

Learning Difficulties in the Early Years

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The magical process of child development takes a long time. This is rightly so because, as human beings, we need a solid foundation to prepare and develop the faculties that will make each one of us unique and able to play a constructive role in society. Unfortunately, in contrast, the gestation period is too short and we are born as delicate and helpless little beings.

On a physical level, we have to be born almost nine months premature as our brains and heads are so large that it would be impossible to leave the bun in the oven until it was fully baked. So babies are delicate creatures that are really not ready to face life. This is why parenting is the greatest task that is asked of us as human beings.

Slowly, the child incarnates and meets the world through the twelve senses. Each child is an individual and will have strengths and weaknesses that may have arisen as a result of karmic and/or hereditary laws or as a result of environmental influences during pregnancy or early childhood. In many children, these individual strengths and weaknesses and also varying speeds of incarnation and development don't seem to matter too much. With reasonably good parenting and teaching, they still pass the normal milestones at similar times to others. With some children, however, there are subtle little differences that can already be spotted in early childhood. These may grow into problems that can cause obstacles to learning and development. This in turn can cause their self-esteem to be effected and could also affect their behavior as well as the behavior of others to them.

In many of these children, these sorts of differences are almost invisible, especially at the pre-literacy and pre-numeracy stage. These problems are usually related to the senses and most frequently to the postural system. The postural system consists of the sense of self-movement and the sense of balance.

Movement

Movement is the essence of life: "From the very beginning of life there is movement. Just a few days after conception, inside a tiny ocean, an acrobat starts to perform. Beginning with gentle rocking movements in response to the ocean's tide, small primitive movements gather in strength until spontaneous movements and reflex responses gradually unfold. These early movements will eventually become part of the dance of development, the stages of which have been choreographed over the course of many millennia through the evolution of human kind. These tiny movements are the human being's first outward expression of their experience of the world. . ."1

In the first year of life, the little child will acquire thousands of new movement patterns and movement skills. Initially, babies' movements are uncontrolled, but the more they move, the better control becomes. At first, the development of coordination of eye, hand and ear takes place when the baby is lying on her back and follows the parent's movement in the room. The baby will start to turn its head in the direction of sounds. The little hand may reach out for objects such as a mobile or other toy. Sight, hand and ear are stimulated to be active by what is happening around the tiny child. Lying on the floor, the baby should have the experience of rolling over on to the tummy, exercising the sense of balance and activating the muscular system. These movements all help to establish the

“body map:” spatial orientation. This will also lead to creeping and crawling and prepare for the momentous moment when standing upright is possible and full movement exploration commences.

Balance

In a lecture entitled “Supersensible Processes in the Activities of the Human Senses,”² Rudolf Steiner explains how the senses of life, self-movement, and balance are sustained by supersensible members of the human being bestowed to us by the spiritual world. He describes how Spirit Man, the spiritual member of the human being which will develop in the far future, interpenetrates the sense of life. Life-Spirit works in the sense of self-movement. Spirit-Self, which it is the task of the human being to develop at this time, sustains the sense of balance; thus, these three senses are at the same time spiritual organs of perception.

The sense of balance, centered in our inner ear, senses the relationship between the earth’s gravity and our own body. It is directly related especially to the senses of hearing, sight, (self-) movement and touch. If it functions in a healthy way, we also feel calm and secure.

If we upset our balance, for example by walking along a tight-rope, or by drinking alcohol, having a middle ear infection, etc., we are less secure and less free. It will be harder to do anything else other than concentrate on balancing. This feeling of security and calm helps us to feel our Self as a spiritual being and experience our Self in relationship to the world.

With the attainment of balance, the child’s head lifts up into the light. The antithesis between gravity and levity is achieved and imagined in the (new) upright posture. Although this is obviously connected with the ego, an experience of balance (and movement) already exists in the womb as the embryo feels every movement the mother makes in the cushioned environment of the womb³. The newborn baby does not yet experience the senses separately as sound, movement, vision, touch, etc. All fuse together as a single experience of feeling. Physically, it takes until the age of seven to eight years for the balance mechanism, the cerebellum and the corpus callosum to be myelinated,⁴ and it is during these years, the playgroup and kindergarten years, that vestibular stimulation/ balance is the natural ingredient in every normal child’s play. Just observe a three- to six-year-old child walking down the street, constantly hopping, skipping and twirling. With great joy, they are learning to control and develop balance. The most advanced level of balance, however, is to stay still!

The little child learns to (self-)balance as the first major accomplishment only he/she can bring about for his/herself. This milestone gives the body the means by which the child can say “I.” This great achievement of free, individual balance is the foundation of the relationship with the world and with others.

So, balance is achieved as part of the incarnation process, on the one hand, but the ego needs the physical organs of balance, the vestibular system to be functioning properly, just as a person would not be able to think as a person if he did not have a brain. Nor would a brain be able to be used for thinking without an ego! Via balance, the Ego attempts to orient itself in the world harmoniously.

Balance enables us to have a relationship to the world outside and the inner world. If we stand on the edge of a precipice we feel dizzy and may even feel a strong pull over the edge. We are filling the space with our presence and temporarily creating an imbalance resulting in nausea, dizziness and disorientation. Our sense of balance is then temporarily out of synch with our other senses. Consider how a child would be if his sense of balance were always just a little bit out of synch with his other senses: he would be disoriented. Being slightly off balance may not cause too much of a problem in the earliest years. Human beings have the most marvelous faculty of compensation and often the child's own parents do not realize the amount of compensating and avoidance that is going on.

It may manifest a little later, when the child is balancing (or avoiding to!) on a log in the kindergarten garden, or when the eyes need to move across a black board or page to decipher some obscure shapes called letters in Grade 1 or 2 or the even more dramatically complex activity of the hand on a piece of paper trying to make those strange shapes. The physiological activity requires enormous balance to hold these things together and not become literally seasick or dizzy ⁵.

Imagine if this feeling were present every time you wanted to read, write or maybe even draw. This experience could even be much more subtle so that you didn't actually know what it was, or even that others didn't feel the same. Maybe you just knew that you feel awful when you're at school, maybe more so in some lessons than in others. Perhaps even break time makes you feel awful if the disruption of balance extends to the whole body and not just to fine motor skills. Your disorientation and balance problems may even cause others to laugh at you in gym lessons in the Lower School or in the playground.

Henning Kohler speaks about the connection between self-esteem and the sense of balance ⁶, he writes: "Every difficulty experienced by a child in the incarnation process has its effect on the sense of balance...Restless-nervous, anxious-timid, and depressed-moody children all share damaged self-esteem, each in his own characteristic way. The first feels unappreciated; the second, left to his own devices; the third rejected and misunderstood. All are ways expressive of a lack of inner balance. . .It must, therefore be our finest striving to help them by giving them every reason to feel that they can connect to our tolerant appreciation, our interested participation, our complete and empathetic understanding. A sense of self-esteem has a feeling of being lifted into light and shone through is identical with experiencing freedom in the use of hands and arms. Here, too, all children who suffer weak orientation in the area of bodily senses are vulnerable. . .When a lack of development of the sense of balance is the major problem..., the problem usually lies in a defect of the central nervous system. From the anthroposophical viewpoint, this would be looked upon as a partial impermeability of the bodily instrument whose function it is to serve the higher members of our makeup. The pedagogical therapy in such a case would include all four of the lower senses in therapeutic developmental exercises."⁷

The Other Senses

Of course the development of the other senses is equally important and the two other lower senses – the sense of touch and the sense of life (in addition to movement and

balance) need care and can be observed for signs that something is not quite right. In our Waldorf kindergartens, the sense of touch gets appropriate stimulation, but does it at home? Or did it when the child was at a playgroup elsewhere? Many of the objects a child gets in touch with nowadays are smooth and unpleasant (plastic) so that she cannot get differentiated touch experiences. Have the children been cuddled and stroked enough? The lower senses are the basis for development in the middle and upper senses, and if they are not stimulated enough then this can effect future development. On the other hand, the middle and upper senses are frequently over stimulated. The sense of hearing, for example, needs the opportunity to develop gently, yet we live in a world full of noise, more noise than ever before. Mothers take tiny babies shopping in the supermarket where they are bombarded with sounds from the tills, and the hustle and bustle of stressed shoppers rallying their trolleys down the aisles. The eyes are exposed to bright light and fast moving objects and lights with hardly ever the chance to gently focus on something.

How Can We Help What Can We Do?

It would certainly appear that many children manage to develop reasonably well despite their environment. Most Waldorf early childhood teachers would, I hope, advise parents to avoid supermarkets and shopping malls with tiny babies, if at all possible, in order to protect their senses. Although we have to accept that if parents have no one they can leave their children with, this may only be an ideal.

I feel strongly that it is our responsibility as educators and care givers to do all we can to

1. find out if there are any signs of a learning difficulty and

2. prevent the learning difficulty or at least help the child to develop so that the learning difficulty has the least possible affect on the child's life.

Prevention of Learning Problems and Signs of Developmental Delay

At the beginning of this article, I referred to the fact that after birth, the gestation period continues. Little babies need to be allowed to develop gently and more or less at their own pace. Dyspraxia and dyslexia frequently run in families so if we know that parents, uncles or brothers and sisters have these sorts of difficulties it is worth taking extra care of the children's senses and general development. My own children have a lot of dyslexia in their family and, partly as an experiment, my wife and I took extra care of their senses and of their "handedness." We were very careful not to expose our children to too much noise but instead only to human speech and gentle music.⁸ In her fascinating book, *Reflexes, Learning and Behavior: A Window Into the Child's Mind*,⁹ Sally Goddard says, "During the first three years of life, the child must learn to use his ears to "tune in" to the specific frequencies of his own language, in much the same way that a radio is adjusted to select specific stations. . .Lack of auditory stimulation, or even a constant cacophony of background noise in early life can discourage early "listening" and the child may learn to shut out and ignore sound from an early age. . .Hearing too much or "auditory hypersensitivity" can be just as much of a problem as hearing deficit. The inability to filter or occlude miscellaneous sound, suggests poorly developed listening skills, and can have profound effect upon later learning, language, communication and behavior. In the last twenty-five years research has turned to focus upon the problems of

“listening,” as opposed to problems of hearing. Tomatis, in France, and Christian Volf, in Denmark, quite independently of each other were pioneers of this approach.”

We also made sure that our children always had time to look at things without hurrying and with time to focus. Even as the children were carried down the stairs as babies, if we could see that their eyes tried to focus on the pictures on the wall, we would stop and let them look building up a slow, unhurried relationship to the two-dimensional.

Some years ago, I heard a lecture by Dr. Angelo Cioci at the Alliance for Childhood Conference which was held in Brussels¹⁰. Dr. Cioci specializes in pediatric medicine and psychology and lectures in pediatric neuropsychology. His research showed that if you can help a child to be totally right-handed¹¹, this could help to prevent dyslexia. He implied that the foundation for handedness should be laid by the time the child is three. Although I had not heard this before, I decided it was worth a try, and as parents, my wife and I have always been very conscious of ensuring our children use their right hands, right ears, right eyes and right feet in preference to their left. Now at ages five and seven there are certainly no signs of dyslexia (yet!). But time will tell! A lot can be done if parents can be made aware of these sorts of things. No child can be harmed by being treated as a dyslexic but many can be helped!

Following an awareness and gentle treatment of the senses, a lot can be done by observing the children’s movement development to note any developmental delays. It is widely accepted that the development of controlled movement has a part to play in the development of thinking and understanding. Children need to experience movement in order to learn about themselves, their relationship to the environment and the interaction of the two.¹²

Crawling (Creeping)

Crawling is an important part of movement development, and, if a child has missed out this developmental stage, it is well-worth observing them carefully to see whether any learning difficulties develop.

Some children move by shuffling on their bum or rolling over and over, but learning to crawl has other benefits. Crawlers use a prone kneeling position which strengthens the muscles around the shoulders and hips. They are often a bit wobbly and need to make adjustments to their position. This helps body awareness and the developing sense of balance. Then, as one arm is raised to stretch out, balance has to be held in three points, and more adjustments have to be made. The extended arm investigates direction and distanced, and these are important learning experiences for understanding positions in space.

The actual crawling action itself is a complex sequence of movements where the arms and legs move in opposition. These movements seem to help other kinds of sequential activities such as ordering which is important for counting and number work and understanding the logic of “beginning, middle and end” in story telling. A vast amount of learning has been acquired by children who have learned to crawl!

Identifying Movement Difficulties

If we think about the children in our care, as parents or teachers, we can ask ourselves, do they perhaps:

- * Move in an ungainly, uncoordinated way?

- *Appear reluctant to try new activities?
- *Crash into things?
- *Get tired and irritable easily?
- *Not hear when asked to do something?
- *Begin a job and then forget what comes next?
- *Have no sense of time and urgency (older children)
- *Find it difficult to concentrate?
- *Have difficulty speaking clearly?
- *Find it difficult to track a moving object?
- *And do they find it difficult, even impossible to:
- *Manage fiddly things like buttons?
- *Let someone near them for a hug?
- *Join in games especially if there are “rules”?
- *Make two hands work together?
- *Stand still and wait?

Some children have several of these symptoms, others just a few.

If a child is frequently tetchy and irritable, it is worth considering why this is so. Is it because they realize other people are tired of them dropping things? Or is it because they have to concentrate so hard to work out what to do next, or because no one will let them play? Asking ourselves this kind of question helps us to empathize with these kinds of children because they do not intend to cause the upsets that arise during work or play. Parents of children with a specific learning difficulty also frequently report that their child:

- *Has never crawled.
- *Reached their motor milestones late.
- *Found it difficult to interact with their peer group.
- *Does not have the same interest as the other children.

*Is often left out, never being chosen.

*Finds it difficult to use two hands together.

*Cannot cross the midline, changes hand instead.

Speech

Closely related to movement is speech. There is no space to go into speech development here, but I would refer you to the article: "Speech Development and Its Encouragement in the First Years of Life" in *The Dignity of the Young Child*¹³. This article also gives a good picture of speech development which is helpful for us as a guide. It is important to realize that a child with delayed speech development, and/or problems with speech may also have a hearing problem and is, in any case, very likely to have a specific learning difficulty.

Observing and Recording

Establishing what is wrong and why is not easy in the kindergarten setting. There are lots of children milling about and playing, and the teacher has a lot to do already. However, observations, and recording those observations are the first steps in deciding how to meet the needs of the child. The Foundation Stage Profile may already help but other, broader observations and records will be needed. It is important to note the children's coping and not-coping strategies and their avoidance and compensation techniques. It is important to observe the children in different situations and maybe even in the home. Parents can certainly contribute to the picture (can the child get dressed without too much difficulty, putting their clothes in the right order, or do they get into all sorts of tangles?). It is also important to observe a lack of consistency as children with difficulties can have very clear good days and bad days.

It is also helpful to record any observations or insights that arise from the teacher's meditative work. These records will then feed into the child discussion that can take place in a staff meeting, or a meeting with the SENCO.

This is when it is helpful to draw up an I.E.P.¹⁴ The I.E.P. can then be developed with the parents to ensure that the approach to the child is consistent and that the work is not undermined at home by too much TV, too little sleep, or too many fizzy drinks, etc.

Social and Behavior Problems

The I.E.P. can also help in planning strategies not only to help overcome learning problems, as may be manifest in the child's movement, but also for social or behavior difficulties. When a child's behavior moves beyond the "naughty" into the realm of problem or aggression, it is important to try to find out what the cause may be as this can frequently also have its roots in the senses, reflex system or other movement problem. It is a fact that more boys than girls have learning difficulties. It is also a fact that boys are more aggressive in their behavior as research carried out in America on children aged four to eleven by Offord, et al (1991) shows.

With most children, this behavior is a symptom rather than a cause. It behooves us to find out the cause(s) before we can design our approach or treatment. The cause could be a learning difficulty. In fact, the victim of any aggression may also have a learning difficulty.

Behavior Boys Girls Mean to others: 21.8 % 9.6 % Physically attacks people 18.1 % 4.4 % Gets in many fights 30.9 % 9.8 % Destroys own things 10.7 % 2.1 % Destroys others' things 10.6 % 4.4 % Threatens to hurt people 13.1 % 4.0 %

Offord et al. 1991

Behaviors swing between the positive and the negative: Altruism < > Aggression
Just as with other developmental milestones it is helpful to remind ourselves of "social" milestones as this will help us to spot any child who is out of synch.

It has been found that even with every effort to remove stereotypes, early years children will still mainly play with children of their own sex. Research has also confirmed that girls' and boys' behavior is quite distinct as a rule. In a study, Maccoby¹⁵ (1990) found that in social interaction girls used an "enabling" style which was characterized by friends supporting each other and making suggestions, whereas boys generally used a "constricting" style. Boys' conversations tended to be boasting and contradicting and using other forms of "self-display." Girls would ask, "Can I have a turn? Boys would demand, "Give me that!" If this is generally true, then it could explain why boys and girls often don't play together, and why some of the less confident boys may prefer to play alone.

So to summarize:

1. An understanding of all aspects of child development is vital.
2. It is helpful to have an understanding of the kind of difficulties we may find in our early years settings. If you do not have a Special Needs Education Coordinator (SENCO) or colleague with experience in this field look up dyslexia, dyspraxia and Asperger's syndrome on the internet. You will find a great deal of information
3. Observation and recording of the children's developmental milestones and behavior is vital—this includes observing what the child avoids doing. Without proper observation, a remedial activity may be inappropriate. A good example is where a teacher deals with a restless child without realizing the child has eczema on her tummy and is itchy.
4. Draw up an I.E.P. and keep up regular reviews.
5. Ensure that the parents are informed, involved and active.
6. Ensure that you are familiar with the Special Needs Code of Practice. (a government document that schools adhere to)
7. Ensure that you have a good Special Educational Needs policy. I will be pleased to email you a copy of ours for your interest upon request (evm@michaelhall.co.uk).

8. Therapy programs with a direct connection to working with the lower senses, primitive reflexes and movement in general are the main tools for helping children with difficulties in the early years. Eurythmy therapy is probably most effective at this time.

Footnotes

1 Sally Goddard Blythe: *The Well Balanced Child*, Hawthorne Press. 2 Berlin, October 25, 1909: *Wisdom of Soul, and of the Spirit; Anthroposophy, Psychosophy, Pneumatosophy*.

3 Visit: <http://www.visembryo.com/baby/index.html> to study embryonic development.

4 Myelination: The formation of the myelin sheath around a nerve fiber. Also known as myelinization.

5 Dr. Harold Levinson, *Discovery of Cerebellar-Vestibular Syndrome and Therapies: A Solution to the Riddle—Dyslexia*.

6 *Working with Anxious, Nervous and Depressed Children*, AWSNA.

7 *Therapeutic Developmental Exercises* by Dieter Schulz. See also the work of INPP and Sally Goddard: www.inpp.co.uk

8 There is no space to go into detail about the importance of music here, please see: *The Well Balanced Child*, Hawthorne Press

9 Fern Ridge Press.

10 October 2000.

11 To be totally right-sided means that a child's preferred hand, foot, ear and eye would all be the one on the right.

12 French and Lee (1994) cited in Digue, A. and Kettles, G (1976) *Developmental Dyspraxia: An Overview*. 13 Medical Section at the Goethenum and International Waldorf Kindergarten Association 14 Individual Education Plan 15 E.E. Maccoby, *Social Development: Psychological Growth and the Parent-Child Relationship* .

Age: Social Development

6 months: Interest in other children begins: Poking, pulling hair; investigating them as objects. Toys are still more interesting, though.

14 months: Children play side by side, occasionally cooperating and inter-acting.

18 months: Playmate preference begins. Comfortable in each others company but still play mainly alone.

2–3 years: Beginning to play with each other and the beginning of altruism or pro-social play.

4 years: Group play begins.

Ewout Van-Manen received a Waldorf education in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom and attended Emerson College in Sussex to do the Waldorf Education Course, specializing in special needs. Following that, he worked in a Steiner Special School for children with behavior and learning difficulties as both a house parent and a class-teacher. Upon completion of Grade 8, he worked as a class teacher and special needs teacher at Michael Hall. His focus is now on remedial work and he founded the SWDA (Steiner Waldorf Dyslexia Association).

Age TABLE 1 Milestones of Motor Development Ages 2 - 6 Locomotor skills Non-locomotor skills Manipulative skills

18-24 mths Runs (20 mths), walks well. Pushes and pulls boxes. Shows clear hand preference; stacks (24 mths);climbs stairs with or wheeled toys; 4 to 6 blocks; turns pages one at a time, both feet on each step. Unscrews lid on a jar. Picks things up without overbalancing

2-3 years Runs easily; climbs up and Hauls and shoves big Picks up small objects; throws down furniture unaided. toys around obstacles small ball forward while standing

3-4 years Walks upstairs one foot per Pedals, steers a tricycle; Catches a large ball between step; skips on both feet; walks in any direction out-stretched arms; cuts paper with walks on tiptoe pulling a big toy scissors; holds pencil between thumb and first two fingers.

4-5 years Walks up and down stairs Strikes ball with bat; kicks, one foot per step; stands, catches ball; threads beads runs and walks well on tiptoe but not needle; grasps pencil

5-6 years Skips on alternative feet; walks Plays ball games quite well; a thin line; slides, swings threads needle and sews stitches Connolly and Dalglish (1989) Milestones of Preschool Motor Development

Table 2 Age-related Development of Movement

Age Locomoter patterns Non-locomotor patterns Manipulative skills

1 mth. Can lift head from lying on front. Can retain object placed in hand

3-4 mths. Stepping reflex pattern. Plays with hands as first toy

5 mths. Rolls over from back. Holds head, shoulders erect when sitting. Stretches out to grasp objects.

6-8 mths. Sitting unsupported, pulling up to stand. Reaches accurately, grasps, lets go

9 mths. Crawling, climbing upstairs. Supports cup/bottle. Transfers objects from one hand copes with finger food to another.

10 mths. Walks around furniture, bends to pick up object and stands Makes toys work! again with one hand support.

1 year Walks usteadily with feet Will start games such as peek-a-boo. Plays with building bricks and apart, arms outstretched other toys. Pulls off socks, shoes.

2 yrs. Walks well, learning to run. Dismantles everything. Enjoys simple Builds towers, pours water from climbs on toys, furniture. wooden lift out puzzles one jug to another.

2-3 yrs. Can ride tricycle. Climbs Enjoys jigsaws, painting, gluing. Can lift heavier objects with some up/down stairs, both feet control. Puts on and takes clothes off.

3-4 yrs. Learning to hop, balance. Can catch large ball. Can release Can draw circle. Buttons coat/sweater.

5 yrs. Can walk, run, skip and Enjoys “bunny jumps” and Can form letters and write own name, hop, even cycle and swim balancing activities hits ball with bat, can tie shoes (5+)