Aspects of Social Media Influence in Early Childhood: One Teacher's Exploration

~ Karen Fjestad

A little girl enters my room the same way each day. She smooths down her dress, glancing down at it and then up to me to gauge my reaction. I say, "Good morning, sweetheart." She tries another time. She looks down, again, smoothing out her dress, then a look to me with more expectation, thinking that I may not have noticed. I say, "The babies are still sleeping. Perhaps you might go check on them." Not to be distracted, she says directly, "I have a new dress." "You do," I say without inflection and continue with my teacher's work, folding laundry. I am making a conscious effort not to feed that need that lives already so deeply in her for a compliment, a "like."

In my conversations with parents over the last twelve years in my classroom, there has been a strong increase in concern over social media's influence on the mental health of teens and young adults. Our children will most likely join the world of social media at some point. In our early childhood classrooms, we allow space for the development of empathy, feeling a connection with another, and self-confidence. With these skills, our children can be better prepared for this ever-changing world online.

Many of our schools have dress expectations that restrict the television and movie character images on the children's clothing. In my experience, when a child surrounds themselves with images of TV princesses and superheroes, it limits their creativity in play and gives them a feeling that the more I have, the more self-worth I feel. Images are everywhere: clothes, backpacks, rain boots, bedsheets, it goes on and on. It is better to learn at a young age that who you are is more important than what you have. Feeding this desire for attention for external things pushes that learning back.

Often, I can recognize the children who receive a lot of compliments at home because they are so hungry for recognition in class. "Watch me, Miss Karen!" is shouted over and over. A child may feel that doing something challenging or interesting is not worth doing if there is no one there to say, "Good job." I react to a child calling out for me to watch them by watching, then a nod in their direction and continuing with my work. I may also simply describe what they are doing: "You are jumping." It is soon tiresome for the child to call for this type of recognition and not receive it. It doesn't take long before they stop looking for someone else's approval. They still will challenge themselves, but it becomes more for internal satisfaction than for recognition.

If a child grows up doing things for someone else's approval they often stop taking risks in different areas of their life. They don't want to risk not getting that recognition that they have become accustomed to. Instead of doing something new, it is better to do what's tried and true. Mom always loves drawings of rainbows, so better stick with those. Academically, a child may be fearful to reveal their shortcomings and not want to see their mistakes. They may blame other people or situations for any disappointments to divert unwanted scrutiny from themselves.

Young adults who have grown up needing that hit of a compliment may have a hard time when out in the working world, where they aren't going to get this reassurance in the same way. Their self-confidence may plummet if they are not getting constant positive feedback.

One day during free play time, a very shy and quiet child in my class piped up with a surprisingly deep, thunderous voice and shouted, "I want to be the scariest one!" In our Waldorf early childhood classrooms, young children meet each other socially in the richness of free play time. This time gives space for trying on different characters, which is such a valuable experience at a young age. Trying on different identities at four years old is healthier than waiting until those teenage years when, through the memory of social media, a temporary identity can be revisited forever.

Our free play time also gives space for the development of empathy and the practice of sharing feelings and describing experiences. When a child is hurt or a block castle has been knocked over, perhaps accidentally or on purpose, the children are brought together often facing each other so that they can experience one another's facial expressions and body language.

If the children cannot verbalize their feelings or describe what has happened, the grownup can describe what has happened. "Oh, dear. Joey was hit in the head with a block. That probably hurt. I don't think that Jane meant for that to happen. I am sorry that you are so sad, Joey." The adult is modeling the saying of "I am sorry," which we want the child to feel sincerely and not just say in words. "Jane, please get an icepack and we'll put it on Joey's head." When Jane returns with the icepack, the grown-up may place the child's hand onto the icepack on Joey's head. The child who has caused the distress is the one doing the healing or helping deed.

During this time there are likely many other little eyes focused what is happening. This is a rich experience that can lead toward developing empathy and the skills for finding words to tell what has happened. Both the children directly involved in the situation and the ones observing can witness this. After the child is feeling better, or the castle rebuilt, whatever the healing deed is has been done, the children return to play. Even in one day, there are many times that children are given this opportunity to participate in or observe this interaction. A child witnesses the cycle of: I made a mistake, I can help fix it, and then life goes on. Empathy needs to be felt to be developed. It can't be taught directly or lectured about.

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A deeper understanding of the other is achieved through this foundational development of social skills in young children. A true friend is someone who cares for you and upon whom you can rely. That is the counter-picture we are offering to meet the superficial influence of "friends," "followers," and "likes" in the social media realm.

Children and young adults who are hungry for compliments are primed and vulnerable to the dark side of the social media realm. Teens' time on screens and particularly time on social media has increased significantly. At this same time, anxiety within this age group has also increased. Parents' concern for their children's mental health is steadily growing.

If we keep in mind the social media realm that our children will almost certainly enter into, we can arm our children for what lies ahead. By strengthening their sense of self and their ability to connect with the other at a young age, we hope that they can remember that who they are comes from within and is not the persona they put on their screen. ◆

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