

# Accelerated and Delayed Development

— Dr. Renate Long-Breipohl

The theme suggested to me for this lecture was that of hindrances to the incarnation of the I. Out of the many possible hindrances I chose to focus mainly on two: on delay with respect to the development of movement and on acceleration with respect to the development of speech and thinking. These are the two most common challenges for the incarnation of the I in children today. I am well aware that I am speaking out of my experiences with children in an affluent country where children are endangered not by hunger, but by obesity and related conditions, and by overstimulation of the senses. However I am confident that what is presented here will be relevant with modification for children in a wide range of circumstances.

*[The following excerpt was chosen from the core of the lecture, as so many North American children fall into this category. References are made to children described in the first part of the lecture without elaboration. Reading of the entire lecture will give benefit of child descriptions, discussion of delayed development and pedagogical responses we can make, and suggestions to how we can newly approach building relationship with the children, encouraging imitation, and guiding play.]*

## Accelerated development

We turn now to what I see as the biggest hindrance for children today, especially in affluent societies: Overstimulation and high performance demands causing accelerated development of the speech and the intellect in young children.

We are looking not at the environmental conditions which act adversely on the harmonious joining of the soul-spirit with the physical-etheric body in incarnation and on the emergence of a healthy consciousness of self. Today the issue is the push within the education system for early intellectual performance, and the issue is also the introduction of modern technology into the lives of young children.

Already in his time Steiner could see the acceleration of intellectual development in children. The in-

dividuality, whose presence is felt in the human being through life and who provides the inner experience of self, becomes overburdened with sensory overload from the world around at an early age. The children assimilate these influences already early in life and therefore appear much older than they are. Steiner states that there used to be a big difference between the first and the second seven-year periods.

He says: “Nowadays children are so very clever...there is little difference between the first and the second seven years. Special methods of education will have to be devised in order to cope with these children. They are as clever as grown-ups and everyone seems equally clever, whatever his age” (from *True and False Paths of Spiritual Investigation*, p. 43).

This is the most widespread phenomenon of acceleration today. Not only the highly gifted, the exceptional child is affected, but children across the board. This development is a consequence of the nearly exclusive occupation of human thinking with the material world and the immense importance given to information gathering, analyzing, expressing opinions and making judgments.

Young children, being imitators, often just repeat information and opinions presented by adults. Children who speak cleverly have been given lots of informative and explanatory input by adults previously, and they have been encouraged to express opinions and to make decisions from early on.

Childhood once was the time for stories, nursery rhymes, children’s songs, time to bring language and meaning to the child musically—not intellectually, but through the rhythms and tones of verses and songs. The feeling element of language was important, not the processing of content.

Today many children have a good ability to process information and identify objects already at an early age. An example is an eighteen-month-old boy standing at a coffee table with flash cards. The child was asked to point to the card that showed the house or other object. The child did perform the task asked

of him correctly, but he could not stand at the table independently; he had to hold on to the table to keep his balance. There was no joy in performing what the adult wanted him to do. At this time of his life he should have been consolidating his upright standing and his walking, not his thinking.

However, the common knowledge that the time before the age of three is most effective for accelerating intellectual development has given rise to many early learning programs. Because of their splendid memory children learn quickly how to use words and some concepts correctly, identify representations of objects, name characters from books, recall details of the content.

However this does not develop deeper aspects of the child's thinking, and also not feeling and will. Thus children seem to be clever beyond their age, but they are not. While there is acceleration in the intellectual development, there is no corresponding acceleration in the soul. Here the child still follows the seven-year periods of soul development.

An example is a very clever little fellow in my kindergarten, who had something to say about everything. For his fifth birthday celebration in the kindergarten I chose the story about an angel bringing the child down the rainbow bridge to his parents. When the story was finished, the child said in amazement: "Is that how it was?" He felt the truth of this picture in his soul. Intellectually he had absorbed other information about birth given by his parents. But even in such an intellectually awake child, the soul resonated with this picture of birth.

Steiner has warned that putting demands of early intellectual performance on the growth forces of the young child before the age of seven will cause stress and lead to the etheric sheath around the child becoming "thin," worn-out. Its life giving quality will be damaged. The strain shows in the children as nervousness, loss of focussed interest in their surroundings, and restless behaviour. These are signs of overload of the soul, not the intellect.

I would like come back to Tobias, the child with early intellectual development mentioned at the beginning. His soul did not take part in his intellectual advancement, the joyless look in his eyes and his inability to play showed that his soul was undernourished.

Tobias also spoke with a monotonous voice. When he was stressed his voice became shrill and high pitched and he gasped for air between the words, a sign that breathing and feeling were cramped and not able to flow out unhindered.

Tobias was not only an intellectually awake child,

but also an anxious child. This was physically expressed in his awkward running style, the leaning backwards of his upper body while running, which made him a very slow runner.

Children like Tobias react to overstimulation with anxiety, not with fear of something specific, but with fear as general soul condition. I regard this fearfulness as a significant hindrance in the incarnation process. It is visible in many children today. It affects not only play adversely, but also sleeping and eating. Sometimes we see this fear expressed as physical gesture when the child flexes his hands closed, almost as a reflexive action.

~ *Steiner has warned that putting demands of early intellectual performance on the growth forces will cause stress. . .*

Six-year-old Benjamin is such a generally fearful child. He is tall, thin, has a long narrow face, wide-open fearful looking eyes, a monotonous voice, and tense movements. He is a very picky eater and constantly on the watch of what is going on around him. There is no protective sheath around him at this stage. Hopefully the warmth of his new teacher and the routines and rhythms of the kindergarten will help him feeling more secure. He is just starting to smile occasionally and to play a little.

In Lecture Four of *Education for Special Needs*, Steiner spoke about those children whose astral body and I are too much drawn out into the environment. This is very relevant not only for children who are fearful, but also to those who live with so much enticement and distraction around them that they lose their secure base. Steiner states that children become inwardly oversensitive and sore and in consequence they are prone to actions which cover up this discomfort with overactive behaviour.

The soul fear which seems to become more prominent in young children goes along with early I consciousness. Saying "I" to themselves used to be the sign that the child had reached an inner threshold and a new developmental stage. Today children say I often as early as at eighteen months, not at three years.

In *Life Between Death and Rebirth*, Steiner describes the I-consciousness at age three as follows: The I pictures to himself mental images in saying "I feel," "I suffer," etc. This is linked to the concept I which is noticed by the child around age three.

But Steiner also mentions the saying “I” from the age of eighteen months onwards and attributes this saying I to imitation, at this stage without the deeper aspect of self as different from others.

One hears young children say “I want this, I want that.” These are expressions of desire which may be misunderstood as arising from being conscious of oneself as an I. This “I want” is always linked to environmental influences, to the immense role which desire and its satisfaction plays in modern life. It is also linked to children being frequently asked about their wishes and asked to make choices. This early saying “I” is not due to acceleration in the emergence of consciousness of self, but rather arises from early intellectual alertness and needs to be seen in connection with the role of consumerism and advertising in society.

### **Pedagogical practice in the face of delay and acceleration**

In our pedagogical practice we must reflect on what is essential and what is less important. There is one essential for early childhood educators, which surmounts all others: to understand human nature and how it specifically appears in young children. Only based on such understanding can we become helpers of the I in the incarnation process to find the right support for a harmonious development and the establishment of balance between the three centers of activity in the child’s body: the nerve-sense system, the rhythmical system and the metabolic-limb system. This holds true for all children.

However, the I meets different conditions and incarnation occurs slightly differently in each child. We need to develop the faculty of intuition in order to understand what is specific about the incarnation process of a particular child.

Kate, Thomas and Michael [*children mentioned in an earlier part of the lecture*] tell the teacher something important about incarnation: A lot is worked out by the child himself according to his destiny, sometimes only over years. Yet we need to understand that we, in whatever we do, become part of the child’s destiny. Where we see problems, we need to be cautious and allow a reasonable time to observe. We must ask ourselves where we see progress, where not. We need to keep in touch with others, doctors, colleagues, therapists to sense what will be appropriate restraint or support for the child.

Thus as teachers we work on two levels:

Firstly we work with what all young children need. We have our Waldorf early childhood curriculum with

essentials such as creating a calm and peaceful environment, providing examples worthy of imitation, creating rhythmical flow in the life of the kindergarten, facilitating self-directed play, and guiding activities such as the circle, storytelling, music. Through this we create life experiences which are conducive to health, also for children with delayed or accelerated development. Many children are thriving on what we are able to offer: the mood of the kindergarten, the images, the activities, the working adult, the togetherness in the group.

But there are children who are not, such as those described at the beginning [of this lecture]. Therefore secondly we have the task to make adjustments with respect to those children.

Steiner has given us the task to remove hindrances so that the child’s spirit may enter with full freedom into life (*The Spiritual Ground of Education*, p. 56). As a teacher today one needs to remind oneself that incarnation has become more difficult in our time and that therefore we meet more difficult children.

Steiner admonishes us not to experience this as a tragedy, but to see every difficult child as a gift by the spiritual world and a “manifestation of the highest. We must live through this feeling of tragedy, because this feeling will help us perceive, how something bad can also be something divine” (*The Spiritual Ground of Education*, p. 55).

Reflecting on my experiences I suggest adjustments to three essential parts of our work: to forming relationships with children, to working with imitation and example, and to guiding play.

[*Editor’s note: The concluding one-third of the lecture discussed building relationships, imitation, and guiding play. Dr. Long-Breipohl gave specific, detailed suggestions to guide us in working in these areas.*] ♦

### **References**

- Steiner, Rudolf. *True and False Paths in Spiritual Investigation*. London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1985.
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