

Children Are Not Little Adults

~ Jane Swain

In our serving young children, what is needed is an understanding of their basic nature. The young child is not a little adult! One of the most defining features of young children is their manner of sensing. In a lecture called “Walking, Speaking, Thinking,” Rudolf Steiner explains: “The first three years, and from then onwards to the seventh year, are much the most important in the whole development of a [human being,] for the child is not at all the same being as in later life. In their earliest years the child is one great sense-organ. The scope of this idea that the child in their first years is wholly sense-organ is not generally brought to mind with anything like sufficient intensity; indeed, it is a question of using very emphatic words if the whole truth is to be expressed.”

Steiner is using clear, strong language in this quote. He regards it as crucial for anyone who is caring for infants and young children to understand

that the young child is a total sense organ. In order to more fully understand this statement, it is helpful to contrast the spatial relationships of the sense organs with the actual sensations they are registering. These spatial relationships are different in the young child as opposed to in the adult.

The sense organs as places of imitation

In the lecture “The Human Heart,” Rudolf Steiner describes that sense organs create inner reproductions of the outer world. “In our eyes, for example, we have a process imitating in a certain sense what is going on in the outer world—reproducing it, just as the camera reproduces whatever is there in front of the lens. The human being becomes aware of what is thus imitatively reproduced in his eyes, and thus he gains information about the external world. It is the same with the other senses. But this restriction of the imitative principle

to the periphery of the human organism occurs only at a later stage in life.”

Steiner states in “Body Viewed from the Spirit,” “... in an adult light comes to a standstill in the eye, and only sends the idea of itself, the concept of light, into the organism. In a child it is as if every little blood corpuscle were inwardly illumined, were transfused with light—to express it in a somewhat exaggerated and pictorial way. The child is as yet entirely exposed to those etheric essences, (effluvia), which in later life we arrest at the surface of our bodies, in the sense organs... Thus, a child is exposed to sense impressions in a far greater degree than is the adult.”

Sense organs employ an imitative process when they are registering stimuli, and this process occurs in the interior of the sense organ. In the mature adult, the sense organs are located on the surface of the body, hence the imitative principle is confined to the peripheral area of the body. However, this is not the case in the child under seven, as their whole body functions as a sense organ. Sense impressions pass into the interior of the body, where they are reproduced—where they are imitated. This is a deeper reason for the young child’s acting out of imitation.

It follows then, that because the young child’s whole body serves as a sense organ, the young child is a permeable being. The outer world impinges upon their interior spaces. They are unable to filter sensations from the environment.

We can use the eye as an example. An impression enters the eye and impinges on the blood at the back of the retina. In subtle ways, the blood carries this impression to be absorbed in the interior of the body. In the same way, in the young child, what is in front of the body enters into the interior of the body as a whole, and acts upon the circulation, digestion, breathing, etc., thus working to form the entire body. All of the child’s physiology is affected and mirrors the sense impressions from the child’s environment, which then directly affects the forming of the organs. In “Walking, Speaking, Thinking,” Steiner explains, “The child imitates in every gesture, in every attitude, nay, even in the pulsations of the blood and in the rhythms of the breath and of the various vessels, everything that goes on around them; from birth to the age of seven, the environment is the model which the child copies.”

We may or may not see any overt imitation when a child senses something. Yet the child’s physiology is

imitating inwardly, and this is what has such an impact on the formation of the child’s organs.

The child’s sensory impressions form the child’s body

Steiner brings this line of thinking to a practical conclusion in “The Human Heart”: “Hence is it very important to let nothing happen in the young child’s environment, not even in the form of our thoughts and feelings, which the child cannot rightly absorb and make [their] own.”

In lecture two of *The Kingdom of Childhood*, Steiner gives the example of what happens to the child if they witness an outburst of anger in their environment. He says, “But the child during the first seven years is really an eye. If something takes place in the child’s environment, let us say, to take an extreme example, a fit of temper when someone becomes furiously angry, then the whole child will have a picture within [them] of this outburst of rage. The etheric body makes a picture of it. From it something passes over into the entire circulation of the blood and the metabolic system, something which related to this outburst of anger.” Waldorf kindergarten teacher Janene Ping often says, “We might as well have a blinking neon sign above our heads when we are angry or out of sorts, for the children perceive this immediately.”

As the young child is wide open to sense impressions—anger, even chronic sadness in an adult—and is unable to filter sensations, it is up to the adults in their surroundings to provide an appropriate environment, knowing that what is sensed in the environment is literally forming their bodily organs. It is all the more important to help form a protective and supportive sheathing around the entire family when a baby is born, in order to prevent or deal with the all too common condition of postpartum depression, for example.

However, there is choice in the child’s imitation

On the one hand, we have seen that very young children are innocent and completely at one with the world. They are unable to guard or protect themselves from what is in their world, and they must imitate it. On the other hand, in lecture four of *Man’s Being, His Destiny, and World Evolution*, Steiner states that there is choice involved in what the child imitates; there is a protection.

“What the child absorbs, however, is absorbed only in the waking state. Eventually the child goes to sleep. Children sleep a great deal. And during sleep the child is able to choose: What they want to absorb is sent out of their soul into their body, their physical organism; what they do not want to absorb is ejected during sleep into the etheric world. Thus, the child takes into their bodily organism only those things that have been predestined for them by their destiny, their Karma. The working of destiny is seen with especial vividness in the child’s very first years.”

In other words, indeed, the child must imitate during the day. However, there is a compensatory process at night by which the child may reject some of what they have taken in. They may choose between what they want to incorporate into their bodily forms and what they don’t. This understanding emphasizes the importance of sleep for the playing out of the child’s destiny.

In the lecture “Working from Spiritual Reality,” Rudolf Steiner discusses whom the child chooses to imitate. He says, “And whom do we like best to imitate? The individual who gave us our qualities in the world of the spirit, from whom we took something when we were in that world, be it in one particular field or another.” In other words, the child imitates the people with whom they had a connection in the spiritual world before they were born.

Steiner continues, “If you do not merely take what I am saying as an abstract truth but let it enter fully into your soul, you will find it has tremendous significance. Just think of the truly serious mood, the profundity of feeling which would come if, in the field of education, people lived with the idea: You are now showing the child something which [they] accepted from you in the world of the spirit before [they were] born. Just think, if this were to be the real impulse! It is much more important that such a mood, such a feeling, is brought to the task, rather than teaching people how to do this and how to do that. This will follow if the atmosphere is right between teacher and pupil, and if teachers are truly conscious of the great task life has given them. Above all there has to be this truly serious mood. It is poison to demand that children should understand everything, as it is often demanded today. I have frequently pointed out that children cannot understand everything. From their first to their seventh year they cannot understand at

all; they imitate everything. And if they do not imitate sufficiently they will not have enough in them later which they can use.”

In this passage Steiner speaks about the importance of the mood of the adult, which can be cultivated when the adult understands the pre-birth connection between the adult and the child. He goes on to say that developmentally, young children are not able to understand, and we should not expect them to. Instead of understanding, they imitate. Imitation builds a sort of framework out of which they can later extract meaning—later they make use of what they have previously imitated in order to understand. If they have not accrued enough imitative experiences, they will be lacking in what they can use.

What exactly do young children imitate?

In *The Child’s Changing Consciousness*, Steiner addresses the question of what children imitate. He says, “How are children affected by what is going on in their immediate surroundings during [their] first period of life...? They see that people are engaged in all kinds of activities. But what children take in are not the actual deeds in themselves, for they have not yet developed the faculty of consciously perceiving them. What they do perceive are meaningful gestures.” Peter Selg puts it another way—he says that the child perceives the “intentional movement of [the attachment figure’s] form.”

In other words, the young child notices process and inner intention as opposed to end product. It’s not important to them that the kitchen has been cleaned up, but rather the manner in which you clean it up. The degree to which babies and toddlers imitate the gestures of the adults in their environments can be astonishingly detailed and accurate. I once witnessed a father light the first fire of the season in the wood stove. He patiently and even reverently built the fire, lit it, and used the bellows to get the fire going. His toddler stood watching, mesmerized by the father’s actions. She swayed side to side in perfect unison and timing with the father’s in-and-out movement of the bellows.

In her book *Peaceful Babies, Contented Mothers*, Dr. Pikler gives an example of the infant’s remarkable ability to perceive our gestures when she discusses caregiving. “How different it can be, what a different picture of the world an infant receives when quiet, patient, careful yet secure and resolute hands take

care of her—and how different the world seems when these hands are impatient, rough or hasty, unquiet and nervous. In the beginning hands are everything for an infant.”

Rudolf Steiner made a similar statement in a lecture to public school teachers in 1919, lecture six in *The Spirit of the Waldorf School*, where he is speaking about the child’s early stage of life. He says, “In every tone of speech, in every gesture that we as teachers use in the presence of the child during this stage, lies something to which the child adapts itself. As human beings we are much more than we know by the external reflection of our thoughts. In life we pay little attention to how we move a hand, but the way we move a hand is the faithful reflection of the whole state of our souls, the whole reflection of our inner mood. As adults with developed soul lives we pay little attention to the connection between our outer [actions and inner soul mood.] The child, however, lives into these intangibles. We do not exaggerate when we say that those [people] in the young child’s surroundings who inwardly strive to be good, to be moral, who in their thinking and feeling consciously intend to do the child no wrong, even in what is not spoken—such people affect the child in the strongest possible manner through the intangibles of life.” The child looks behind our superficial presentation and perceives the “intangibles” of our inner being.

Herbert Hahn captures the essence of the child’s need for the adult to act out of their higher selves in his verse:

*It will indeed come to be for us a necessity
That we observe the children day by day
And also exercise in ourselves day by day
Control of our own thoughts and feelings.
Every child has a subtle perception
Of whether the person looking after them
Or teaching them is inwardly equipped in their soul.
The child’s well being depends to a great extent
On what is growing and developing in the inner soul
Of the person in charge.
Develop your keenness of observation,
Nurture the powers of your inner Being,
Develop vitality of thinking,
Depth of feeling, strength of willing. ♦*

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