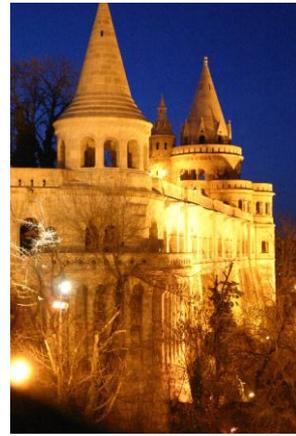


The third international Alliance for Childhood conference 'Childhood in Balance' was held in Budapest, Hungary, from 13-16 October 2010.

The conference was attended by participants and speakers from 17 different countries and held in the light, well-appointed City Centre directly in the heart of beautiful Budapest.



*The conference was supported by the **Jean Monnet Programme of the European Union**
In collaboration with **ECSWE** and the **Hungarian Waldorf Fellowship***



Wonderfully organised by Andrea Liszka (pictured left) of the Hungarian Waldorf Fellowship (Waldorf Ház), the general atmosphere was one of excitement and openness.

The lecturers and workshop leaders were well received and the workshops eagerly attended. The pace of events from the beginning was good and the audience attentive to every word. The translation team was tireless and quick; their seamless efforts contributing greatly to making the talks and workshops very accessible.

Feedback from delegates and lecturers alike has been overwhelmingly positive, with enthusiastic comments being given about all aspects of the conference:

"I was glad that it dealt with childhood comprehensively"

"Active conversation, motivated participants."

"We have to find new possibilities - thank you for pointing to it."

"It was a good conference, very inspiring!"

"Thought provoking; excellent material"

"It reflected beautifully that children are not for the world, the world is for them."

The conference opened Wednesday afternoon with a speech from mayor Zoltán Pokorny. He assured listeners that politicians were aware of the issues concerning children, and that this conference was of particular interest to him not only as a politician but also as a Steiner parent. In his constituency he intends to address the problems and challenges faced by children, parents and teachers, and he will help work toward finding solutions in all areas.

Following the mayor's speech, Christopher Clouder of ECSWE spoke of the value of the diversity of the cultures assembled and the strength it gives to our

individual and universal efforts. (A more complete record of his remarks can be found in a forthcoming publication on the quality of childhood).

The following days were certainly a testament to the truth of those words and the tone of inspired fellowship was evident from the beginning of the event.

The evening ended with marvellous *a cappella* singing by students and ex-students from various Waldorf schools, led by their teacher, László Bencze of the Pesthidegkút Waldorf School.

The participants greeted the Thursday morning session with enthusiasm. The morning started very well with Geseke Lundgren's lecture, 'Development Towards Freedom: Childhood as the Source of Creativity'.

She began with this thought: "In order to be able to meet needs we don't know will exist, to solve problems we don't yet have, to be able to think in a way we cannot imagine today, how can we possibly prepare the children of today to be the generation of tomorrow and create a better world?" A thought-provoking start to the theme of 'Early Childhood and Care'!

Geseke went on to say that the next generations will need to use free thinking and creativity to determine their own goals and solutions. To prepare them to develop these ways of being, they need to have a safe environment for them to integrate and play from a very early age. Developing the fantasy world through creative play can be a means to help them enter reality in their own way and at their own pace. The idea is that children could be allowed to build their self-image from inner resources, rather than basing their value on the ability to complete externally prescribed tasks.

Mihaela Ionescu, director of the International Step by Step Association (ISSA) continued the theme with her presentation, 'Adults Around Children - Quality Principles in Education and Care'. She asked how congruent are all our influences on children? What more can we do so that children develop in a consistent environment? What and where is there more to be done? She remarked that although each culture must respect its own way of supporting and educating children, creating a *consistent* environment for young children by determining who and what has the most impact on them is universal – and if we can provide children and the people who are most influential to them with what they need in fundamental ways, then we are on the right track.

After lunch, Martina Leibovici-Mühlberger shared some eye-opening research in her lecture, 'Mind & Body-Altering Media: the Effects of Modern Media on Our Children'. She started by stating: "More has changed in media consumption over the last two years than in the 30 years that preceded it. Thanks to smartphones and laptops, people are now spending one-half of their waking days interacting

with media, and have increased their media consumption by an hour per day over the last two years.¹ That's more time than they spend working or sleeping!"

She reported that 'the new digital media's impact on children's physical and mental health, which in professional and private everyday life has become increasingly frequent and intense, is widely underestimated.' Other startling points include the assertion that children who watch television at ages one and three had a significantly increased risk of developing attentional problems by the age of seven.

The very latest research on communication disorders suggests that early childhood television viewing may be an important trigger for autism and Autism-associated syndromes. By ignoring these observations, Dr Leibovici-Mühlberger believes we may ultimately be responsible for the greatest health scandal of our time.

The following four workshops were run simultaneously:

'What is the Need for the Setting to Embrace the Child of Today?' - Geseke
Lundgren & Helle Heckmann

'How to Orchestrate the Improvement of the Quality of Childhood in a Town, a Country or in the European Union?' - Michiel Matthes

'Adults Around Children - Quality Principles in Education and Care' - Mihaela
Ionescu

'Hungarian Early Childhood Education Compared to the International Trends'
- Villányi Györgyné Jutka

The afternoon theme of 'The Effect of the Media and IT on Children' was further examined by lecturer Martine Delfos in her lively talk entitled, 'Let's Game: The Virtual Development of Children'.

She spoke of how games considered to be the 'best' among young players are constructed to be ongoing and addictive.

The issues that arise through playing the games and interacting with others across the globe is something that many parents are not even aware of; this is not their world, they do not understand what happens there or what the rules are, or even why it's important to their child – and, as a consequence, may leave them without guidance in an area where children need it. With this in mind, Martine argues that not addressing a child's media consumption is akin to neglect. Media games and virtual worlds are part of the modern child's life, and they need time and help to navigate through and process what happens there. Parents and teachers need not be afraid of what they don't understand; perhaps instead they may see this as an opportunity to allow their child to teach them so that they may be conscious of the gaming experience and, therefore, protected.

The afternoon's simultaneous workshops were:

'Integration in Early Childhood' - Anna Bakonyi

Workshop on the theme of 'The Effect of the Media and IT on Children'

- Martina Leibovici-Mühlberger

'Antidotes to Media for the Young Child: Learning Through Play and Encounters with the Real World' - Susan Howard

Workshop on the theme of 'The Effect of the Media and IT on Children'

- Martine Delfos

Clara Aerts of the International Association for Steiner Waldorf Early Childhood Education (IASWECE) gave the plenary session for the evening.

Like ISSA, there are 28 member countries, who all offer information about what the universal needs of the child are, and help train educators to understand and share this knowledge with each other without cultural bias. IASWECE is always searching for ways to help children find their own intuition and create balance in all areas of their lives.

Friday's theme 'Poverty and Exclusion' was begun with a moving talk from Ann Sharfman on her personal experiences of setting up kindergartens and teacher training courses in the townships of Capetown, which she has been doing for the last seventeen years. She observed that, "children take on the entire framework of the parents, and the surrounding society they grow up in. If parents feel disempowered, unworthy, and that life is just survival, this is what the children adopt, unconsciously. The only thing that can change this is education, of the right sort [human development education]."

She begins her training programmes with discussions about how the attitudes and demeanour of the adults affect the children, not only in the present, but also in their future lives. The teachers explore and discuss the Three Golden Rules of Waldorf Education, which apply from the beginning of life: Receive the child in Reverence, Educate the child with Love, Let the child go forth in Freedom. She says, "Governments can make laws, but it is PEOPLE who make the difference." Ann reported that things are improving in the townships, though slowly.

Next we had a compelling report from Bernard Rorke on the case of Roma children in the European Union. UNDP reports in 2003 and 2006, using measures ranging from literacy to infant mortality to basic nutrition, showed that Roma were among the poorest of the poor, and had to endure "living conditions closer to those of sub-Saharan Africa than to Europe."

He asserts that 'they must rise to the challenge to ensure the Convention's four core principles of non-discrimination; devotion to the best interests of the child, the right to life, survival and development, and he urged that respect for the views of the child should apply equally to all children, Roma and non-Roma alike.'

Friday morning workshops were:

'Why it is Important to Understand that Children are Not Little Adults'

- Helle Heckmann

Workshop on the theme of 'Poverty & Exclusion' -Stefanie Allon-Grob

'Why Do We Exclude?' - Ann Sharfman

The afternoon's theme, 'Parental and Social Expectations and Stress' was related with gentle good humour by Godi Keller in his lecture, 'Isolated Parenting: Conditions for Modern Parents'.

He explained that parents these days can feel very insecure in trying to cope with difficult modern challenges – new situations that have no precedent, no set rules. Godi observed that parents feel more supported when there is a 'third field' of communication created with, for example, the teacher; they need to find out what they want for their children, and what they expect from them. He believes that 'dialogue with a warm heart and a genuine will to understand the other side and to look forward, not back' is the way forward to assist parents and teachers to understand and help their children.

Dr Tamás Vekerdy was next to explore the theme in his talk, 'What Do We Want from the Child? What Should We Want from the Child? Adult's Expectations, Children's Possibilities'. He asserts that providing emotional security to the young child is all-important. Unconditional love, spending real time together, making sure the child is ready for each stage in their development – these are essential elements.

He gives an example of how teachers of old would wait until their pupils were demonstrating an independent ability to hold a pencil and draw a circle with ease; this would indicate to the teacher that the child was ready to begin learning the more complex task of writing. Dr Vekerdy believes that rather than pushing children into each stage at a prescribed pace, we should observe and allow their development to unfold naturally, with care and respect.

Friday afternoon workshops were:

Lecture on the theme of 'Parental and Social Expectations and Stress' - Don Beck

'What Do We Want from the Child? What Should We Want from the Child? At Least

8 Different Intelligences' - Dr Tamás Vekerdy

'The Role of the Class Meeting in Parent Education' - Louise deForest

Saturday, the last day of the conference, was summed up with the theme, 'What Action Can We Take?'

Dr Don Beck was first to explore this with his enigmatic discourse entitled, 'Smart Kids: Discovering, Developing & Nurturing the Natural Intelligences in

Children'. His first question was 'what makes a child smart?' The contributing factors he cites are genetics, community, experiences and teachers, along with eight types of intelligences – words, numbers/reasoning, pictures, body, music, people, self, nature; these all require a system to help each child fulfil their potential.

Dr Beck said that the system must then be able to find, define and assist children with their own potential. Dr Beck believes that tailor-made solutions can be found for each child with the application of the system of Spiral Dynamics, which allows children to recapture, or indeed realise, their individual sense of purpose.

Mária Herczog then shared her thoughts on the theme with a lecture called 'Balanced Childhood, Balanced Parenting' in which she remarked that the idea that children need to be protected is a relatively new one. Only in the 20th century did adults begin to realise that children have rights of their own, and how we must recognise the needs of the child at each stage of life in order to help them develop into healthy adults. Now that we know, how can we approach this in a holistic way? And whose job is it?

Dr Herczog wove threads into her talk from the previous speakers, confirming that the ideas discussed at the conference are current topics and the way that children are regarded and treated is changing - not just in Europe but around the world.

The closing speech from MEP Mrs Livia Járóka focused primarily on the Roma question and was read in absentia by Michiel Matthes. Her letter began, *"One of the most defining attributes of a 'Childhood in Balance' is obviously the quality of education that children have access to. In Europe however, there are great disparities in accessing proper education, affecting the children of various groups in European societies. In contrast to other minority groups however, such as people with disabilities, linguistic minorities, religious, and even other racial and ethnic groups, the barriers that Roma children encounter in accessing quality education are even more intolerable in view of the extreme extent of poverty and deprivation they suffer..."*

A recent research in Hungary has also proved that integrated education - when accompanied with suitable pedagogic support - will enhance the educational performance of Roma students, and at the same time will not block the progress of majority students. Underprivileged students make remarkable progress in integrated classes, given that children learn at least as much from each other as from the teachers, while segregation would block this channel of education. We must welcome all good and effective initiatives that can help fulfilling the above premised goals, given the extreme rarity of real "good practices" in the EU and with most projects being "self-advertised" by the overoptimistic reports of national and local governments and project-lobby groups...

The participation of Roma in projects and decision-making procedures affecting their own communities still lags far behind the extent of representation of any other interest group. Roma must be let to set the discourse about themselves, to

reveal the roots of the problems and articulate what actions and measures they need.”

The closing remarks by Christopher Clouder again stressed the importance of working together and how successful such endeavours can be in ideal circumstances; Brazil is a fantastic example of how, when an association grows strong enough, it can directly influence government policies and decisions.

He stated that the goal of improving the quality of childhood is now a rising global phenomenon – we are being offered a great opportunity to foster respect for cultural diversity now more than ever, and particularly when we meet at events like this conference.

Christopher believes we need to know our differences and accept them in order to be human – and that the roots of this are in childhood. If we can find this curiosity, openness and appreciation of diversity in ourselves as children do, then we can continue the exploration of our human nature.

He encouraged everyone present to ‘listen to the child within, and see the world constantly with fresh eyes and openness. We have the tools to do this and we should use them. We need to take responsibility and intend - and do - the best we can.’

The closing music was led by a Hungarian teacher from among the delegates. Everyone, regardless of cultural origin, joined in to sing the traditional Hungarian folk song ‘Két magyar népdal’. It was a wonderfully unifying moment which illustrated that with a little effort and willingness, any group can come together to create a harmonious understanding.