



'Child's Play' is 'Work'.... is the view in Steiner-Waldorf early childhood education

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Remember your own childhood days. Whizzing recklessly down the street, we boys with short knickers, with bruised knees and triumphant facial expressions and a stick in hand wheeled old and disused scooter tyres. We stood on the steps of the entrance and played "On the bank-In the river" in its myriad variations. We simply sat down and played with the traditional five stones, tamarind seeds or sea shells. We roamed in our own groups and made adventurous journeys picking mangoes and guavas. We ran, we played, we laughed, we climbed trees and we fell and we got back to our feet again and most importantly we sweated. A reminder call from our parents and we were inside the house to wash ourselves and study or eat the simple meal together as a family. TV was an uncommon device.

Cut the scene some 25 years later to today. Urban life has ensured that the number of cars have doubled on the streets. Nuclear families means that older siblings no longer take care of younger ones and have been replaced by house maids. Today's sophisticated and technological toys leave very little room for children to either move or be creative, only endlessly repeat what has been done before at the press of a button. Rag dolls made by an elderly aunt have been replaced by the Barbies. Play areas are sanitised, safe and devoid of imagination. The proverb, "Necessity is the mother of invention" holds well no more.

Most parents are busy working away from home to earn money to buy their children the best that money can buy. Another new trend among parents lately seems to be a rush to dispense with childhood, to reach its end as early as possible. There is a scramble among parents and even schools to enrol children into grade schools as early as 5 years or lesser in an effort to feel that their children

are very intelligent. Research shows that children enrolled early may show good strides in the first few years but are unable to cope with studies in higher classes due to the tremendous amount of information to be stored in a literally 'small brain' added with peer pressure and parental fears, finally burning out the child followed by tuitions and more mechanical and boring work. Where is the time to 'Play'?

Let's understand that children have their own pace and timescales unlike adults. When was the last time you paused to show your child an aeroplane in the sky, a ladybird in the bush or sat on the rock gazing at the stars? Says Sally Jenkinson in her book 'The Genius of Play'¹, "Childhood is a state of grace, a big in-breath, a time for storing riches for the future. Have we lost our ability to empathise with children – to hear their voices, to enter their worlds? Can we protect them, yet also leave them free? Each child carries the knowledge of who he or she wants to become, and charts their course towards the secret future guided by the deep wisdom and light of the inner vision".

I would like to quote psychologist Dr. Stuart Brown, "Childhood Play, rather than being optional or extra-curricular, is central to an Individual's healthy development". The child who has played much during those early years is less prone to stress-related diseases as an adult, is more well-adjusted in her home or work environments or in marriage, and builds confidence and mental strength to handle crises situations in life. Play is as important to life as is sleeping and dreaming.

Therefore in Waldorf early childhood programs, "Play is Work and Work is Play" and the kindergarten is just an extension of the home. The classroom is an

¹"The Genius of Play: Celebrating the Spirit of Childhood" by Sally Jenkinson. Hawthorn Press (First published in December 2001)



open space unlike other kindergarten environments that are full of furniture. Who are we to trap young ones from moving, (behind those desks and chairs), when all that nature wants of them is to move? Medical Science has proved today that the organs of a new-born are not yet fully formed and is in the process of developing. **Movement and Play** is so vital for the development of the body and the completion or solidification of the organs until the change of teeth. So two kinds of play, an indoor and an outdoor, that serves as a 'breathing out' in a beautiful rhythm set by the kindergarten teacher is alternated between acts of circle time, story-time and artistic or craft activity which are more a 'breathing in' process. This **rhythm**, that is consistently and diligently followed enhances life forces in the child and sets strong habits and builds rhythmical memory, which is a treasure of health for the whole lifetime of this developing human being. For instance, even clearing up after playtime becomes part of the daily rhythm setting the first lessons in **reverence** of objects that we use.

Dr. Rudolf Steiner² in his Spiritual Science refers to this as "To find the spirit in matter". So the 3Rs of a Steiner kindergarten then are, RHYTHM, REPETITION & REVERENCE. The teacher tries to, nay, lives through the 3Rs herself, so that children can follow her actions, gestures, thoughts and even vibrations in a deep unconscious process instilled in the activity of **imitation** in those first 7 years. Many conventional kindergartens have shifted from this natural imitative process of learning to a more head-oriented instructive process of teaching. Instruction and Teaching awakens the child's dream consciousness earlier than is appropriate leading to heaviness and burdensome in the child's will to learn purposefully in the later school years. The beauty of the environment, its consistent rhythm soaked in play, the opportunities for language building, the awakening of the powers of cognition through working with those nimble hands, and the whole joy of coming to school after leaving home at that tender age in a Steiner Kindergarten are unparalleled in any other systems in the world.



²www.rsarchive.org For a collection of the works, lectures given by Dr. Rudolf Steiner, the pioneer of Steiner-Waldorf education.

Photo courtesy: Smitha, Bangalore Steiner School

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