

# THE BAUMGARTEN CHILDREN'S HOME

**Siegfried Bernfeld**

*The Kinderheim Baumgarten was a Jewish children's home set up in Vienna after the first world war by the American Joint Committee, Vienna Branch. There were three hundred children there, in unfinished buildings with not enough heating, clothing, food, books or pencils. It ran from the 18<sup>th</sup> of October, 1919 until the 15<sup>th</sup> of March, 1920, and in that short time demonstrated the success of what they called "new education," in the teeth of continual disapproval from the authorities. The following article is an extract from Anti-autoritäre Erziehung und Psychoanalyse, selected writings of Siegfried Bernfeld, März Verlag, 1969. It shows how innovative Bernfeld's methods would still seem if they were reintroduced today.*

People writing about education like referring to "the garden of childhood," and comparing the educator with the gardener. They are referring basically to the gardener's peripheral activities, as if his most important work was pruning branches, digging up and digging in, pulling up weeds and finishing things off with knife and shears. This calls up a picture of a completely hysterical figure, running hither and thither, tying things up, watering and cutting back and behaving as if it was he who made the grass grow, the flowers bloom blue and red and the apples ripen; it does not recognise the true picture of the contemplative man who does indeed do all those things, but incidentally, not in order to make the plants grow, and grow a little more as he would like; someone who really knows that what they need is rain, air and soil, and that if he can't provide those then he is left only with pale anxieties and hopes. This quiet man's true function is to learn to understand his charges and their needs by careful observation and to create the conditions for the fulfilment of these needs, but to do all this in the calm and security that is a natural consequence of affectionate, understanding observation. ...

In the same way, the new educator's activity could be better described as non-activity, observing, watching and loving rather than perpetually advising, punishing, teaching, challenging, forbidding, inspiring and rewarding. And that was why we, who are educators of this kind, or at least would like to be, do not find it easy to say what *we* have been doing; we would always have more to say about what *the children* were doing.

People, particularly the management, have criticised us for this behaviour. We too were often uncertain about what we were doing, and used to compare our actions with those that are usual in similar circumstances. Today, however, we are able to say that in fundamental matters we, and the new methods, were right. It was not always easy for us to be clear about this, particularly as the environment in the Baumgarten was not at all favourable to the natural development of new education. However, since our new pedagogy always had the old one running alongside it as a reproach, a challenge or a potential alternative, continuous comparison was both necessary and possible. Hence let me follow this immediately with a few examples of our deviant behaviour, concrete trifles which are significant in their very triviality because thousands of them combine to make the life of a school.

From the very first day the children made a considerable noise in the dining-room; they shouted, pushed the tables about, banged their spoons on their plates, fought, called angrily for their food, pestered the maids who were giving out the food and so on and so forth. Old pedagogy demanded that this should immediately be stopped. New pedagogy said that we too would like the meal-times to be quieter, more concentrated, less irritating and disagreeable for the adults, but we had time to think.

We asked ourselves how peace could be established in the dining-room. The head teacher would have had to announce, with threats, that he required absolute quiet, complete silence – with two or three hundred children a quiet murmur would grow into a considerable noise, and what's more the children would be completely unable to understand the boundary between tolerable and excessive noise and to respect it – and when it did not work he would have first to threaten punishments and then to impose them. And perhaps eventually the children would eat their meal in silence, to the delight of the

head teacher, who saw his demands fulfilled, and to the astonished admiration of any newly arrived visitor. But at the very least the teachers and the head teacher, instead of being with the children at mealtimes, would have had to stand over them and make sure they did not make any more noise than was acceptable. And it would be just the same if the head teacher's harangue had given reasons for demanding silence, for instance that without it the maids would find it difficult to do their work, or the teachers were tired and wanted half an hour of quiet, and so on. The children would only hear this as the banning of an enjoyable activity, because they are completely indifferent to teachers and maids and their work and well-being.

So we did it differently. The teachers sat down here and there with the children and joined in the noise, that is to say they talked to their neighbours and got to know them. And then we considered what was needed for a peaceful and dignified serving of food. And we soon saw that there had to be enough plates, mugs and spoons, that food must be served quickly and fairly in a fixed order, that there must be enough to eat, and so on. What we gained from this interaction, from not beginning by demanding order, is shown by the following quotation from a report written by teacher, Frau Gusti Bretter-Mändl.

For example, there were fights at lunch again over spoons and who got bread first, and so on. I never took a spoon if I had been given one because I was a teacher. I gave it to the children, and my bread too, and so on, and I didn't begin to eat until everybody had everything. At first the children gave me amazed, mistrustful looks, then they accepted the spoons in a way that showed they were slightly ashamed – that was already great progress, they were beginning to get the idea. And in the end it reached a point where none of them would accept anything from me, and even competed as to who should give me their spoon. That meant I had won. We liked one another. As food was the most important thing in their lives, I was able to influence them by my behaviour. If they saw that I was not eating much they persuaded me to eat, or said, "Today you must eat with us." For me that was the greatest proof of love. Now I could start on teaching in the ordinary sense. I have seen how essential it is for a teacher to live with the children, for her personality to make its effect in every practical, everyday situation; if I had been able to be with the children in the evenings and at all other times it would have been different again.

And we all had similar experiences. Slowly, very slowly, but nevertheless noticeably, order and peace developed in the dining-room, starting from the separate points where the teachers were sitting, and spreading out into larger and larger circles. Even before the time when the school community created a list of dining-room rules and made sure that they were kept, it was already being emphasised in discussions, with the complete understanding of all the children, that we had to treat the maids with respect and that it was not proper to "eat like animals." And after three or four months we had flawless order at the table (and this was acknowledged by the management too), without any of us ever shouting out an angry "Quiet!" Order, not as a compulsorily enforced, unexplained demand from the head teacher, who has the power to demand it and to enforce it, but as an expression of a community of young people and adults that had become well-mannered and perceptive.

Right until the end there were some things that were not exactly as one or another of us would have liked. It would have been easy for us to introduce these things too, as we wanted, to suit our own standards. We did not do it, because outward form only has meaning when it is the expression of emotion or mood, and the progressive changes in orderliness at table were symptoms of the progressive refinement of the social awareness, which had greatly, though not completely, developed when we had to leave the Baumgarten.

Or:

The children drew all kinds of decorations and wrote all kinds of words on the tables, the benches and the doors. Of course we agreed with the management, that that is not appropriate in a well-run children's home. But we didn't curse and punish; we didn't even forbid it, and gained great advantage from this. At the beginning the children did it right in front of us; we knew what they were thinking, we saw who did it, and we took notice of the situations they did it in. We also got to know those who were opposed to such senseless destruction and supported them, gave the children paper to draw on, pinned up sheets of drawing paper on several walls in the little ones' space. And the naughtiness gradually stopped, as the children gradually came to feel that they were the masters in the children's home, that the furniture

belonged to them, that by damaging it the only people they annoyed, insulted and harmed were themselves.

Or:

A group of boys played football in an extreme, excessive and exaggeratedly passionate way. This seemed to us in many respects undesirable. We would have approved of restrained, cultivated play, even though other sporting activities seemed to us to be of greater educational and social value. However, the extent and the style of the way our Baumgarten boys played the game seemed to us to involve too great a risk that the children, who anyway had very few intellectual interests, might completely drown in the limitless intoxication of movement and competition.

Of course we could have limited the time the playground was available, we could have punished anyone who overstepped these limits, we could have introduced compulsory cross-country sports, long-distance running and so on – and would still not have achieved one particular thing, a cultivation of sport and care of the body, a control of the drive to play, a sublimation of the strengths struggling to emerge in fighting, roughness, competition and unlimited racketing around, and all this motivated from within. We did not punish or curse or preach, but enthusiastically joined in; we rejoiced with the boys when the team from the nearby boys' school was beaten, resolved with them to play better and more skilfully when we lost.

Admittedly we went against the basic principle that one must play properly, well, fairly and honestly if one plays at all. Of course we often expressed our opinions in conversation with individuals and with groups; we didn't feign approval when we did not approve; but we never spoke in that false, kindly, admonishing tone, apparently only wanting to convince, that cunning teachers like to assume when they know that if that doesn't work then they will resort to force. In contrast, our views were genuinely put forward in opposition to, but with the same weight as, the children's. And we found supporters. In particular among the passionate players. Admittedly very late and slowly. Our confidence in the laws of development of the child's psyche were severely tested in this particular question, only to be all the more brilliantly justified in the end. It didn't occur to us to resort to any means of compulsion or to put through an apparently democratic decision in the school

meeting, even when we saw the children were still happy with their own way of doing things and wanted nothing to do with our improvements to the game.

And then suddenly it happened in a great rush. Spontaneously, without our knowing about it beforehand, they founded a football club, precisely those who had come close to sharing our views; they made rules about times and types of games, and brought the football to me with the request that I should only give it out to approved people for the play-times; gymnastics, long-distance running, cross-country games and last of all athletics were taken up more actively. The members of the football club began to see to good behaviour and gracious play; the narrow clique of football players was broken up, football began to be one part – admittedly still a very favoured part – of the system of games and exercises which belonged to the home as a whole, and not to a gang within it. We gained even more from our apparently laissez-faire approach. The boys found leaders in the teachers who played with them. And they experienced and learned to retain a very fine feeling of chivalry when they had to take care about the limited football skills of an otherwise popular male teacher, or a highly respected woman; and finally this chivalry also began to apply visibly to the weaker ones of their own age.

Or:

On the second day I announced that all children older than nine could get permission to go out under certain conditions. For every child who wanted to go out, I noted down his supposed age and purpose; and knew after half an hour, by comparison with our records, that most of them had lied. To be on the safe side they had made themselves a few years older, and they were all going “to tea with an aunt.” The exit permits that I signed were an instruction to the management to give out bus-fares, which only those who had no money were supposed to ask for. No child failed to claim the few pence, even though many of them had plenty of pocket money by comparison.

At this point I ought to have shown myself in my full head-masterly authority – the management demanded it, and so did my feelings as a teacher who had not been respected. However, I just told the children that most of them had lied and that this was unnecessary, because they had a right to go

out, no matter where they were going, and we only needed the address so that we would know where to look for them if they didn't come back. And instantly the number of lies reduced, but they didn't really believe me, and some of the braver ones tried me out. One said he wanted to go to the cinema, and another said he wanted "to wander around the town for a bit." It is impossible to describe the vast astonishment of the children who were present when I just wished them a good time and drew the attention of the older ones to the complications of the tram connections in the town. Their view of the world was shattered, because they had been sure that at last all hell would break loose; the absence of such fury since they arrived at the Baumgarten camp had put them into a weird, hitherto unknown situation, a situation which, owing to the total impossibility of incorporating it into their old patterns of life, left no way out but unlimited love. In an astonishingly short time all lying at the distribution of exeats had absolutely completely stopped. And this amoral but matter-of-fact and proper circumstance soon turned into a genuinely moral one, when soon after the organic development of the school community became clearly visible, I dropped my last arbitrary powers and the school community elected exeat officials, and quickly and fairly solved the financial problems associated with the exeats. The old pedagogy would have shuddered to hear that I allowed children to go to the cinema and would have reproached me bitterly.

The headmistress once met two children at the gate and naturally asked them where they were going. because such worthless and pointless questioning is one of the basic principles of the kind of pedagogy which makes a teaching opportunity out of the tactless stammering that occurs as result of embarrassment and the inability to say a simple "Good day" when a teacher meets children. The children simply said , "To the cinema," as they had said to me. The headmistress "wouldn't believe" that I had allowed it, and in any case forbade it on her own account. When I was questioned about this I could only cynically answer that I went to the cinema too and would be happy to discuss the value of such outings with the children when the opportunity arose, but there was still time for that; until then I was happy that the children no longer lied to me, and did not disguise Joe Deeb as a kind aunt who gave them bread.

On the other hand I told the children (and the management were naturally informed about this) that nobody could forbid them any kind of outing when they were in possession of the official exeat filled in by the school community – nobody, neither the headmistress, nor I, nor anyone else. You can understand that such events were ideal for building up resentment in the souls of those who were of the opinion that the children were there to satisfy their unacknowledged needs for power and status meekly and safely and over and above that expected regular general approval for being good (i.e. strict) teachers; the kind of teachers who like school councils when they make their difficult tasks easier, but hate them when they want to take their place in all matters of authority.

Perhaps these concrete examples are enough to illustrate for the reader our approach to children in general and to the children in our care in particular. And I think that if we succeeded in anything, it was in the new tone in our dealings with children. Although we were certainly not all the same. Among the various people who made up the teaching body, there was a very considerable variety of world views and attitudes, principles, insights, experiences and behaviours. One or two were never able to set aside the character of the school-master altogether. We adults also made far too little effort to establish internal and external unity.

Nevertheless the most striking characteristic of our school was a really serious and wide-ranging embodiment of the new kind of relationship between adults (teachers) and children. Its general formulation could be unconditional love and respect for children; ruthless limitations of all one's own longings for power, vanity, and desires to be masters and trainers. Although basically this requirement has been around for such a long time, though it seems so modern today, when the slogan is friendship between teachers and pupils, it is still just as rare as ever to see it manifestly realised. Perhaps the first criterion for judging that should be a negative one: friendship must not mean lowering oneself to the children's level, because that would make the grown-up foolish; nor does it mean wanting the children to like you, because in that case it would be hypocritical and aimless.

It means that the teacher must remain completely true to himself; the only requirement is that he must be the kind of person that some of the children

can love. And the first positive condition for that is that he must, quite simply, love the children, and be sufficiently aware and accepting of his own wishes and abilities not to not to feel his personal worth judged or his self-esteem destroyed by a child's words, manner or emotions. At the same time he must be completely free of any over-evaluation of his own worth, which leads to fundamental scorn for the condition of childhood. He has to have a calm, clear relationship with his own childhood, so that he had no need to punish, judge, train or repress himself in others – and if he is already secretly proud of what a fine fellow he is, however clever and valuable he may be he must be vividly aware that he began exactly like this child before him, and that the child will do just as well as he has done, if it is only given the time. He shouldn't hold back his opinions, likes and dislikes and demands – the children require it and would otherwise mistrust him – but not in such a way as to convey that his opinions and wishes are differentiated from other people's by the fact that his remarks must be followed to the letter by the appropriate action from the children.

An assured calm, and a wise patience are the basis for the friendliness that we mean, which really changes the life of the school from the ground up, makes it into a pedagogically creative achievement even if, for some reason or other, popular modern institutions such as the school council, court and so on are missing. If this friendliness is missing, the school community and all the rest of it are nothing more than wretched bungling.

When the teachers show the right friendliness, the children show trust. This concept is also very popular at the moment, but in an unbearably sweet and sentimental form. I think I am telling the complete truth when I say: just as most of our teachers have hit on the right kind of friendliness, so the children have had the right trust in them. This happened in stages.

We took the children on in the situation I have already described [summarised in the introduction to this extract], which was made even more acute by the restlessness and anxiety which the new situation and the new people must have caused them. Their previous carers and educators, all of whose attempts to get jobs in the new children's home I had bluntly rejected, were very offended and told the children horror stories about us and our intentions; on the other hand, before they moved to the Baumgarten, the

head teacher had promised the children paradise. Now they saw that in respect of food, accommodation and so on they had been lied to. And they armed themselves to avoid being taken in by us, too, although they liked us for our youth, calm and friendliness. They didn't trust us one inch. When we sat with them at lunch, when we were served after them, with exactly the same as they had, and exactly the same amount as they had, it was extremely weird: what sort of new trick was this unusual behaviour? And that is what happened with every measure which we had been sure would bring us an affectionate response.

Luckily we did not do anything in order to win affection, but because we thought it was right. Otherwise we would have suffered the same fate as the teachers who took over the home after our conflict with the American Joint Committee. (In a recent private conversation I reminded some of the 9- to 11-year-old boys how they had mistrusted us to begin with, in order to warn them against hostile behaviour towards the new teachers. Then one of the smaller ones said, "Yes, that was quite different. We soon saw that you were nice to us. The new ones are nice to us, too, not at all strict, but they 'are always wasting time talking.'" How should I have answered such sharp knowledge of people, such a strict and accurate pedagogical judgement?)

The first decisive step towards a better relationship happened because of something that was so obvious to us that we had never imagined that it could have been done any other way. We kept our word. If we had promised something, it would obviously be done, without any expectation of thanks. And if it couldn't happen, we apologised to the children. Almost all of us remember what an enormous impression this made on the children. It was mostly only small things, but the sum of them over several days produced the first step towards trust. They believed what we said. For almost three months this relationship made no significant progress. There were indeed, from the very beginning, individual children who had formed a deeper attachment to one or the other of us, and these relationships developed and refined themselves. The number of instances kept on gradually growing and with the decisive first trust the a priori hostility towards most of the teachers disappeared. But overall the behaviour of the children towards us was distinctly cool, with a slight remainder of mistrust. They believed us, and

above all the school community which was developing meanwhile, enough to be friendly towards us.

But their overall consciousness and therefore their behaviour with us was one of discontent, whining, complaint. The real theme of their conversation was: we're hungry: we're cold: we're ill: our shoes are broken: we haven't got any handkerchiefs, overcoats, toothbrushes, shoe-brushes: when will we ever get to Holland or Switzerland? They considered themselves to be merely in transit in the Baumgarten. In a few weeks or months this wonderful piece of luck would happen, which was the consuming fantasy of almost every one of them. However on no account would all this be expressed as one tells a friend of one's secret grievances, but aggressively, with hostility. Sometimes each of us may have been close to a kind of despair, when all his love and kindness met with no other response from the children than the often very unfair and exaggerated, almost always spiteful, demanding complaints. On top of that although the children, since they had found out that we never punished them for the tone which they adopted towards us, only seldom spoke to us "cheekily" and "cockily", as the old pedagogy terms it, they did still behave unkindly and rudely.

Anyone for whom friendship was only a pedagogical trick completely unlearnt this during these months. However, for most of us it was part of our characters and our emotional attitude towards children, so we stuck to our tone, for the same reasons as we remained physically at the Baumgarten. We felt very clearly that the children were simply right. There was much too little to eat, it was bitterly cold, the most primitive requirements for underwear, clothes, comfort and furnishing were for a long time completely unsatisfied by the administration, and when a slight improvement did happen, it was no longer necessary for psychological reasons. We were all uninhibitedly on the children's side in all these things. Of course we told them about the many difficulties, about the deprivations caused by the war, and the social misery, of course we told them about children and people who were even worse off, but essentially we recognised their full right to physical happiness. We froze just as they did. In the Baumgarten we had no better or richer food behind the children's backs; but we also never lied to them about our situation at home, and they knew that some of us caught up at home on what they missed in the Baumgarten.

This behaviour on the part of the children naturally never completely stopped – we had never seriously expected that. It was a roundabout route which there would have been no possibility of avoiding for the sake of the children or us without deeply endangering the final outcome. While the children complained for weeks and months about their current misery, they worked through their hidden unhappiness that had been stored up for years, and thoroughly healed those psychological wounds which the past had imposed on them and which had become the source of their degeneration and waywardness. A completely abnormal, unchildlike, even pathological emotional life had developed in the process of age- and sex-related displacement and separation. The means of this healing process, its manifestations, could of course only be found in the sphere of the previous conscious content of the psyche; healing could only be achieved through the use of the previous ways of expressing feelings. While all this was being worked through, thawing, newly freed emotions, which up to now had been completely repressed or attached to the wrong things (for example the food), began gently, unconsciously and inarticulately to make new connections, with the teachers, with friends, with the school community, with the Histadruth [the General Federation of Jewish Labour], with the Kwusoth [the Jewish youth groups], with the children's home in general.

Only when the majority of the children had reached this point (an exact date for this can be given – the first half of January 1920), did the outer visibility and shape of this new emotional condition begin to develop with the greatest speed. Not until now had the feeling towards us, which had long ago changed, also changed its content and form. The previous topics went right into the background or disappeared. If people still mentioned complaints then it was with considerably reduced emotional content, appropriate to the situation. The children began to say more significant and refined things which to some extent only became conscious, emerged and developed through being spoken out loud. And every cheekiness or bluntness of behaviour towards us disappeared totally. To be sure, the boys never turned into teachers' pets, as they themselves scornfully expressed it. They were uninhibitedly open and lively, man to man, with unsuspected warmth and restrained affection. Many of the children became chivalrous, devoted, attentive and hyper-courteous; many retained a grumpy, aggressive surface

that was occasionally broken by impulsive love and affection; many hid the true direction of their feelings from themselves and others all too obviously behind a surface of irony and naughtiness.

In the second and third months of this stage, so from the end of February to the middle of March, we completely achieved what every pedagogy strives towards as its ultimate objective and cannot be achieved by any other means or methods than through the right attitude to the children and the necessary patience; the children had acquired an emotional life and fixed very considerable amounts of the freed-up libido on the teachers and the home and were beginning to connect their ever richer emotional life to the other children as well.

A further but very much clearer measure of this development was their attitude towards going abroad. At first Holland was the star and centre of all their longing; there were wild scenes when one of the children who had been sure he would find a place was turned down; they unscrupulously tried the most refined undercover manoeuvres in order to be accepted – even those who were otherwise showing the clear beginnings of a sense of justice; those who were chosen were blissful, those left behind deeply depressed, only sustained by one hope – the next time. That was how it was with the first transport in November. With the second it was still similar. Nevertheless there were not a few who announced that they wouldn't try to get accepted by cheating, and they showed themselves to be consistent and really strict in the interpretation of the concept of "cheating." Those who were going said goodbye often and at length; requested a leaving school assembly for themselves, were very conscientious and solemn when they passed on their official positions, were very interested in the possible shape of things while they were away and enjoyed the idea of coming back; those who stayed behind were no longer in the least speechless and inconsolable, they were pleased that they could stay, that "that was how it was." The third and fourth transports saw a considerable number who absolutely refused to go for the medical examination and hardly anybody wanted to go away; not a single one of the children who were rejected was offended or upset.