

Concerning Restless Children
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To be a teacher nowadays means to be able to deal with restless children. There is often at least one child in a class taking up enormous energies from everyone by constant distraction, irritability and chaotic motion. In its cover story, a recent Newsweek issue reminds us that the attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) has become America's No. 1 childhood psychiatric disorder. (Note 1) It raises questions about the "treatment of choice" with Ritalin and asks "Are we over-medicating our kid?" 1.3 million school children in the United States take this psycho-stimulant regularly for treatment of ADHD; an increase of 250% since 1990.

Such popularity, which has brought Ritalin even into Waldorf schools, is astounding considering the list of adverse side-effects that include: growth retardation, motor tics or Tourette's syndrome, and drug dependence. The manufacturer states that "...sufficient data on safety and efficacy of long-term use of Ritalin in children are not yet available." (Note 2) The logic is that the research of a giant manufacturer has proven over 40 years that there is no long-term efficacy besides detrimental side effects. The paradox of Ritalin treatment stands as an example for the profound ills of western civilization affecting the growing child. Where should we start when trying to prevent and heal severe restlessness in children?

The understanding of a child, as it was taught by Rudolf Steiner, leads us into a different direction. The school-age child is the result of three streams:

The spiritual entelechy of the child

The bodily heritage from the parents which needs to be individualized

The influences from the growing child's environment

From birth on, the environment starts to shape the helpless, trusting baby. When Rudolf Steiner outlined as early as 1907 the anthroposophical principles of education, he left no doubt about the responsibility we carry as parents and educators in providing the child's surroundings. "Whatever happens in the physical environment (during the first seven years) the child will imitate, and by imitation its physical organs are being poured into their permanent shapes." (Note 3)

By "environment" Rudolf Steiner means all physical, esthetics and ethical impressions a child will perceive, most powerfully the impressions of joy and love. "Such love, which as it were, permeates warmly the physical environment, hatches in the true sense of the word the forms of the physical organs." (Note 4)

The first seven years are the formative period in a child's development where the lack of loving warmth will cause the most lasting damage. Unfortunately, traumas like parents' divorce and daily exposure to television have become common. They are only the beginning of a list of childhood adversities. As a consequence, children develop serious restlessness, to which boys, especially the first-born, are more prone than girls. Although this condition can be obvious already by the age of three, it is mostly diagnosed in the first years of school, at which point a comprehensive therapeutic approach becomes necessary.

By the time the child's behavior has become a concern in school, the class teacher is often desperate. Therefore, the needs of the child are best taken up by a group rather than by the class teacher alone. A care group includes the child's parents, teachers involved with the child, one or more therapeutically experienced faculty members, and, if possible, the school physician. The parents will give a thorough history and child description. The care group members then will share impressions from all angles of observation. The physician or a therapist can offer insights about constitution, development and psychological issues. To achieve a heightened image of the child's being within a group is a strength that brings already the beginning of an improvement.

If “nest warmth” was missing in the family, the parents will appreciate the guidance toward the right atmosphere of daily rhythms, appropriate literature, individual time with the child, creative ideas for play and other child activities, and the structuring or elimination of TV at home. The quality of clothing often reveals a lack of warmth in the child's life. This would lead to conversations with parents about the benefit of natural fibers and of wearing at least two layers of clothing, similar to adult practice.

In nutrition, the use of concentrated sweets and “junk food” creates problems for a restless child. Soft drinks containing phosphoric acid, artificial sweeteners and other chemicals are detrimental. There are numerous nutritional systems, such as those based on Feingold's studies, macrobiotics, vitamin and other supplementation, with benefits as well as dangers. It is helpful to offer parents insights about wholesome nutrition that is derived from reliable biodynamic or organic sources and prepared from 'scratch.” Meat and eggs should be kept to a minimum.

Constitutional remedial treatment for restlessness mainly aims at restoring the harmony of function between the kidneys and digestive tract. Even without symptoms of manifest illness, the soul-life of restless children is not well integrated into these functions when, for instance, emotional tension and lack of impulse control are combined with bed wetting or chaotic eating habits. These are but a few aspects to illustrate how a restless child has made an uncomfortable connection with his/her lower body. For such children I like to recommend Chamomila Cupro culta 1% dilution (Weleda) 10-15 drops two times daily in a teaspoonful of water, for three months or longer.

The above medication is supported by rubbing twice weekly Cuprum praep. 0.4% ointment (Weleda) in a circle (5-10 times) over each kidney; the downward motion always close to the spine. The rubbing is done with a pea-sized amount of ointment, slowly, and using the palm rather than the fingers. Instead of two circles, the rubbing can be given in a lemniscate. On days in between, a parent (often the mother) can do a whole back rub with Blackthorn body oil. (Wala) Besides its remedial effects, the prescribed back rubs allow parent and child to restore physical closeness and warmth in their relationship. Unless experienced, the parent should be instructed by a therapist as to how to perform the rubs. This is one possibility of a constitutional therapy that could be individually expanded. As the organic causes for restlessness can be quite different, the therapies would have to vary as well.

In school it is up to the care group to work out assistance in the main lesson, or temporarily arrange for an extra lesson with a remedial teacher. Therapy for the restless child can come from the realms of color, form drawing, music, speech, eurythmy, drama, and other artistic expression.

Remediation begins where the child is, with movement, excitement, and activity, and it will lead toward the contemplative side.

It is important to capture the child's imagination in joyful ways and bring content to the empty movement energy. Eurythmy is excellent because it works directly on breathing and blood circulation. Even without the remedial eurythmy training, a eurythmist can help with exercises like AEA, IAO, hexameter with vowels, and verses and rhythms at the level of the child's age and fantasy.

Rudolf Steiner gives unique insights into color therapy. (Note 5) He describes how the perception of red color has a calming effect by bringing forth the complementary green as a response to the child's organization. Based on Steiner's suggestions, extensive groundwork has been laid in this field and also in the other realms of anthroposophically-oriented art therapy. (Note 6)

As in teaching, we pursue long-range goals in remedial work. The question is, what kind of person will we have by the age of twenty? The priority is to help the child rebuild a shattered constitution, to balance the inner rhythm, and to restore a sense of heartfelt warmth and trust. In order to make such progress, we will have to listen intuitively to the child's body. language that talks about the torment of being driven through life by haste. There are children who have a poor tolerance for the restlessness of our civilization. They become our teachers when they demand us to change ourselves and to accomplish them on every step along the road to inner peace.

Notes:

1. Newsweek, March 18, 1996
2. Physician's Desk Reference, 1996. (Medical Economics}
3. R. Steiner, Education of the Child, Anthroposophic Press
4. Ibid
5. Ibid
6. See Association for a Healing Education Newsletter, December 1995.