DOLLS IN STEINER/ WALDORF KINDERGARTENS, PRESCHOOLS AND PLAYGROUPS

You or someone you know may send their child to a Steiner kindergarten, preschool, family day care, play group or other early childhood setting inspired by Rudolf Steiner’s educational approach. If you have been in one of these settings, you probably noticed the dolls tucked carefully into a doll’s bed surrounded by household toys, such as little plates and cups. You may have noticed that the dolls look quite different to dolls one buys from toy stores and wondered why they are so different.

In a Steiner kindergarten the dolls are handmade out of fabric and shaped into form with sheep’s wool stuffing. The hair is usually woollen yarn sewed onto the head, and eyes and mouth are indicated by a few stitches. Some dolls have arms and legs and are beautifully dressed; other dolls for younger children may have head and trunk, and the lower body disappears into a soft sleeping sack. From school to school the dolls vary in size and the way they are made, but essentially they are simple, well-made and hand-crafted with natural materials.

These handmade dolls can be created to have skin tone, hair colour, clothing or significant features of people and cultures around the world, providing children with opportunities to include these imaginatively in their play and daily activities.

You may think these dolls are “old fashioned” and wonder if dolls are of any interest or value for the children of today at all?

ARE DOLLS RELEVANT TODAY?

For centuries children have played with dolls. Museums around the world exhibit the remnants of dolls; drawings and paintings show children cradling a doll; stories speak of children playing with dolls. The Concise Oxford Dictionary tells us that “a doll is a small model or representation of a human figure used as a child’s toy”. The key words are “representation (image), human and toy”.

A doll is a child’s toy that represents the Human Being; it is an image of the Human Being. In her book, “The Genius of Play” Sally Jenkinson observes that through the medium of the doll children can rehearse events, recapture their fears and worries, take risks and indulge in behaviours outside their usual scope in a safe way in which they have ultimate control. The dolls that a child plays with take on different personalities and roles: family member, friend or companion. The doll can be bossy, frightened, friendly, “naughty”, sick or strong; the possibilities are infinite.

In her book, “Children at Play: Preparation for Life”, Heidi Britz-Crecelius tells many wonderful stories of children whose doll is a part of who that child is. She says: “Through the doll the child finds its own self.” A special doll can be imbued with a spark of the child’s soul; it can be a second “I”; faithful friend and playmate who accepts the child unconditionally or is the culprit when something is broken or lost. Eventually that part of the child which has been embedded in the doll will free itself and the child will be ready to put the doll away. The child will generally communicate this in some way, but until that time dolls play an important part in the life of the child.
In play children develop a sense of identity in role play with dolls. These experiences are vital for all children. Play is initiated and directed by the child; boys or girls guide the play in a way that is meaningful and relevant for them. For this reason, the benefit of doll-play is universal and not limited to girls.

PLASTIC DOLL, SOFT DOLL: DOES IT MATTER?
While doll manufacturers have focused on “authentic” attributes such as drinking, crying and wetting the nappy, one can also focus on “authentic”/natural materials such as fabric, wool and cotton for the doll. Children are very tactile; touch is an important part of sensing and experiencing the world. A doll made of soft cotton, stuffed with wool fleece, with strands of woollen hair and durable cotton clothes appeals to the touch (and smell) of the child. The softness of the doll brings out “softness” in the child to cuddle, comfort and look after the doll. The soft doll has a living warmth from the use of “living” materials from plants (cotton) and animals (sheep or others with fur), flexibility/responsiveness and durability, whereas the plastic doll feels cold, hard, rigid, synthetic and unresponsive – anything but “authentic” or representative of humanness.

It goes without saying that the marketplace of business profits is happy to promote violence and early sexuality in the toys it sells for children. Some dolls follow fashionable images with make-up, clothes and body that emphasise sexuality. Many of the baby dolls have either no hair or scratchy synthetic hair. Dolls intended for boys often emphasise violence and fighting with exaggerated muscular bodies.

In Steiner early childhood settings there are always soft dolls for the children to play with. In order to stimulate the imagination of the child, these dolls have only an indication for features such as eyes and mouth. In this way the child is able to transform the doll using his or her imagination, so that the doll can be happy or sad, sick or tired, as the play scenario unfolds. The child must be able to use their own imagination to create the play, rather than the toy dictating the course of play because of the way it is constructed. Taking the example of the crying doll that cries whenever it is turned or pressed in a certain way, one can see how the play is pre-determined (not to mention that crying is experienced as a mechanical, entertaining feature of the doll). If the child has a soft, simple doll, the child can take the play in any direction.
Another feature of the dolls in Steiner settings is that they are all hand-made. Not only do educators and parents make the dolls that the children play with, but there are a number of initiatives in South America and Asia where whole communities are involved in making these types of dolls. Animal husbandry for wool, spinning, dyeing, sewing and the actual making of the dolls from the materials produced, provides an income for struggling third-world communities. (Refer to websites such as OXFAM.) The children have an innate sense of admiration and care for something that has been carefully and lovingly made by hand. It is as if they sense the effort and care that has gone into the making, especially when adults set the example by showing care for these handmade dolls.

The dolls made of fabric are durable and can be cleaned, repaired and maintained. In the preschool where I taught, 2 of our dolls were 20 years old. They were regularly played with in a group with 20 children attending on a daily basis. The children and I occasionally gently washed the dolls with a damp soapy cloth. During holiday periods I mended the hair and clothes or sewed new ones. Every few years a seam could be opened and stuffing renewed. This was a great learning experience for the children: toys can be cared for, maintained and repaired, rather than thrown away or replaced - an important lesson in our consumer society.

If parents are interested in learning to make dolls they can look for a Steiner school or centre in their area where there is generally a craft group or people who can teach doll-making. There are also stores, markets and websites where these dolls might be bought. In the Bibliography are listed 2 books which will help with doll-making, but to get started a workshop is invaluable.

---

Making Dolls, by Sunnihil Reinckens gives instructions and patterns for doll-making.

Connie Grawert
Connie has been teaching in Steiner early childhood education for many years. She is currently a consultant and provides support for Steiner Early Childhood teachers and carers.

Bibliography