

Moving with Soul: Supporting Movement Development in the Early Years (Part Two)

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This article is an extended version of a lecture given at the National Early Childhood Conference at Ringwood Waldorf School in England on October 17, 2009. Part One of the article was published in the previous issue of Gateways.

One of Wilma Ellersiek's gesture games, which are mentioned in this article, is included in this issue starting on page 22.

Self-directed movement for the child under three

The development of movement, speech, and thinking in the first three years of life is guided and protected by spiritual beings. Yet there is a role for the human being as a model as well. Without experiencing upright human beings the child will not learn to be upright; without the unconscious will to be upright and walk, the model would be of no avail. Both have to come together. In the early years the child seems to be guided “from inside” and seems to intuitively “know” what he needs to do: an endless practice of the most varied movement combinations. Rudolf Steiner advises us to leave the child undisturbed and “uninstructed” at this early stage of development. The child educates himself. (See *Soul Economy and Waldorf Education*, Lecture 7, and *The Spiritual Guidance of the Individual and Humanity*, Lecture 1.) The undisturbed exploration of movement “from the inside out” is the precondition for the development of a sense of freedom in the human being.

The situation changes around the age of three. At this time in the child's development, when the foundations for thinking have been laid and I-consciousness stirs, Rudolf Steiner recommends eurythmy as being of great benefit for children. The child has reached a level of development where he not only unconsciously absorbs what lives in the environment but also is eager to follow an adult, who guides a movement sequence.

I would like to stress that in the work with children under three there is no need for a formal movement program as we practice it in the work with children

aged three to six in Steiner/Waldorf kindergartens or preschools. Whenever one experiences circles in play groups for toddlers, the circle seems to be more directed towards the mothers' experiences and learning while the child is “taken along.”

In a group situation with children under three, be it in childcare or in toddler groups, the play area is the space for free movement and the child's play time is the movement program. The space however needs to be carefully prepared with the possibilities for climbing, for exploring different heights and ways to get up and down. It is a space for practicing differentiated, child-initiated movement.

The adult accompanies the child's “movement work” with warmth, love and reverence and as much as possible, without interference. Steiner warns that adults should not impose their will on the young child under three, as this may damage the development of the child's will.

The research of Sally Goddard Blythe on the importance of vestibular stimulation in the very early years should be taken seriously in the work with young children. Mothers have always intuitively stimulated the baby's vestibular system through cradling movements. Later the child is rocked on the lap to the rhythms of nursery rhymes. Once the child has achieved the upright position, the child delights in being rocked more vigorously backward and forward, sideways or up and down in a see-saw motion. Swinging up and down or being whirled around will stimulate the organ of balance as well. As of the third year of life the child will find pleasure in rolling in the grass, in jumping and sliding, sitting on a swing, or turning and spinning in the upright position. Many of the traditional outdoor games contain vestibular stimulation. It seems that being outdoors for a certain part of the day is conducive for self-directed, explorative movement of the young child. The outdoor environment also seems very suited for an individualized rhythm of times of activity and play, balanced by times of rest. The age of up to three years is the prime time for

children to become confident in their bodies and to develop a healthy sense of self. It is of course understood that self-directed movement has a place in the child's play throughout the time of early childhood.

I would like to acknowledge at this point the work of Helle Heckmann, Denmark, who has pioneered the outdoor kindergarten in Steiner early education and has documented in publications and video presentations the importance of self-directed movement for the healthy development of children. See the reference list for some of her work.

Guided movement with children from age three to seven

As of the age of three the child displays an increased natural desire to participate in group activities. The child is filled with interest in what happens around her, enjoys experiencing social situations, and imitates out of a natural devotion and trust in the goodness of the world.

Kindergarten teachers work with this natural desire. Rudolf Steiner indicates that adults imprint their way of doing things into the still malleable physical organs of the child by way of imitation. Hence he places such importance on the quality of the gestures performed by adults in the presence of young children. These gestures enter into the physical body of the child more deeply than the spoken word or singing.

One can observe various stages in the process of imitating movements: from the purely inward moving which may show itself only in the facial expression, to the small occasional hand movement and then to movement which involves the whole body of the child.

The impulse to move lives much stronger in children than in adults. It is a natural expression of the strength of their will forces and their healthy etheric forces. Yet while the child is active in movement, the consciousness of the child is still dreamy. Healthy young children are not yet self-conscious of the quality of their own movement. The three-to-four-year-old child naturally has no desire for self-expression, but moves out of sympathy for his surroundings. Therefore his movement is not self-centered, but has a devotional quality. By participating in guided movement the element of devotion and sympathy can be strengthened in the children and can counteract the tendency towards an early awakening of self-consciousness. When the child becomes self-conscious about his movements, it often weakens the natural vitality and the will forces of the child. A self-critical element comes in: "I can't do it."

Kindergarten eurythmy, as well as the daily morning circle based on imitation, leads the child away from self-feeling towards an interest in and a feeling for what lives in the surroundings. This can be achieved by working with the feeling quality of language, of vowels and consonants, and with the rhythm and the musical quality of words and sentences.

Today there is an increased interest in research about working with children through speech, following on from the working with movement as described previously. In his article "Ringtime as Pedagogical Opportunity" Stephen Spitalny has presented some initial thoughts on this. In early childhood movement education the conscious use of the sounds and rhythms of language is still to be developed.

Wilma Ellersiek has done pioneering work in this field. Her work is a wonderful example for supporting the development of the ability to discriminate in the child, which Karl König has described in connection with the movement of the hands and the development of feeling. (See Part One of this article.) Ellersiek's hand gesture games carry the cultural impulse of refining speech and movement, of becoming sensitive for the subtle variations in rhythm and tone of speech in unity with appropriate movements of arms and hands. Thus movement and speech become helpers in developing the fine aspects of humanness, in "moving with soul," which the child may not be able to achieve otherwise. The child can develop a strong will and confidence through self-directed movement, but the thinking and feeling, which refine willed movement and bring it into relationship with archetypal forms of nature and of human action, have to be brought to the child through the example of the adult and through imitation.

In addition, the hand gesture games are a help for incarnation into the body as described in Part One as well. Many hand gesture games are based on the practice of expansion and contraction and will be a help for the incarnation of the ego into the body. Eurythmy, in its educational and curative form, has always worked with the harmonizing and balancing quality of the archetypal movements of expansion and contraction. In the educational work expansion and contraction movements can be practiced by a variety of games based on the opening and closing movement of the hand. Later on the whole body can be involved with movements such as curling up and stretching high, or with moving between the center and periphery. Wilma Ellersiek's hand games are a wonderful help for working with the young child towards a harmonious interplay between these two poles of human existence.

Archetypal movements and their relevance in movement with children

There are movement patterns which express in image form the process of incarnation. They are “archetypal” in that they evoke the experience of the essence or primal quality of an object, process or being in the human soul. All “expansion and contraction” movements are archetypal, and so is the experience of breathing in and breathing out. In spatial dimensions they appear as the polarities of above–below, front–back and right–left and evoke very different sensations within the soul. In early childhood the most important archetypal experiences are those that relate to the front space and the space of above and below.

In supporting the exploration of the front space the kindergarten teacher can work with different ways and paces of walking, running, skipping and coming to a standstill. The occasional step into the backspace may be added to encourage the child’s use of his senses of balance and hearing.

In working with the modes of in-breathing (tension) and out-breathing (releasing) and the polarity of contraction–expansion there are manifold images, which lend themselves to express this polarity, such as opening–closing (performed with hands or as a group in a circle), going out–coming in (flying birds), lifting–pressing (the different walking of fairies or giants), jumping up and down (connecting with the earth gravity), sleeping – waking, growing–withering, hiding–reappearing. These experiences must be brought to the child by the teacher in such a way that they speak to the soul.

One can discover archetypal gestures in all realms of nature, the seasons, the weather, the plant world, and the animal world. In the realm of the human being one can work with the gestures of care and love for other human beings, plants and animals.

It is one of the great benefits of guided movement that one can bring the rhythmical element back into the movement patterns of a child. Children of today do not find their way easily into rhythmical, lively movement. Modern life has lost the rhythmical quality and children are surrounded by mechanically generated movements. They are drawn into imitating mechanical movements and quite easily fall into repetitive, lifeless movement patterns themselves. Through guided movement and through images which speak to the child’s soul, it is possible to invite back natural liveliness into the movement of children.

Movement as activity of the human soul and spirit

Steiner describes movement as a will process, which involves all four members of the human being before becoming visible as action. Movement originates as intention in the I, yet often this intention is hidden to the moving human being and therefore overlooked in explanations of what causes movement. Steiner states that the I cannot convey the intention to move to the limbs directly, even though the I is to be regarded as the final “mover.” He continues that movement appears first as inner movement through the activity of the astral and etheric bodies, which are the “transmitters” of movement into the body. Through the astral body the intention of the I will take on the quality of interest, which is a quality of the soul, physically represented in the nervous system. Through the activity of the etheric body intention and interest receive the quality of life, physically represented in the watery processes of the entire body and the limbs so that life-filled movement can arise. In the act of becoming outer visible movement, the intention of the I is fulfilled and will as a process of inner and then outer movement comes to completion (Steiner, *Study of Man*, Lecture 4).

When searching for an understanding of movement in the young child one needs to take into account all these four aspects of the process of movement: the activity of the I, astral, etheric and physical bodies. In mainstream psychology this is not recognized. (Sally Goddard-Blythe describes the superior role which music can play in alleviating learning difficulties, but she does not make the link to music as a soul experience, or to the spiritual dimension of movement. See *The Well Balanced Child*, chapters 5 and 6, on music and the overcoming of learning difficulties.) The discovery of physical movement being preceded by the movement of the soul is Steiner’s contribution to a spiritual psychology of movement. “It is significant that we must work on ourselves to develop from beings that cannot walk into ones that walk upright . . . In human beings. . . it is the soul that establishes the relationship to space and shapes the organization,” he says in *The Spiritual Guidance of the Individual and Humanity* (p. 6).

However, it is possible to merely move physically without participation of the cooperation of the soul-spiritual members of the human being with the etheric body. Then movement takes on a lifeless, mechanical character. In Lecture 6 in *Curative Eurythmy*,

Rudolf Steiner indicates that the etheric body cannot participate in movement which is derived entirely out of the physical body. Then the movement of the etheric body does not occur and thus is not able to accompany physical movement. This will have serious consequences because the normal human condition of the etheric body mediating between the soul-spiritual human being and the physical organization is then disrupted.

Kindergarten teachers can strive to guard the child against this tendency towards mechanical movement by imbuing their own movements with soul and life so that the children are able to absorb these qualities through imitation into their inner experience of movement.

In Chapter 1 of *Being Human*, Karl König compares the activity of moving with performing music. He uses the image of the I being a musician who plays on the instrument of the body. Movement is the music that arises in this process. This picture of the musician describes the soul-spiritual quality of movement well and is a key to the understanding of the mystery of movement. It is the soul and spirit in the human being who moves the limbs and thus enables the individual signature of a human being to be imprinted onto the body. It is a task and a challenge at the same time to learn to recognize this individual signature in the movement of children.

In his lectures to teachers Rudolf Steiner also characterizes the soul experience of moving as musical. Here he speaks about not the preconditions of movement but of the consequences of movement for the soul. He indicates that the soul belongs to the realm of stillness and does not experience physical movement directly, but rather reflects movement as “tone” in the soul. Steiner states that it is the lawful cosmic movement that creates the most harmonious experience for the soul.

What is “cosmic movement”? The rhythms and forms of the movements of the stars and of the etheric realm of the earth, which are expressed in gestures and movements in order to let archetypal cosmic qualities be experienced by the human soul.

Our purpose is to imitate, to absorb the movement of the world into ourselves through our limbs. What do we do then? We dance. ...All true dancing has arisen from imitating in the limbs the movement carried out by the planets, by other heavenly bodies or by the earth itself. [The head rests and the soul, being related to the head, must participate in the movements while

at rest.] It begins to reflect from within the dancing movement of the limbs. When the limbs execute irregular movements, the soul begins to mumble. When the limbs perform regular movements, it begins to whisper. When the limbs carry out the harmonious cosmic movements of the universe, the soul even begins to sing. Thus the outward dancing movement is changed into song and into music within.

(*Study of Man*, p. 144).

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