

Supporting the Development of Movement in Children Under Three

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Two streams are especially important in early childhood, the one which leads to the development of imagination and thinking, and the other stream which is related to the development of movement and will; the stream of connecting with the past, the pre-birth experiences, and the stream into the future, moving forward into earthly life. In working with movement, especially with older children, there is a wonderful merging of both aspects, imagination and will.

The following considerations relate to the steps that children need to have completed in order to happily and confidently participate in guided movement programs such as the morning circle.

In the process of working with issues of movement, the question of what is needed for a healthy development of movement has condensed for me into one single main aspect: **Uprightness**. Rudolf Steiner has placed great emphasis on upright posture as the archetypal human gesture, and my own work with children has confirmed this for me.

In the last decade important publications have appeared related to the theme of movement and young children. A range of different support programs is offered around the world for prevention and treatment of delays in the development of movement. Some of them are used in Steiner early childhood programs in Australia. I especially would like to mention the work of Sally Goddard Blythe and the Institute for Neurophysiologic Psychology (INPP) and her discovery of the connection between “retained reflexes” and learning difficulties of children. This research has gained international recognition and has also influenced the “Extra Lesson” work in Australia. I would like to add to this some more recent research into the development of movement, which has become available in Germany in 2005 and has led to a different approach in movement therapy.

Uprightness: The spiritual picture

Two spiritual processes are at work behind the development of movement in the first three years of life:

- the process of spiritual growth forces working from the head downward in the formation and fine tuning of the skeletal-muscular system and the inner organs, and
- the process of learning to walk, speak and think in which the I works together with the will forces from below upwards.

The spiritual origin of movement is the I, who works in the forces behind movement, as described by Rudolf Steiner in his lectures to teachers (Steiner, *Study of Man*, Lecture 12). The intention to move which originates in the I may become conscious in the human being or remain totally unconscious as is the case when young children learn to stand upright and begin to take their first steps.

The working together of the two streams, the will stream from below and the formative forces from the head down, brings about three important milestones in child development.

First milestone: the acquisition of upright posture

As the child randomly moves arms and legs and at the same time perceives her movement with her senses, the child becomes more and more conscious of her body and able to direct movement. This process moves through the body from the head downward. As the child tirelessly attempts to first bring the head out of the horizontal plane into the vertical position, then the torso and then the whole body, she works with her will and ego forces, which rise up from the lower part of the body.

Second milestone: the change of teeth in the seventh year

Here Steiner describes the co-working of both streams in the form of a “battle” through which a new stage of development is achieved. The battle happens between what he calls the “musical” forces rising from the body and the formative growth forces descending from the head, and serves the process of pushing out the second teeth. The musical forces

then recede back into the body. The etheric head forces are freed, which enables the child to achieve new, more advanced abilities in imagination and thinking.

Third milestone: puberty

Musical forces from below rise up again and meet with formative forces coming from the head in a kind of big clash in the region of the larynx. In this process the changes of puberty occur, and again there is a significant step in the development of thinking (see Steiner, *Balance in Teaching*; Klocek, Chapter 3). Steiner was able to spiritually perceive that growth and development arise out of the working of two opposite streams or forces. In other developmental pictures we are directed only to one stream, that from the head down (the cranio-caudal stream), to the process in which the formative forces take hold of the entire body and work on refining the skeletal-muscular system and the inner organs. Steiner also was the first to see the unique significance of human uprightness in the physical and spiritual development of the human being and in the process of spiritual collective evolution.

Regarding the development of the individual human being, it takes two and a half years to develop uprightness fully, not only one year. It takes all that time for the I together with the spiritual hierarchies to fine tune the skeletal/muscular system, the speech organs and the human brain as physical foundation for the development of the human soul forces of willing, feeling and thinking.

Standing upright at around twelve to eighteen months is only the first step. The entire process is not completed until the hands have reached a certain independence from the lower body and are able to act in accordance with sense perception for exploring the world, and the head is able to be held in balance and becomes independent of the movement of the limbs so that the child can experience thoughts. Uprightness and balance belong together; it is the greatest achievement of the child, if he is able to stand still. Dr. Michaela Glöckler once summarized this milestone with the following words: What are we wishing for in terms of movement achievement by the age of three? The answer: that the child stands with full uprightness in the world, expressing through his posture and gesture: "This I am" (Glöckler, 2002). Up to this

time, according to Steiner, the child is a "hermit" and not yet open to other human beings' will and intentions.

At the age of two-and-a-half the spiritual beings and the higher I start to withdraw after having established the child's orientation in space, his ability to speak and to think. At the same time the child becomes able to separate his impressions of the outer world from his perception of self. In consequence the child reaches a more detached way of perceiving what is around him. This results in more acute observations as to what adults are doing and in a new interest in experiences that adults are offering.

Now the opportunity arises for adults to take on the role of "helpers" in guiding the child further into life activities. This is the time when a more formal movement program or circle time can be introduced.

Uprightness: The physiological picture and therapeutic approaches

According to the model of cranio-caudal development, the child grows "from the head down." The increasing differentiation of the structure of the brain enables the child to develop new movement patterns and skills. Involuntary or uncontrolled movement gradually becomes directional. Yet often this does not happen properly. Research into the sequence of developmental movement patterns has been conducted with the aim of identifying the causes for the increasing number of children with delayed or incomplete movement development. These developmental irregularities are linked back to problems with the hierarchical sequence of processes in the brain and to an inability to integrate sensory and motor activity.

Sally Goddard's research into the phenomenon of "retained reflexes" and her therapeutic approach are based on the hypothesis that all children go through the same sequential pattern of "primitive reflexes." While these reflexes have an important role at a certain point of development, they do become a hindrance for further development if they are retained beyond their time. Goddard designed a developmental movement program with the aim of overcoming these retained reflexes. In this movement program the sequence of reflexes is

repeated in the order in which they are normally occurring and in which they are meant to disappear under normal circumstances. These so-called “floor exercises” are used in Extra Lesson work and to some extent in the kindergarten work as well.*

Through her work with children Goddard has made some interesting discoveries about the vital role of the sense of balance and the vestibular system in the prevention and therapy of learning difficulties. As balance is situated in the lowest parts of the brain, it is fundamental for the development of free deliberate movement. Therefore in her therapeutic program Goddard emphasizes the stimulation of the vestibular system. She was able to produce evidence that musical therapeutic programs clearly benefit children with movement disturbances and resulting learning difficulties (Goddard Blythe, *The Well Balanced Child*).

In 2004 a former co-worker of Goddard, Wibke Bein-Wierzbinski, published a dissertation proving the therapeutic success of a movement program which does not repeat the sequence of primary reflexes, but is based on specific movements which she claims play a key role in movement development. She questions programs based on the theory of repeating all stages of primitive reflexes and suggests that a child may have overcome the primitive reflexes initially, but then at a later time and possibly under stress may have returned to primitive reflex patterns. She suggests that all primitive reflexes may be present in an inactive state within the human being and that they can “flare up” under certain circumstances.

Bein-Wierzbinski proposes that the repetition of the sequence of primitive reflexes should be avoided in therapeutic programs, and that only certain key developmental movements, leading towards uprightnes, should be practiced and reinforced in a developmental therapy. She found that there is a critical age at around four to six months for these

* Originally Audrey McAllen’s program did not include these floor exercises. Neither did she recommend beginning the Extra Lesson program in the first seven years of life. She states that this remedial/therapeutic work should only be done with children older than seven years to allow the etheric forces the full period of early childhood to complete the development of the physical body.

key movements. If they are mastered correctly, they will set the child on a track of subsequent normal development. Bein-Wierzbinski suggests that these particular movements should be practiced and strengthened through therapy.

They are described as follows:

- Firstly a full stretch as occurring naturally between four to six months of age, with the back straight, legs straight, arms straight, head up. The head tilt backwards and the pulled up legs as in the Symmetrical Tonic Neck Reflex should be avoided.
- Secondly a movement with the opposite quality to the full body stretch: bringing the foot to the mouth with the help of the hands. The entire body is curved.

Both movements together form something like an expansion—contraction movement sequence. Bein-Wierzbinski was able to show that if these two movements are performed correctly and frequently, then the process of becoming upright proceeds normally.

In her therapeutic program she focuses on the spine as the area of development of uprightnes. She found that if movement is no longer initiated from the upper body and head but from the area of the lower spine and hips, then the head is able to move or stay still independently of the rest of the body. The whole picture of limitations in movement activity through retained reflexes does not occur. Therefore in her therapeutic approach she uses exercises of leg movements guided by the rotation of the hip rather than the turning of head and shoulder. This will cause a shift of the gravitational point from the upper part into the lower part of the body.

There are now movement therapists in Germany, who are working from Steiner’s indications and have started to work with “Rota Therapie.” Ingrid Ruhrmann focuses in her movement program for children with retained reflexes on a simple set of movements based on variations of turning sideways and rolling over as they naturally occur in movement sequences such as crawling, rotation, sitting, rotation to change direction, crawling in new direction, rotation, sitting, and so on.

In addition she uses Anthroposophical therapies

to strengthen the etheric and astral forces of the child through water applications, nutrition and rhythm. She teaches mothers how to use Rota Therapy at home in a playful way. It is heart-warming that the child before three years can be held on mother's lap during the therapy and thus be in a protected space. Ruhrmann was able to confirm that basic hip rotational movements will stimulate normal development into uprightness.

Existing reflex patterns are ignored in Rota Therapy; the aim is to strengthen the deliberate movement at that crucial point from which movement development will proceed normally.

Supporting movement in young children

If one wishes to enable the child to feel comfortable and free in the upright position, one needs to be able to recognize when development is not following the normal order of steps or when steps are omitted.

Healthy movement at age two-and-a-half should include:

- Upright posture, the child is able to stand still (balance)
- Free head rotation without causing either arms or legs to move
- The head does not tip to the front nor is the neck extended towards the back.
- The arms swing freely while walking
- Movement is intentional
- The hands can be brought together in the sagittal plane at will
- The hands move freely in the horizontal plane, above and below the horizontal midline (butterfly)
- The speed and force of movement can be varied at will and adapted to different situations
- The centre of gravity and the rotation point of the spine is in the hip area
- The face is relaxed while moving, which means that the child does not spend extra effort in maintaining posture and balance (Ruhrmann, 2006).

Uprightness must be regarded as the foundation for all further differentiation and refinement of movements, such as those brought in morning circles. If uprightness and balance are not yet achieved, the child will not be able to fully live into the action/movement patterns of the circle, and will have difficulties imitating the gestures of the teacher and confidently moving within all spatial dimensions.

The steps to uprightness are the young child's work

The child needs time and the appropriate space to practice these. Adults should step back and watch the little ones' progress with love and minimal intervention.

Emmi Pikler's documentation of the development of movement of the children in her care at the Loczy orphanage in Hungary (see Pikler, *Give Me Time*) has shown how the child explores and practices a wide range of movements: rotations, pushing forward or backward, lifting and turning. Through this process the child experiences her own capacities in mastering her body and develops confidence and a sense of freedom.

Regarding the connection between the development of the dexterity of the hands and speech development, Wilma Ellersiek has shown through her hand gesture games how we can support movement development of the very young child, starting on a one-to-one basis (see Ellersiek, *Giving Love—Bringing Joy*).

The life forces are stimulated in hands and feet through gentle hand touching games accompanied by rhythmical speech or song. Gestures such as the opening and closing of the hand, holding and releasing are practiced.

From Sally Goddard's work the need of stimulation for the vestibular system has become apparent and this should flow into our work with young children. Mothers have always intuitively stimulated the baby's vestibular system through gentle rocking. Later the child is rocked on the lap to the rhythms of nursery rhymes. Once the child has achieved the upright position, the child delights in being rocked more vigorously backward and forward, sideways or up and down in a see-saw motion. Swinging up and down or being held by the hands and whirled around will have a stimulating

effect as well. From the third year of life the healthy child will find pleasure in rolling in the grass, jumping and sliding, sitting on a swing, or turning and spinning in the upright position. Many of the traditional outdoor movement games contain vestibular stimulation.

I would like to make the point that in the work with children under three there is no need for a formal movement program as we practice it in the work with children aged three to six in Steiner kindergartens or pre-schools. Whenever one experiences circles in play groups for toddlers, the circle seems to be more directed towards the mothers' experience and learning while the child is "taken along."

In a group situation with children under three, whether in child care or in toddler play groups, the play area is the space for free movement and the child's play time is the movement program. The space, however, needs to be prepared with the possibilities for climbing, for exploring different heights and ways to get up and down. It is a space for practicing differentiated, child-initiated movement. The involvement of the adults in their domestic or craft work will provide an opportunity for children to observe the movements and gestures of the grown ups. The child absorbs these gestures deeply. Some of these may be imitated and reappear in the child's free play.

The adult accompanies the child's "movement work" with warmth, love, and reverence and as much as possible without interference. Steiner's warning not to impose the adult's will on the young child, as this may damage the child's further development, needs to be taken seriously.

We turn now back to the beginning, to the spiritual mystery of movement. It is the I who moves the limbs and thus imprints each child's individuality onto the body movements.

It is one of the most difficult challenges to learn to perceive this imprint of the individuality. The following questions arise:

- How can we learn to understand the individual signature of movement?
- What is the spiritual intention or destiny that expresses itself in individual variations of developmental movement patterns?

- Why are reflexes retained or re-enlivened in a child?
- Why do some people have to live all their lives with retained reflexes?
- What is the lesson to be learned through physical challenges?
- If the physical hindrance evokes a greater effort of will in the child, will this effort later bear fruit?

Holding such questions within and pondering about them, will help to see the child with intensified human interest and compassion. They are the big moral questions of education and of therapeutic intervention. May we never forget to ask these moral questions. Through professional training one can learn to identify patterns in the development of movement. Through inner spiritual work one can become sensitive to the hidden forces behind movement and tune into what wants to evolve as the child's destiny. As Rudolf Steiner says, "To be a teacher and educator one must work with what is taking place in the depths of human nature" (Steiner, *Study of Man*, 67).

Conclusion

How does one educate the young child under three? Rudolf Steiner's answer to this question is very clear. The child educates himself under the guidance of spiritual beings. The adults around the child contribute through their own self-education. The fruits of self-education become visible for the child in the quality of our gestures and these gestures are imitated by the child and work in physical growth and development.

Beyond this the child also unconsciously absorbs movements and rhythms of the earth and the cosmos and these one can see beautifully in the levity and dance-like quality of the movements of the young child. To contemplate how we could work in accordance with planetary forces in movement programs would be a further step towards a spiritually based education of the young child. A quotation by Rudolf Steiner may just hint at the dimensions of this issue.

Our purpose is to imitate, to absorb the movement of the world into ourselves through our limbs. What do

*we do then? We dance. . . All true dancing has arisen from imitating in the limbs the movement carried out by the planets, by other heavenly bodies or by the earth itself. . . The head rests and the soul, being related to the head, must participate in the movements while at rest. It begins to reflect from within the dancing movement of the limbs. When the limbs execute irregular movements, the soul begins to mumble. When the limbs perform regular movements, it begins to whisper. When the limbs carry out the harmonious cosmic movements of the universe, it even begins to sing. Thus the outward dancing movement is changed into song and into music within (Steiner, *Study of Man*, 144).*

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Web resources

Bein-Wierzbinski research: www.paepki.de
Rota Therapy: www.rota-therapie.de