

Raising Free Children

Gabriele Brueggemann, excerpts from a free speech (2002)

Translated from the German by Martin Winiecki



I want to begin my talk by quoting Sabine Lichtenfels from the chapter "The Dream of Children" in "Sources of Love and Peace": "All children are children of creation. Hear the language of your children and sense their dream, that will awaken your dream too. Don't try to realize your own un-lived longings through your children. Realize it yourself."

Before speaking about raising free children, I want to speak about freeing love from fear, as both issues are closely related. What is free love? It's a way of life in which you study and follow the functional logic of love and Eros. Genuinely free love isn't limited to the relation between people, it encompasses all of life, including our work with children. It simply changes everything, because you step into a completely different system of thinking. Free love means love free from fear and calculation. In this realm, you will no longer ask, "If I do this, what will he do in response?" Free love is a more open system. In a possessive relationship, fear arises in my partner when I desire or fall in love with another. Because of this fear, partners cling to each other, which only perpetuates their entanglement. However, there is a way of life where there's no longer any fear when a partner falls in love with someone else. You probably need to have experienced the trust that arises in community to imagine this at all. I'm currently discovering that I can live in intimate partnership and stay free without risk of collision. I decided to walk the path of partnership and still follow my sexual attractions and impulses of love to other men. This is no contradiction, but good news.

Creating Community Among Children

At the Children's Place we want to develop a way of life where children can experience both freedom and intimacy and where there's no longer any contradiction between their relationship to their parents, other adults and their needs as a child. For this, it's essential that children of different ages live together in a children's community. This is their starting point where they experience continuity, adults that are available to them, and a stable home. At the same time, it's a space that's supposed to protect their freedom, in particular from getting entangled with the adults. Children often behave very differently when they're among one another. They can do more and need less. They immediately change when adults come closer and especially so when their parents show up. The adults working at the Children's Place set up the infrastructure and take care that community arises among the children, so that we adults need to interfere less and less and will only seldom be needed. Their task isn't to keep the children busy, look after them or to play with them.

Children actually need the same things for building their community as adults. That's why people who already carry knowledge about building community should work at the Children's Place. You don't need pedagogic, but social education in facilitating groups and especially in love. Adults relate to children in the same way as they act in love. As we need to learn to leave the system of fixation and claims of possession in love, we need to learn the same thing in relation to children. So long as I live in a system of love that triggers the fear of loss within me, I will try to attach children to me and will, by doing so, generate fear of loss in them.

There's an area at the Children's Place where the children can just be among themselves. Adults will only go there if they have a very particular intention with them. This is where they live, have their kitchen, their pottery and their art studio. We also plan to install a place for acrobatics, sports and theater. They hold their own meetings, their Forum and plenaries in this area. We've tried it out during a summer camp and I'm astonished how well it has worked. The children were alone in this space while the adults held their study time and Forum. They knew they could always come to us in case they needed something but they almost never came and hardly needed us at all. As is true for us adults, creating community among the children requires spaces of trust. For us, this is usually the [Forum](#), where we can speak the truth without reacting emotionally or hurting each other. Children also need big goals and real challenges that allow them to grow.

In the Forum work with the children, I discover more and more that they wish for a clearly understandable explanation of issues. And, differently than the adults, they almost never judge each other. When a conflict surfaces in the Forum, they don't want to know who is guilty, but how to continue and solve the conflict. They think toward a solution and don't carry grudges at all.

If we allow it, they're very free of psychological suffering too. For example, when small kids fall down, it makes a huge difference whether adults are near them or whether they believe

they are alone. When they don't feel observed, they fall down, get up, fall down again, get up again and so on ... and the whole process takes place without any suffering.

At the moment, we have very clear rules for all children who want to live at the Children's Place. These are still very basic rules, but we will expand on them the more that the children can comply with them. One rule is that you don't just leave the community or the place without telling the others, especially when you've had a conflict with someone. Retreating is allowed, but you don't just leave without letting the others know where you are going. Another rule is that you don't just cut someone off when someone else is in the center of the Forum, even when you believe you've got something more important to say. You wait and first listen to what the other has to say. There are also specific rules for the different age groups. The older children don't just run into the space of the babies. All these rules serve community building.

Children as Teachers for Love

I want to quote another sentence from "Sources of Love and Peace" by Sabine Lichtenfels: "It can be that you will recognize your children as your cosmic companions and teachers." Time and again, children are teachers in love for us. In particular, small children are, by their nature, freely loving beings, who show their joy and love very openly. When I get to the Children's Place, Jackie often runs toward me with open arms and screams joyfully, "Gabi, Gabi!" She wouldn't ask herself beforehand, "What will I get in return? Is Gabi looking forward to see me? Am I allowed to do this now?" She just freely expresses her loving impulse toward me. She doesn't calculate. In other moments she doesn't say anything at all, because she's busy with something else. She doesn't calculate here either, thinking, "Do I need to greet Gabi now, because I greeted her yesterday?" The next time, she might walk past me and greet Oskar. She doesn't ask herself whether or not I might be offended. This kind of freedom is what I love in children. They live free love in such moments. My exercise as an adult is not to be offended in those places, not even in my thoughts, and not to make them give me proof of their love by demanding their attention. We adults need to understand what's happening here and offer children the free space and the feeling that their impulses are right and allowed. These are impulses of love that won't make the children dependent. At the Children's Place they must have safe space in which they can practice free choice in love. And they're doing it! Time and again, they're choosing other adults to be their beloved contact persons. Children can perceive on a subtle energetic level whether they're allowed to love freely or not. The connection between children and adults is as subtle as it is among lovers. On this level, it's not only about the things you say, but much more about what you think and feel. I can tell my partner often: "It's okay if you meet another woman!" but he will certainly feel it if I'm not actually okay with it.

I want to give a few examples of this subtle energetic realm. Wencke is 18 months old and has been living in the children's community without many problems for the past few months. When her mother led a horse course, Wencke particularly blossomed. She felt that her mom was really fulfilled and a deeper state of freedom arose that generated pure happiness in her. When her mom came to her in the evening, she was totally happy to see her, even though she hadn't missed her. You don't need to miss someone to look forward to seeing him or her again. You also don't have to need someone to look forward to seeing him or her. During the day, she enjoyed the happiness of freedom and in the night, the

happiness of intimacy. We adults are also challenged to lead intense, interesting lives ourselves so that we can set our children and love partners free. When I pick up Jackie from the garden around noon, she always asks me, "Where are we going to go?" and I tell her, "We'll go to the Children's Place." She celebrates, saying, "Yes, to the Children's Place, to the Children's Place!" She does this every day. And when her father passes by the Children's Place, not to pick her up, but to do something else, she's absolutely happy and asks him, "Will you stay here?" he says, "No, I'll go again" and she replies, "Bye, bye, dad!" And this is it. When a child is happy to see their father, this doesn't necessarily mean that they need him more often or miss him, but simply that they show joy, because they are very happy at the moment.

Very often, children help by opening the hearts of the adults. In the contact between children and parents, it's about a genuine love affair, which we could learn to take care of like a love affair. For love to endure, you need the right proximity and the right distance: in other words, the right type of intimacy. The intimacy a child is looking for is less about how often they are together with their parents, but rather about whether or not the parents are really free for the contact to the child. When the parents are too deeply entangled in their own love conflicts, they can't be free for their contact with their child. The same is true for a love relationship among adults – intimacy doesn't arise by being together as much as possible, but through free, authentic connection between two beings. A child that's allowed to love freely and realizes that their parents are there for them will need them less often. If I support my love partner in becoming free and in being with other women, he will certainly have adventures more often. This is what we fear. That's why we don't set our children free. Yet, the fact that children will get in touch with many people does not mean that our love decreases – it means that it becomes more truthful, freer and more fulfilling on both ends.

To conclude, I'd like to read a poem I love, because it captures this sound of freedom. It was written by Hans Herbert Reiske and is entitled, "Poem on Childhood":

**You should teach a child to dance on a rope without a safety net,
To sleep alone under the open sky at night.
You should teach them to dream about cloud-castles, rather than about owning a house.
To be at home nowhere else but in life and to find safety in themselves.**