

From Our Gentlemen Colleagues

— Lincoln Kinnicutt, Tim Bennett, Joe Robertson

In anticipation of this issue, a request was sent out to some male kindergarten colleagues to describe activities they are bringing into their classes. Below are some “bits and pieces” that have come in response. They give a surprising and delightful glimpse into the range of what the “gents” are doing.

Lincoln Kinnicutt **Kindergarten teacher** **Potomac Crescent Waldorf School,** **Alexandria, VA**

We had been doing Nancy Foster’s woodcutter circle, which I modified so the woodcutter was using a two-person saw. This change was made in part because in the past when we had gestured using an axe, the children (boys) would quickly start chopping each other. We also have a large bow saw, which we use for cutting wood outside, and I wanted to use that familiar image. In circle the children would pair up and hold hands, sitting down with their feet together, and go back and forth “cutting.” When we started cutting wood outside, I realized that the sawhorse I had made was too small. So instead of standing to cut, we would have to sit just like in the circle, using the bow saw as a two-person saw.

After that circle we did a gnome circle with images such as hacking rocks. A parent gave me a box of geodes which we were able to hack open when we were outside, just like in the circle.

Neither of these things is particularly practical (we do use the wood at the school bonfire), as in “useful,” but they did end up being real activities which were mirrored in gesture in our circles.

Tim Bennett **Kindergarten teacher** **Seattle Waldorf School, Seattle, WA**

Tim’s class spends a large portion of each morning as an “outdoor kindergarten.” There is a large park nearby that the class journeys to each day where they have free unstructured movement and the kinds of climbing and scrambling activities most kindergartens can

only dream about. Yet the “practical work” that has arisen from these outings is a surprise.

Some years ago Tim had seen a hand-sewn winter cap made out of triangular shapes cut from old thrift-store wool sweaters that had been felted in the washer and dryer. The pieces were sewn together with blanket stitch, using brightly colored knitting yarn. On their way to the park this winter, they commonly saw homeless people. So their practical work has been to sew caps for their hatless, homeless neighbors.

Joe Robertson **Parent/Child class teacher** **Rudolf Steiner School, New York City**

Joe guides classes of 12 to 14 children, 25 months to 43 months old, who attend with one or both parents (or grandparents or a caregiver. . . and sometimes the whole lot). The classes are 90 minutes in length with free play, a short circle, hand washing, snack, and a short puppet story. Most of the activities listed below occur during the free play time, which is about the first 45 minutes.

We iron silks and napkins for the upstairs kindergarten, fold napkins, wash and polish apples, cut apple into slices, knead dough for our rolls. We bake rolls also for one of our nursery rooms. We clean the table and floor when finished. We wash our hands, sand all our well-loved wooden toys, sweep, and put away our things. This year we sawed and sanded nature blocks. This is all so simple and ordinary.

It is an amazing journey to dedicate oneself to teaching young children. “Teach” seems to be such an ill-fitting verb. We do not sit them down to learn letters and numbers; we do not review colors and shapes by name until the children

can identify and repeat them back to us—all routines that are quite common in most American pre-schools today. In Waldorf early childhood programs the most important lesson we have to offer is who we are as worthy human beings and that the work we do is nourishing to the children in our care. In early childhood and in the majority of my work with parent-child classes, the main lesson is always what I bring of myself each day. Each year that I am in the classes it becomes more and more apparent that what the children need are jobs that fold seamlessly into the morning we are living. It is the simple rule in the form of a question: Is what we are doing needed?

We make oatmeal and bake rolls because we need to eat. We iron because our silks and clothes are wrinkled. We sand the boat because it has splintered, rough patches. We cut apples because often we get a bit hungry before our group snack. We sweep the floors when we have dirtied our floor with flour or wood dust. I get out the screwdriver and repair the cabinet door if it falls loose. When the chairs need washing, we will wash them.

There was one job this year that I am not certain met my criterion of really being needed. The two- and barely three-year-olds gathered to watch me saw small limbs and then sand the cut rounds to make a little basket of play wood. Though the children did need something bigger,

both in gesture and effort to take in for themselves, we did not need any more wood pieces. We had plenty. But at the suggestion and encouragement of a colleague, I chose to go ahead and use the wood table and see how it went.

I sang a little inchworm song to find just the spot to cut. My concentration heightened without much effort once I held the large and very sharp saw at the ready. But I joyfully made a clear action on purpose and sawed away. I realized as I observed the children flock over and live into this job, the nature of the two- and early-three-year-old is still so timeless; each moment has the purpose we give it with our inner life and connection, even if it is a bit out of context to our defined morning.

The quality of physical work children witness adults doing in the world and home has diminished rapidly in our technological age. It is the loveliest gift for the children when we have given great thought and heart to what we do for them and around them, to assure that what we choose to do in our rooms will nourish them in lasting ways. It is my experience that nothing can matter more to the children, ourselves and the other adults in the room than the way we take our time. A peaceful, steady pace and the permission to finish our job un-rushed nourish a soul deeply with a beauty and strength that is without words. ♦



Carrying wood from the forest. Photo courtesy of Su Rubinoff