

The Young Child in the World of Today
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The following considerations result from three lectures given to early childhood and kindergarten teachers in Adelaide in April 1997 on the occasion of the Vital Years Conference.

The theme will be unfolded in three steps:

1. The Universal Aspect of Childhood
2. Challenges and Dangers for Children in the World of Today
3. Educating Modern Children

1. The Universal Aspect of Childhood

Much praise has been given to modern civilization and its high technological standards by contemporaries, and much concern has been raised by educators about its dangers for children. There is an increasing awareness that childhood as a unique and fundamental life experience has to be protected. But what is childhood?

To understand it one has to go into the past, one has to understand the repetition of collective experiences within the individual development of consciousness. Within Steiner Education much consideration has been given to the problem of matching the content derived from cultural history to the appropriate stage of the child's evolving consciousness. However, not much consideration about this has then been made public. After all, kindergartens do not "teach". Yet beside the question of selection of content there is a need for identifying the features of a child's consciousness between the ages of 3 and 7 and of relating it back to the evolution of humanity. Does the child in her early years relive ancient Lemuria, Atlantis or the Old Indian cultural epoch? There is no easy answer to this.

Two streams unite in the child: the spiritual one coming from the life before birth and the earthly one containing the hereditary aspect and the acquisition of earth-consciousness.

Karl König, the founder of Camphill, researched the child's path down to earth and described in beautiful images the process of incarnation. At one stage he compares the initial stages of gestation with the creation story of the bible and with the expulsion from paradise. He compares the breaking of the water at birth with the Atlantean flood and sees the child born into the post-Atlantean world. Then follow these very special first three years under the protection of the hierarchies and the Christ Being: a time of unity in consciousness with the spiritual world in which the fundamental human qualities of walking, talking, and thinking are acquired. Up to this point it is nearly impossible to mark any sequence of evolutionary stages in the development of the individual human being. It seems to be more appropriate to think of elements of early evolutionary times reappearing and coloring the time before birth and during the first three years. This changes around the third year. With the appearance of a rudimentary consciousness of I on the one side and the start of a gradual freeing of the etheric forces for memory and fantasy on the other, an inner soul space is established, a stage on which the child's will, his feeling and thinking will gradually unfold. This happens in a consciousness comparable to dreaming-feeling and in constant will activity which is accompanied by the still subterranean stream of thinking. This process goes beyond the seventh year and embraces childhood from year three to year nine. It is the time which can be called participatory or sentient soul consciousness.

In his lectures on the evolution of consciousness, Steiner has pointed repeatedly to the importance of the third post-Atlantean epoch for our time and encourages teachers to study this time especially carefully. Much of what was pre-formed in the Egypto-Chaldean epoch is of significance for our time, the age of the consciousness soul.

Much of what Steiner has to say about this time seems to have a connection with the way the child experiences the world between the ages of three and nine:

1. The close connection between the human being and nature, the living in natural rhythms and the immersion into sense perception.
2. The seemingly materialistic way of relating to the spiritual world (as can be seen in Egyptian death rites).
3. The importance of images and mythology.
4. An objectivity in feeling which is still void of personal emotion (as can be seen in the Isis/Osiris myth).

Whereas there are big differences between the child of three years and, let's say, a seven or eight year old regarding the degree of their thinking ability, there are many similarities. For example, their outer expression of feeling, their way of dealing with human relationships, the consciousness of belonging, of oneness with the world.

“Only between the ninth and tenth year does the child begin to feel himself separate from the world. Therefore, when the child starts school (first grade), things in the environment have to be transformed into living beings. One does not speak about plants, but plants speak themselves and to each other as living beings. All contemplation of nature has to be transformed into imagination - plants speak, trees speak, clouds speak. The child at this age should not feel the difference between himself and the world.” (R. Steiner: *Education and Modern Spiritual Life*. Ilkley, Aug. 1923)

This consciousness is universal in children. They all start life relating to the past, to the dreaming of images, to participation and imitation. Yet, whereas children in some parts of the world remain in this consciousness undisturbed, sometimes even with little possibility of evolving further, children of awakened western-oriented societies aren't allowed much of this necessary reliving of the past. They are awakened from their dreaming and affirmed in their consciousness of **I** before the consciousness of **We** can consolidate. In many cases, these are the children we mostly deal with in Waldorf kindergartens and schools today.

2. Challenges and Dangers for Children in the World of Today

Jorgen Smit (*The Child, The Teachers, The Community*, Lecture 2) speaks about Lucifer and Ahriman making their appearance in childhood.

Lucifer stands at the entrance of the period of participatory consciousness as the bearer of consciousness and memory, casting his shadow over the years to come, and Ahriman stands at the 9 year threshold of the child, foreshadowing what is to come after age 9. This situation has existed for quite some time: Lucifer calling prematurely on the child's feeling, Ahriman trying to gain access to the child's thinking prematurely and thus weakening her life forces. What is new is the fertile soil in the souls of those who educate and bring up children today. In his lecture series *The Fall of the Spirits of Darkness*, Steiner has pointed to the attempts of Ahriman to gain access to the children of today, and he states that of all areas of life, education has succumbed most deeply to materialistic thought. He emphasizes that knowing evil is the foremost task at the end of this century. Thus teachers and parents are asked to become guardians of childhood and stand up against tendencies to overstimulate the child's dreaming soul in the area of feeling as well as thinking.

One can notice the Luciferic influence in many children today. Anxiety in children and feelings of isolation which arise anyway in early childhood as consequence of necessary processes of separation, have increased through the tendency of parents and educators to make children conscious of themselves, their decisions and their ever changing wishes. It is regarded as a sign of open-mindedness and progressiveness to draw children in the emotional life of adults and to discuss feelings. Beyond the sphere of the normal, exposure to adult sexuality and emotional and sexual abuse of children have increased and become a problem in society. Whenever sexual talk appears in the kindergarten and which kindergarten teacher today has not experienced this - it is accompanied by a disturbance of feelings in the children involved. Children's drawings tell about it. Wherever astrality becomes too strong too early, the etheric forces of the children suffer. The classroom, even the kindergarten room becomes a battle field of social dispute: who is the leader, who is best friend, whom does one hate and what are the conditions of being loved? There is not participation but division, not playing or learning together, but social turmoil.

Another observation can be made regarding the tendency to address children as ego-beings at an early age. A. C. Harwood ("The Birth of the Ego" in *The Way of a Child*) points to the fact that in the age of the consciousness soul, the consciousness of ego appears first at the age of three in an immature form. It should rightly appear only at the age of 21 with the birth of the ego after the establishment of the etheric and the astral bodies. Without adult help and guidance this ego-quality could be dragged down to the level of astrality and deteriorate to egotism. (This often shows quite abruptly.) This egotism is different from egocentrism, the specific form through which children experience the world. Egotism manifests in ever increasing demands and wishes of children, in the need to be in the center of happenings, being the first and getting as much attention as possible from adults and other children. Whenever children become overly focused on their bodily cravings and emotional needs and are distracted from sensing and exploring the world in play or learning, Lucifer attempts to take hold of their souls. Adults often feel overwhelmed by the intensity of children's wishes and they may give in more than is beneficial for the child. After all, egotism is such a widespread phenomenon today that it may not even be recognized as a danger with far reaching consequences.

Regarding the Ahrimanic influence, Steiner indicates that the middle of the last century was a decisive time for the development of modern materialism in that the Ahrimanic powers gained entry into human affairs for the first time in human history. The ways of Ahriman's working are well described in anthroposophical publications. I want to relate two aspects which have special importance for young children.

At a time when Steiner predicted the appearance of the new spiritual faculty of etheric perception in an ever growing number of human beings, there appeared in the 1940's, in the then only modestly developed mass media, new images which were to become of great influence. They can be found in Disney's animated feature films with its powerful colors. Superman and Batman emerged as new heroes, both of whom celebrated come-backs only recently. Who are they? What is the power of their attraction even for young children? "Batman is good, he kills the baddies," some of my kindergarten children told me. If one looks at this modern hero with his black flowing cloak, able to fly wearing the sign of the bat on the heart and the gun in the hand of the raised right arm, one is reminded of an angel in a perverted form, a dark force with remembrances of a Michaelic gesture, evil hidden behind the illusion of the good. Many children who are born today will have come to earth with the intention of participating in the Michaelic battle against Ahriman. How will they develop the faculty of discriminating if untruthful images are everywhere around them? How can their sense perception and their thinking learn to judge between truth and deception? There is a flood of new images pouring upon children today with every TV-success, images of the subhuman like the Ninja Turtles, ET or the dinosaurs in Jurassic Park. The deception of Virtual Reality does not start only with the invention of three dimensional viewing.

It is the intention of Ahriman to bind human beings to his realm and to tie human thinking to an autonomous subhuman realm of intelligence. Children come from the world of living thoughts, of unity with the creator spirits into a world in which human thinking has separated itself through the gift of freedom from the divine intelligence. Through the use of electromagnetism the “Web of human thought”, an expression with which Steiner describes the etheric world, is replaced by the “world wide web”, a network of thoughts which can be entered without much thinking effort. Pathways of thought can be used according to the rules of those who set up the net. If children get introduced to this, they will just follow the flow and the effort of thinking for oneself will become ever harder. Steiner predicted that thinking will be taken away from human beings and established in a subhuman realm. We can see the beginnings of it now. Children today are drawn to the realm of intelligence. The exposure to media and computers has already changed the way their minds work. Brain structures become simplified by the selective demands made by television viewing (Healy, *Endangered Minds*). On the other hand children become faster in capturing the essence of quickly changing visual stimuli and more able to follow several trains of action at once (Rushkoff, *Children of Chaos*, Harper Collins, 1997). They are lacking in concentration and the ability to go deeply into a subject matter. What are the consequences for educating them?

3. Educating Modern Children

There is no point in just looking to the past, to the wonders and beauty of the sentient soul age and its participatory consciousness. With the discovery of electromagnetism, the unleashing and the use of these powerful earth forces, we have entered the future. On the path of discovering the being of electricity one is led to the realm of the sun, of wisdom and light. Light makes its appearance on earth in powerful nature forces and also in the artificially provoked phenomena of channeled electrical charge. Sun forces hold the potential for both the highest spiritual development and destruction. It is the task of the consciousness soul age to find the balance.

“Wherever electricity is used and much else, there is far more of demonic magic, because this operates with entirely different forces having an entirely different significance for the cosmos. It will be possible to produce great outer effects in the universe. Counter forces must be created to reestablish the balance. They can be created only if humanity again comes to understand the Christ principle, if humanity finds the way to Christ. Vocational karma, into which man enters more and more, must be counteracted by an understanding of the spiritual world which can prepare man to find the way to Christ.” (Steiner: *Karma of Vocation*, Lecture 9). One needs to look at modern childhood with a double perspective.

Certainly the first seven years of life bear the sign of the moon, of Jahve, the Creator God. The qualities gained from there, the qualities of the picture consciousness are vital for a healthy human life. Children have to relive the past in order to establish on earth some of the qualities of the spiritual world to which they are still so close. Many children do this naturally, provided the environment is right. But there are also children who attend a beautifully set up kindergarten with a program to match childhood consciousness and yet they seem to look for something else. Are they just the unhappy, damaged ones? One cannot be sure, but they seem to come more often from homes with a strong presence of modern technology. Teachers have observed such children over many years. Some of them have come to earth to be servants of Michael and they prepare themselves for encountering the realm of the dragon. In their movement they show something of the quality of light, resembling though the beam of electrical light: fast, straight, piercing. Their faces are often serious, but they become radiant like the sun if they are met by understanding and love.

In their play one observes the tendency to be on the move, spreading out across the room, using sticks, rods, ropes and ties for antennas and tools, for wiring and telephone cables. Travel means going up into space.

These children show that they have partly left behind the dreaming consciousness through their critical comments on stories and songs, their reluctance to participate in circle time, their maneuvers to distract others, their sometimes abrupt and aggressive behavior. They don't touch silk veils or the puppets as they do not like to look back into the world they came from.

But they long for rhythm, for order, for somebody to hold the world together. Even though they may make fun of the story the teacher was just telling, one can perceive how lovingly they are connected with their teacher. In meeting, from being to being, they are moved in a deeply moral way.

Having experienced this, the question arose as to how it was possible to balance what comes from the moon and the past with what is represented in the sun as the forces of the future?

Personally this question led me to reassess the range of play materials one might offer to meet the need for “technical inventions” of the modern, young child. The age of the child and the suitability of the “invention” would, of course, have to be kept in mind. One could also think of colors, room arrangements and use of the fabrics for decoration purposes with the aim of providing an “etheric mood” that would prevent the astral element from working on children too strongly.

One might also consider paying close attention to the choosing of stories. I remember having told the Grimm's tale “Old Rinkrank” and saw all these awake and precociously intellectual children sitting still, totally immersed in this story.

Yet, it is important that the Sun quality should be living in human relationships, in the social interaction between children, teacher and parents. Planning and implementing a curriculum then develops a new dimension. It not only opens the gate to the world but also bears witness to the love and earnestness in the striving of a teacher. To this human quality the child of the future will respond.