

Sukhomlinsky News

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Beginning with good health

*For Sukhomlinsky, good health provided a foundation for all other growth and development. This is very evident from a reading of works such as **My heart I give to children** and **Pavlysh secondary school**. This week's main translation is taken from **Pavlysh secondary school**, a work that attempts to explain the holistic nature of education at Sukhomlinsky's school in Pavlysh, where physical education, moral education, intellectual education, aesthetic education and vocational education were harmoniously combined.*

Sukhomlinsky's school was in a rural settlement, and he took full advantage of this, giving students opportunities to spend time outdoors, taking his students for walks in the fields, orchards and forests, conducting lessons outdoors, and encouraging families to grow and preserve healthy, vitamin rich foods.

Students were encouraged to develop healthy routines governing work, rest and recreation, and to become independent in establishing a healthy lifestyle. Often the students themselves were responsible for planting fruit trees or establishing bee hives.

You may notice I have changed the heading 'Stories for children' to just 'Stories'. Many of the stories are written for adults as well.

Best wishes,

Alan Cockerill

A concern for health

Student health was one of Sukhomlinsky's overriding concerns, as shown in the following extract from *Pavlysh secondary school*.

Health and the spiritual life of students

Good health—a sense of abundant, inexhaustible physical energy—is an important source of a joyful outlook on life, of optimism, of a readiness to overcome any difficulties. A weak, sickly child, predisposed to infections, faces continual adversity.

For twenty years we have been trying to understand why some students fall behind in their studies. Research into the physical and intellectual development of children who fall behind has led me to the conclusion that in 85% of cases the reason for falling behind, failure to learn, unsatisfactory work in class and at home, or repeating a year, is a poor state of health, some sort of illness or indisposition, more often than not imperceptible to a doctor, and able to be diagnosed only as a result of the combined efforts of mother, father, doctor and teacher. We began to uncover conditions which were imperceptible at first glance, masked by the child's lively and active nature—conditions affecting the circulatory system, the respiratory and digestive systems. With each year we saw more and more clearly the dependence of a children's inner life—of their intellectual development, thought, attention, memory, assiduity—on the 'play' of their physical energy. Observation convinced us, for example, that in the vast majority of cases so called 'retarded thinking' is not the result of any physiological or functional impairment of the brain cells in the cerebral cortex, but rather the result of a general malaise of the organism, a malaise that the children themselves are unaware of.

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A concern for health (continued)

Children with such an indisposition work assiduously at the start of the lesson, but after ten or fifteen minutes their eyes glaze over, they stare into space, they cannot focus their thoughts or listen attentively to the teacher. These hidden ailments and indispositions are particularly evident when the teacher tries to fill every minute of the lesson with intense intellectual work, trying to make sure not a single moment is wasted. This accelerated tempo, this gallop (for instance, when during a maths lesson the teacher asks students to solve five or six difficult problems in succession) leads some students to a state of complete exhaustion. Their eyes become dull and their movements apathetic. In this connection we need to warn proponents of so called effective, accelerated instruction: do not play games with children's health. Our staff are seriously concerned that the forced introduction of a three year program for primary schools, without significantly raising the pedagogical skills of all teachers, without enriching the whole intellectual life of the children, without giving sufficient thought and planning to intellectual education in general, will be to the detriment of children's health.

When it became clear to us how much intellectual work and the whole inner life of a child are dependent on their health, our staff decided to begin our study of each child by studying their health. Following a thorough medical examination, a doctor reports to our staff on the health of each child enrolling in grade one. Any children who are found to have weaknesses of the circulatory system, the respiratory system, or the metabolism, are constantly monitored by our teachers.

We try to halt the development of any illness, and to strengthen

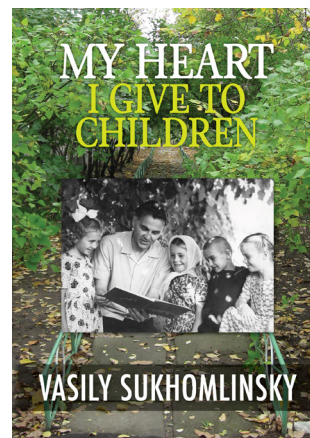
the organism's defences. Together with the parents we develop routines governing work, rest and diet. We have been able to establish practices whereby those children whose slow thought processes are the consequence of a general weakness, leading to sluggishness and depressed activity in the cells of the cerebral cortex, sleep outside in spring, summer and autumn, and receive a diet that is rich in vitamins and phytoncides (honey, milk, butter, eggs, meat and fruit). This has a truly miraculous effect on their health and their intellectual development.

With each year we become more convinced that preventing illness and susceptibility to illness, strengthening the organism, is the main precondition for effective intellectual work and the whole spiritual life of the child. And if, today, we still have two or three students repeating a year, that means we have not been able to improve those children's health, due to deep pathological anomalies, mainly inherited (for example, sluggishness of the cells of the cerebral cortex in the children of alcoholics).

This issue has a reverse side to it. Health depends to a huge extent on the inner life, which includes a child's approach to intellectual work. We do not permit the implementation of methods of 'effective', 'accelerated' instruction, that view a child's brain as an electronic mechanism capable of limitlessly absorbing information. Children are living creatures, and their brains are most delicate and tender organs, which must be treated with care and concern. It is possible to give primary education in three years, but only on the condition that there is a constant concern for the children's health, and for the normal development of the child's organism. The basis

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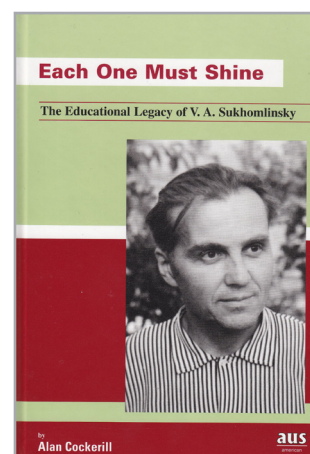
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for effective intellectual work is not to be found in its tempo and intensity, but in the due attention being given to its organisation, in carrying out multi-faceted physical, intellectual and aesthetic education. Educators need to give particular attention to the spiritual lives and health of students during the adolescent years.

The psychological resilience of adolescents and senior students flows from a sense of joy in life, vitality and abundant energy. I use the word 'sense' advisedly, because at this age students do not think about their health or appreciate it. Our teachers' concern for the health of their students is tactful and subtle and does not undermine their charges' noble scorn for children who are over-protected by their parents and afraid of catching a cold or getting tired. The fact that our adolescent and senior students view straining their physical energies, and even risking their health, as a form of valour, is not recklessness, as some members of the older generation may imagine, but the very essence of deep moral processes, connected with affirming one's identity, and the formation of moral maturity. We try to have many common interests and points of contact with our students, so that our concern for their health is expressed subtly and in a heartfelt way...

... Rapid physical development during adolescence and young adulthood demands of educators significant attention to the harmonising of the physical and intellectual work of their students. Many years of observation has convinced our staff of the significant danger during adolescence of excessive, crippling intellectual work—cramming. We will not tolerate young people aged 12-15 doing four or five hours homework daily in addition to attending classes for five or six hours a day. This will cripple them, affect-

ing their health for life, as well as their physical appearance. They will become round-shouldered and narrow chested, and may become short-sighted. In this book we will explain how we manage intellectual work in such a way as to take care of a person's health and beauty.

We do not allow girls to bear heavy burdens, to participate in excessively strenuous physical work. One of our traditions is that our female teachers are also excused from such work. This tradition provides a good example for our young men.

Environment and routines

Routines governing physical and intellectual work and play are a very important factor in maintaining good health and good spirits. The conscious maintenance of routines is also a significant factor in the development of a strong will.

We will show how the observance of hygiene expectations and routines governing work and rest facilitate students' integrated physical and spiritual development. In our school grounds there are more than ten trees for each student, and this 'oxygen factory' expands each year. During the spring and autumn months some grade one and two lessons are conducted in 'green classrooms': in the open air, on green lawns, surrounded on all sides by trellised grape vines. These are also used for conducting after-school care.

We do not allow students in junior classes to spend more than three hours a day doing intellectual work in closed classrooms. In every family in our village the parents construct outdoor pergolas, in which young children can read, write, draw and do manual work. To this end we have a special nursery for wild grapes, cuttings and seedlings, which we freely supply to anyone who needs them.

At our staff meetings we often

discuss what more we can do to ensure that our students breathe fresh, clean, oxygen rich air, free of microbes. We decided to create green barriers around our workshops. Along the walls we planted grape vines that have covered the walls up to the rooves. The windows of our workshops now open onto a sea of green foliage that diffuses the bright light of the sun and permits only clean air to enter the workshops. The air is enriched with oxygen and is cleansed of carbon dioxide, and during the winter months there are many citrus trees in the school grounds.

All our lessons are conducted in a single shift, so all lessons are conducted in natural light. Regardless of that, we monitor the eyesight of our children medically. If we observe the slightest abnormality in vision, we take measures to strengthen the whole organism, so as to prevent any deterioration of eyesight. Such children receive dietary supplements, foods rich in plant and animal vitamins. For children with weak eyesight special reading routines are established, incorporating more frequent breaks, and greater variation in intellectual work. Some children are excused from lessons for a few minutes to have a walk.

As well as periodically checking that desks are an appropriate size for each child, some individual modifications are made to desks used by round-shouldered children. Neither the child, nor the class is aware of these modifications. Routines governing desk work affect the harmonious development of the body and of posture. Teachers and parents cooperate to ensure that there are daily limits to how much time students spend sitting at desks doing schoolwork or homework...



Stories

The new teacher

The grade three students suffered a great misfortune. Their teacher, dear old Antonina Niki-forovna, died.

The children grieved for her for a long time. Only gradually, and with great difficulty, did they become accustomed to their young new teacher. It made it even harder that her name was also Antonina, though her patronymic was Petrovna.

Antonina Petrovna seemed to the children to be too happy and carefree. The children doubted if she would be able to love them as tenderly, as demandingly and as strictly as Antonina Niki-forovna.

One day black-eyed Fedya was running outside when he fell and drove a large splinter into his hand. The boy ran to Antonina Petrovna. The young teacher, who was always so happy and carefree, gave a little scream and turned pale. She sat Fedya on her knee but did not know what to do next. Andryusha, an irrepressible mischief maker, walked up to her and said very quietly, 'You need to pull the splinter out with your teeth...'

Antonina Petrovna bent over the boy's hand and pressed her lips to the wound. When she raised her head a large splinter was sticking out between her bloodied teeth. The children looked at their young teacher, their eyes now shining with delight.

That night, in thirty-seven households, the children told their mothers about their new teacher for the first time.

An incident on the Dnieper

It was during the autumn of 1943. The left bank of the Dnieper had already been liberated from German occupation. The Germans had taken up fortified positions on the right bank.

The Germans sprayed the Dnieper with machine gun fire and launched shells against the left bank. Two of our soldiers took a large wooden plank, lowered it into the water, and held on to it while they swam to the opposite bank, occupied by the Germans. They placed their weapons—machine guns and grenades—on the plank.

The soldiers swam quietly, but the Germans noticed them. A hostile machine gun opened fire. One of the soldiers, Anatoly Volkov, from

Moscow, was seriously wounded. His friend, a Ukrainian named Petro Shevchenko, said: 'This is my native village. Try to hold on...'

Dusk was falling. The plank that Petro was clinging to reached the shore. He lay wounded Anatoly on the ground. Petro waited until it was completely dark, then lifted Anatoly, took the weapons, and made his way through the undergrowth along the bank of the river. As it was his native village, he knew every path...

During the night he knocked on the window of his mother's hut. His mother recognised her son and opened the door, crying from joy and from anxiety.

'There are Germans in the village,' she whispered.

'We'll put my wounded friend in the attic,' said Petro.

When they had laid Anatoly on a bed of sweet-smelling hay prepared by the mother, Petro took his weapons and said farewell.

'Farewell, mother... If I die, let Anatoly be your son. He is from Moscow, and his mother died before the war.'

The mother wept as she saw her son off into battle.

Petro made his way to the Dnieper, where his comrades were already climbing out of the river onto the shore and firing with their machine guns at the Germans. Petro joined forces with them.

The battle for the village lasted three days and three nights. When it was over, Petro's mother walked to the river bank and found her son's body, closed his eyes, wept over him, and buried him next to his father's grave.

Anatoly Volkov became the Ukrainian mother's son. He was treated in hospital. He made it to Berlin, returned to the village in Ukraine after the war, married, and lives there now with his children and his elderly mother.

