

Purposeful Movement for the Young Child

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Author's Note: The following article was inspired by the recent offerings of Susan Weber and Helle Heckman at the 2003 East Coast Waldorf Early Childhood Conference. I am grateful for their wisdom and understanding of the young child, and for their courage to develop unique programs that meet many of the fundamental needs of today's young children and their families.

Over the last two years I have had the opportunity to closely observe children at both ends of the first seven years of life. Two realizations have become profoundly clear for me. First of all, we need to find our way to supporting the family in the child's first two years of life. Secondly, in order to continue the health that is fostered throughout those first early years, we need to earnestly strive to provide a simplified early childhood experience, based on the intention to support the development of the lower senses.

Education of the lower senses is an enormous topic that many of us who care for the young child are exploring in a variety of ways. For now, I will address the sense of movement, as it is through movement that we feel ourselves and find our way in life. In supporting the child's healthy movement we are also supporting their cognitive and social development. When we engage the children in movement we are helping them to find their way to a healthy expression of their will. In movement we are working with the highest intention of the individuality.

In my work with parents and infants I have observed that already in the first months of life the cultural attack on the very young child is immense. This is first expressed through the anxiety of many mothers towards the infants. I myself experienced this; as a conscious and modern mother of an infant (and a student of anthroposophy), I felt parenting to be a weighty deed, yet I had few tools to address the needs of my wide awake, arrhythmic baby. Any signs of distress from my newborn infant

only increased my feelings of anxiety and inadequacy. I have observed that rather than feeling comfortable with allowing babies the opportunity for free, self-initiated learning through movement and life experience, mothers are anxiously protecting, distracting and stimulating their babies. The infants are thereby free from any experience of struggle. As well, in this age of convenience and materialism, most babies have been inundated by baby swings, baby saucers and walkers, vibrating bassinets, noise making toys, baby gyms that fit over them when they are lying in their crib, and various other movement-invasive and inhibiting equipment. The parents are often unable to find a way to help the infants to sleep without using the vibrating bassinets, car rides, vacuum cleaner noise or various other overwhelming sense experiences. Over-stimulation, sleep deprivation, and inhibited movement is the norm for most of our infants.

In my current young infant group that has been meeting together for five months, I have offered continuous support for the parents in an environment devoted to the gentle and deep care of infants and families. This consistent care and attention towards the families has been tremendously helpful to them. The same mothers who were bringing their one-month-old infants to the movies, and helping them to sleep by turning on the vacuum cleaner, are finding new ways to care for their children. The parents are now seeking to better protect their babies from too many sense impressions; they are creating more rhythmic lives for their infants; and they are discovering the importance of warmth and good nutrition. Perhaps most importantly they are learning to respect and find joy in their infants own, self-paced movement development, and to say "yes" to all of the challenges (opportunities) that these mighty individualities face each day in their journey to their self. In holding back from constantly intervening and assisting, but instead observing and creating a

nurturing soul and physical environment, the parents are supporting the work of the "I" of the incarnating child.

In our early childhood classes there is much that we can do for the children who have not had adequate opportunity for full expression in movement. In the first seven years we support the child's development through engaging the will. We accomplish this through creating a healing environment in which the child experiences joy, competency and purpose in his activity, his movement.

In the last school year I had the opportunity to teach an older kindergarten class, in which a number of the children had significant challenges. I also had many more boys than girls, and felt that extended time outside would more fully engage the class. I made a number of surprising discoveries.

Children who enter into destructive play with repetitive, limited movement in an antisocial mood while inside the classroom, would play very differently while we were on our walk and in our little grove of trees by the river. In the classroom the "blood" might pour out of the top of the monster's head day in and day out, but outdoors the children were able to engage in free, creative play. These children would help the other groups of children create mailboxes, and then would play as squirrels, frisking about and delivering mail to all of their friends. Sometimes the children would start a wind ensemble with last season's dry reeds. On most days the children with extensive movement challenges would join their classmates in climbing up the steep bank, climbing the trees, and lying comfortably on large, holding branches. There they could look out at the water where each season would bring a new awe-inspiring picture for them—a lone swan, an ice covered swampy area, animal tracks in the mud or snow. The children are surrounded and enveloped by the grounding and healing forces of the earth when they play in nature. And while outside the children find it much easier to breathe socially amongst one another. Classrooms, especially some of the small classrooms many of our children are in, are too constricting for the children to easily find their way into full and healthy movement, both socially and physically.

Another important discovery I made was that when we were engaged in purposeful activity, the children tended to be more able to focus. They were

at peace and more harmonious in their social interactions, appearing quite comfortable in their bodies. Recently, at the early childhood conference in Spring Valley, Helle Heckmann reminded us that the children must experience being *needed* in order to feel themselves an important and integral part of a group. This is not something many of our children experience any longer. Early childhood programs do not serve the higher intention of the children when we provide programs that emphasize enrichment experiences for the children that are extracted out of real life. We need to offer a life-centered curriculum in which the young child can experience our full engagement in the etheric life rhythms of the cycle of the year. This penetrates them so that the healthy will forces can then develop. As they imitate and engage more and more in the substance of life around them the lower senses develop, enabling the children to find access to the higher senses. The strong immersion in the practical work around them creates the possibility for the children to pour themselves into their deeds through movement. Caring for the animals, the buildings, and the gardens, the children feel themselves an essential and needed part of the whole.

The experience of the earth's rhythms in our practical and artistic life is profoundly healing to our children. The connection with real life and nature, combined with our attention to bodily care and extensive opportunities for movement, create an early childhood curriculum that fully meets the children who are coming to us in these times. The children come to their family first (biological or otherwise). We can offer the necessary support so parents have the opportunity, out of their own observations, to recognize the needs of their children. And then they come into the community of our classrooms! Here we strive to create a warm, joyful, real-life experience where the children are able to creatively find their way on their journey to becoming fully human.

Mary Triulzi lives in Hadley, MA with her 15-year-old daughter, Ananda, who attends high school at The Hartsbrook School. Mary facilitates Parent-Infant classes at Sophia's Hearth Family Center and teaches Parent-Toddler classes at the Hartsbrook School.