

INVITATION PART THREE SUPPORTING CHILDREN'S INNATE NEEDS AT THIS TIME

Whether they are our own children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews, neighborhood children or children in our schools or places of care, they are watching us. No matter how the world around us may change, their silent, perhaps even unconscious hope, is that they will be able to find the goodness, the beauty and the truthfulness that still exists. It may feel like a tall order that we are the "first responders", that we are the ones they are looking to in order to figure out how to navigate the daily unfolding of life. Rather than feeling it as a burden, we might consider it a gift. We have the opportunity to lift ourselves up and out of the flotsam and jetsam of "world gone crazy", and instead become the sleuths, investigators, the seekers of the good, the beautiful and the true until we begin to manifest as their representatives.

Early Childhood

In the very young child's innate expectation of goodness, they are the most open. So open, in fact, that they are without filters. All that surrounds them to some degree enters into them. Judgment free, their experience is simply that what is, is. And typically they are fearless; timidity is not to be confused with fear. Judgment is something they learn over time, and the same can be true of fear if they are surrounded by it or experience trauma.

So, what is our mandate as the models of life for the young child? One could say that it is to "be the goodness". And this begs the question, "What! Are you kidding me? What does that even mean?" Perhaps a starting point is to trust ourselves, trust that we want what is best for the children and we are who they need right now. And, in that, we can willingly begin the sometimes arduous process of sculpting ourselves into our best selves for now, our *good enough* selves who are striving to be better than we were and forgiving of the possibility that we are not yet the best of who we are becoming. Another word for this might be *resilient*. Modelling resiliency may indeed be the greatest gift we can bestow on the children. Perfection is neither the goal, nor is it what they need from us.

What they need from us is to orchestrate their lives so that they may do the following every day with the minimal amount of materials and toys needed:

Awaken
Eat
Play*
Eat
Play*
Eat
Rest
Eat
Play*
Eat
Rinse Off The Day
Sleep

*Play is how the young child learns and assimilates life. Thus it is the foundation of almost everything they do and may include such activities as self-directed free play; exploring nature; crafting; drawing or painting; playing games; rough and tumble play; caring for dolls or helping with real babies in the home; singing and playing with simple instruments; dress-up; listening to, telling or acting out stories and puppet plays; bathing and other personal body care; preparing food; cleaning and tidying; laundry; sweeping and occasionally doing any of these with a beloved adult.

We do not need to entertain them; however, when we do choose to spend some time with them, we need to be fully present. Then, in good conscience, we can go about our day doing the other activities that we choose and need to do while they continue to do what they do best: play! LifeWays, Waldorf Early Childhood Association and numerous other organizations are posting ideas regularly of simple activities one could consider.

Play looks different when the child is an infant. Then our personal presence is needed more, and eating and sleeping; gazing; exploring their own bodies (fingers, toes, hands and such); exploring our faces, hair, etc.; lots of opportunities for freedom of movement; diapering and bathing; gentle massage and all we do to provide a sense of safety and well-being – all of this supports their growth and development.

Play changes again as they become upright, start coming more fully into their native language, and are exploring how to communicate through their awakening capacity to think. Toddlers' play tends not to be as potentially organized or planned out as the child who is slightly older. Mobility and speaking themselves into the world are their pleasure and delight. They are, however, moving in the direction of the Eat and Play chart listed above. The learning how to be together of the slightly younger and the slightly older can call forth another layer of patience and creativity from the adults in charge! Remember, it is like riding a wave that typically rises and falls over a period of weeks to months until new levels of capacity have been developed within the children. **Spend some time observing your children without them noticing. You may be surprised what you will learn about them and the ideas that may come to you. And if it makes sense to you, lift them up each night when they are sleeping to their guardian angels. They are the best partners to have in watching over your children!**

Middle Childhood

As we move to the second stage of childhood, they continue to look to us as models for how to live even though the push-back can be intense at times! They also learn from how we handle their push-back!

Play continues to be important, and this is the stage of life in which many of our fondest memories are formed. Riding roller coasters, playing games that required a certain level of dexterity or capacity to strategize, participating in competitive sports, adventuring with a best friend or circle of friends, having sleepovers, riding our bicycles or scooters some distance from home without an adult. These, and certainly other things, were all rites of passage, and blessed are the children today if we allow them to wait, perhaps even yearn, to do some of these things in middle childhood instead of allowing it when they are still in early childhood. We can easily fall prey to doing things with our younger children that are not quite age appropriate because we remember how much we enjoyed them from our own childhood. It's just that we were typically in our middle childhood when those memories were formed. If you find you have already done some of these things with your little ones, then trust that the joy you surrounded them with helped to mitigate the fact that they were perhaps a bit young for the occasion! I speak from experience having exhausted my own four-year-old at Disney Land almost forty years ago! Gak! Just pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and try to remember next time you start to jump the gun. And take them out in nature to slow back down again!

The innate, and typically unconscious hope, for the child in the second stage is to experience that the world is beautiful, and how we present the world to them can either distance them from this sense or draw them in to a real love of their surroundings, of the earth, and of the starry heights. This is a great age to share stories and chapter books of adventure, biographies of explorers and inventors, and stories from our own lives of discovery and travel and places we loved or from our own childhood memories of games we used to play. They also need a little alone time, stargazing time, time to explore their changing bodies especially as they approach puberty, time to wonder. Something they still need as much as the young child is a sense of protection, an awareness that we are there for them. And when the world seemingly flips on its head and all established life habits have to change, it can be a great time to explore something completely new with them. Perhaps it is singing together as a family or playing an instrument or learning a new craft or painting on canvas or learning new jump rope games or teaching them how to prepare a whole meal for the family or growing a garden or cleaning out the garage together or any number of other household activities that we now have the time to tend. And as they grow into the next stage of childhood, it can be a perfect time to introduce or increase community service.

They also need physical movement. As most of the things mentioned in the second paragraph of this section are not currently sanctioned by the *shelter in place* regulations, what are some other things they can do that exercise their bodies? When weather allows outside time, it's a great time to introduce old-fashioned games like hide and seek, tag, capture the

flag, hula hooping, hop scotch, relay races, shooting hoops, obstacle courses and other games they create out of their own imaginations.

If our mandate for the young child is to “be the goodness”, we might say that our mandate for the elementary-age child is to “show the beauty”, through the stories we tell and all that is listed above, and to help them find and experience beauty in their surroundings. Like the little flower that cracks open a sidewalk to show itself to us, we can find beauty anywhere if we train ourselves to see it.

Youth

Play in the third stage of childhood, youth, the time from puberty to stepping into early adulthood, may start to shine a light on the inner life of the child as we observe their choices of what entertains them and who and what they seek for daily companionship. It can also be a time when the influence of peers may play a role in choices they make.

At a time when everyone is required to stay home, social media, which already plays a significant role in the lives of many youth, may have an even greater uptick in use. This is an opportunity, however, for families to draw their young people back into their family culture – or to help create a new family culture that includes them heartily. The media-addicted youth may have a harder time with this as they have already united themselves with a virtual world that can cause its own form of social impairment. And indeed, now they may additionally be on the computer extra hours to continue their schooling! It is worth every effort, both loving and firm, to call them out into touchstones throughout the day – meals together, participation in the responsibilities of the home, physical exertion through exercise or play, perhaps a game night (not on a screen), reading classic literature together, and eventually having real conversation.

The innate drive of youth is to search for what is true; however, it has been so long since many people have felt that “truth” is being represented that youth can feel apathetic or cynical. In fact, many adults feel that way as well. This is a great time to simply listen to our young people. If they are able to open enough to express emotion – listen. If they are able to speak of their disappointment in society – listen. If they are able to share their fears or disappointments in humanity – listen. Listen as deeply as possible.

With teens, also listen to learn. What do they know that you don’t know? What might they teach you or share with you about a topic that they find interesting? What may already be living in them that will show up later as part of their artistry, part of their unique gift to the world? What intrigues them enough to want to dive in deeper and learn more? How can you help to draw that out, to honor their interest, and yes, perhaps to learn from them?

Some schools choose “community service” to be part of their high school students’ curriculum. This is ideal. At a time when a human being can easily fall deeply into self-involvement or, the opposite, self-loathing, doing something for someone else is the best. Listening to a holistic physician recently, he indicated that serving others who are in greater need than you also serves your personal health. Most of us probably already intuited that, yet it is somehow soothing to hear it confirmed. Starting with one’s own neighborhood and perhaps checking with volunteer organizations nearby, catalyzing our youth to serve can also help them to feel that they are making a difference.

As we were called to “Be the Goodness” for the little ones and “Show the Beauty” for the second stage of childhood, perhaps our mandate for supporting our youth is to “Guide and Support the Inquiry for Truth”. I will never forget when my younger son’s class sang a song for the parents called *Show Me the Way* by Styx in 1990. It seems worthwhile to share the full lyrics here with you:

*Every night I say a prayer in the hopes that there’s a heaven
But every day I’m more confused as the saints turn into sinners
All the heroes and legends I knew as a child have fallen to idols of clay
And I feel this empty place inside, so afraid that I’ve lost my faith*

*Show me the way, show me the way
Take me tonight to the river
And wash my illusions away
Please, show me the way*

*And as I slowly drift to sleep, for a moment dreams are sacred
I close my eyes and know there’s peace in a world so filled with hatred
Then I wake up each morning and turn on the news to find we’ve so far to go
And I keep on hoping for a sign, so afraid I just won’t know*

*Show me the way, show me the way
Bring me tonight to the mountain
And take my confusion away
And show me the way*

*And if I see your light, should I believe
Tell me how will I know*

*Show me the way, show me the way
Give me the strength and the courage
To believe that I’ll get there someday
And please show me the way*

Every night I say a prayer in the hopes that there’s a heaven . . .

This song feels every bit as relevant as it did thirty years ago. Trust that our youth still need us to show them the way.

It is also a time to offer as much levity, humor and lightness as you can. While they may not admit it, they may also be feeling uncertain, concerned about the future, and even fearful. Levity and humor are known to drive out fear and even send dark energy fleeing. Might be a good time to implement a joke night! As a little poem I wrote years ago says,

*Devils and demons all must flee
When first we practice mirth and glee!*

