

# On the Inner Attitude of the Adult in the Education of the Young Child and in Working with Parents

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An important key to the appropriate inner attitude of the adult in relationship to children in the first seven years can be found in a lecture held by Rudolf Steiner on December 29, 1921 in Dornach. Let us first turn to his descriptions of the child:

*To a certain extent, the child closes the gates of its the soul life toward the outer world, and thus toward everything which those outside the child in the surroundings want to achieve with the child through their will In the earliest years of life, the child does what it wants to do – one can say that without reservation. Thus, observant adults must admit the fact that to a great extent, they are powerless when confronted with the will of the child—especially regarding what the child will become during later – or even the final - stages of its human biography. (1)*

On the other hand we encounter the well-known sensitivity of the child toward the surroundings, which poses a particular task for us as educators:

*And this is what is particularly significant regarding the child in the first two and a half years is that although it is not accessible to the will of others, its has a fine, instinctive perception for everything going on around it. (1)*

And then a supplementary comment from a later lecture:

*And the moment a child perceives something, whether it be a movement, or a sound, there arises in him the impulse of an inward gesture, to re-experience what has been perceived with the whole intensity of his inner nature. (2)*

The child is thus active right into its very perception through its unique will activity, which as we know works directly into the formation of the organs. Because, however, the child can work only with that which is in its surroundings, we as educators have a great responsibility to shape the surroundings so that they support healthy development. Rudolf Steiner on this: *This imposes on us adults the task, not of exerting our will upon the child, but - far less comfortable - to "be" in such a way in the presence of the child that the child can imitate what we are doing. For the child will take in everything we do, and how we move...And he or she is sensitive to our feelings, and our thoughts. Thus education in these first two-and-a-half years is actually purely a matter of us adults educating ourselves to such an extent that when in the presence of the child, we think and feel and will in such a way that this can be taken in by the child." (3)*

Based on this background, the key to the inner attitude of the adult for this developmental phase can be found in the following central statement:

*What must I do to obliterate, as far as possible, my personal self, in order to leave the child free from being burdened by my own subjective nature, so that I do not interfere with the child's destiny, but educate the child toward human freedom in life? (3)*

Thus for each child the following image arises: The child lives in the greatest conceivable devotion to the world, following however his or her own most inward impulses in everything he or she does. In a healthy way this can happen to the extent that the child's educators are constantly educating themselves, so that the child is not subjected to the adults living out their "personal" selves. But what does that mean? If we are not living out our personal nature, how else should we live? We can find a similar theme in the words of Saint Paul, "not I, but the Christ in me". Apparently the "personal" has to do with our soul life that wants to express itself, without first examining whether or not this suits the mood of the overall situation - in other words, everything we identify with that weakens our devotion to the world. Formulated in a positive way: our attitude as adults is most supportive of the child's development when to the greatest possible degree we develop devotion to the world and in our actions, follow only those impulses that are able to be experienced as being in harmony with the particular situation. Such impulses arise from the innermost being of the human soul, from the "holiest of holies" that lies beyond all identification and is connected to the eternal. At the same time, we can see this ideal of the inner attitude as the great human ideal of freedom, which Steiner describes in *Theosophy* as follows:

*The ability to act out of one's inner being can only be an ideal toward which one strives...but the seeker of knowledge must have the will to clearly recognize this path. This is one's will to freedom, for freedom is action out of one's inner being. Only one who draws his motives from the eternal may act out of his innermost being. A being who does not do this acts according to motives other than those inherent within things. Such a person opposes the world order, and the world order must then prevail against him. That is to say, what such a person intends to carry out through his will cannot in the end be fulfilled. It cannot become free. The arbitrary will of the individual being annihilates itself through the effects of its deeds.*

Here again we find a characterization of what Steiner calls our "personal" self: a soul life that wants to express itself by separating itself from its connection to the world. One cannot portray drastically enough the nature of this central pedagogical task: each and every personal expression of our soul life in the presence of the child – even if its "only" a feeling or thought – confronts the child with an overarching concept that has the tendency to "spoil the child's destiny".

We can express this ideal of the inner attitude of the adult in the following words: to follow the innermost impulses that arise out of a quiet listening to the world. This however corresponds to a particular stage which little children reveal to us in its purest form. Apparently it is the same being that expresses itself in the little child and with which I unite myself when I strive for the "not I, but the Christ in me." (5)

Waldorf education places before the educator of the small child the highest ideal of being human. Early childhood education, in the eminent sense, is a spiritual self-education as described in the words of Christ: "except as you become as little children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven." (6)

What does this mean for our activity with the parents, the most important educators during this phase of child development?

If we take Waldorf education seriously, the only answer must be: the central task of parent education is to create a culture of self-education with the goal of overcoming the merely personal and living in the presence of the child in an experience of harmony with each particular situation. But how can we succeed without imposing something on the parents?

In our many years of experience in accompanying parents using the art of conversation developed by Gaby Derrez as now taught in the parent-education training courses at the IPSUM Institute, we are having the following very encouraging experiences:

When the parents experience a conversation in which the parent facilitator also holds back his/her personal aspect, such as personal views of what is “right” or “wrong,” and instead takes an interest in each family’s situation in an open way, offering affirmation – in other words, with the same inner attitude toward the parents as with the child, - then the parents find their way out of “everyday” experience and enter a higher realm. There they experience on the one hand how the attitude of the facilitator creates a space in which they will be able to find a solution suited to their own individual concerns, for which the facilitator is a “midwife.” On the other hand, they experience in themselves a state of consciousness that allows them to lift themselves above their everyday problems and worries and come to new, fruitful ideas.

This experience in facilitated situations often allows for a breakthrough in the attitude of the parents toward their children. Even if for parents the practical solutions for overcoming concrete everyday problems remain in the foreground, through such an experience in the facilitated meeting, a new perspective of a new, more nourishing quality of relationship opens itself to them, that they can nurture through their own self-education.

Particularly parents who already carry such impulses in themselves find their way in many situations to an autonomous inner path of schooling. Others wish for further suggestions, impulses and support. Thus there arises for Waldorf education the task for which we can be grateful, namely, of creating for the parents of young children a culture of self-education. This is less a matter of lecturing about various topics, and more, in addition to the necessary study activity, about creating communities of practice – and these can take place in the presence of the children – where we develop a spiritually active, selfless attitude, through which we strengthen and support each other. The children will thank us!

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(1) *Soul Economy*, Rudolf Steiner, December 29, 1921, GA 303

(2) *The Spiritual Ground of Education*, Rudolf Steiner Lecture 1, 16 August, 1922, GA 305

(3) *Soul Economy*, see above.

(4) *Theosophy*, Rudolf Steiner, Chapter IV, “The Path of Knowledge”

(5) see also further thoughts in *The Spiritual Guidance of the Individual and Humanity*, by Rudolf Steiner

(6) Matthew 18:3