



## **What is happening to our Childhood?**

Lecture by Michaela Gloeckler at the Alliance for Childhood in Brazil's foundation

I would like to give an account on the reasons why we have founded the "Alliance for Childhood" movement. There was a series of conferences in the USA involving professionals from a wide range of areas who were engaged in childhood development. Among them a substantial number of people that followed the Waldorf approach, like me, for example.

After four or five years of work, we came to the conclusion that the research level that humankind has reached nowadays is so high that what is good for children's development is widely known. The problem now does not lie in acquiring more knowledge, but in applying what we already know.

We know for example that in early childhood our brain is extremely sensitive and receptive, and that everything that comes to the child's attention immediately stimulates the brain development. However, the reality is that children are still being neglected. They are still sitting in front of TV sets and



using toys that are not appropriate for a real stimulation of the brain, since being active and having abilities is best for brain development.

Children are not being sufficiently motivated. We also know that the most important element in a child's healthy development, especially in the first three years of age, is having at least one person highly engaged in a relationship with her.

There have been some great and wonderful studies with children, mainly in the Hawaiian Islands, in which children from extremely deprived social environments were observed. One of these studies spanned more than forty years and included eight hundred children. Their environment was permeated by criminality, drug addiction, alcohol, negligence, stimuli deprivation; all very serious problems. Those who conducted the study thought that if they followed the development of these children, the prospect was that the majority of them were going to end up having the same problems they had been exposed to. Mainly drugs, criminality, and social deprivation.



The researchers were extremely surprised to find out in the end of these studies that 70% of these children became completely normal people: they had their professions, family, jobs, and normal satisfaction with life. Thirty per cent of all had gone through transitional moments in their lives in which they found themselves in borderline situations of juvenile offence, but later became reintegrated again.

Only a small percentage of these children, 10 to 15% depending on the criteria adopted, confirmed the expectation of falling into anti-social development. The researchers tried to understand the reason for such positive result since the theory, as we know, says that the child is the result in one hand of her genetic heritage and, on the other hand, of the influences of her environment. If that was true, these children should have developed differently.

The researchers found something that in the meantime became well studied. Besides the genetic and environmental factor, there is a third factor that contributes decisively to the development of the child: the relationship.



It's obvious that it had been known since the middle of the twentieth century through the research started by René Spitz on the effects of deprivation on children that the constant presence of a person caring for the child is extremely important for her initial development. However, it hadn't been known how the quality of a relationship acts in a distinguished way. This fact has become known through the studies conducted in the last 20 years. It was found in Spitz's research that those children who had had that good development - and more than 50% developed themselves exceptionally well - had encountered through their own destiny, a person who felt a deep love for them. It hadn't necessarily been one of their parents; it could have been the grandmother or a person at a shop at the corner who found that this child was so pleasant to be with. Whenever this child would come by, there was some talk, a little gift, or even an invitation "would you like to stay here?".

The child, being around this person who might take care of a small store, imitated her and related to her own being with this adopted father, mother or uncle. This process worked in both ways; the adult watching the child and the child watching the adult. It provided a non-verbal engagement from babyhood



or a little later, when the child was beginning to walk. The interesting aspect the researchers came across was that each of these relationships is individual. It's actually something that we all know, for example, if we ask a mother how she treats her children. A good mother will say that she treats them in the same way, but each relationship is individual. This was shown in the study. They asked the children how they felt their mother treated them. In spite of having the same mother, one child said she felt well cared for, another one said she always felt overwhelmingly demanded upon, and a third would feel neglected in comparison to the others. Thus, although the mothers behaved in the same way, the children perceived the relationship in a completely different way, individually.

A research was conducted by Judy Dunn and Robert Plomin, who wrote the book "Why Children are so different?" based on studies about siblings. This quality in a relationship was also found in Spitz's large study mentioned earlier. The reason I am bringing this up is that it has been known for years how important a constant, loving, engaging relationship is, and nonetheless it is



not realized. Unfortunately, in this sense, the necessary care within the families is not provided.

Another fundamental factor is that the development of the senses is a most important aspect for the healthy incarnation of the child (what is understood as "incarnation" will be explained later). If you observe the looks of a child watching television, you will see eyes that are totally empty, rigid; the child's gazing is cold. Children that are observed, for example, while in direct contact with nature, exploring and playing with water, drawing on the sand, their gaze, their expression is warm, active, radiant.

It is clearly seen how a child expresses itself through its sense organs, becoming one with the world. Through stimulus, the being of the child forms its organs and unites itself with the world around it through observation, listening, touching. This incarnating activity, this attention, this observation, brings the child into its own body, skillfully forming it.



We know that, if children see something, they immediately react with their motor skills because they need to recreate, to imitate what is observed. That's why we talk about a sensory-motor intelligence that makes body and soul become skillful and intelligent.

Our question was "since we know about it all, why are big companies allowed to develop software for babies of 6 months?". The whole biography is computerized. It's a large market in which advertising is increasingly adapted to infants. It is widely known, from the point of view of research, that this is very bad, but why is it allowed to happen?

It is known that it's not necessary for children to adjust to computers right from kindergarten and school years in order to become good at it. Those very people who invented computers had nothing to do with them in their childhood! Why do they act in such an anti-childhood manner?

Therefore we should now put into practice, but really put into practice. At least 10% of what we know! We need to find partners around the whole world



to help us fight for the rights of being a child and to treat children according to their inner and outer needs.

That was the first reason for funding Alliance for Childhood. There was still a second reason. We have discovered that childhood is something special, new. If we observe paintings of children in the 18th, and even in the 19th century, we see that they are dressed up like little professional adults: a little policeman, a little soldier, a little peasant. They were portrayed according to the adult way of life; they were taught to say "Sir" and "Madam" to their parents.

If we observe the native population we see that there are certain customs applied to ritualize life stages. Children grow up close to their parents, live the life of adults, and at 12 or 14 are initiated to become adults. Only more recently, just in the second half of the 19th century, we find special places dedicated to children, such as nurseries and kindergartens. This is by no means a long story.



Discovering in childhood a special phase in life, when we meet ourselves, when we can play and be in a free space for one's own development is an essential change. Children had been adapted step-by-step to the customs of adults, and in that way they became social beings.

Since we started having kindergarten and discovered that childhood is an open space for the development of the individual; since that time, we have in our culture the strong tendency to develop individualism, autonomy and emancipation. This is something very new. Therefore, allowing a child to be itself is the best pre-condition for her to become really an individual and not just part of an organized society. Now we know that being a child is not just being small, or biologically underdeveloped.

This was the second reason for us to decide to start this global effort focusing on children's needs. We told ourselves that what our culture really needs is greater awareness of the childhood reality among adults.



What is characteristic of childhood? If we look at a 3 or 4 month-old baby who is fine, well fed, and in a state of well-being, and you smile, it might be that the baby may not only smile back - for a short moment - but also start to look back in a very serious manner. If one has the inner strength to keep this eye contact, this eye-to-eye, it may go on for one or even two minutes. Only people, who are completely in love, look at each other in the eyes for so long. This is normally never done, except in this situation. But babies do this to all the people who really look at them with their minds and hearts open.

One of the greatest rewards of my life as a pediatrician was to have being granted this trust from each baby. I was always left wondering why they could look so deeply into my heart's core, exploring who I am without knowing me. This is one of childhood features: an enormous trust in other people and in the world.

A second trait is that children are completely open. Until they start saying "I" with reference to themselves, and thinking - which occurs between two and a half and four years of age -, they are incapable of lying, and they are



absolutely honest. Even later, children usually tell the truth; to the extent that there is a German proverb that says that a child's lips always tell the truth (*Kindermund hat Wahrheit im Mund*). For instance: the bell rings, the mother opens the door, a man comes in, the mother greets him very nicely, asks him if he wants to sit down, offers him a drink. Part of the family is also there, the guest shakes everyone's hand, and then the little daughter says: "Wow, how interesting, when the bell rang my mother said "oh gosh! You're the only one missing!", which means "your arrival at this moment isn't at all convenient". And children take it seriously and say it, because it's the truth.

Another typical characteristic of all children is that they have the capacity to truly forgive. A person can be as mean as she wishes, but from the moment she smiles again life goes back to normal. The child forgets the event and gets on fine with the person again, and forgives. This goes on until the age of 8-9, and then this period is concluded, because this sacred phase of childhood really ends.



Children experiment with freedom if they are given space. They always act in an absolutely free manner from within themselves. In their innate openness, children are extremely skilled in being full of admiration and devotion. They have their silent moments in which they really sit, observe and admire. They love to play. But what does it mean to them? They have pleasure in playing, but for them playing is serious work.

A famous Waldorf educator, Herbert Hahn, wrote a wonderful article about the seriousness of childhood play. If we as adults loved our work - the things we do - as if they were a play, in a way that each day we could perform them with more intensity and seriousness, knowing better what they are for and who would employ the produce of our work, with the typical identification of a child, our social life would obviously be totally different. We would almost have heaven on earth.

Before starting to play seriously, children never ask: "How much am I going to get with this?" We as adults become occupied if we know that we are getting paid, and not because we like the world and want to contribute to it.



We lose our childhood when we lose this idealism, when we become less and less honest, more and more outfitted with a superficial mentality and doing easy things. Step-by-step we lose our openness, our inner truth, our admiration towards life in all its manifestations; we lose our candid childishness and become increasingly less humane.

It's interesting to observe that if we ask ourselves what we should do to discover again this child inside us, we will see that the first step is to become religious. And by saying this I don't refer to any specific confession. There is a very archetypal religiousness, which is devotion and admiration towards nature, towards the whole creation. It corresponds to a loving attitude of establishing relationships of openness, of being always ready to forgive and to ask for forgiveness, counting on the existing goodness of the world. If we established a range of childlike patterns, beginning with these aspects I have mentioned, we would have a correspondence in adult life to more developed patterns of spirituality.



We think that protecting childhood, fighting for the rights of children, for the right to be a child, could also help to find again in the world these childlike qualities, bringing them into the adulthood in order to humanize our culture.

On the other hand, it's certainly part of our lives to grow old. Becoming old is the opposite of being a child. Childhood is this wonderful openness and this feeling of being integrated to life and in all its circumstances. To become old means to have more and more perspectives, feeling increasingly isolated, excluded, questioning oneself. Finally, when we die we are ready to reunite again, spiritually, with the world. When we die, the spiritual power in everything we did and developed becomes free from the body, becoming a newborn spirit in the spiritual world, ready to join, as a spiritual child, the other world.

The third reason to start this work was that after having thought about the ways in which to feed the children, to help them grow, collected all the main possibilities in order to survey what the children are in need of we now need to find out how their needs can be fulfilled.



Therefore, we started working in different world locations, organizing congresses about the dignity of children. We intend to exchange experiences on what has been occurring in these first 3 years as it was done at the Alliance for Childhood Congress in Brussels in October 2000. We will invite people from all the European countries who are connected to politics, to government life, researchers, journalists, public relations staff, and also those linked to the field of law, to discuss ways in which to act upon.

But the most important task is to create a real local network of people, extremely regional. For example, around each person who is sitting here there could spring a little activity, even if only twice a year, of organizing children's playtime activities, in which healthy things take place, and the children have the chance to adopt an adult who's occupied with playing and singing songs with them. This is more than nothing!

Another possibility would be to meet once a week at a restaurant inviting the local people involved with children, such as a politician or a social worker, asking for their opinion and providing them with our support.



This network formation, this confidence that there are many more people ready to do good is extremely stimulating, useful and encouraging.

Lecture by Dr. Michaela Glockler, Head of the Medical Section of the Goetheanum (Dornach, Switzerland), delivered at the Associação Palas Athena in São Paulo, on July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2001, during the First Meeting of the Alliance for Childhood in Brazil.

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