

Elfriede Hengstenberg: Working with Children

Many years ago when I began teaching children, I was only concerned with offering a thorough-going "body education." The parents who entrusted me with their children were just as convinced as I was at the time that physical training alone could awaken in the children their vitality and total involvement. We assumed that the **lively readiness** acquired in my *Gymnastik* classes would also be available to the children in other life situations as they arose.

Doctors sent children to me assuming that I would correct flat feet, knocked knees, spinal curvatures, postural and walking difficulties as well as breathing and circulation disturbances. Parents and teachers assumed that *Gymnastik* could enliven the passive and flabby child and bring overactive, disruptive children to become more peaceful. And the children themselves had great fun with these lessons in which I often used music as a stimulus, along with lively activities involving swinging and jumping exercises, and movement games of all kinds. My procedures seemed to me to be quite successful.

In the course of the years, however, I began to look at my work more critically. I came to ask myself seriously whether I had actually achieved my purpose for the children with the kind of teaching I was doing. When I observed my students during the lessons, felt their joy and interests and noticed positive changes in some of them in their bodies, in their whole beings - then I could answer "Yes." But when I saw the same students outside of the lessons, again and again I had to say "No." Only as long as I, as a teacher, stood behind the children and gave them stimulus for pep and vitality, did *Gymnastik* seem to have the desired effect. Only at that moment did the lessons accomplish that of which parents, teachers and doctors had hoped.

But what remained of their "good posture" outside the class, in everyday sitting, standing and walking? What remained of their **flexibility and lively involvement** when nobody stood behind them, when the stimulus of music and *Gymnastik* was gone? What remained of their liveliness and readiness when the task was to sit hour after hour over their schoolwork? And what remained of the inner animation through breathing when it was necessary to cope with personal weaknesses and conflicts, and do tasks which were considered disagreeable? I saw my students coming home from school, sitting or standing in the bus or subway, shuffling through the streets in a state which shook me deeply. And not only the older ones, but already the little ones, the six-year olds.

For years I had been deceiving myself in the belief that I could strengthen the child's organism so that it would be able to withstand unfavorable influences. And I also had deceived myself in assuming that the exercises I thought up - stimulating and exact as they were - could reach the whole organism, the inner of the child, with all his/her difficulties and disturbances. Much less could they alter pervasive attitudes.

I finally came to the awareness that "bad posture," for instance, seldom could be corrected from the outside. It is rather the indication of **an unfavorable inner attitude** - the expression of a disturbed way of being which is both physical and psychic, and is always accompanied by a loss of vital energy. I recognized that what I had done with the children in my class was "gymnastic skill" for itself and had basically nothing to do with **the existence of that resilience which life with its challenges is constantly demanding of us**. Consequently the question became more and more urgent for me: **"How can I create a more understandable connection for the children between that which they practice in my classes and that which they need for an uninhibited unfolding in daily life?"** I had to search for a more fundamental and comprehensive understanding of our life problems and life processes.

This understanding I found a few years later in **my work with Elsa Gindler and Heinrich Jacoby**. Through them I came to the insight that **one can learn from very young children how their unfolding can happen naturally**. Children start out toward unimpaired development on paths which arise out of their nature and way of being. Those who had not yet lost their way - their ability to conform to natural laws - could teach me how to help the others who had been pushed off the track.

When we have the opportunity to watch a child's earliest endeavors, when there are no interfering adults about, again and again we find that whatever the child wants to do, he/she wants to do independently, with no help from the outside. One hears very young children insisting, "All by myself!": all by themselves to climb down the stairs; all by themselves to see what a water faucet does when it is turned this way or that. We are familiar with these natural impulses of children, but seldom give them due respect. Instead we try to "help." **I came to recognize that such help, though given with the best intentions, gradually leads to dependencies which undermine the confidence of the children in their own independent observation, exploration and endeavor. Endlessly and untiringly overcoming resistance through their own initiative gives them just that readiness and resilience which is needed to keep alive and to live fully.**

The more that children have the chance to explore for themselves the more skilled they become, the more confident, and the more vital in their totality. And the upright way children sit or stand is an expression of their vitality and their obedience to the natural laws of gravity. In viewing the illustrations in this book, not the expressions of unimpaired behavior. We all respond to such expressions, but we draw too few conclusions from them. We are generally satisfied to find the child "daring" or "delightful." But there is much more than that: We have real phenomena in front of us - children in full possession of their capabilities and strength. From this "self-possession" comes the vitality of their movements, the radiant or collected expression on their faces, and their exemplary upright sitting and standing.

Through my work with Elsa Gindler and Heinrich Jacoby I came to see the children more perceptively. I saw those with unhindered, natural unfolding, and those whose development had been hindered by family, school, society. I discovered how, through clearly seeing the former in all their movements and way of being in the world, I could find wherein the latter might unfold, fulfilling their potential. I found that adults, even with their more deeply seated hindrances, could change through the same kind of work, and that, particularly in the cases of parents and teachers, such change in them was a necessity for the healthy unfolding of the children in their care.

