

Soothing the Effects of Homelessness in Early Childhood: A Waldorf Inspired Approach

— Ilana Jakubowski

Visitors who come through the doors of First Place Kids Preschool are greeted with the harmonious hum of children at play. A group of children build a playhouse in the corner, while others help prepare the vegetables for tomorrow's lunch. In the adjoining classroom, toddlers crawl and take wobbly steps, babies stretch out on the soft rug and squeal with delight. The lighting is low and gentle. The teacher quietly sings. All is good in the world.

On the other side of the doors, there is a cacophony; the clamor of many adults moving about, trying to meet their family's basic needs under the roof of one building. First Place Kids Preschool is housed within First Place Family Center, a day shelter in Eugene, Oregon that serves families who are experiencing homelessness.

First Place Kids Preschool started in 2010, when local early childhood specialists recognized a gap in services being provided to young children within our community whose families were experiencing homelessness. What began as a weekly "playgroup" has now blossomed into a Waldorf-inspired preschool for children from birth to five, which runs five-half-days per week. Each day, First Place Kids Preschool

serves up to twenty children with free drop-in access to the therapeutic space which they so desperately need.

When a family becomes homeless, this often brings about a total disruption of routine, loss of familiar possessions, and a shift in community. The stress of these changes can lead to anxiety, depression, and aggression in homeless children at a rate of three times higher than their housed peers. Additionally, children whose families are experiencing homelessness are more likely to witness abuse, violence, and erratic adult behavior.¹ When the stressful events that accompany homelessness in early childhood continually overwhelm children's ability to process these experiences, they can be adversely affected for their entire lives.²

First Place Kids Preschool has become a beacon of safety, security, and refuge, giving children an opportunity to process their outer experiences while feeding them with the nourishment they need to heal the wounds of homelessness.

Six years ago, First Place Kids Preschool's original Program Director, Eileen Chanti, brought the first impulse to intertwine First Place Kids Preschool with Waldorf pedagogy. Over the years, we have found

that Waldorf early childhood pedagogy continues to provide the ideal framework for a therapeutic structure in which child self-healing can take place.

The wonderful article “Essentials of Waldorf Early Childhood Education” by Susan Howard³ distills the Waldorf early childhood approach into the following elemental parts: love and warmth; care for environment and nourishment for the senses; creative, artistic experience; meaningful adult activity; protection for the forces of childhood; gratitude, reverence and wonder; joy, humor, and happiness; and adult caregivers on a path of inner development.

At First Place Kids Preschool, we strive to consciously incorporate each of these elements into a Waldorf-inspired healing experience for the children that we serve.

Love and warmth

Three on-staff teachers welcome the children each morning and lead them through the half-day program. Children who are homeless are at high risk of suffering from a broken relationship with a caregiver,⁴ which often results in developmental delays and mental health issues later in life.⁵ Thus the dependable consistency of love and warmth embodied by our preschool staff become a crucially stabilizing factor in the development of the children within the preschool.

Care for the environment and nourishment for the senses

Life in a shelter is often chaotic, with high-volume, adult-content conversations, intense fluorescent lighting, and heavily-processed food; this sensory experience is intensified for children with heightened sensitivity to their sensory environment as a result of the stress of homelessness.⁶

Within the preschool walls, the physical environment strives to soothe the senses. The lighting is gentle, the colors are soft, and the classroom is tidy. We work with the tone of our voices, both in speech and song, to create soothing and melodious sounds. Essential oils with calming properties are diffused into the rooms. Our toys and equipment are made



of natural materials that offer rich sensations to the touch. Snacks and meals are prepared with organic ingredients, often in the children’s presence and with their help, bringing the nourishment of enticing smells and wholesome ingredients.

Creative, artistic experience

Children who may not be able to process their challenging experiences through talk or play often find an open door in the nonverbal, tactile act of creating art. Research backs the use of art therapy for children who have experienced trauma.⁷ Each day, we offer the children an artistic activity such as watercolor painting, drawing with beeswax crayons, sewing, or clay modeling. The children often become absorbed in this creative activity, sinking into it as an expressive outlet.

Meaningful adult activity as an example for the child’s imitation

Opportunities to practice simple homemaking tasks are few and far between for children without a home. Thus, the children are purposely invited to engage in much of the work of tending to the preschool space. They help prepare meals by rolling out bread dough, chopping vegetables, and stirring the soup. Cleaning is done in the presence of the children, who are often eager to help, jumping up to reach for the child-sized brooms and sponges. In the outdoor play yard, fun chores abound, from tending organic flowers and



vegetables in raised garden beds to toting pails of sand to the sandbox after a delivery. Caring for the physical environment seems to bring a sense of order to the children's inner worlds.

Free, imaginative play

Preschool mornings begin with a burst of free play. The classroom is designed to be as inviting as possible, with open-ended toys and objects from the natural world. Many of the children seem to have little experience engaging in imaginative play. Tragically, often their free play is spent reenacting challenging real-life situations, as the children attempt to process their daily realities. As teachers, we strive to create ample opportunities for free play and offer sparks of suggestions until the children can begin to tend their own fire of imaginative life.

Infants in homeless families have unique challenges. If the family lives in their car, babies likely spend most of their time in a car seat, with little access to clean, open floor space, and thus are often behind on basic motor development skills. Within the safe and inviting environment of the preschool, infants are able to practice rolling over, pushing themselves up, or crawling for the first time.

Protection for the forces of childhood

First Place Kids Preschool provides a world attuned to the unique physical, emotional, and intellectual processes of the young child. We rely on repetition, modeling, and a consistent rhythm to carry us throughout our day. A circle time that is rich in seasonal songs, stories, and imagery gives the children a felt experience of the earth's cycles.

Safeguarding the innocence of early childhood is at the foundation of our work. Children in our program often step into adult roles at a young age, tending to younger siblings and absorbing the anxieties of their caregivers.⁸ For them, the preschool is an oasis from the jangling, confusing adult world; they thrive in the preschool, where they can play, explore, and just be kids.

Gratitude, reverence, and wonder

The dreamy consciousness of early childhood lends itself to a sense of reverence for the natural world. There is no place quite like the garden to get lost in nature's magic. Each school day, rain or shine, the children pour out into our play yard and are immersed in the beauty of our flower and vegetable garden. Whether it is searching for worms under logs, watching birds build a nest, or planting seeds, children and teachers alike marvel in the processes of the earth.

Joy, humor, and happiness

The most common remark that new preschool volunteers make is surprise at the amount of joy expressed by these children navigating such challenging life circumstances. Whether it be witnessing a baby's first babblings, or seeing a seed sprout, or sharing in a warm hug and a joke, the children continually gift the teachers with many moments of shared happiness.

Adult caregivers on a path of inner development

One of the key factors in building resilience in young children is the presence of caring, attentive adults.⁹ By comprehensively training our staff, interns, and volunteers in trauma-informed care, Poverty 101, and

Positive Discipline, we offer children the support of informed and self-aware adults, laying the foundation for life-long resiliency.

It is a challenging reality that the children we serve are making their way in the world amongst a myriad of unjust and oppressive societal structures. As caregivers, we must accept that we often have minimal ability to change a child's external life circumstances. But we can rest assured that within the protective walls of First Place Kids Preschool, there is the opportunity to weave threads of nourishment and support into these children's lives. Our great and fervent hope is that the children we serve may blossom forth into their full, free selves. ♦

First Place Kids Preschool is interested in connecting with others bringing Waldorf impulses to children living in poverty or homelessness. If this applies to you, please contact us at: ilana.jakubowski@svdp.us.

Ilana Jakubowski is the current Director of First Place Kids; a program of St. Vincent DePaul of Lane County. Ilana holds a certificate in Early Childhood Education from the Waldorf Teacher Education Eugene program. She has long been interested in the cross section of therapeutic education and social justice issues and is deeply grateful to work and play at First Place Kids Preschool.

Resources:

- 1 Child Homelessness and Trauma," www.first5la.org/files/ChildHomelessnessTrauma.pdf.
- 2 "Complex PTSD," www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/treat/essentials/complex_ptsd.asp.
- 3 "Essentials of Waldorf Early Childhood Education," www.waldorfearlychildhood.org/uploads/Howard%20Article.pdf.
- 4 "The Cycle of Homelessness," <http://beyondhousing.icphusa.org/filelibrary/Zlotnickpresentation2010.pdf>.
- 5 "Taken Away: The Prevalence of Homeless Children in Foster Care," <https://www.icphusa.org/reports/taken-away-2/>.
- 6 "Considering sensory processing issues in trauma affected children" www.celcis.org/files/6114/6054/8502/002._2016_Vol_15_1_Robinson_Considering_Sensory_Processing.pdf.
- 7 "Art Therapy for Children: How It Leads to Change," <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1359104506061419>.
- 8 "Growing Up Before Their Time: The Early Adultification Experiences of Homeless Young People," ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4797323/.
- 9 "InBrief: Resilience Series - Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University," <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/inbrief-resilience-series/>.