

A Contribution to the Study of the Second Core Principle

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Phases of Child Development: This process of embodiment has an archetypal sequence of approximately seven-year phases, and each child's development is an individual expression of the archetype. Each phase has unique and characteristic physical, emotional, and cognitive dimensions.

What makes the four-year-old different from the ten-year-old, and what makes them both different from the seventeen-year-old? The Second Core Principle of Waldorf Education recognizes the critical importance of understanding the universal patterns of child development from birth to age 21, as well as the distinct characteristics of the first, second, and third seven-year cycles in the life of the child and adolescent.

To understand the differences we need to refer to the fourfold human being as described by Rudolf Steiner. The fourfold human being is comprised of the physical body, the etheric

body, the astral body, and the I-organization. Although Steiner uses the word *body* in relation to the etheric and astral, he notes that these are actually “bodies” of forces, rather than material substances.¹

Each of the first three bodies is connected with one of the seven-year periods of development and lends to that period and the developing child certain characteristic attributes.

Birth to Age 7

The physical body is born at the emergence of the baby from the womb and is preeminent during the child's first seven years of growth and development. Just as the child's physical body is emancipated from the womb of the mother, according to Steiner, the other bodies also have a birth or emancipation from their protective sheaths.² The subsequent births of the finer bodies are as important for Waldorf education as the child's physical birth.

From birth to around the age of seven, young children are working on and out of their physical natures. Sensory experiences and movement are the means by which they develop their physical capacities and explore the world. Endowed with immense will forces, they take in the world by active doing. Whatever they sense in their surrounding, they become and act out or imitate. They master the essential human capacities of walking, speaking, and thinking through imitating the adults in their environment. They think through doing and learn by imitation.

The etheric body works in conjunction with the physical body during these first seven years, bringing forming forces to the physical body and maintaining its organic life processes. Edmond Schoorel suggests that the etheric body has its “inner birth” at the time the physical body goes through its “outer birth,” in that the baby is able to maintain its own life processes separate from its mother.³ Approximately seven years later, when the child’s physical growth and development has reached a certain conclusion and fewer etheric forces are needed to form and maintain the physical body, the etheric body is born or emancipated from the physical body. A portion of the etheric forces is freed for new adventures. The eruption of the child’s permanent teeth can be seen as a sign of the conclusion of this phase of development.

Between 7 and 14

With the birth of the etheric body, some of the child’s formative life forces are now available for psychological rather than physiological activities—for instance, for the forming of concepts, memories, habits, and temperament. The physical body is still active in gathering sensory experiences, but now the child of this age can form and recall inner pictures of his or her own experiences. This allows the child to be ready for direct instruction and to receive guidance from the teacher as a beloved source of worldly

knowledge and skills. During the first seven years, rhythm is brought to the life of the young child out of regular and repetitive rituals in its surrounding, as well as out of the etheric forces of the parent and early childhood teacher. In the second period, rhythm and repetition help grade school children begin to strengthen their own etheric bodies and habit life.

Experiences connected to lively pictures and a rich palette of feelings are the ones most readily received and recalled. During the first seven years, the feeling life was still under the sway of the bodily instincts, impulses, and desires. Now the yet “unborn” astral body is connecting with the newly-freed etheric forces and the feeling life is slowly awakening. Feelings can be strong, even extreme, and often come over the child like uncontrollable weather. The inner life of the teacher, along with her stories and artistic activities, nourish and bring order, sense, and consequence to the imagination and developing inner life of the child between 7 and 14.

Whereas the young child thinks by doing, the grade school child thinks through images and pictures. This is not yet the abstract thinking capacity that will develop later, but rather a sense for wholeness, for relationships, and for the deeper meaning of things that can arise from a well-developed feeling life and artistic practice.

Between 14 and 21

The outer birth of the astral body is heralded physically by the onset of puberty and the beginning of adolescence. The physical changes that signify the beginning of this period are readily recognizable. Was there also an “inner birth” of the astral body, as there was with the etheric body, and if so when did that occur? The moment when the young child, around the age of two or three years of age, begins to say “I” signals, according to Schoorel, the “inner birth” of the astral body.⁴

As an early childhood teacher, this awareness helped me greatly to understand the changes that I perceived in young children as they began to refer to themselves as an “I.” This event in the life of a young child signals the end of a unitary consciousness or oneness with everything and a beginning of the separation that is required for the human being to be reflective and to think. The interval between the inner and outer birth of the astral body is around ten or eleven years. The seed of self-consciousness and abstract thinking that is planted at three takes many years—indeed the whole of the development between 7 and 14—before it is ready to flower.

Rudolf Steiner speaks about this in his seminal talk on education, *The Education of the Child in the Light of Spiritual Science*. In this lecture he says,

Thought must take hold in a living way in the children’s minds so that they first learn and then judge. What the intellect has to say about any matter should only be said when all the other faculties have spoken. Before then the intellect has only an intermediary part to play; its task is to comprehend what occurs and what is experienced in feeling, to receive it exactly as it is, not letting unripened judgment immediately come in and take over.⁵

During the final period of child development, the intellect and abstract thinking capacities come at last into the foreground. With the astral body emancipated from its protective sheath, the search for truth and a sense of self begin. The young person who is searching for his or her own truth cannot help but question the authority of adults and teachers. Reverence for the experience of one’s elders is quickly replaced with criticalness. This is the expression of strengthening intellectual capacities, which is already present to some degree between 12 and 14.

These three periods of child development are sometimes referred to as the era of will, the era of feeling, and the era of thinking. However, the beginning of each seven-year period is more strongly influenced by the will element, the middle by the feeling element, and the final third of each period by the thinking element. It is as if there is an echoing of the past development and foreshadowing of the future development in each period. *Pars pro toto*: In each part the whole is reflected.

Whereas the early years of adolescence are often marked by rebellion and dissolution, as young teenagers seek to find their own way and to develop their ability to think and make well founded judgments, idealism and excitement about possibilities that lie ahead characterize the latter years of the period from 14 to 21.

Archetypes and Not Norms

These developmental archetypes help us understand what we are observing in our students and inform the shaping and presenting of our lessons. The timing of developmental changes can vary widely among normally developing children, as can the individual means by which they express the changes that are taking place during a particular period of growth and maturation. Our knowledge of the archetypes should not blind us to seeing our individual students.

The Birth of the “I”

Around the age of 21, the fourth birth—the birth of the ego or “I”—takes place, crowning the journey of child development and giving the young adult the means by which to direct his or her own life path and further development. For Schoorel, the inner birth of “I” occurs at what is sometimes called the nine-year change.⁶ This represents a distinct shift during the second period of child development when—like the milestone of early childhood at three—the child experiences both the pain of separation and the enthusiasm for a newly-found independence.

The Higher Bodies as Teachers

Waldorf teachers are familiar with the advice given by Steiner that is often called “The Pedagogical Law.”⁷ Schoorel indicates that the sequential births of the four bodies are the physiological basis for this principle.⁸ In the process of development from birth to 21, the unborn members of the human constitution influence the development of the lower members, the next higher member having the strongest influence. The higher body, as yet unborn, works on the lower body that has been born already. Specifically, the unborn ether body, with the help of the environment, educates the physical body; the unborn astral body educates the ether body, and the unborn “I” educates the astral body. In each case, this occurs with the help of the environment, which includes parents and teachers.

This education is not, however, a one-way process. Schoorel speaks about the relation between the etheric and physical bodies during the period between birth and age 7 in this way:

The stronger the imprint that the ether body makes on the physical body, the more the ether body itself will change and the more easily it will liberate itself from the physical body.⁹

It makes sense that this principle would also hold true for the relation between the astral and the ether during the second seven-year cycle and the astral and the “I” during the third period.

For me, the recognition of the origin of “The Pedagogical Law” and its physiological basis is tremendously helpful in understanding more deeply the process of development during the first 21 years and the distinct characteristics of the three seven-year cycles. It also gives me a new picture of my role as a helper of the child’s own unborn members. Lastly, it underscores for me that the goal of our work is to support young human beings in their process of achieving self-determining independence.

Endnotes

- 1 Rudolf Steiner, *The Education of the Child in the Light of Spiritual Science* (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1965), pp.9–16. Steiner uses the German word *Leib* rather than *Körper*, both of which mean “body” in English. *Körper* is a cognate of a more physical organization (akin to the English “corpus” or even “corpse”), whereas *Leib*, as its sound suggests, is more akin to a living body.
- 2 *Ibid.*, pp.21–22.
- 3 Edmond Schoorel, *The First Seven Years* (Fair Oaks, CA: Rudolf Steiner College Press), p.25.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p.26.
- 5 *Op. cit.*, Steiner, p.26.
- 6 *Op. cit.*, Schoorel, *The First Seven Years* (Fair Oaks, CA: Rudolf Steiner College Press), p.27.
- 7 Rudolf Steiner, *Curative Education, lecture 2* (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1972).
- 8 *Ibid.*, p.24.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p.22.