

Transforming Our Parent Meetings

Louise de Forest

In most Waldorf kindergartens that I know, when a class meeting nears, teachers feel burdened and apprehensive about meeting with the parents, and parents feel burdened by yet another thing to do in their already exhausting day. Many parents are reluctant to leave their children with babysitters or feel too tired by 8:00 p.m. to drive to school yet again, and teachers, who have given their all during the day, dread a late night when they have school the next morning. While we are all too busy for our own good, I think this holding back from one another also points to an uneasy relationship we have with one another; teachers may ask themselves, "What if a parent asks a question I can't answer?" or "How can I put into words what I do with their children everyday?" Parents can sometimes feel judged or guilty or, let's face it. . .bored.

Now that I have been teaching close to twenty years, I realize that one of the greatest gifts I've received (and the most unexpected) is to get to know adults I would otherwise never have known, either because of lifestyle or generational differences. I am so grateful to these courageous and intuitive parents who send their children to a Waldorf school, thus enabling me to unfold my life's work and giving me an opportunity to be intimately

connected with their families during a very formative period of growth and development. As we know, each child "chooses" a particular family where he or she can best prepare for the tasks awaiting them in life; so, too, does each family that comes to my class help me develop capacities and overcome inner obstacles that I might otherwise never have the opportunity to do. Out of our mutual gratitude we can develop a relationship based on trust and respect, thus supporting the children in a way that we could never do separately.

Last year I mailed out an informal survey to fourteen Waldorf early childhood programs from Tennessee to Maine. The questions asked covered the number of class meetings a year and their attendance, inclusion of parents in the classroom and school, class meeting topics, parent/teacher conferences, regularity of communication between parents and teachers, changes perceived by teachers in the parent body and the joys and challenges experienced by the teachers in working with parents. What I found was interesting and supported my sense that a change is needed (and has already started) in parent/teacher relationships. Most teachers agreed that helping parents effect positive changes in their home life was deeply satisfying and that building community among

the class parents gave teachers great joy. Many teachers also mentioned that parents today have more access to the classroom, accompanying children on walks, joining them in their daily work and celebrating festivals together. Teachers also noted that parents are more anxious, stressed and overwhelmed than ever before and that attendance at class meetings is sporadic and generally low. Many teachers admitted that they only call the parents when their child is doing poorly in the class, never when he or she is doing well. Several teachers mentioned that parents are more critical and that they are hesitant to be candid about their child's challenges or difficulties. And all the teachers mentioned the ongoing challenge that parents have of protecting their children from media, establishing home rhythms and safe guarding their children from over-stimulation. Parent education today—indeed any adult education—needs to be experiential. No longer are adults content with taking someone's word for it, but need to find their own relationship to new ideas. As a new parent, I was often deeply moved by the eloquent words and clear thoughts of various speakers and would leave a lecture inspired by that person's wisdom. The flip side of that, however, was that I left the lecture feeling that I knew less than I thought I did, and if only I could be as wise as the lecturer I had just heard. . .you get the idea.

In my parent meetings, I want the parents to leave feeling that they know more than they thought they knew; I want them to leave feeling strengthened in their role as parents and more confident in their understanding of their child. I strive to create a situation where I can enable parents to have a certain experience and, out of that experience, arrive at their own conclusions. An example of this way of working is what I have come to call the Toy Workshop, developed long before I began my career as a Waldorf teacher. It came from my question, as a parent, about what kind of toys promote healthy play and support the creative imagination of my children.

In my class meeting, I introduce our work together by saying that we are going to play with toys and that the point of our exploring toys is *not* to compare Waldorf toys ("good toys") to "bad toys," but to reach an understanding of the role toys have in determining how satisfied our children are with their play. What are the possibilities and limitations of different kinds of toys? I start our meeting by talking about the receptivity and freshness of children's senses and that it is through their senses that children begin to form a relationship with the world. I then have the parents close their eyes, and I pass around natural and man-made articles, asking parents to try not to identify the object but to feel it, smell it, etc. What feels good in your hand? What wants to be held? And what feels too hard or too cold? I pass around plastic and wool toys, pine cones, shells, dolls, stones—anything that is an interesting tactile experience. The parents quietly pass things to each other around the circle, without commenting on them, and, as they finish, I place the objects in the center of our circle. Parents then open their eyes, and I ask them to comment on their experience. Were there surprises? Were there unpleasant sense impressions? (You may be surprised to find that some of the Waldorf toys are not as sense friendly as you thought!) What felt especially good?

I then divide the parents into groups of four to five (separating couples), and then send them (ideally) into different classrooms. In each room, there is a covered pile of toys. I try to make a fairly typical assortment of plastic and more natural toys—what one would possibly find in an average toy chest at home (so there are some broken toys, mismatched toys, etc.). In one pile, I put plastic, mainstream toys and, in the other pile, I put toys from my classroom. Ideally, these piles should be in different rooms. I ask the groups to create a story line out of what they find in their pile and to play it, using the toys available to them. It is important to let them know that I am not interested in what their story line is: that they are not going to have to repeat the story afterwards. What I am interested in is how they carry the story

through the toys they have. They then have fifteen to twenty minutes to play in their groups, and I go from one group to the other, keeping them on track. As we all know, when adults get together, we tend to be chatty, and my job is to be sure that they are not talking about their children or their week-end plans but are focused on bringing their stories into form. Sometimes, especially with the more formed toys, play ends earlier than the allotted fifteen minutes, but I ask them to keep going until the time is finished. They then take apart what they have created, cover the pile again and go the other room and do the same thing all over again, but with another type of toy. After fifteen to twenty minutes, we cover everything up again, come together in our circle, and I ask them what their experience was. I have done this experiment with hundreds of people—many of them not involved with Waldorf education, and the results have always been the same. The “Toys-R-Us” type of toy results in more difficulty carrying a story line and invariably ends in more violent, louder and more destructive play. I find that all I have to do is ask the questions, and the parents, out of their own experience, discover that the more fixed the form of the toy, the harder it is to sustain the imagination. After we have had a discussion, I

then speak about the image of the human being, and we compare several types of toys depicting the human being. Which is stronger: the plastic day-glo colored Hulk or the simple prince table puppet my son was given for his birthday by his kindergarten teacher? Which is more feminine: Barbie or a princess marionette? Which is more human: the transformer or the little knot doll? I speak very little during this part; I just pose the questions and let the parents arrive at their own conclusions. Again, I reiterate, this is *not* about good vs. bad toys; it is about being more conscious about what we bring into our homes and how we give an opportunity to our children to express themselves fully and creatively through what they play with. Usually by the next day, I have bags of discarded toys! The parents have formed a bond through their work together, and the community we teachers strive to create among the parents has been strengthened.

So, for your class meetings, find a topic of interest, and then see how you can turn it into an experience, with the parents as active participants. You and they will have a wonderful time!

Louise de Forest recently joined the board of WECAN. She will be taking a sabbatical from her many years of kindergarten work at Green Meadow Waldorf School next year.