

Discipline Questions

By Donna Simmons

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The topic of discipline in Waldorf circles can seem elusive – this is mainly because discipline as such is rarely talked about. Rather, discipline is understood as something which arises quite naturally out of a right understanding of children and of the ability of the adult – whether parent or teacher – to create the forms necessary to support the growing child. With a right understanding and right forms, discipline "problems" rarely, if ever, arise.

Now, don't get me wrong – this isn't to say everything flows perfectly once the above is achieved – but, honest to god, in my many, many years of experience in and out of Waldorf schools with 100's of children, I know that this really is so. If one has a picture of discipline as a right relationship between adult and child, then, although children will certainly test, push limits and do all the other wonderful things they must do to understand the world, it just isn't a problem.

So what am I talking about? Well, the number one issue to address is the inner work of the adults involved – that's us parents. What unresolved issues do we have, what buttons do we hide which our children always find? How are we about issues like anger, control, loss, spontaneity, routine? What is the picture we carry of the growing child – and not just of our individual son or daughter? What role do we see as the mother's role?

I believe absolutely 100% that parents need to be really clear in how they understand their roles as parents and as teachers and what they understand the developing child needs. I think parents need to understand the importance of how they create their family rhythms – or what the consequences are of not doing this. Is it really so important to take the baby out past his bedtime so I can go to that meeting? Is it pushing my child's limits to take him to the zoo before we go out tonight for a meal? Who says 3 year olds should be expected to be able to join in Circle Time at a nursery or coop meeting? Can a 6 year old really be expected to keep his room clean on the basis of verbal instructions? Do the television shows my 10 year old watches have any effect on his behavior? Is my 14 year old old enough to make choices about all the important areas of her life?

Again – who am I, the mother or father – and who is this person, my child? What is our relationship? Are we democratic in our family – or has this child come to learn, to be within my circle of strength and compassion so he can grow within that circle, encompassed by its security until he is ready to strike out on his own and use his voice and his choices meaningfully? What is the gesture of each stage of childhood and how must I, the parent, adapt and change to create that gesture and meet the needs of my growing child?

Do I have any answers to these questions? Oh yes, I have many (!) as those of you who have read my books, consulted with me and/or attended my workshops know! But I think by considering some of these questions, by figuring out one's own relationship to what is behind these questions, then one can start to discover what one understands about the basis of Waldorf education.

But I'll offer one more thing here. Discipline rides the waves between extremes. What is more, discipline itself is a state which must be flexible and must not only mold itself appropriately to the situation at hand but also to the changing needs of the growing child.

To speak of discipline itself with regard to a baby is, of course, absurd. But here it is the gradual bringing into rhythm of the tiny child's patterns of wakefulness and sleep that forms the child's life and so lays the foundations for discipline. By creating forms as the baby grows into toddlerhood – now it is naptime, now it is lunchtime, now we brush our teeth and go to bed – we can avoid many of the conflicts which can plague households with little children. It is the very act of forming the young child's life rhythms that functions as a kind of overall discipline.

By constantly giving choices, conflict arises more easily. This is as draining for the little child as it is for the parent and has a negative effect on the child's growth forces. If, instead, we carefully form the child's day and present him with his food, clothes, and schedule of events, then conflict arises less often. Many 'progressive' modes of parenting reject this, saying that early practice of choice gives children the experience of making choices and learning consequences. My experience is that the reality is that it tends to create nervous children who are precociously 'in their heads', who are having to think through too much information too young. (Wrong thing at the wrong time.) My experience is that premature choice weakens children and can be counterproductive in terms of desired eventual independence of thought and action.

Having said all this, a parent will be sensitive to those times when it's fine that Johnny wants Cheerios not oatmeal, and wants to hear this story not that one. The point is to present the form ("Here is your jacket") and to be willing to shift when it's appropriate ("Okay, you can wear your sweater today"). Further, try to be aware of creating rhythms which are doable and take into account the child's needs: too many hours in the car, overstimulating trips to the mall, or too many visits with playmates can make otherwise harmonious family rhythms go haywire.

As the child grows and matures, the way one can work with questions of discipline depend less on forms – on imitation and on strong rhythms – and more on the natural authority of the parent. In Waldorf schools, the years between ages 7 and 14, the class teacher years, are characterized by the relationship of dynamic authority between the child and his or her class teacher, the teacher who starts with a class in First Grade and ideally accompanies that class all the way through Eighth Grade. This relationship is based on love and it is the challenge of each class teacher to love each of the children in his or her care.

At home this is a given. We love our children and they love us. Our authority as parents, nurtured by this love, is based on the fact that we are the moms and dads and that we provide the framework of family life. Our children grow up in this framework and, crucially, the framework – which must be conceptualized not as a dead, rigid thing but as an organic, dynamic thing – must change and grow with our children.

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Waldorf Education taught me a particular kind of discipline that is perhaps unusual in schools today. It taught me how to think and feel my way deeply into a subject; one can call that the cultivation of imagination. It taught me how to work patiently, quietly on a project for many hours at a time; one can call that the cultivation of understanding. It taught me how to present school material beautifully and with attention to detail; one can call that the cultivation of artistic sensibility.

In short, Waldorf Education taught me that knowledge in all its forms is conveyed in and through time—that time is required for any subject to come to life. I was able to experience for myself at a very young age that the conscious, respectful use of time results in abundant rewards that show themselves on many levels—imaginative, cognitive, creative.

This sense of discipline has helped me tremendously in my chosen career. Academic studies require above all else a particular kind of concentration and rigorous patience. I knew already when I enrolled in my undergraduate courses that my goals would not be realized fully until many years in the future when I graduated with a Ph.D. I knew already that I would get tremendous pleasure and satisfaction out of practicing this kind of discipline. These were lessons many other students still had to learn.

Since graduating, I am working as a freelance writer/researcher. Any freelancer knows that discipline, coupled with a love of what you do, can determine the difference between success and failure. I feel thankful to the Toronto Waldorf School for having prepared me so well.

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