

The Power of Touch

Joan Almon

In February 2007, I had the pleasure of working again with Fred Donaldson as we both delivered keynote talks at the east coast Waldorf early childhood conference. For those who don't know Fred, he is a "play specialist." He travels the world playing with children, youth, adults, and elderly persons in all kinds of venues from ordinary preschools to prisons. He also plays with animals, most notably wolves, elephants, and lions as well as dolphins and manatees.

He's learned important lessons along the way, and at the essence of his work is the realization that play is a form of love. It is a gift from the Creator and provides a deep connection between us and other living beings. It is part of the wellspring of all that is creative within us. A child once said to him, "Fred, when we play we're not different." This expression of unity and love that is experienced within the world of play is among the great gifts that Fred imparts when he speaks and shares his stories.

Fred's background is not based on Waldorf education or Anthroposophy. He was a professor who became unhappy with academic life. He walked away from it and took a job at the other end of the education spectrum: he became an assistant in a preschool. There he learned profound lessons about play and began to practice those lessons with children, adults, and animals. The play he discovered is what I would call a primal form of play. It is the type of play we have in common with all other human beings and with many animals as well. It happens most often through touch, such as when you see puppies — or young children — rumbling and tumbling on the ground with each other. It may look wild but it is actually very peaceful, for if it becomes aggressive it ceases to be play.

When Fred speaks of the divine quality of play, I am often reminded of an experience I had in my kindergarten. I would be working on some basic activity such as baking or shoe polishing and the

children would be deeply engaged in play all around me. There was a hum in the kindergarten that was a sure sign that deep play was taking place. On some of these occasions the thought would arise from deep within me, “This is as close to heaven as you are likely to get on this earth.” It seemed to me that to enter into the child’s world of play was to enter a heavenly sphere, and I relished each moment there.

But there is a world of difference in how Fred interacts with children in play and how I do, and that is what is both very interesting and challenging to understand. As a Waldorf teacher I had been taught to enter the sphere of play without actually playing with the children. My early teachers, especially those from Europe, had made a strong point of saying that the teacher is not supposed to get down on the floor and play with the child. We do the work of the kindergarten and through imitation the children enter into the spirit of play. In fact I experienced the power of this approach thousands of times with the three- to six-year-olds I worked with. I worked, they played, and we shared a wonderful intimacy with each other in that common space of meaningful work and genuine play.

But working with Fred makes me question the strictness of some of the “rules” that governed my work. Even as a teacher I frequently “broke the rules” in order to bring children back into play. There were many times when I entered the world of play with a child to get him or her started on play. I learned when to withdraw so the child could go forward alone or with other children. But Fred enters a space I rarely allowed myself to enter. It is the space where we touch each other in play with a clean, safe touch, where we are down on the floor interacting with the children with our whole bodies. I touched the children in passing, or held their hands on walks or when saying a blessing over a meal. I washed and dried their hands, oiled their hands, or stroked their backs at nap time. I learned many things about touch but I never rolled around on the floor with children as Fred does. I never engaged in full body touch with the children, and I’m not sure I would now if I had a kindergarten again. But I am left wondering about the place of touch-based play in the lives of children, not only touch that involves adults but the rumble-tumble play that is so much a part of many children’s lives.

I ask myself if I was too strict in this area and did

not give children time to explore the full range of play. One thing is clear to me as I hear Fred’s stories: this type of touch play is very profound and touches a deep chord in people, as well as in animals. The other thing that strikes me is that there are definite guidelines or boundaries involved with this type of play. There is nothing aggressive about it. There is no tickling or other subjugation of one person by another. It is a safe space and is an ultimate form of safe touch.

I left the conference with more questions than answers, especially the question of whether I had held too narrow a conception of play while I was teaching. Social make-believe play is for me the highest form of play, for it leads directly to the development of free, creative thinking, but it is not the only form of play. Movement-based play, such as running, climbing, jumping, and balancing, is also critical for children. Indeed, for many children who are blocked in their imaginative play, physical play opens the door to social play.

I ask myself now, is it the same with touch-based play? When children rumble-tumble on the floor with each other are they exercising a form of play that is satisfying in itself and also opens doors to imaginative play, to deep communication with others, to a profound sense of social relationship?

A whole new research field about touch and touch-based play has opened before me. At the moment I can only invite others to join with me in exploring what we know about the importance of touch in early childhood. I am sure that many of you have been consciously working on the sense of touch already, especially those who have taken up therapeutic approaches in early childhood work, and perhaps you would be willing to share some of your experiences and insights in *Gateways*.

Joan Almon is the Director and Founder of the Alliance for Childhood.

FLY ON THE WALL

5 year old girl –
When I woke up I thought I was a grownup because I was so serious.