Practical Activities with the Young Child

~ Stephen Spitalny

This article was adapted from Steve's book, Connecting with Young Children.

The task of the kindergarten teacher is to adjust the work taken from daily life so that it becomes suitable for the children's play activities. The whole point. . . is to give young children the opportunity to imitate life in a simple and wholesome way. —Rudolf Steiner, April 1923

Imitation is the natural learning mode for the young child. Rudolf Steiner described it as a sort of bodily religion arising from a sense of joy and wonder with all experiences and sensations. The young child, so recently arrived into a physical body from the spiritual world, loves all he meets in the world. The adult, whether caregiver, kindergarten teacher, or parent, has therefore a huge responsibility since the child is molding himself out of his experiences, out of what and who is imitated. Therefore it is incumbent on the adults to create an environment of objects, people and activities that we would be happy to have taken up in imitation by the child. An environment that nurtures the child includes crucial elements that create form and order in the developing child: rhythm in daily life activities, safe and healthy boundaries, and adults' consistency in maintaining the boundaries and rhythm.

Young children naturally are most active in the doing, the willing realm of soul life. They are drawn to adults' work activity, especially when the adult is truly engaged in meaningful working. I experience that when a chair breaks, or we are making lunch—meaningful work that needs to be done—then the older children in kindergarten are attracted to participating and helping, while the younger ones exactly imitate the activities in their play. Young children are drawn to the activities of real workers and craftspeople like the blacksmith, the carpenter, spinner, plumber, and so on. The experiencing of these activities is a body-building experience for the child, as well as an example of focused adult will for the child's will forces. A young child who experiences, and even does, various different types of real work is given a blessing of many images to incorporate into his or her development. As Joop van Dam writes in "Understanding Imitation Through a Deeper Look at Human Development," "[his] body becomes an instrument with all kinds of tones and colors. This is a body the individuality can enter and live in for a lifetime."

When the adult fully engages in her own work, the will of the adult is engaged and it is a sort of invitation to the imitative will of the young child. There are certain qualities of this "real" work for the adult to develop. It is meaningful if you do the work whether or not the children participate. If you are simply doing something so that the children will join in, and then when they don't you put away materials and tools, then clearly it not something important that needs to be done. It is also an important quality to model that you are planted in one location while focused on the work, rather than a little work, a little roaming the room, a little more work and a little more roaming. This calls for being prepared when you set to the work—all needed tools and materials are at hand, as well as tools and materials for the children who choose to imitate your activity.

There is so much to do to care for a kindergarten home: washing, cooking, sewing, ironing, planting, weeding, pruning, repairing chairs, tables, dolls and other toys, making toys for the kindergarten, and more—not as activities that are done to give the children projects, but work related to the care and improvement of our kindergarten home.

All learning involves an engagement of the will. Learning requires effort. With young children, the will is directly connected to sensory activity, without the mediation of thinking or understanding—this is the process of imitation. It is a special art to engage the child's interest and attention, an art that adults must

learn. When the adult takes up the tasks that need to be done with joy and with enthusiasm, with his or her own engaged will, then the child's attention is more likely to be present in the task as well. Tasks attended to with care and love engage the child's interest much more than tasks done in a disinterested or even resentful way.

One's inner attitude to the work at hand is so important. Do domestic activities conjure thoughts and feelings of drudgery, of chores? If the adult is begrudgingly doing the task, the attitude that the task is unpleasant is passed on to the child. Also, if the adult's heart is not in it, the adult's will is not truly engaged. So the children experience an adult who doesn't want to do a task, but is doing it, with just a part of herself involved. Even the name "chore" has a connotation of something one doesn't want to, but has to do. So consider the language used. "Task" or "job" seem to have a nicer ring to them.

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We are working with the reality of educating the will of the young child. It is will education to make a toy while the child is watching. Will education is making a wooden crate for kindergarten while the children are watching, and perhaps some are even helping. The child learns that first of all, it can be done. Human beings can make things, and the children can even make things. We are continuing the work of the creator beings in ways that are easily experienced. "Oh, we make stuff if we need it."

And the adult taking raw materials and making something from them is an example for the child's imagination. This type of activity stimulates the child's imagination into creative mobility. The imagination resonates with the activity of making when encountering it. This resonance works deeply into the child's soul and physical body. It stimulates the formative forces working in the brain and works deeply into the developing breathing and circulatory systems. The activities of making nourish and energize the young child's will forces.

When an adult makes a toy in front of the child, a doll or wooden animal for example, the child's will is stimulated by the creating power of the will of the adult. Making is will activity, and is a dwindling art. We all can be makers! Through making we immerse the young child in our engaged will.

One role of the adult is to welcome the child into the community of human working by doing work as example and with the young children. The adult's work is the tasks that need attention; the children's work is their play. In kindergarten, one day I was ironing and folding the napkins and placemats. "Steve, will you be a dog with us?" "I'll be a dog, but I'll be a dog right here doing the ironing." "Okay." The adult can be present, near the child's play, and engaged in adult activities. This example of working can be a stimulus for the child's play. The adult may of course initiate play, but needs to be aware of his or her role and the effect on the children, and know when to leave the children to play on their own terms. Children should not depend on adults to participate in their games, nor on adult attitudes. Free play will come from the children's own imagination, inspired by adults' working, songs, and stories, as well as everyday events.

If the adults are engaged in calm, purposeful activity, the children are likely to imitate it in their play, or even want to participate in the activity. Mending, sewing, washing, sweeping, and repairing toys, are among the activities for the teacher to be involved in while the children explore the room, play, draw, and so on. When conversation is kept to a minimum—both with adults and with the children—the children can be more deeply engaged with their play. The atmosphere created by adults engaged in such purposeful activity creates a protective and nurturing environment for the child in which he can either help with the chores, or explore the world through play.

Janet Kellman once spoke about the myth of quality time. What is "quality time?" Many adults think "special" time going to "special" places is more valuable than other activities; it has more connecting going on. Quality time really is measured by how truly present one is with the children, while one is supporting their developmental needs, the needs of the developing soul, etheric body, and will of the young child. Connecting with the children while immersing them in life activities, activities that nurture and sustain life, is a powerful support for the child's etheric and will development.

If one of our wooden chairs in kindergarten breaks, we fix it. We mend what needs repair, from chairs to dolls to children's pants and aprons. Whatever needs fixing, I always attempt to fix it myself before I call

in a "paid expert." Perhaps if I don't have the tools or skills, I ask a parent to help, and have it done when the children are present.

When something breaks, usually the children first try to fix it themselves. There always are one or two repair specialists who actually have the skills for many types of repairs. If those children can't do the repair, they bring it to me. We have created a culture of fixing and mending. One aspect of that is to acknowledge the situation right away, saying "We will mend this," even if it will be a while, or even another day, before repairs can begin. I always make sure to get to the repair project when the children are present, and not let it slide and end up forgotten.

Steiner said that it is important to bring life activities into the kindergarten, to surround the young children with real life. These life activities, life-giving and life-sustaining activities such as cooking, cleaning, gardening, and "housework," are nurturing the developing etheric body, the life body, of the child which will not, in a sense, be born until age six or seven. Life activities support the development of the life senses, the foundation for truly social life.

The whole point of a preschool or kindergarten is to give young children the opportunity to imitate life in a simple and wholesome way. This task of adjusting life as one carries it out in the presence of the child in a meaningful, purposeful way, according to the needs of each child, is in accordance with the child's natural and inborn need for activity and is an enormously significant educational task.

What are real life activities? They are real *and* they are life-based, need-based activities. At home or in the kindergarten, there are always domestic chores to be done: washing placemats and napkins; hanging them to dry; ironing, preparing and cooking meals, cleaning up after meals, weeding, pruning, raking leaves, and on and on. Both indoors and outdoors, there is plenty of work necessary for the maintenance of home and garden life. When we engage our adult will forces on this meaningful work, both the developing will and the developing etheric body of the children are strengthened. The children benefit from being surrounded by loving adults engaged in meaningful work such as housekeeping activities. The taking up of household tasks gives the children a sense of calm purpose and meaningful work. These activities help to create a sheath of warmth and protection around the children in our presence. And when the adult is meaningfully and joyfully engaged in work, the children play more peacefully, creatively and cooperatively. It is the magic example of the adult's engaged will for the child.

Adults engaged in the domestic arts (cooking, cleaning, building) provide real work examples that stream into the play of children and are very much in need because of the children's widespread lack of experiences of housework done in the home. Kindergarten has to take on some aspects of what the home once stood for; the home is no longer the heart center of the family, but has become a resting place in between errands, activities and appointments, to which parents and children are often on their way. Waldorf early childhood centers more and more have become a replacement for certain aspects of the traditional home. They provide a place where there is enough time for housework to be lovingly taken up and accomplished with participation from children. Providing a home-like environment for children gives them the opportunity to do things out of their own initiative. And the children need time, enough time. We need to create the feeling of "There is no rush. There is time to play."

Domestic activities, housework, taking care of the surroundings: all of these take us out of the personal and into the social realm. Caring for one's surroundings is a social gesture. We work together and for each other! The basis of our community life is the home, and social responsibility starts there.

Linda Thomas, whose cleaning company cares for the Goetheanum in Dornach, Switzerland says:

> *There exists a great difference between cleaning and caring. When we clean, we remove dirt, and the result of cleaning sometimes does not even last five minutes. At the Goetheanum, you have barely cleaned the hallway, and already someone walks over it, leaving footprints everywhere. The same goes for parents with young children. For this very reason, many people consider cleaning a frustrating and unrewarding activity, a troublesome necessity.*
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> *Yet, we should try to do this task with our full awareness, with all our love. Once we learn to consciously penetrate each little corner with our fingertips, then cleaning takes on a nurturing aspect and becomes caring. What is so wonderful about it is that the result of caring lasts considerably longer than the result of removing dirt! When we have taken special care of a room, the little bit of fresh dirt that is brought in is barely disturbing—one can live with it. The glow is totally different from areas where layers of dirt and grime have built up. Lately, a new cleaning culture, which we should really try to prevent, is*

trying to establish itself. There is supposedly a spray for everything—you spray and you wipe away—not much water is needed! One does indeed remove a small quantity of dirt, but instead of caring for a surface, you leave a chemical layer behind, containing quantities of dissolved dirt.

While caring for a room, we do not only come into contact with the physical world. The whole atmosphere changes, the room is filled with light. Children react especially strongly to this transformation, and they also seem to perceive the change directly. (See Linda Thomas, "Chaos in Everyday Life.")

How can we redeem housework, the image of housework as drudgery, so we provide a positive example for the children? We can find joy in the work and express it in our movement and our gestures. We can bring order and planning to our work and finish it. Some projects take more than one time to complete, but persistence over time is important for the child to observe. All of these, though, are self-discipline on the part of the adult, and hard work at first.

We can cultivate an attitude of looking for work that needs doing. That is a real gift to the children. Rather than, "What should I do with the children today?" we can say, "What needs to be done, and how do I do it?"

Rolling dough for pretzels. Photo courtesy of Joli Kiss, Hungary

Taking care of our body and our surroundings are most important. For me, craft projects are not as high a priority, though a craft project as a part of the preparation for a festival becomes a meaningful element in the life of home or kindergarten—for example, the making of a card for a birthday, or gifts for Mother's Day. But a project "to give the children something to do" is not so meaningful. Crafts and projects with the children can support creativity and motor skill development, but they don't exercise the will unless they come from the child's initiative. If the adult has a sewing project that needs doing—perhaps a cloth has torn—then of course you will have extra materials available as the children will also want to sew. And you can help them along as needed. Five- and six-year-olds will sometimes want to make something to bring into their imaginative play, perhaps a doll or puppet. But then it comes out of the child engaging herself, out of her own initiative, and based on imitation—the will is exercised and strengthened.

Domestic activities anchor the child in the world, both the physical world, and the social world in which we live. Our housework provides a healthy example for imitation. We are helping to make the children truly capable, and helping them toward their future with strong will forces.

It happens from time to time that a child is out of sorts and is not able to play constructively, either by herself, or in the social setting. A magical cure for that child is helping out with some real work that needs doing. Folding the laundry or cutting the vegetables is an opportunity for the child to get grounded into the work, and the obstacle to relaxed and peaceful play they may have been experiencing dissolves. A few minutes later one hears, "I want to go play now." The adult can feel that the child is really ready to play. Her fantasy or imagination has woken up again from a small dosage of meaningful work. ◆

References

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