

Nokken, A Garden for Children

A review by Carrie Dentler

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Nokken has come up on almost every Waldorf Yahoo!Group and Waldorf forum I am on, so I thought it was about time to address the work of Helle Heckmann. More and more, Nokken is being held up as an example within the Waldorf community of what to do right within child care for young children, and as an example of the value of outdoor play and outdoor time and connection with nature for young children. For this post, I read both “Nokken: A Garden for Children” by Helle Heckmann and “Nokken: A Garden for Kids September 2003 Celebration Edition.” I hear there is also a lovely video about Nokken that I have not yet seen.

For those of you who are unfamiliar with Nokken, Nokken is a Danish approach to Waldorf-based childcare in Copenhagen, Denmark. The minimum age for children to enter is walking age. Helle Heckmann writes, “The child must be able to walk away from her mother and into the world on her own,” on page 26 of “Nokken: A Garden For Children.” The center is open for six hours a day only, from 8:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. “Our idea is that we share with the parents,” writes Helle Heckmann on the same page. “We look after the children for six hours, the parents have them for six waking hours and the children sleep for twelve hours. In other words, the family will still exert influence on the child’s development.” The staff at the center does not change during the day, unlike child care centers in the United States that are open for long hours that necessitate shift changes. The children are together in one group from walking age to age 7, and sibling groups are welcomed and kept together, which is again different from the vast majority of child care centers in the United States.

Helle Heckmann writes on page 27 of Nokken, “It is obviously difficult. Parents often need longer opening hours, while at the same time they want the world’s best early-childhood program with a motivated and relaxed staff. This is a difficult task, and knowing that we cannot accommodate all needs, we have chosen to favor the children. It is a conscious choice we have made as a child-care center. Most of our parents also have to make a choice. They change jobs, reduce their working hours, or work flexible hours: the solutions are many and varied as they consciously choose to spend a lot of time with their children.”

She goes on to write that the role of child care has changed; in the past it was for primarily for social stimulation and now, “*The centers must teach children the basics to help them achieve the necessary skills to choose their life style at a later stage. The parents’ role is mainly to stimulate and organize activities of a social and/or cultural interest.*”

Ouch.

Okay, I guess since I am home with my children, perhaps I have a different perspective on this as a homeschooling mother. Why as a society do we throw up our hands and say, this is the way it is? People have to work, people have chaotic home lives, so the children are better off in child care than with their own families? Why are we not coming up with more ways to support and develop parents? Why in this age of abundant information (yet, often contradictory and just plain wrong information!) are parents feeling so confused and isolated as to what children truly need? Why is there not more understanding of children as children and childhood development and such as opposed to treating children as miniature adults?

Back to the things that are good about Nokken. On page 31 Helle Heckmann writes, “Our first priority is to spend most of the day outdoors. We spend five out of the six hours we are together outdoors.” The children and staff walk daily to a park with open natural spaces and also have a garden with many fruit trees, berry bushes, sand pits, a hen house, rabbit cages, a pigeon house, a vegetable garden, a herb garden, flower beds and a laundry area. The children who are younger and need to nap sleep outside in an open shed, which is common in Denmark.

Children are met in the morning with a handshake, which I find uncommon for Early Year Waldorf programs in the United States. This seems very awakening for the child, and something I truly only hear of teachers of Waldorf Grades doing with their students. Perhaps my Danish readers can tell me if this is a cultural difference? My husband’s family is from Denmark but have not lived there for a long time, so I have no one to ask!

The daily schedule is something that is lovely and takes into account the ages of the children. On page 60 of Nokken, Helle Heckmann writes, “We are careful not to let the youngest children participate in story-telling. If it is a long story, the three year olds sit in another room and draw, because in my experience it is important not to engage them in activities for which they are not ready.” She also talks about how festival celebrations are mainly for children over 3 as well.

The part I have the most difficulty with however, outside of the few things I mentioned above, is the perspective of child development based upon the work of Emmi Pickler and Magda Gerber and their Resources for Infant Educators. (Okay, that title of “Infant Educators” just bothers me as well. Steiner discussed repeatedly how the child under the age of 3 is developing under the spiritual realm and under the inner work that we as parents are doing... I am not sure how he would feel about that title of being an “Infant Educator”. I think if anything Steiner would say the infant is educating US, not the other way around!)

I liked Helle’s description of the need of the infant to cry as a form of communication. However, much of the thrust of her perspective of infant care seems to be “to leave the infant in peace and quiet to sleep or, when awake, to get to

know herself without constant intervention from her surroundings. Often it is difficult to show this infant respect and leave her alone. Constantly satisfying your own need for reassurance and your need to look at your beautiful baby will often influence the infant's ability to be content with herself....By giving the infant peace and quiet for the first months of her life, she will get used to her physical life; the crying will gradually stop, and the baby may start to sleep during the night without waking up at all hours."

As an attached parent, I believe I can respect my child and still enfold her within my protective gesture and be physically close. I believe I can still carry her in a sling and nurse her and have her act as a (passive) witness to my life without overly stimulating her. I believe in our particular culture at this particular time, parents need reassurance to enfold their child within themselves and their family unit, not to separate their children in their infancy to be independent. Perhaps this is a cultural difference than Denmark, I don't know.

However, I also have to say that I do not believe baby-wearing is an excuse to take my children everywhere I went before I had children. I believe in protecting the senses but doing this in an attached way.

I do agree with some of Helle Heckman's statements regarding infants, including her statement on page 17 of Nokken that, "The more restless the adults are, the more restless the children will be." However, statements such as "The less we disturb the infant, the better chance she has of adapting to her life on earth," rather bothers me. I agree in not initiating the disturbance of the infant, but I fear too many parents will take this as license to just set their infant down and let them cry or to keep them passively in a crib. I do agree with Helle Heckmann's assessment that it is difficult to care for children under walking age within a child care setting because of the high needs of care and because infants need peaceful surroundings.

As a homeschooling mother, what I take away from Nokken is the lovely thoughts of a forest kindergarten, napping outside, using action to communicate with small children and not words (see page 32 of Nokken), using singing as a way of talking to small children (page 51), Helle's constant inner work and development, her obvious love of the children.

And as a homeschooling mother and attached parent, I don't like the whole notion that is invading Waldorf Education that children under the age of 4 or 4 and a half should be out of their homes, I don't like the notion that the child care center, no matter how outdoorsy "shares" the child with the parents, and I don't like the idea that parents are not as empowered as they could be in childhood development. Why are we positioning anyone but the parents to be the experts on their children and acting as if someone else knows better? Waldorf schools are also taking children earlier and earlier into Kindergarten, and I also have an issue with that. I would like to see more effort to again, empower and inspire parents within the Waldorf

movement to be home. The hand shaking to greet a small child with such pronounced eye contact also baffles me.

There are many wonderful things at Nokken, and many American parents who need child care would be thrilled to find a center such as Nokken in their neighborhood. Many mothers attempt to create such an environment as part of their homeschooling environment or take in children from outside their family for care so they may stay home with their own children. These are all realities.

However, I would love to see a movement toward empowering and inspiring mothers to be homemakers, to be truly spiritual homemakers, to encourage families to make tough choices to be home with their children, because I feel this is where the power of the next generation is truly going to disseminate from.