

## **Touch Becoming Trust-**

### **How the young child finds relationship to the world, to others and the sense of self**

Social distancing and other protocols that have been put into place to protect our families and particularly vulnerable populations has created a truly challenging quandary for Waldorf early childhood teachers. The young child lives in the joy of movement and discovers the world through wide-open senses, especially the sense of touch.

Touch is the primary means by which a child comes into relationship with another human being and discovers the world, as well as a dawning sense of self. Loving touch from a caring human being invites the child to come into his or her body. Through touching (and with babies and toddlers, tasting) the child establishes what is “not-I” and with each new experience, the beginning sense of who is doing the touching. Sometimes, even for adults, touch can be the surest way to find the truth of a situation.

There is, in addition to physical touch, a secondary aspect that is described by Henning Kohler. When we touch something physically, we resonate inwardly in response to its inherent characteristic quality. A colleague called this the soul sense of touch. This process of resonating happens for the child unconsciously, but it is nonetheless a foundational experience for the child’s future capacity for fine-tuned discrimination. If we add this secondary aspect to the primary one of “not-I” and “I, which forms the basis for awareness of self, in later life this becomes our sense for the “I of another human being”, according to Rudolf Steiner. This could be called our spiritual sense of touch.

It would seem impossible to replace the role of touch in the development of the young child and in the EC teacher’s relationship with the young child. Fortunately, children are sheltering in place with their families and touch experiences are not restricted in the home. While we are hopeful that the current situation is temporary, teachers are having to make accommodations for a range of restrictions when school resumes in the fall.

What kinds of physical touch activities can we offer? Certainly, we will offer lots of free time in nature. Perhaps we can rework typical games to involve giving oneself a variety of movement and touch experiences. It has also occurred to me that rhythm can be very supportive of touch, because in its essence, it is a kind of “taking hold and letting go.” Ideally, we take hold and let go in a regular or predictable sequence. Many EC teachers have supported families during this time in understanding the importance of rhythm for their children at home.

A predictable rhythm helps a child feel more secure, but these are uncertain times for all of us. We may also have to lend to our children our own willingness to live courageously with the uncertainty of the current situation. The children can easily “touch” into our inner soul state and will sense and feel what we feel. So, a deepened understanding and consciousness of rhythm and the recognition of the importance of our own inner mood are two ways that we can support the child’s sense of touch and sense of trust.

A third way to work with touch is related to the secondary aspect of touch- resonance. How can we heighten our attunement to the children, individually and as a group? We have all experienced anxiety in the past months and perhaps, even trauma. A heightened attunement might mean that we are on the watch for behaviors that indicate that the children are still feeling uncertain. Are specific therapeutic activities being called for? Do we need to adjust our expectations, simplify our schedule, or smooth out our transitions? It might mean that we need to work closely with our colleagues to review our day together and share what each of us has noticed about individual children. It might also mean intensifying our imaginative, meditative work in the evening before sleep.

A fourth possibility that has occurred to me is to support the children's sense of touch is through story. At one point in his research on the twelve senses, Rudolf Steiner indicated that there is an aspect of touch in all of the senses. We are especially aware of this with the sense of sight. We can easily feel as though we are reaching out and touching something or someone with our eyes. We can also see, feel, smell and taste things that are described verbally.

The pictures that we bring through the telling of a story, whether it is a simple nature story, a fairy tale, or a puppet play, are actually evocative of all the senses, touch included! If we are able to really live into the pictures and sounds ourselves, they will live even more strongly for the children. The child can feel "touched" and comforted by our own relationship with the mood, the pictures, the beauty of the language and the wonder of the story as a whole.

Understanding touch more deeply will, I think, help us prepare for how to meet the children as they return to our Waldorf classrooms in the fall. It may also make us better teachers, even when we are able, once again, to hug our loved ones and give free rein to the children's natural inclination to touch and be touched by the wondrous world in which we all live.

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