

The Need to Know

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How much do our under age 7 children need to know about things going on in the family and life? This can be such a delicate subject because it gets at the heart of how parents talk to and relate to their children, but I believe it to be an important one. *Please do take what works within this post for you and your family and what resonates inside of you from this writing. You know your family and children best, but I thought some of you may be curious to how Waldorf views this subject.*

According to Steiner's views of the seven year cycles, a child under the age of 7 should be in their bodies, and in a rather dreamy state. You would not want to do things in this period that would call the child's attention to himself or to promote having a child think in a grown-up way. The child should be immersed in feelings of warmth and delight by the parent, but not so many words.

How much we tell a child, how much we explain to a child, and how we answer things can be part of what leads to premature intellectualization, premature analytical ability, and essentially putting the cart before the horse as we use discipline tools that are beyond the child's developmental maturity level. A three or four year old cannot reason, and they cannot put themselves in someone else's shoes. They need to have gentle discipline methods that reflect this reality. They can certainly learn all the words that you say, and how to answer back "correctly" and play a very verbal game with you, but this is NOT the same as truly being able to internalize and rationalize. The ability to do this really does not come in until the child is of age 14 or so, according to Steiner. If you have a child who you think can do this at such an early age, I would argue that this child is 1. very verbal, but perhaps is not as advanced as you think and cannot understand the ramifications of things the way an adult does and 2. if the child is trying to do all this verbally with you, the child has been intellectualized too early and it is your job as the parent to bring this child back into balance. More on that in just a moment.

Why do we get ourselves into this difficulty in the first place? This is just a hard shift for many attached parents, especially with the first child. After all, many attached children are just "always there, always around", (and if you are co-sleeping they are even there at night!) There is not much time without the child to work on or talk about grown-up things. Furthermore, many attached parents have had to work so hard to surrender themselves to

being an attached parent, to learning how to read an infant's cues and how to breastfeed according to these cues, that they have difficulty not carrying this surrender over into other areas. Breastfeeding and co-sleeping with a small child under the age of 3 is a wonderful, opening experience in which the mother and child almost seem as one. The mother grows to feel her child is an extension and a part of her. According to Waldorf, all small children under the age of 7 are under an extension of their mother's etheric "Madonna Cloak" – in essence, sharing their mother's energy and life forces, for lack of a better description.

However, as a child heads past the age of three, more boundaries need to be in place. The child, at least according to Waldorf tradition, does not need to be privy to adult conversation and adult topics. The child under the age of 7 does not need to know everything going on with you and your life. The child under the age of 7 does not need to see how the adult decision-making process works. They do not need all the answers to their questions in adult terms, even simple adult terms, and they certainly do not need your adult views and baggage. Let them dream and come up with their own fantastical answers! This comes up all the time within Waldorf – but children simply do not view things through the adult veil and experiences in which you view them. Things in life can co-exist in many improbable ways for the small child that would be impossible for the adult. This is developmentally normal, and please do not try to rush your child into adult logical thinking. Enjoy this stage with the wonder that your child has for life!

If you have a child who has been intellectualized early, it will make integration into the Waldorf curriculum harder. The child will have a tendency to take the fairy tales, the heart of the Waldorf kindergarten and first grade, very literally and with great difficulty. The child will have difficulty accepting less explanation and will have difficulty coming up with their own explanation – they will be looking for the "right" answer, instead of being able to be an out of the box problem solver and imaginative person. This will become an impeding factor in science and later for such subjects as creative writing. But most of all, you are setting yourself up for very rocky teenaged years if you cannot let your child be a child when they are under the age of seven!

If this is what has happened to your child and you would like to change this, (and it is not too late, even for a child that is seven or eight!) here are some suggestions:

- Get rid of all media exposure for awhile.
- Do not discuss world events and household affairs in front of this child. Do not discuss the happenings of your child's friends and their families with your child

unless it is a small, happy, warm event that can be described in a sentence or two. Your child should be in a dreamy state. There will be plenty of time to know about these things, and about people and events. **The child should know that the world and the people in it are good. Do your own inner work if you cannot believe this, because this is YOUR baggage, not your child's thing to carry around.**

- Stop any back and forth bantering you do with your child. Just. Stop. It. These verbal games are not appropriate to play with a small child.
- A child under the age of 7 can be told things pretty much right before they are going to happen, or you can use your daily, weekly rhythm to carry what events are going to happen.
- This child does not need a myriad of choices when recovering from early intellectualization; they don't need to think all the time – this is your job.
- They do not need to have all their “why's” answered – hum, a warm smile, a hug, a very simple statement is all that is needed – and to move on to practical work and involve them in that. Don't you ever remember being told when you were little, “We will talk about that when you are older?” We vowed as parents to never do that to our children, but guess what, there was common sense in that for some situations! Let your child tell you their own explanation for something – answer their why with “Hmm, I wonder about that too. ”
Guaranteed they will come up with something creative and wonderful and free of adult baggage and gray-ness. They live in a world of black and white, and a world of fantasy where things co-exist; this is normal developmentally. They should not live in gray-ness, in the land of seeing all the exceptions to the rule.
- Use your songs and verses to announce what is going on next.
- If your child is asking for “something to do”, get something out and start playing with it – without words!
- This child needs to be outside in nature for hours a day without you explaining everything to the child about nature and why the leaves turn yellow and brown. Let them be! Let them come up with their own names of animals, and their own explanations! Joseph Cornell, in his wonderful book “**Sharing Nature With Children**” (and yes, this one absolutely should be on your bookshelf!) says this:

Don't feel badly about not knowing names. The names of plants and animals are only superficial labels for what those things really are. Just as your own essence isn't captured by your name, or even by your physical and

personality traits, there is also much more to an oak tree, for example, than a name and a list of facts about it. You can gain a deeper appreciation of an oak tree by watching how the tree's mood shifts with changes in lighting at different times of day. Observe the tree from unusual perspectives. Feel and smell its bark and leaves. Quietly sit on or under its branches, and be aware of all the forms of life that live in and around the tree and depend on it.

This, my friends, is the heart of not only nature education at its best, but of Waldorf education and the way to relate to small children under the age of 7 who are one with everything in the world.

- Think about the concept of warmth with this child – warm foods, warm foot baths, warm beds, candlelight, warm thoughts.
- Provide liberal doses of oral storytelling and simple made up stories.
- Provide lots of experiences with baking, gardening, wet on wet watercolor painting, and imaginative play all through story and song, not verbally oriented instructions.
- If your child is doing something that you do not like, if it is at all possible, involve the child in practical work. If it involves an item, gently take the item away without words and then immediately involve the child in practical work! This does not mean to IGNORE the behavior, but to have the child make restitution later with their hands or their bodies (but do not intellectualize it for them). A simple sentence is all that is needed!
- If your child balks at the new rhythm, the new way of doing things, so be it for right now. This is important, and you have to be the one to carry this one. Your child will quickly adapt and be better for it – a better problem solver, a better imaginative thinker down the road, a more reverent and observant person, a better listener. You do not have to explain why you are not explaining anymore, LOL!
- The work for you in this period is to **stop talking to your child so much about everything!** Get some time with other adults for you, and stop putting your child into the adult role. Do your own inner work and see how you can bring the joy, humor, fun and warmth back to this little being. The other work for you is to **find out about normal childhood development.** Many parents are amazed when they read books such as the Gesell Institute books 'Your Three Year Old', 'Your Four Year Old', how children really do typically view

things such as pregnancy, death. They realize their totally verbal child actually understands much less than they originally thought!

I know this is so hard, but if you have ever wondered why your child speaks to you like they are a grown up, if you have ever wondered why your child asks why constantly, if you have ever wondered why your child takes every single story so literally, try this plan for eight weeks and see what happens. You may have a different child on your hands at the end of eight weeks!

And lest you be worried this will somehow stunt their maturity or developmental growth, let me assure you you will only be putting them back on track, back into where they should be....And when they are seven, or even nine and closer to the age of separation of themselves from the world, the parents and the plants and animals, then you start answering all the questions. There is a time to answer questions! There is a time to move forward!

However, protection is developmentally appropriate and normal and right for a under 7 aged child. They are not miniature adults with less experience. Honor that within this first seven year cycle. If you are interested in Waldorf, you most likely are not the type of parent to let them watch 15 hours of TV straight, or eat chocolate all day long (um, except for holiday cookies? ha ha), or stay up all night. **Just as you would safeguard against those physical things, you as the parent are now learning how to safeguard their imagination, their innocence, their problem-solving ability and their future adult physical health.**

Please consider trying this plan, and do let me know how it goes. And again, please take what works for you from this post. You may agree, you may disagree but thanks for reading! You can leave a comment below.

Just a few thoughts from my little corner of the world.