

Daily Rhythm at Home and its Lifelong Relevance

by Helle Heckmann



As parents of little children, you are often very tired and you get too little sleep, and when you have too little sleep you also have too little energy and then often you give in when you think you should not have done, or you get angry or irritated so you are not present and when you are not present you lose the children and you do not like yourself. To make it easier for you to deal in the daily life with your children there are three important considerations:

- **To be flexible**
- **To set limits (borders) and**
- **To observe the same routine everyday**

To become flexible is the result of objective inward observation. You may train your flexibility through an inner work where you learn about yourself. In relation to limits, you have to find out them for yourself. You have to decide what the limits are for your child in your house: time to go to bed, time to eat, what to eat, what language to use in the family and so on. You have to make up your mind about limits beforehand, so, instead of saying “no, no, no...” and becoming angry, you simply do not allow the children to go beyond the limits. You know this is your decision and do not need to be angry. If you are ahead of the child and you see a certain situation coming, with humor and the right gesture or word, you can move away from the situation, and this will be possible if you train your flexibility. Knowing more about yourself will give you the possibility to also be ahead of yourself. When you catch this tool you can start working with your children in a much freer way, because the limits are set.

The third recommendation, to make a routine which is the same every day, gives the child rhythm. All Waldorf families probably know how the daily life is in the nursery and kindergarten. The children go through the day in alternate periods of concentration and expansion, as if in a breathing rhythm where there is inhaling and exhaling.

In the inhaling or breathing-in phase the child directs his attention to an activity that basically relates him to himself. For little children each breathing-in period (drawing, water painting, and knitting, eating...) is very short because little children can only

concentrate for short periods of time. In the exhaling or breathing-out period, the child relates mainly to the surrounding world (free play, free running etc.). For each breathing-in period the child needs a breathing-out period and so a pattern is established. This rhythm is something that you can bring into your home. You have to try to find out when the children breathes-in and when they breathe-out. And when the children are in the breathing-in period, you have to make sure you are present, so the child feels *ah, here I feel my parents, they are there for me*. After that, for very short time, you can do what you have to do at home and you can tell your child *you have to wait because I need to do this*. And this will be all right because you know you have been present with the child. As an example, look at the situation when parents pick up their children from the kindergarten. At the very moment you are picking up your child: Does the cell phone ring and you answer? Do you greet your friends and engage in intense talk? If yes, then you are not present for the child. In my last visit to Mexico I saw very few parents really greeting their children, the majority were talking to other parents or engaged in school affairs or talking in their cell phones, or arriving late or in a hurry.

But, for your child who has been gone for five hours and who really wants you... you are not there. So the child screams *I want an ice cream! I want this or that!* or he starts running around, or falling, or getting into little conflict because he is confused, because he has not really met you. On the contrary, if you take the time (and it is five seconds perhaps), you bend down, give him a hug and then smell him (*so lovely!*) and really you are there, his eyes will tell you more than words, how his day was. He cannot tell you with words because he cannot remember, but his eyes will tell you everything. And then you take his hand and walk together (of course in a tempo that the child can follow), and this is really lovely because you are making a new nice situation, a "you and I situation." Now, if you need to greet people you can do it, very shortly, but together with the child because your child will feel *I am where I belong, with my parent*. This was a breathing-in situation where you were present.

Then you go to the car and go home (breathing-out) and it is probably time for eating which brings again a breathing-in situation. How do you eat? Do you sit down together with the child? Or is the child sitting by himself and you are walking around talking on the telephone? If you give yourself the time and sit down with your child you will teach the child manners at the table by your example. Many of the children today do not sit with their parents and they do not learn to hold utensils appropriately. However, this is important, otherwise when they are seven years old they cannot hold a pencil and to learn it at that age is so difficult compared to when they were one or two years old.

In addition, to sit at the table and to have a beginning, a process and an end, is important because this is how you should live the whole of life. Everything has a beginning, a process and an end. It may take you only fifteen minutes to sit appropriately, to check how the child holds and drinks from cup (children from one year onwards do not need a sip cup), to eat with closed mouth, and everything you are given and so on, being, in this way, an example for your child to follow, but more importantly

you have taken this short moment to make again a “*you and I situation*” and at the same time you also help the child to find a social form of *how we are when we eat together*.

When you finish with the meal you remind the children they need to help with the table so that they also learn that when they are a part of a social environment they also take part in the cleaning up. In this way you have made and create a situation where you have been present and now you can say to the child *go and play* (breathing-out) because you have been there, and then you can do what you need to do but you have to be visible to your child. This is so, because a little child cannot play by himself if the center is not there and you are the most important person for the child. You are his center, and if you leave the room the little child will follow you.

When you are doing your things, the situation may occur where children will say *I am bored*. In this case you, of course, don't turn on the television or music. When you are occupied with other things, you can tell your child *now you play by yourself*. If you know you have been present you can actually expect them to find something to do themselves. It is very important that you are not afraid of your children not knowing what to do or being bored. It is very important that you feel it is right: *I have been there with them now they can be by themselves*.

Nowadays, parents often use media or adult-directed activities for their children because they are afraid of their children being bored and assume that they are not able to do anything themselves. This is a tricky situation. If you think you have to entertain your under-seven children all the time, with media (films, TV, videogames, computers and so on), after-school classes, and/or other adult-directed activities, then they do not learn how to play by themselves. They will not have a moment where they can be in a state of not knowing what to do and from there progress into a state of finding images inwardly and thus creating things from inside out. By letting them to be bored you help them, because being bored represents the opportunity the children will have to go into this process of inner creativity. The fact that children are able to be by themselves, to create their own play without adult direction is of great importance because during the first seven years of the child everything is about being able to create.

If all the activities come from outside (electronic screen, video-games, adult direction, etc.), then not much happens in the sphere of inward creation. That is why in Waldorf kindergartens, teachers do not sit down and play with the children but do real work, from which the children draw inspiration to use it in their own play. In these kindergartens you may find teachers sweeping, cooking, sawing, tending the vegetable patch, taking care of farm animals, cutting wood, and whatever the particular setting of each school allows to do. Equally, you, as a parent, in the breathing-out phase, may do your work and the children beside you should be able to do their work (i.e. their own play). This is possible only when the children feel that they have met you in a previous breathing-in phase.

It is the same when children go to bed in the evening. What the child loves to hear are stories from your life. No book, no radio, no music, no film nor cartoon can make the same impact on the child as *you*. And to find your own story to tell means so much and it is, in addition, a tool with which you can change very stuck situations. It is so difficult for children to let go of you if they have not felt you present. But, if you have hold your child, blown a little in the ear, told her a little story from the heart, so you have really been there, then you can kiss her and put her to bed and feel *I can leave because I have been there*. And then you can expect that your child is able to sleep by herself, which is healthy for your child.

In Denmark, where I come from, many parents are in a situation where they have to lie down and hold hands with the child, read 20 stories, sing 50 songs, and all this takes one, one and a half, two hours and when finally they go out quietly of the bedroom they hear '*Mum, water, Mum!*' and then become annoyed. You can avoid this by setting limits and finding a comfortable way to leave because you have been present in different situations during the day. Otherwise the child has not been filled enough with your love and, if in addition, he has not been given opportunities to do his own play, to work from inside out, you cannot expect he will be able to sleep by himself.

There is an additional aspect I would like to draw attention to for the after-nursery/kindergarten time you have with your children. If you take your children from class to class or entrust them to the media in its different varieties you have less time with them. Children are small for very short time. At present, you may be thinking it is a long time to go but, in no time you will see it went so fast. By letting your child to engage in his own play while you are around doing your own chores, and being really present in those breathing-in situations, you build trust between your child and you. And this trust will be important when they get a little older and get into pre-puberty and puberty because with this, they will come to you when they have problems and listen to you when you tell them what and what not to do. But they will only do it if they trust you, if you have been there for them. And that is why the first seven years of children are so important, because their whole trust, their believing that the world is good, is the basis of their future lives.

After that first seven years, it is their friends who become the focus. Their choice of friends has a lot to do with the morality you have shown them and built up through the first seven years. In addition, if children were given the opportunity to work inwardly, they will know themselves and then they will be able to say "no" when they meet something they do not like and "yes" to what they want. You can make a choice if you know yourself and a human being who can make a choice has healthy self-esteem.

In this context it is important how the kindergarten and the home relate to each other: there must be a bridge from one world to the other. In a way, it is a little hard for families who choose a Waldorf education for your children as you become different from the mainstream, but this is your choice. You cannot do both. Once you have taken

the road of consciousness, you are concerned about the food, their upbringing, everything. To make the bridge from having the children in the Waldorf kindergarten and at your home is, of course, important so the child can see that everything fits. That is why it is incredibly important to build up trust between the kindergarten and the family, through which the kindergarten teacher is able to support the family's choice but also for the family to respect what is brought in the kindergarten so one thing without the other is nothing. So you need to find a way together.

I have three children who are 29, 26, and 23 and now I can harvest the 25 years of hard dedicated work with my children, and it is so fantastic because I can see how they can go out in life with freedom and also I can move around in the world with freedom and wisdom, because they don't need me anymore but they like me and they like to be with me and also their friends. And this is, I think, the highest thing we wish as parents, that when our children are adults, they actually, by their own free choice, choose to be with us at certain moments. We can find with our children a new way of building social relationships because we have another consciousness by which we can meet our children better.

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