

Meeting the Six Year Old

Barbara Kloczek

In my years of teaching, meeting the children as they turn six in the kindergarten has challenged me. This is an issue with which most of us work. I offer these reflections of my experience and hope they will stimulate dialogue in *Gateways* and among ourselves.

It was a memorable first week. One of my returning boys, nearly six, was having a ball. Rushing from one activity to another, he led his old friends and most of the new boys in escalating speed around the room. Outside the pattern was repeated, going from the swings to a explosive game of freeze tag. My redirecting and gentle reminders fell on deaf ears, and noticing me, much less imitating me, was the furthest thing from his mind. How could I meet this six year old who was beginning to turn my class into his own little group?

The mood and the environment of the kindergarten enfold the young child in a wonderfully gentle manner. The principle of imitation holds sway as the young child is carried in the rhythms and gestures of the teacher. It is a peaceful kingdom with an abundance of play and work. However as the children mature (around the age of six), they move into the "adolescence of childhood". Their consciousness is changing, and no longer are they simply in imitation but they begin to live with the question of authority. As their feelings become stronger, they test boundaries in a direct way. There are the challenges of "no." One boy's comment at clean-up time was, "I don't want to." He watched me to see my response. I simply looked at him and said calmly, "You may." They can bring a silly mood to circle, for they find that their own variations on circle are more entertaining to their friends than what the teacher is doing. The importance of peers is reflected in the play as well, for the issue of who is the boss of the game becomes increasingly common. The teacher is challenged to meet them in a new way. How can we honor who they are becoming while maintaining order and peacefulness in our classroom? My experience has shown me that if we do not find a way to meet these children, they will begin to lead the class in a rebellious manner.

This is compounded in our modern day, especially in America, by working with children whose parents are not comfortable being the authority or setting boundaries. They do not want to "damage" the child's spirit and so allow the child to make many inappropriate decisions. One of the mothers in my class told me that for a period of time, each day after her daughter was picked up from school, she wanted to go somewhere special. For a month the mother complied, but then realized that this exhausted her and both she and the child needed to come home and rest. When she took charge and initiated this change, her daughter became more settled in school and at home. It is important to empower the parents to be in charge and to make healthy choices for their child. I have found Rosemond's book *Six Principles for Raising Healthy, Happy Children* a valuable support for my work.

Perhaps we can look at the form of our day to help create an easier rhythm for these children. Is there some time that is very difficult that can be changed? When I first was working, we had free play followed by clean-up and then circle. It was a real trial to try to have a peaceful circle after cleaning up, for I found the clean-up time to have a great potential for chaos. Now we have circle first thing in the morning when the children are fresh and eager to be together. I also feel we are sprinkling seeds of imagination for the creative play that follows. This change has made for a much more joyful and enthusiastic circle time, especially for the older children.

How can we meet the older children in the kindergarten? What are they seeking? I think part of the answer lies in their desire to have challenges. The boys especially seek much rougher play and have a desire to meet the resistance of the world. Outside, often the sand box and the digging hill will provide a place where firm earth, shovels, water, and mud will satisfy the hunger for contact. I had a class with two very choleric boys vying to be "first boss." Several pounds of nails and a fence provided many hours of satisfied play. Hay bales set at jumping distance has created a

wonderful movable obstacle course. Building projects with wood and vines call on the interest and skills of the older children.

I observe the challenge for older girls to lie in the social realm. Learning to be inclusive in their friendships often needs the help of the teacher. Often a gentle word and attention when a situation begins can avert hurt feelings. We simply state that we all play together at school. We can suggest to the parents to have play dates outside of school to develop new friendships.

Inside we can find situations that will ask more of them. Can they knead the whole batch of bread dough? At clean-up can they bring order to a specific place? Can they carry the full pitcher of water? Can they help tie the shoes of the younger children? We are asked to find times when they can be a leader in a noble way. One day in free play the children wanted to do one of our plays, and one of the older girls gave up a favored part to another child. I said very quietly, "That was a lovely thing to do."

Older girls are also seeking boundaries. I have found an open defiance of the teacher needs a direct response immediately. Often early in the year we teachers hope to be only sweet and loving, however if these boundaries are not established early on, the rest of the year can be a constant challenge.

The older children are beginning to reveal their temperaments and the choleric need to be met. If this is done, all of the other children will take note and a sense of peace can prevail. A clear message is simple and effective as in, "We do not speak to adults/teachers that way," or "You may come down now." I have also found the occasional use of a "watching chair" to be valuable early in the year. I had a student who kept pushing others in waiting to wash his hands. I had him sit on the watching chair (I sat beside him in another chair) and we watched how the other students were waiting patiently. This also has proven useful at clean-up time. This needs to be done calmly, without anger, with loving firmness.

Another child was constantly being rough with all the other children. In his first year, part of this was out of his control, so we had him work with a specialist to develop his lower senses. When he returned the next year he was nearly six, and we felt he needed to develop his social skills. It was Michaelmas and he wanted to make his golden sword. We told him how often a boy would need to spend seven years as a page

developing the patience, strength, and kindness of a knight. This boy needed to carry himself in such a way for he was preparing to be a knight. After watching others joyfully working on their swords, he himself took up the task to be more gentle with the others. What a wonderful transformation was set in motion. He did get to start his sword after a week. The transformation continued for the whole year.

Circle time brings its own challenges. Occasionally if the mood of the goodbye circle is not good, I will say to my colleague, "Oh dear, let us do that again with our gentle voices." Perhaps once a year, for the most rascally children, I will dismiss the other children to free play. Then we will repeat part of the circle in a most gentle but firm way so they have a chance to do it in the "right" way. They know what I mean and after this are glad to be part of the group. This can also be an eye-opener for me, for once I had a child who simply could not do some of the gestures, and I was thus awakened to his challenges in a new way.

The dramatic play of a fairy tale can also serve to inspire older children. After telling the fairy tale and bringing it as a puppet show, we then act it out as a play two or three times. This is done simply, often in the circle of chairs with capes and crowns. I have found the older children are nourished by this experience of trying on different roles. One older boy tended to fall into silliness, but when chosen to be the king he was able to come to a different place within himself. This new attitude began to permeate his play at school. In dramatic play the child can therapeutically experience different soul states in the context of the fairy tale. In the series by the Gesell Institute, *Your Six Year Old*, the child at this age is characterized by a lack of equilibrium and the tendency towards polarity. He becomes the center of his world and begins to experience himself as stepping out of oneness with the world. It is helpful when we can help them become flexible and creative in this area.

The awakening of new capacities in the child at this age releases them from having to play out their imaginations into planning, imagining, and talking out their inner experience. They become more goal-oriented in their play and their work. There is a new interest in creating things in sewing, woodworking, and so forth. They relish the challenge of creative endeavors over time. After Easter, I have for the last six years had all the children going into first grade create a table puppet of their choice. They begin by

making a needle book by stitching two pieces of felt together. When it is finished they each receive their own needle and six pins. The making of the puppets takes about four weeks, and when all are done we create a puppet show for the younger children in the class. What a sense of satisfaction shines in the faces of the six year olds.

When I was first teaching, I felt my primary task was to protect and provide the child with a nurturing, supportive environment. My task has grown. Over the years, as a result of my working with my colleagues in the lower school, I now consider part of my work is

to prepare them for first grade. This includes being able to sit while eating or hearing a story, to stand in line, to tie their shoes, and to listen and to respect each other and the teacher. I have found this leads to a more joyful classroom, as there is a mood of calmness and safety. As the older children's developmental needs are being met, the gifts of the kindergarten are nurtured in all the children.

Barbara Klocek has been a kindergarten teacher at the Sacramento Waldorf School for many years.