

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE NO BLAME MEETING

Written by Therese Sibon

As some of you may know, Mountain Laurel Waldorf School uses a Social Inclusion approach to deal with the issues of bullying and teasing that arise with children in their daily interactions. This approach was instituted a number of years ago, after an enthusiastic parent response to a workshop led by Kim John Payne, M.Ed, educator and teacher with a Waldorf background . A group of parents, teachers and friends of the school was formed to address bullying and teasing and to review the Social Inclusion policy. Over the course of the next 4 years, parents, teachers and children were interviewed to see if this program would suit our school, and how best to implement it. Weekly meetings the first year were followed by biweekly meetings until a workable policy was written, one approved by faculty and parents. Faculty and staff needed to do deep inner work to better understand their attitudes towards social inclusion. Parents were asked to do the same. Children benefitted from their role models' work.

Just an aside on the process - at the beginning, a number of Social Inclusion committee members from neighboring Waldorf schools came and shared their experiences. I was surprised at how long it took them to completely implement the policy in its totality, an average of 3 years or so. I knew that Mountain Laurel, being a more innovative, more forward-reaching school, would require maybe 6 months before a total, successful implementation and I pitied those other - not as capable - schools. The hubris - it took us almost 4 years! But the time taken made this a firm foundation of our school's philosophy, not just a band-aid action mandated to mask unpleasant symptoms. We cannot preach to the children unless, as adults, we follow our own teachings. And that takes work, attention, and a commitment to change (the most painful process of all).

After the interview process, as mentioned above, and faculty input, and a multitude of meetings, Mountain Laurel held a mediator training session, led by Kim John Payne, to instruct a group of teachers and parents, the focus of which was the No Blame Meeting technique. This has been used at the school for the past two+ years.

The flow chart for the Social Inclusion Process

After an incident is reported by a parent, teacher or child to the class teacher and then to the Social Inclusion Core Group, the choices for actions are: 1) a private word from the teacher; 2) an informal conference (usually at the time this incident occurred); 3) A Ready for Change / No blame meeting; and 4) A Restorative Justice / No blame Formal meeting (to be explained in a later article).

If the situation still is not resolved successfully, there are other steps which could be taken, including having the child on a disciplinary contract and, if necessary, a review of the child's continued presence in school. At all steps, parents are kept informed.

The philosophy of a No Blame approach

At first the idea of a No Blame approach might sound like some insurance company nightmare. Let's say there is a situation in which one child, Child A, is obviously bullying another, Child B (we prefer to use the word "targeting"), with deliberate exclusion tactics.

Maybe there has been some physical manifestations - Child A hit Child B. We could go up to the two involved, tell "A" what he is doing wrong, set parameters, make him apologize to B and leave it at that. It might even appear to work - for a while. But most likely it will go deeper underground, creating an even bigger rift which eventually could become too deep and painful ever to change.

Another approach could be taken, one in which neither child is chastised or made to perform gestures which appear to bring about closure. At Mountain Laurel, when a situation arises with evidence of a bullying/teasing pattern, a series of No Blame/Ready for Change meetings are set up with all the children involved. The children are informed that while no one person is being blamed, all of us are focused on finding a solution to benefit everyone. Parents are informed. This is an exploration to see what is needed to move the situation towards resolution and each one of the children will have a chance to speak his story. The child who allegedly targeted another child is met with, as well as the targeted child, alternating with individual meetings with any child witnesses to the specific event or pattern of events which catalyzed these meetings.

Each child is interviewed separately, with two mediators and, if possible, the class teacher. A series of questions is asked by one mediator, the other mediator takes notes, with no names written down. The notes are kept in a confidential notebook and kept in a safe place. Each child's story is listened to, with an open heart and mind. This is an exploration, not an indictment. Specific questions are asked in a focused attempt to unravel the layers of miscommunication and to begin to discover what each child actually needs and wants. Brainstorming is used to look for ways to improve the situation. These meetings are short - not exceeding 15 minutes. Afterwards, the mediators and the teacher group discuss the meetings just held. Another meeting to check in on the situation is set up. Sometimes other sources of help are enlisted, including professional counseling or medical intervention. No one is blamed - everyone is involved and responsible for changing this situation, because at it stands now it does not work for anybody.

After the following check-up meeting is held, the mediators and the teacher may decide that another round of meetings is required. The same process is repeated. If not enough improvement has been reached, the next step would be to hold a more formal Social Inclusion meeting, this one involving more adults and some or all of the class children. This meeting will be described in a later article.

You are your child's first ally

A No Blame approach is not meant to dismiss any responsibility for bullying actions taken by one child against another. Nor does it purport to exorcize a normal parental reaction to your child being hurt, whether it be physically or mentally. You are your child's first ally, and must always retain that position. A mama lioness doesn't dialogue with a marauding predator ready to pounce on her offspring - she destroys it. This instinct is necessary for the survival of the species - a spontaneous and powerful motivation that comes from within, unbidden. When your child is hurt, it brings up that energy, no matter how you attempt to sublimate it. Obviously, attacking

the other child is not a viable option - we do not inhabit a jungle. And yet, we have this instinct - this necessary and appropriate instinct - to protect our offspring. If we look at ways to redirect that energy we can continue to protect our child's survival, but broaden its power to a social and even karmic level. What tools will they need to go out and maneuver their place in this world? We cannot always be at their side. What is my child here on earth to learn in this lifetime, and how can I help him accomplish that? What is my role in this play - as parent, community member, world citizen, spiritual being? The energy is the same, but the perspective shifts. We are, after all, our child's first ally and protector. And there is a context which holds us all.

In all the years I have been involved with Social Inclusion in MLWS, the story was never - and I do mean never - what it appeared to be at first. The children knew something was not right, felt it and did not want it to continue going on in that way. Nobody is happy with hurting another person, certainly not with being hurt, even if it seems as if the children involved have become immune to its effect. They need tools, different modes of communication, and adult interaction in order to realize the significance of their actions and to work together so that everyone is heard and valued.

The beautiful complexity and concomitant simplicity make up this wonderful paradox of Life, with all our intertwining relationships. Conflict would not happen if there were only ONE person - it takes at least two. It is no one's fault in one sense, or it is everyone's fault, if fault is the measure used. There would be no conflict if there were no relationship. And there is no growth or development without conflict. If you hope for a stable, secure, unchanging relationship, what you are hoping for is something inert, flat-lined - in other words, dead. The sign of a healthy organism - whether it's one person, several people, an organization, a country - is movement. What counts is how that movement is handled, how we value conflict and view it as an indicator that change is necessary. The best change is one in which all persons willingly take part.

With the Social Inclusion approach, sometimes a resolution is attained, sometimes not. It is the process which is the goal, the importance of the approach surpassing the one resolution to the one situation in the one time frame. MLWS alumni who were involved in the Social Inclusion process have contacted us - even years later - to share their experiences and voice an expression of gratitude for being shown tools to help in their lives after graduating. That is the fruit of this work!

We, as human beings, will always be involved with other people in relationships which challenge us and require us to grow - if we allow it. Or we can just tune it out, be 100% invested in our total rightness, and refuse these wonderful opportunities. We want to offer our children the education of the entire being, from a just plain getting-along-with-others to a deep soul connection, and an acknowledgment that every person we meet has been chosen on some cosmic level to bring our awareness to self knowledge and, ultimately, to divine awareness.

It is nobody's fault, but it is everyone's responsibility.

