

“Between Explosion and Inwardness”

Symposium on free play organized by Rudolf Steiner kindergartens and primary schools in Switzerland and Liechtenstein

Bettina Mehrstens and Gerda Salis Gross,
Bern, Switzerland

More than 70 parent-child and playgroup leaders, and kindergarten, first, and second-grade teachers from all over Switzerland met on Saturday, September 5, to give thought to their concerns about the alarming situation of free play in our institutions.

The theme was: ***Between explosion and inwardness: to venture open space for diverse free play as a challenge.***

The conference provided the opportunity to deepen and exchange actual specific questions and problems in regards to the development and possibility of free play in our groups. Some of these questions demand particular thoughtfulness in actual situations.



Gerda Salis Gross gave a motivating presentation as an introduction to the theme that occupied us for the day. Here is a short summary from Gerda:

"Free play, which our society has deemed an unnecessary pastime and pushed into a shadowy existence over the past fifteen to twenty years, has recently aroused the attention of scientists, specifically in regards to the potential benefit it holds for child development.

We posed ourselves questions in this regard: How free is free play in the first place? How is free play understood? Adults prefer to watch children mostly through 'teacher's observation glasses,' that is, from a certain monitoring perspective. Free play, which until recently was characterized as 'purposeless' when seen from this vantage point, is now also declared by the scientific community as 'goal-oriented.' When looked at from an educated adult perspective, one can see a purpose in everything.

But how is it for the child? Does a playing child think of a goal, aside from that he wants to be playing? While playing, does he think that he is in contact with himself and the world? The need to play is a fundamental need of children, throughout history and throughout the world. Free

play is the way the child experiences the world and expresses himself. It gives life form and is the child's way of coping with life.

Thereby, the child plays with free reign, flexibly and variably, and in tune with the themes that resonate for him.

To clearly differentiate, I call free play in this sense, in which the child has determined what and how he plays, without instruction, expectations, or examples from adults, 'primary play,' because every healthy child plays foremost in this way. I call play that does not arise from this free inner impulse, but rather from an objective - play that is goal or purpose-oriented, instructed, and controlled - 'secondary play.' This is play that, in some way or another, has rules, value, or objectives that mirror those of the existing society.

As a means of deepening their experience of Gerda Salis Gross' presentation about the impulse for free play, participants were given the opportunity to work with the theme "The Many Faces of Play" in different working groups in the morning and afternoon after the lecture. In these groups they were able to deepen their relationship to the theme and, through motivating play sequences, revive their own inner child!

Irmgard Beckert, a crusader for free play in Germany, worked with the theme "Preparing for and Accompanying Free Play in Play Groups and Kindergartens with Impulses Called Forth from One's Own Sense of Play."



Maria Luisa Nüesch, publisher of the book *Play from the Depths*, worked with "The Undisturbed Development of Play and Movement in Babies as a Basis for the Unfolding of Free Play in Play Groups and the Kindergarten." Hannes Amos, an expert in Switzerland for the moveable classroom in the elementary grades, gave a glimpse into his rich experience as a class teacher: "The Moveable Classroom and the Cultural Assets of Child's Games such as String- and Marble-Games."



Here are a few excerpts from the rich feedback of participants, on what they took with them as the most important aspects of the day:

"How free am I in my own demeanor, thoughts, my entire way of being and attitude when I offer free play [to the children]?"

"That which I refer to as "the ability to be lost in play," would understandably be classified as primary play, and would differentiate itself from secondary and tertiary forms of play."

"Train a soft eye on the child, so that the

free space and security arise in which the child feels free to let himself unfold in play." "What good fortune for the children, that "Play Protectors" rescue and care for this cultural asset, otherwise it would be forgotten!"

"Facilitate free play through wrapping, recovering gestures and protective space, as well as well as beneficial boundaries and helpful suggestions, so that the child can trustingly open himself in play."

"If I wish to follow the impulse further, to enable play to be accompanied with an adult in the room, the adult should have a handwork task to attend to (a grandparent, someone from the parent community, a retired person).

"I must be clear with myself about which expectations I have for the free play of the children. Can I hold myself back for a long time, instead of impulsively intervening?"

„Create outdoor play spaces which correspond to the need of the child and which stimulates the play.“

"Observe openly and non-judgmentally. In that way, one can first find freedom in one's own mind!"

"Rediscovering old games is a lot of fun: namely how, through movement, numbers and writing can be learned!"

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