

Considering Young Children in Pandemic Times

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In times of pandemic it is important that we hold care for the most vulnerable groups of people and act to protect their wellness as best we can. We have a social consensus that the elderly and most vulnerable need a reduction of the presence of the virus in their environments while still maintaining loving relationships around them. It is equally important that we remember the needs of young children and how these social changes affect their development.

Most adults don't remember what it was like even as a 4 or 5 year old child so let's try to start where they are. The experience of life for a young child before the change of teeth can be compared to an open body of water. Like the water, they feel the ripples of events and emotions as a small lake does a thrown pebble, a fallen tree or the blowing wind. Along with the biological activities of growth and decay, these external influences affect how the shore of sand and clay around the pond is laid down. Children are open to all that the adults around them feel, say and do. They are in a stage of deep imitation, mirroring just as the water reflects what is around them. They take the activities of the day with them into their sleep as they grow and develop physically, emotionally and cognitively. At no other time is a human more vulnerable to outside influences than in early childhood. Children naturally look for all that is good in the world and especially in the adults around them who they emulate. They take in all that it is to be human: work, play, language, moral feelings, etc., and from this they form their self-image and their very physical selves.

"There are two magic words which indicate how the child enters into relation with the environment. They are: Imitation, and Example. The Greek philosopher Aristotle called the human being the most imitative of creatures. For no age in life is this more true than for the first stage of childhood, before the change of teeth. What goes on in the physical environment, this the child imitates, and in the process of imitation the physical organs are cast into the forms which then become permanent. 'Physical environment' must, however, be taken in the widest imaginable sense. It includes not only what goes on around the child in the material sense, but everything that takes place in the child's environment — everything that can be perceived by the senses, that can work from the surrounding physical space upon the inner powers of the child. This includes all the moral or immoral actions, all the wise or foolish actions, that the child sees." - Rudolf Steiner

What are the real consequences when we require masked environments for children? This deeply imitative period of life is one in which young children drink in all they take in through their senses. With this they build their physical organs, giving them a foundation each for his/her whole life and biography. For a child to wear a mask and frequently be exposed to the half covered faces of others deeply affects this organ development as well as language perception and body language sensitivity as part of relationship attachment. It is not only the covered face and the "flat" and "cool" communication experience of masks but also the fear of closeness and disruption of heart connection that is behind the practice of face covering which strongly affects the children. What do these kinds of communication experiences do to their image of the human being and their developing organs? Don't we need the whole human face

to best understand each other, even as adults? As adults we also have to compensate and cope in masked situations. How can we expect children to have healthy encounters in this way?

Young children still significantly live in a pre-birth spiritual consciousness which speaks the picture-language of archetypes, instructive wisdom and the riddles of the soul's journeys. This is why the fairy tales give them such nourishment. They find a language there that they are more familiar with rather than matter-based intellectual explanations. With wonder they can feel that the good always wins over evil. The essence of the symbolic pictures reveals eternal truths of the inner human experience. Fairy tales, fables and myths were not written only for children. They were witnessed, told orally and eventually written down for all people.

How can the truths within fairy tales give insight and courage in our current pandemic situation? The state of Pennsylvania has turned to the authorities of the CDC and the American Pediatric Association (APA) for the unprecedented recommendations that all children 2 years old and above need to wear masks and have the adults around them wear masks inside and outside during play. These recommendations are not supported by evidence or common sense. These guidelines do not reference any safety data on all-day mask use for children, and are being made by pure abstract logic disconnected from life's realities.

APA guidelines excerpt: "Although children and adolescents play a major role in amplifying influenza outbreaks, to date, this does not appear to be the case with SARS-CoV-2. Although many questions remain, the preponderance of evidence indicates that children and adolescents can become infected and are less likely to be symptomatic and less likely to have severe disease resulting from SARS-CoV-2 infection. We continue to learn more about the role children play in transmission of SARS-CoV-2. At present, it appears that children younger than 10 years may be less likely to become infected and less likely to spread infection to others, although further studies are needed. More recent data suggest children older than 10 years may spread SARS-CoV-2 as efficiently as adults, and this information should be part of the considerations taken in determining how to safely and effectively open schools... Additional in-depth studies are needed to truly understand the infectivity and transmissibility of this virus in anyone younger than 18 years, including children and adolescents with disabilities and medical complexities. Policies to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 within schools must be balanced with the previously noted known harms to children, adolescents, families, and the community that come with keeping children at home."

APA recommendation for cloth face coverings for children in the Pre-K setting: "Encourage families to practice wearing cloth face coverings with children while at home."

What recommendation could be more harmful than making children wear masks at home so that they have no escape from this stressful situation? How have we allowed fear to go so far?

Read the full APA guidelines here:

<https://services.aap.org/en/pages/2019-novel-coronavirus-covid-19-infections/clinical-guidance/covid-19-planning-considerations-return-to-in-person-education-in-schools/>

Even the World Health Organization recognizes the harmful effects for children so young to wear masks:

“In general, children aged 5 years and under should not be required to wear masks. This advice is based on the safety and overall interest of the child and the capacity to appropriately use a mask with minimal assistance.” Recommendations for 6-11years old are even then only risk-based considering the “potential impact of wearing a mask on learning and psychosocial development, in consultation with teachers, parents/caregivers and/or medical providers.”

Read their full recommendations here:

<https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/q-a-children-and-masks-related-to-covid-19>

With these conflicting recommendations we are called upon as free thinking adults to integrate a response based on the responsibility we carry for children. Even our common sense tells us that requiring a young child to wear a mask and connect with masked people is not healthy for many basic physical reasons. Carbon dioxide is a waste product in human metabolism. Never before have we been in a situation where so many children are being made to re-breathe their carbon dioxide in an unnatural way. A long standing principle of medicine has been to “First, do no harm.” Where is the proof that this is not harmful?

For all children, masked situations require coping and adjustment. Children over seven years of age have gone through early childhood and thus have some orientation and most have some ability to communicate their needs and feelings. However, even some older children have difficulties with anxiety and breath-holding when wearing a mask which disrupt their growing rhythmic systems. For children less than seven years of age the situation is more dire. One cannot explain to a younger child conceptually what is happening. In fact, an adult’s reasoned explanations are often damaging. They are experiencing what is happening around them in a holistic way through example and imitation, and are not able to find meaning in abstract reasoning.

Do we know that the experience of a mask covering significant portions of the face does not affect the way children will from now on see human beings, including themselves? They are now experiencing that the human nose and mouth are being hidden. The human body is suddenly understood as being something dangerous, and our very own bodies are also seen as a source of danger to everyone else. This is the incessantly repeated world view that the adults are modeling. It is this worldview which lays the basis for social distancing of everyone: the human body is a potential carrier of danger, and close contact should be considered reckless and socially unacceptable. This experience is being imprinted in their bodily unconsciousness as an experience of fear of the other. The human encounter is the basic building block for community and society, this experience will affect not only the health of each one of us but also of society as a whole in ways we may not be able to imagine now.

We see a pattern repeating itself everywhere of those in a group or community who are most afraid setting the tone for the wider policies affecting everyone through an intellectualized, fear-based thinking which has become disconnected from the wholeness of life. It has gone too far with the restrictions on young children. Should the children suffer because the adults are so afraid? Through these policies we are creating adverse childhood events which only later will show up as health problems for these individuals. In good conscience it cannot be allowed to continue. Children cope with even the most dysfunctional situations as a social reflex to attach to the adults around them in their need for love, care and survival. We cannot use their lack of complaints as a standard to judge what environment is healthy for them! The less they are able to communicate their needs and fears, the more they have to find other ways to cope with dysfunction and the more unconscious their responses to stressors become. This is what brings physical illness later in life. The body keeps the score. Our responsibility and task as adults is to create environments for children in which there is no need for them to have to create coping mechanisms.

“Illnesses that appear in later life are often only the result of educational errors made in the very earliest years of childhood. This is why an education which is really based on a knowledge of humanity must study the human being as a whole from birth until death. To be able to look at a person as a whole is the very essence of anthroposophical knowledge. Then too one discovers how very strong the connection is between the child and the environment. I would go as far as to say that the soul of the child goes right out into the surroundings, experiences these surroundings intimately, and indeed has a much stronger relationship to them than at a later period of life.” Rudolf Steiner

Children in the first seven years of life need most of all to experience the good, true and beautiful through example and imitation of their surroundings. We should know instinctively to protect them from adult themes and allow them space to feel safe in the world as they grow. This has become even more important in the pandemic because in the life of a child even a period of a few months holds vital life experiences. Children need to know that hygiene is good but that human beings above all are a source of healing for each other. Fear of the other is a pathology in itself.

We must take a stand on what is the right approach for these children. We are responsible for what we choose, and it is not enough to just follow authority guidelines when we know they are without wisdom.

What can be done to further the health of children? A clear recognition for the need to protect the experiences of young children is a good first step. A healthy lifestyle such as that inspired by anthroposophy is one effective approach for true hygiene in the body, soul and spirit. Authentic Waldorf education as well as anthroposophic medicines and therapies have known beneficial effects on the health of children. Specifically of interest in our concern for respiratory illnesses,

in the following asthma studies, the incidence of asthma and the use of antibiotics was decreased showing better respiratory system health even though in the Waldorf sample of students the incidence of parents with asthma was higher. Read more about these studies here: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3048604/>
<https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2006/01/060111073504.htm>

In the fall and winter season we are exposed to many viruses. Most of the time we do not become sick. If we were to test ourselves at the times of exposure, we might also test positive to those viruses, but it would not be considered an illness because our immune systems would not be reacting in an inflammatory way. There are many people testing positive for Covid-19 who do not exhibit symptoms. This is because Covid-19 is now part of the microbial flora around us. Eventually we will all have exposure to it. If we were to test for all viruses all the time --logistically impossible -- but theoretically if we had that information, would we be in a constant state of fear? Or would we come to realize that it is natural for our immune systems to live in a milieu of the natural world which also helps to strengthen our health. Our immune system gets better at recognizing “what is me and what is not me” during the normal course of human social and flora interactions.

We are in such a state of fear disconnected from understanding life that we have now become destructive in our approach. Out of fear of inflammatory illness and putting “safety” over “living humanely and fully”, we are causing other kinds of illnesses and compulsive obsessions. In coming back to our question, “How can the truths within fairy tales give insight and courage in our current pandemic situation?”, might we learn something from Rapunzel, who also endured isolation? Maybe we can see ourselves in Clever Elsie, who is unable to live due to her abundant fears. How might we become more like the miller’s daughter, who draws a chalk circle around what is truly essential and in need of protection within us? Might we discover within us the youngest kid in the clock case, who with the mother’s wisdom helps to rescue his siblings from the heavy belly of the hardened wolf? These inner truths are what many adults have lost touch with in our times. In their place outer scientific authorities are counted on to show the way although there are significant differences between them and there is constant change! It is this which causes the unease and panic, including in the scientists themselves, to whom we are looking for guidance. It may be the inability to see the truth of this that keeps us from discovering fairy tales as a source of strength and nourishment in our adult lives. Maybe it would take a scientist to help bring us back to these truths? We could all learn something from Albert Einstein, “If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairy tales. If you want them to be very intelligent, read them more fairy tales.” This holds true for all ages of life.

We are in the uncomfortable process of waking up out of a dream that we have been living in for too long. Like Briar Rose in a long sleep, it will require a kiss to awaken us. Only the strength of love within the kiss can help us to go forward in health in a world more and more susceptible to viral pandemics, fear and one-sided intellectualism. We then can go forward with hope and greater understanding of health, the true essentials of life and what it is to be human.

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Resources:

1) To better understand how Waldorf education best supports early childhood, see this local teaching initiative the We Nurture Collective: **<https://wenurturecollective.com/listen>**

2) Referenced Grimm's Tales

Rapunzel: <http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/grimm012.html>

Clever Elsie: <https://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/175/grimms-fairy-tales/3102/clever-elsie/>

The Girl Without Hands: <http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/grimm031.html>

The Wolf and the Seven Children: <http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/grimm005.html>

Briar Rose: <http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/grimm050.html>