the craft activity had been so popular, we continued to make it available either after or before the domestic task was completed. It now often took a week or two longer to complete a project but this was not seen as a problem. Craft making continued to be a social opportunity but since there were not as many doing it at one time it seemed better integrated with the overall activity of the morning. Parents even began to sometimes take their handwork to an area closer to their child where they could concentrate on their own work with an outer eye while focusing on the children with an inner eye.

The change in the mood in the room coinciding with the change in parent activity was marked. As adults became more focused on the tasks that contributed to the program, the children seemed more content to enter into play and to help with the varied work projects in progress. The children in their participation reflected the inner mood and the outer activity of the adults in the room. They were described by one visitor as being “as happy as clams” enfolded so by the caring and purposeful activity about them. One three year old watched admiringly as her grandfather ground grain with strength and purpose and then helped him scoop the flour into a bowl. A two year old boy built a wooden structure beside his mother while she sanded wooden blocks. Occasionally he gave her a piece of wood saying, “This one is rough.” He made a fine pile of wood which he called a “building without windows”. This mother was conscious of her small boy’s imaginative play while she focused on her work but she did not interrupt his activity. It seemed that her inner consciousness contributed in some way to his unconscious but focused industry.

At group activity times there are now more people in a larger space than earlier but no major change has seemed necessary in the way parents join children and teachers. Everyone sits together around the table for snack with a child beside a parent. Children usually go off for another short playtime when finished while parents linger chatting before collecting the dishes. Parents also participate in a short circle of songs, verses and nursery games and watch a simple puppet show, often with a young child on their lap.

During the earlier sessions beginning three years ago, I attempted to have a short discussion time when the parents and I sat together while the children went outside with one parent. At this time we would talk about an article given to them the week before or a chapter from a book. Sometimes we discussed a question arising from the morning session or a burning issue that one parent was carrying. Although we tried organizing this time in different ways the idea always seemed better than it proved to be in actual fact. The children really did not like being separated from their parents and protested by either refusing to go outside or by coming back in after a few minutes. I learned gradually to trust more in the example of the morning to speak for itself and to join in with the craft making where I could be a part of the informal conversation.

Because there was a desire expressed by some parents to have an uninterrupted time for discussion, we now hold one or two parent evenings per 8-week session where I give a presentation and open discussion ensues. We also implemented an orientation evening for new parents prior to the first morning of a program series. Although not everyone can attend, it does help to explain to some what can be expected. It is comforting to me to assure prospective parents that there are good reasons why they pay tuition and then will be asked to sweep and clean the room!

During the morning activity time we of course do not all manage to be completely conscious throughout the ten minutes (or so) that it takes to do the daily chore.

The very striving, however, to achieve more consciousness of inner mood, outward gesture and the involvement of a child is reflected in the overall atmosphere within the room. We find that surrounding children with rhythmical and understandable work activities and adults who are consciously striving to radiate love for their tasks and quiet appreciation of their children works magic in creating a harmonious and dynamic environment.