

Toys and the Young Child

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This is the fourth in a series of offerings to share with you some of the underlying principles of Waldorf education. Here I include some of my observations, questions, and thoughts on the relationship between a young child's surroundings and toys, and his/her imaginative play.

As teachers and parents we must constantly be taking a second look at the kinds of things in our children's environments. As adults, we have the capacity to consciously make a separation between ourselves and our surroundings. As I walk down a busy street, for instance, I may choose to listen to the cars and trucks rolling by, or I may listen to people's footsteps, or I may be totally absorbed by my own thoughts of what I should make for dinner. A child does not have this conscious choice. Particularly the young child lives fully into his surroundings. One can see just how deeply the child takes in the activities of his surroundings in his play. He becomes the car or air-plane, the cat or dog, the milkman, the doctor, the mommy or daddy. As adults, then we must examine the kinds of activities the child has to imitate and the kind of toys the child has to play with.

In looking at the kinds of activities a child has to imitate, we may compare our times with ages past. It used to be commonplace for children to see farmers milking cows, ploughing in fields, and planting seeds. They saw mothers baking bread, washing clothes and floors by hand, sewing, knitting and mending. They saw men chopping wood for fires, building houses, cutting and stitching leather for shoes, and repairing the streets with shovels and picks. These were all food for a child's active play. As our society has changed so much, we must now consciously give our children the experience of as many healthy activities as possible.

Now turning to look at the kinds of toys a child has to play with, we must first ask ourselves, "what is the purpose of toys?" When we observe a child picking up a doll and putting it to bed, we see that toys inspire creative and imaginative play. Toys are to children what clay or paint are to the artist. With this in mind we must examine the kinds of toys being made for children.

A typical doll, for example, is made of hard plastic, has a realistically formed body with detailed fingers, toes, eyelids, lashes and painted smiling lips, wears detailed doll clothing and has arms, legs and neck that swivel. Perhaps the doll has an opening at both ends, one for feeding, one for wetting. Some dolls even have hair that grows or a voicebox with tape-recorded short phrases. The face as well as the activities of this kind of doll are thus fixed. What then is left for the child to imagine or invent? And how 'life like' is the doll really? In other words, how much life is the doll imbued with? Or does it seem to have a frozen death-like quality just because the features are so delineated? And how beautiful or aesthetically pleasing is it? These are the questions we must ask whenever we consider toys for our children.

If we look at another kind of common toy, little metal cars, we can clearly distinguish by the details that one is a police car, one is a station-wagon, one is a Buick. Perhaps the face of the driver is even painted on the window. Of course, children can play happily with both the doll and the car. The doll can be washed, carried and put to bed. The car can go fast or slow, can go to a filling station, or bump into another car. But is the child's active imagination being called on to the fullest? The power of imagination and fantasy in children is often strong enough that they can defy the boundaries and limitations of their toys. My brother, for instance, had a set of army men which to him were football players. And as a child, I had a big stuffed toy poodle which was to me a horse. But if we look at the trend in toys, we see the limitations encroaching more and more upon the child's imagination. We can see this in the extreme computer toys where a child pushes a button and gets a certain response. What fascination this holds for a child: The child sees a response without understanding how it occurs. But, one can mathematically calculate the number of responses. The child is certainly impressed, but is this fantasy inspired? And how much of a contribution can he/she make to this toy?

If we now ask, "What kind of toys do encourage a child's healthy imagination?" We can look at how happy a child can be with such simple toys as shells in a sandbox, roughly cut logs, scraps of material, and simple handmade dolls with a suggestion of a face. A shell can be a boat, an air-plane, a car, or a snail. With logs and big blankets and a few chairs, children can build a marvellous house or castle. With a few aprons, scarves, and squares of material, a child can be a King or Queen, a cat or dog or a baker. And the simple dolls can laugh, cry, sleep, dance, skip and talk. And without the limitations of the voicebox, the doll can say anything the child wishes. The possibilities are infinite. He/she is an active co-creator, not just an observer.

In Waldorf education, particularly in the Kindergarten, these thoughts underlie much of what is done. The room is filled with beautiful toys made out of natural materials. Activities during the year include baking, whittling wood, washing, carding, spinning, and knitting with wool, candle-making, mending and fixing broken toys, dusting shelves and tending plants. Fairy tales and other stories are told and eventually acted out. The toys, activities and the stories all help to inspire creative healthy play. The rewards of healthy imaginative play as a child are great, for in later life it is transformed into such faculties as resourcefulness, initiative, vitality, flexibility and mobility of thinking.