

The Daily Blessing of the Older Child in the Kindergarten

by Ruth Ker

I cannot speak about my daily routine without acknowledging the importance of the mixed-age setting within which I work. Repeatedly, the younger children are invaluable for keeping the older children interested in the lively play scenarios, reminding them about the wonder of new discoveries and helping the older children to modify their robust approach to life. Of course, all of this happens spontaneously and unconsciously as they eagerly embark on the ever-new discoveries each day. During our day together, we are constantly reminded about just how important it is to the younger children that the older ones are met with limits and expectations that make it safe and respectful for everyone. There is a sigh of relief and a visible change to the countenance of the older and younger children when the boundaries are maintained and disruptive behaviors are met with matter-of-fact justice.

Our day, which goes from 8:30 to 12:00, begins outdoors and ends with games time indoors. I find the traditional games to be a wonderful harmonizer for the social fabric of the class, so I have found a way to incorporate them into our daily routine. In the latter part of the year, in addition to ending the day with games time, we also play some of these games on our morning walks and sometimes even invite the other class of kindergarten children to join us. In this way, the future grade one children begin to meet each other and are already building social skills together. As the year progresses, I usually wait for the older children to signal their need for these games to be played at outdoor time, too, by asking for them. They often remember them from the year before when they were a younger child in the kindergarten. The capacity to retrieve this memory is also a signal that the new consciousness of the six/seven year change is arriving.

Below is a schedule of my daily routine. Further explanation follows after that.

8:30-9:00 a.m.	Work and play outdoors in the playground
9:00-9:30	Morning walk and play at the "Big Garden"
9:30-9:50	Lavender hand wash
	Circle time
9:50-10:00	Rest time
10:00-10:20	Snack time
10:20-11:20	Free play
	artistic activity
	life activity
11:20-11:30	Tidy-up time
11:30-11:40	Story
11:40-12:00	Games time
	Going home or to After School Care

Outdoor Play

In the morning, on the play yard, time is given for a brief greeting of the children and the parents as they arrive. Some children come earlier with their parents so, when the teachers arrive on the play yard, the children are already playing together while the parents watch. Each year I see the need of the parents to be met in some way at this drop-off transition. A warm smile and a greeting can go a long way. I encourage the parents to visit amongst one another outside the play yard *after* they drop their children off. It can be intimidating for the young children, particularly at the beginning of the school year, to come upon a whole group of conversing adults as they (the children) try to get through the gate and into the playground. It is at this drop off time that I can quietly say to the parents that I am seeing their child showing some of the six-year-change phenomena. We then agree to speak about this privately at a later time.

As soon as possible, after entering the play yard, the teacher takes up meaningful work. The children often come to help, but many are immersed in their play and look up once in a while to see the teacher at work raking, building paths, weeding, filling birdfeeders, digging trenches, planting, pruning, edging, shoveling,

digging over the compost, chopping wood, building fires in the cob oven, etc. Swings, a sandbox, a cob oven, a playhouse, a rolling hill, gardens, flowerbeds, wheelbarrows, wagons, a water pump, grass, trees, mud and stones provide ample opportunities for earth, air, fire and water experiences.

As the year goes on, we begin to see the behavior manifestations of the six-year change at our outdoor time. Children who, previously, were happily engaged in methodical, engrossing play begin to run around with frenzied gestures, climb as high as they can on the structures available, chant “Na, na, na, na, na” (mood of the fifth) rhymes, whisper things and giggle at the top of their lungs, etc. Meeting these behaviors in a firm, loving way with imaginative pictures helps. “The horse next door gets frightened when he hears those loud sounds.” “We need to hear Brother Robin’s song instead of the squawking parrot today. That parrot is scaring away the other birds.” Enlisting the children’s help in a focused activity also helps. It’s important for the teacher to remember that the older child’s etheric is seeking out movements to assist it in its final pass through the body before the etheric liberates itself for future tasks. That’s why we will sometimes arrange movement journeys or obstacle courses outside on our morning walks. On our way to the “Big Garden,” we will play follow the leader while we balance on logs, crawl through tire tunnels, roll down hills, hop on hopscotch stones, skip across the field, etc. Helping the children to find appropriate channels for this “big energy” they are experiencing (until they are able to self-regulate on their own) is part of our work with the older children.

The children can be just as impulsive with their social blunders as they are with their body movements. Sometimes repeating what they say to one another and then giving an alternative way of saying it can be helpful. One could say to the child, for instance, “Is it better to say, ‘Give that to me right now!’ or ‘Can I have that when you’re finished?’” The children generally hear the proper way to speak to one another if the teacher accurately repeats the voice intonations in the way the child has expressed them.

At the end of our play time in the playground, a bell is rung. (I searched for a long time to find a soft sounding bell that has a sound close to the musical note of an A.) We learn at the beginning of the year that when the bell rings, we put away our things outside and come to the teacher right away. The bell signals that it’s time to leave where we are and go on our morning walk. As we wait by the gate for everyone to arrive, I choose two children who will be the kings to lead us to the Big Garden. This satisfies a much needed desire on the part of the older children to be the leaders or the bosses. If the kings forget to wait for everyone and consequently run on ahead, then I call them back with the bell and they wait until another day to be the kings. “A helpful king waits for all the other people when she leads the parade.” Often, the younger children do not want a turn until the year is well underway and the older children can be even more helpful by taking the hand of a younger one and assisting them to be a king for their very first time.

Our morning walk reveals many different spectacles throughout the seasons – the wax and wane of the flowers and vegetables in our garden, how the sunflowers look up at Father Sun at the end of the summer and then hang their heads down as autumn arrives, the colorful leaves that Lady Autumn and Fire Flick have been painting, King Winter and his Snow Fairies going up and down the mountain, Jack Frost’s amazing paintings of the ice and frost crystals, mushroom fairy rings, caterpillar journeys across our vegetable garden, and then the inevitable discovery that the caterpillars are gone and now we see so many butterflies, etc. There is also work to be done at the Big Garden. This work is something the older children relish especially if they can be “in-charge” of something. Many hours are spent harvesting worms, building homes for these squirmy creatures and seeing who can collect the biggest “family” of worms, under the guise of making a trench or planting row for the seed children. Needless to say quick results are not the expectation!

The older children also love to make suggestions about what they think is needed (i.e. a ladder to pick the beans off the bean pole) and then remind the teacher MANY times about its importance. “Teacher, remember about that ladder? When can we do that?” If the teacher can connect to their suggestions, the children will take up this task with great satisfaction and authority. A bond can grow between the children and the teacher that is reminiscent of the feeling, “We are in this together.” Because this transition into the six/seven-year change is often called “first puberty,” it is good to cultivate this feeling of togetherness and to give the unconscious message that we understand their need to have more authority and will meet it in ways that are good for the whole kindergarten family. This is one way we make a bridge from working as a model

for imitation to the next developmental phase that the six- and seven-year-olds are expanding into, the stage of responding to a beloved authority.

At the Big Garden, there is also a little forest. It is here where the children believe the Fairy Mother lives. I see how important it is for the older children to deepen their imaginations about what her house looks like inside the hollow tree, where her front and back doors are, who her helpers are, etc. They build paths for her, make stair steps out of stones, and leave little offerings by her door. Sometimes she leaves things for them, too. I am reminded that the changes that the older children are experiencing do not signify that the children now need intellectual understandings. Rather, the six/seven year transition time asks for the teacher's assistance to create opportunities to allow the older children to cultivate expansive inner landscapes into which their newfound rich picturing capacities can pour.

When it is the end of our play/work time at the Big Garden, the bell rings again, our toys are put away and kings are chosen to lead us back to the school. At the beginning of the school year, we learn that the big children of the grade school are inside their rooms and do not want to be disturbed while they are writing in their books, so we walk quietly by their windows. This prepares us to arrive at the school door and enter inside with a semblance of calm and order. Of course, "Dusty Gnome" awaits us inside and our arrival will probably wake him and Redbird up. The children often bring back sticks, moss, berries, rocks, etc. and gift them to Dusty in his home under our Nature Table. Sometimes we have to help him houseclean as the year goes on. Each time we arrive back into our classroom there is always some child who draws our attention to what is new on the Nature Table.

Transition to Indoor Time

Our arrival in the classroom finds some of us changing wet socks and pants. We take off our outdoor clothes, hang them up properly, put our dirty laundry in the basket by the door and make our way to the circle rug to put our shoes on. I find it makes a great difference if I can model a slow pace and a calm presence before we open the door from outside and after we enter the cloakroom. I even slow down my speaking and gestures as if we have all the time in the world to accomplish our next tasks.

Our places at the rug are marked by our indoor shoes and a picture card. The card is the same symbol that also marks our cubby. We don our shoes, leave our card behind, make our way to the line-up for the lavender hand-wash, wash our hands accompanied by a loving towel-dry from teacher Claire and then make our way back to our place still marked by our card. We sit down and wait until teacher asks a friend to pick up all of the cards.

Circle Time

Then circle time can begin. We begin circle with the same verses each day and end with a lullaby that beckons us into rest time. The beginning verses along with the lavender hand-wash are designed to help pull the children into themselves and to help ground us after our long outdoor playtime. Although I value the outdoor experience, I also see the need of children in our time to be able to self-regulate in an indoor environment. I value the importance of a program with a balance of outdoor and indoor opportunities.

The physical changes of the six/seven year transition are often accompanied by what appears to be great restlessness in the child's body, and it's important to help the child to find ways to bring control over his/her impulsive gestures. Otherwise the change becomes even more distressing for them and others around them. Impulse control is something that children can learn through strong rhythms and imitation of the gestures of beloved others. Circle time provides opportunities to expand gestures and then bring them back into form, and this subtle massaging activity can have wondrous effects on the older child. At circle time, I work with some mood of the fifth circles (effective tools for pulling the older child back into a more dream-like state), developmental journeys (ample variety of movements to assist the etheric in penetrating the whole body), fairy tale circles (to assist the burgeoning picture imaginations), and seasonal/festival themes. Sometimes the older children will have ideas about how to augment these circles. I remember one year a six-year-old boy said, "I think just one child should sing that part." This child's mother is Verbeck trained, and I knew he had witnessed many of her performances so I took his response to mean that he would like to sing that part of the

festival play alone. He was overjoyed when I asked him if he could do that for us. Sometimes the children will also give suggestions about gestures. "Let's do hopping steps now." To connect to the older children's suggestions and incorporate them without reinforcing interruptions at circle time can be a valuable skill that a teacher can cultivate. However, care must be taken to ensure that it doesn't become a game to see how many times circle can be interrupted. One can determine when a suggestion emerges from an older child's deep-seated need and often his/her suggestion is something that could be important for the whole group.

The older children, of course, manifest responses to circle that are representative of their development. Often when the older children begin to experience cause and effect and the sense of time in their consciousness, they will speed up the words in a circle or they will slow it down. Or they will do different gestures than the teachers, or they will refuse to do this "boring stuff" or repeatedly interrupt and have a "better idea." Being the center of attention and being the "boss" of things becomes important to them. Incorporating opportunities for the older children to enter the middle of the circle one at a time can change the focus so that they are awaiting their turn to do this. Circle games and some fairy tale circles can provide these opportunities.

Of course, each situation must be met with loving firmness. "You weren't interrupting us, were you?" or "You probably just forgot how to do this. You can watch us from the watching chair and then you'll see how we do it." Sometimes just a gentle touch or a teacher standing close by reminds an older child to join in. The placement of the children at circle makes a big difference when there are those who are going through the stage of whispering and giggling.

During circle time, I find it is an invaluable tool to just carry the assumption within myself that everyone will participate. Somehow the children pick up on this and then a gentle reminder, "Joseph, you'll be helping us" without stopping the flow of verse and gesture can serve to bring the children all along together. I also frequently imagine that I have angel wings and that I am wrapping my wings around particular children and bringing them along with me.

Estelle Bryer in her book, *Eurythmy for the Young Child*, says "When the children are school-ready, the teacher can become more authoritative and expect the children to be more correct and qualitative in their movements. Here, nods of recognition can do wonders." Sometimes I have to work hard to make an individual connection with a child when he/she is going through the change. If the child cares for me and we have built soul/spiritual substance between us, then it's more effective when I can glance at him/her across the circle with raised eyebrows. In order to cultivate this bond and mutual interest, a home visit pays off mightily. Because of the link we have created together during our communion time at the child's home, a glance in his/her direction at circle time is all that is needed.

Often the older child is moving into a phase where being met as an individual becomes important. It can be therapeutic for the classroom setting to listen and respond to the older child so that he/she feels heard. The younger children are often still operating as a group ("a bunch of grapes") while the older ones are beginning to individuate.

Then comes the time in the course of the year when we can have some circle activities where we can take turns. This usually happens when a few of the children have completed the six/seven year change. Then, the group dynamic is able to allow for the watching of others while some, for instance, use the scooter boards three at a time or take turns getting wrapped in a cocoon and unfurled.

Another circle activity that addresses the older child's changing consciousness is, after many repetitions of a particular verse, to then begin to whisper or silently move it. During these times the whole group is very attentive and one can see the older children looking out and away as they form the words and picture images in their mind's eye without saying them out loud. The younger children are often carried along in this circle activity just by the sheer force of their older peers' concentration.

Rest Time

As I mentioned, the end of circle is signaled by a lullaby. The children, one by one, pick up a pillow and blanket and find a place to lie on the rug. This is a relatively new aspect of my program – something that I never attempted or felt was necessary in my earlier years as an early childhood teacher. The trigger for change for me was observing in James Hillier's class at the Lake Champlain school. The quality of peace as the children eagerly took their rest was palpable the day that I observed in his class. That day, as I also used those moments to recharge myself, I realized what it could mean to a child if he/she had a regular opportunity to build a habit of "taking time." Could this be a wellspring for the child's later meditative life? I decided to incorporate a rest time into my program. And, what better time than to place it after an expansive hour-long outdoor playtime and a vigorous circle!

At the beginning of the year, rest time is not something that some of the new children understand or have experienced as part of their routines. Fortunately, the older children can carry the habit on from their kindergarten experience the year before. This activity is also accompanied by an imagination. The children are the birds in the nest and Mamma Bird (the teacher) can tap the birds on their back only after she sees that they have had their rest. It generally takes about two weeks before the children are visibly drawing sustenance from these moments. Those that aren't able to settle often benefit from a little cozy nest by themselves or by being close beside the teacher. Sometimes this can be the opportunity for a well needed foot massage or back massage – another opportunity for the teacher to bond in a loving way with the individual child and for the child to receive loving touch. It's also a valuable observation to ascertain which children respond to firm touch and which find soft touch more acceptable. It seems to me that children nowadays have very busy lives and touch experiences are often one of the things that are sacrificed.

When Mamma Bird taps the baby birds on the back, then they put away their pillows and folded blankets, go to the bathroom, wash their hands and make their way to the snack table.

Snack Time

Our snacks vary according to the grain of the day. Keeping in mind that the children often have quick breakfasts and that they have burned off a lot of calories so far during their vigorous morning activities, we serve healthy, abundant portions. We also augment the grain with a seed or nut that then makes the food a complete protein. Children who do not have protein before coming to school can show signs of irritability, light-headedness and lethargy. We all know how these symptoms can complicate a child's kindergarten experience. So, fresh ground almonds, ground flax seeds or ground sunflower or sesame seeds are added to the grains and a fruit or vegetable is served on the side. Drinks are made from a mixture of apple juice and herbal tea or just simply mother earth juice (water).

During snack time, we practice passing food to our neighbors. Even warm soup bowls are skillfully passed down our big, long table. We practice our social graces by asking for things with pleases and thank yous, putting our napkins on our laps and trying to remain sitting on our bottoms on the benches. The act of calmly sitting of course becomes more difficult as the six-year-olds begin to go through the change and become like little bubbling pots.

The table has been set with placemats, cloth napkins, cups and utensils, and our places are marked with our symbol cards. The candle is lit, the blessing is sung and then the serving and conversation begins. Some years we have quiet mealtimes because the children are unable to visit without using their loud booming voices – this also is a good opportunity for impulse control and, of course, is accompanied by an imagination so that it doesn't seem like a cruel imposition. However, most times we are able to visit, joke and tell stories within an acceptable decibel range. Redbird inevitably lets us know if we're too loud. He hangs from a branch near our snack table and it truly is magical to see that if it gets too loud the children will report that "Redbird is turning around! It's too loud."

During our community meals, I learn a lot of things – like. . . what infinity is, who God really is, that there are angels on the ceiling of the kindergarten, what video a child has watched, who's parents are arguing and about what, who is losing another tooth, who doesn't believe in Santa Claus, what misconceptions the

children have and who is starting to say and do things that signal the six/seven change for them. While overhearing the children as they speak to one another, I am helped to appreciate where they are in child-consciousness, which is often not where we adults perceive them to be.

At the end of snack time, Redbird kisses a child to put out the candle and we say thank you for the meal and blessings on our. . . painting or drawing or bakeshop or soup-making day. Two children are chosen to clear the table, do the dishes and sweep the floor under the table. They don their aprons and proceed while the other children are called to come and place their cups on the tray by the sink and then, one by one, enter the play.

Free Play Time

Let the enthusiastic delight begin! It's a wonder how the children's eagerness and spontaneity is there day after day! The children seriously choose their props and find their way into some friend's imagination and then the alchemy begins. I have some everyday toys that the older children tend to appreciate. Heavy wooden boxes become boats, sleighs, nests, etc; leftover wooden rounded pickets from our picket fence are used for skis, crutches, skateboards and roof panels; a thickly laminated heavy wooden slab becomes a computer, TV screen or performance stage. All of these heavy things are lifted high into the two climbing platforms. Because these platforms are across from each other, the children often attach fingerknit wires between them, arrange pulleys for transporting baskets of things across the room or for giving babies rides. Some dress-ups also facilitate the older children's imaginations. The white skirts and tops stimulate weddings, a variety of hats stimulate the pictures the children have of the professions of the world. Of course this leads to who is the boss of this game. There are endless conversations amongst the six-year-olds working out who gets to be the boss.

For the older children, there comes a time in the year when these well-loved props fall short of their developing consciousness and then the children can be seen at free play time sitting for long periods of time talking about what they are going to do and sometimes never quite getting down to the task. They spend so much time discussing and planning that at tidy-up time they will loudly complain that they did not get the opportunity to play. Sometimes they will sit around with their finger-knitting baskets and converse or philosophize like a group of old men or women.

When the capacity to see ideas and plan ahead arrives for the older children they can go through a time of frustration. They haven't yet developed the skills to implement their ideas, and, when they do have some success in orchestrating the specific play scenarios that they are imagining then they can also become trapped in it. They can't seem to get any further than playing the same thing over and over again, and they are reluctant to let any other peer move the imagination along. The older children can benefit from the teacher being available during the play to help them to overcome this mire of being stuck and to give a little prop or suggestion that can help the play to move on to new horizons. The younger children are also helpful at this time. The fluidity of the younger child's play, where the child responds lightly to the props involved and then freely moves on to new scenarios, is a helpful remedy to the older child's newfound consciousness. The interplay of the older and younger children can help massage the older child into his new reality with more grace and comfort. It can also be helpful for the older child to be brought into the teacher's work activity. From this perspective she/he can watch the other children's play and then be inspired to go back into the play in a freer way.

It also helps to have some general "rules of the land" during free play time. One of our necessary rules is that "we are all together in this land." This alleviates a lot of the exclusiveness that especially the girls will play at when they go through the change. There are still many opportunities for them to have private times with their special friends. There are also many ways that we can be all together that do not crowd others. If I see that there is a particular child that disrupts the play, I have to work harder trying to find a way that he/she can be occupied serving the play, developing new skills or perhaps, that child can be distracted into another activity until the mood shifts.

The healing basket is one of our important tools, as well. If a child's gestures have gotten away from him/her, then this child can administer the healing salve to the offended party. Perhaps also the healing silk cloth that

is in the basket needs to be wrapped around the child's hands, feet, etc. while the child waits quietly for her helpful ways to return. While the etheric is making its final pass through the child's body before it liberates itself, teachers often see manifestations of roughness in the child's gestures and a sense that he/she is more out-of-control. A time to sit with the healing cloth on one's hands needn't be a punishment. It can be administered kindly and matter-of-factly and can give the child just the right few moments to settle back into himself.

Above all, at this time in their development, I find the older children need adults around them who are not alarmed by them but can, instead, carry the inner stance of "I know these changes are hard for you. I understand and I will help you." The older children tend to be appreciative when they can meet a firm and loving boundary. Although initially, the children will push against a boundary or a teacher, when the limit is held lovingly and firmly, the eventual response is usually a fond embrace or a desire to come closer. So much is changing in their world and they need to have the assurance that they will continue to be held surely and safely in the arms of the kindergarten.

Some of the common games that I see the older children play are master/servant (mothers tending babies, owners taking dogs for walks); tying finger-knitted ropes into knotted masses; building houses, going inside them and talking; wrapping presents and delivering them; making money; building up puppet play scenes and talking the puppets through little stories on the landscapes they've created; and finding ways to elevate themselves in their play. Each year many of these same themes repeat themselves.

Another prop that I find very useful is a variety of softly stuffed cushions. The children drag them around, use them in their houses and derive much pleasure from the kind of sensory play where they can climb underneath and be squashed, pile them up and jump into them, etc. Although this may seem rambunctious, it actually turns out more often to be an orderly game that enables the older children to direct the taking of turns and the making sure others are out of the way. This activity can take long periods of time to organize and set-up.

During free play time, the teacher takes up a work activity like folding laundry, fixing toys and props, carving, ironing, baking, chopping vegetables for soup and making new toys. Also, at certain times of the year, life activities like threshing and grinding grain, processing wool, etc. resonate with what's happening in nature. The older children tend to become more interested in participating in these focused activities as the year progresses. Sometimes the older children will suggest that they can do it themselves. One year a group of older children told me that they didn't need my help to make the soup anymore. Another child said, "When are you going to let me clean this whole kindergarten by myself?" (Needless to say, he didn't repeat that request too many times.)

In our kindergarten, all of the equipment is designed to be used in play except for our two work tables. Our cupboards have been unloaded, flipped on their side and used for four-seater boats. At the time when the children themselves are stretching taller and spreading up through their ribcage and out through their limbs, it is not uncommon to see the older children work very hard at moving furniture and hoisting it on top of each other until they have built structures that tower up toward the ceiling. I like to be close to make sure that these three-dimensional works of art are safe. The next inevitable step is that the creator climbs to the top of the creation and perches there contentedly while surveying others in play. The closer the children can get to the ceiling, the better! Often at this time we also see ladders and stair steps appearing in the children's drawings. It is during free play time that we also have our painting, drawing, baking and craft times. Everyone comes to our table to paint and draw but baking and handwork are not compulsory.

The older children can be very helpful to the younger children at handwork time. Threading needles, tying knots and many other tasks can be joyfully accomplished by those who want to be in charge. However, it is my experience that children, old and young, prefer their play. And handwork projects that are begun can be soon abandoned in favor of interesting play happening somewhere else in the room. This is why I have handwork baskets for each individual child. Unfinished handwork projects go into the baskets. The younger

children may begin a project which they complete much later or not at all. If I feel it is therapeutic for a child to complete his creation, then I will bring him over to it later, but mostly I honor his need to be in the play instead. This reminds me of Michael. Michael, a premature child born at twenty-six weeks, has been with us in the kindergarten for three years. Each year, he enthusiastically comes over to the handwork table and begs for a turn to make a heart pin cushion for Valentine's Day. This year is the first year that he has stayed with the task without being distracted into the play. For three years, he's been working on the same pincushion. This year, he has asked if he can make another one for his own sewing basket. (The kindergarten children who will be going into grade one make a sewing needle book and prepare a sewing basket as their grade one project). Readiness for working to completion on focused projects has finally arrived for Michael, and it's no surprise that so have a lot of other characteristics of grade one readiness.

Painting and drawing time are signaled by a song. Some of the older children generally voluntarily come to help me set up. When everyone has arrived at the table, I open the window a crack to invite the color fairies to come in and dance on our paper. Of course, the color fairies come in when it's quiet. This can be quite a challenge for the older children whose desire to socialize is strong. For them to paint quietly is another opportunity for impulse control and for them to practice self-regulation.

When a few of the children have finished their paintings (drawings) and have put their boards (books) away, then the clean-up gets underway. Children volunteer or are asked to clean the paint pots or put away the drawing mats and crayons. Those that have finished that are not cleaning up the paint/drawing tables then move into the play to help tidy-up the play props.

Tidy-up Time

My approach to cleaning up the kindergarten with the children has changed over the past five years. When I began teaching over thirty years ago, I would sing a cleanup song and the children would willingly join in, imitating my activity. Through time, I have seen many changes to children's reactions to this transition, and it has been hard for me to relinquish the ideal that the children should just calmly imitate my activity. More and more children cannot deal easily with this transition. Behaviors such as going limp, racing around the room wildly, hiding, sitting, wandering around holding the same prop for the duration of tidy-up, going to the bathroom until clean-up is done – all of these are common reactions. This is what I have found works for me now.

When we have painting and drawing days, the children finish and leave the artistic activity a few at a time, and the first thing they see is one teacher already busy putting away the play props. This teacher leads the children into helping with the tidy-up tasks if they do not join in naturally. Sometimes they have to be reminded about their task if working alongside them with enthusiastic example does not work.

On the other days, when play is interrupted for tidy-up, the teacher sings "Let us form a ring" to call the children together; sits on the floor with arms crossed; lights a candle; sings a song and then assigns tasks. After the tasks are assigned the teacher covers her eyes ("I'm closing up the curtains.") and then counts to ten, "opens the curtains," and sees that the children are well underway with their jobs. The children love to scurry away and be busy with their task so when the teacher "opens the curtains" she can see that they are already at work. I also find it much easier for the children to transition into tidy-up if they have an opportunity to collect themselves first. Crossing the arms and singing our tidy-up song accomplishes this. Assigning tasks gives them forward momentum and then they are able to imitate again instead of getting caught up in the nervous agitation of the transition. Covering up my eyes (curtains) and then opening them again adds an element of playfulness.

There are still many sensitive children who need to be removed from the change in activity as their friends scurry around the room. Scrubbing a pot, sweeping a floor away from the main area of activity, wiping down a table, sitting on a chair and coiling up finger-knit ropes – these can all be more solitary tasks which are calming for these sensitive children. When all our toys are put away, the story candle is ready and our benches are circled around the rocking chair, then story time may begin.

Story Time

Each year the stories I tell depend on the group of children in the kindergarten. The older children will begin to request stories that they remember from the year before when their memory capacity begins to change. I try to honor these requests, especially if they are beneficial for the younger children as well. These stories are like old friends to them.

As the year progresses, the older children relish the opportunity to pretend the stories together. This is a way to prolong the number of times the stories are told, and, therefore, allow them to sink a little deeper into the children's consciousness. This activity is a bridge to drama in the grade school. When we pretend or dramatize the stories, the children wear drapes or costumes while the teacher leads them through the story in a dream-like way. Sometimes some of the older children will spontaneously speak the voices of who/what they are pretending, sometimes the teacher just tells the story as the children move it. A story is told at least five times, sometimes more. Then it is often pretended or presented as a puppet play. Sometimes the story theme finds its way into our circle or play time as well. During play time the children will find the same props or make up their own, and then an older child will often direct/tell the story.

Nature stories are also told, and curative stories are helpful for the children going through the change. There's nothing like hearing what happened to the little princess when she wouldn't let her sister play with her friends; or what about Mousie-nibble-tooth when he hid behind the tree instead of helping to clean up the nest.

As the years have passed, I've noticed that different groups of children have different interests that they share. Sometimes I've felt that I could perceive a bit of their destiny together. One year the children persistently begged to have a play each day. "Can we pretend the story today?" Their class eight Shakespeare play was a wonder to behold. Another year, the children were constantly doing puppet plays. Sometimes, during the course of the year, we will invite the parents in to see our plays. The younger children sit with their parents while the older ones play out the story. The preparation beforehand is a wonderful exercise in developing group qualities that the older children have been struggling to cultivate. Sometimes, they work out that two children move the same puppet or that, in the play that there are two or three of one character. I try to be available to assist but leave the arranging up to them as much as possible. Of course, a word of suggestion placed at the right time is often helpful. Sometimes, if someone is left out, I will suggest that he/she could play the music (kinderharp or tone bars). It's surprising to see how they work together and often come up with solutions that I wouldn't have thought about. All of this is done with the same quality of dream-like play that they also carry into their play time.

After story time is over, I put out the candle while singing a song. We then stand and say a verse together and then we play games. Games time interfaces with the time that the children are dressing to go home or to our continuing care program. So, while my colleague comes and takes the children one at a time to dress for going home with their parent who is waiting outside the door, the rest of us are occupied in focused play together.

This is our way to make this transition calmer because the children are not usually all in the cloakroom area at the same time. It is also an opportunity for us to bring to the children some of the old traditional games which in olden times used to bring neighborhood children together in the spirit of co-operation and fun.

Games Time

These games belong to a rich inheritance that our society is running the risk of losing and the children love them. It's insightful to see which games are favored by which child. There are often requests, but I usually rely on my instinct as to what particular game would help to harmonize the events of the day so far.

There are also other kinds of games that we play at this time. Depending on the energy level of the children and the mood of the group, we will play floor games, finger games, traditional games, obstacle courses, or use the scooter boards or other props.

These games rely on the children's abilities to be able to take turns, to wait, to be in a leadership and/or following role and to co-operate with a group intent. Perhaps the hardest lesson learned is waiting for another day if we don't get a turn today. Although the younger children tend to be more accepting, this can be difficult for the older children and especially those who have the family constellation of being an only child. Many productive conversations with parents can ensue and, as a result, the traditional games can be a teaching tool for all of us to show how important sharing activities are for these children. Valuable skills are developed in the children as they are stretched by these structured play opportunities.

Later in the year we play skipping games with the skipping rope that we have made from some of the children's finger-knitting. We know the year is coming to an end when the parents arrive to see us outside, skipping to our jump-rope rhymes.

As I look back over this article, I am reminded of how important the rhythm of the day is. If any changes occur in our routine, there is always a ripple effect for the older and younger children. There are so many body, consciousness, emotional and social awareness changes happening for the older children already that they especially need the security of being able to rely on events happening in the usual order. We have found that we can shorten or elongate aspects of our rhythm but changing the order of things can affect adversely the well-being of our kindergarten family.

Working with the older children on a daily basis can be a challenge. However, a teacher who compassionately appreciates the tremendous upheaval these children are undergoing can contribute much to the immediate well-being of the children and their families and the children's later success in the grade school.