

Sensory Development as the Foundation for Healthy Social-Emotional Life¹

Nancy Blanning

When casual observers look into a Waldorf early childhood classroom, they encounter an environment with beautiful aesthetics formed by soft and inviting colors and natural materials. If children are in the room, they are playing if not otherwise engaged by circle-time movement and imagination, story-telling, and different sorts of practical and artistic activities. The scene appears sweet and nurturing—which it is. These activities are not an end in themselves, however. Each is a stepping stone to support human development toward building strong, healthy social and emotional lives for each individual student and the class as a whole. This commitment is one of the profound intentions that undergirds Waldorf education throughout the entire curriculum. In subtle and obvious ways, the curriculum focuses on building relationship in multiple dimensions—relationship of oneself to the physical body, relationship to the natural world, and relationship to other human beings.

The beginning of Waldorf education was planted in a moment of strife, when so much of political, economic, moral, and social life was in shambles, in the aftermath of World War I. Emil Molt, a student of Rudolf Steiner familiar with the ideas of the Three-fold Social Order, asked the long-awaited question: Did Steiner have ideas of an education that would encourage humanity toward a healing, healthy social life with more respectful and caring, tolerant, empathetic, and justice-filled creative thinking to guide how we live with one another? Waldorf education is the answer to that question.

Educational circles are currently buzzing with conversation about social and emotional education. One sees curricula for purchase offering early childhood educators discrete lessons for teaching social-emotional growth. *Waldorf early education from its inception has intrinsically offered opportunities to develop these capacities in each day.*

Steiner perceived that children come to earthly life with anticipation of being recognized as beings of body,

soul, and spirit. Understanding this was one of the first principles that Rudolf Steiner articulated in the 1919 pedagogical lectures given to the soon-to-be teachers of the first Waldorf School (Steiner, 2019, translator M. Saar). He emphasized that the developing human being is an entity with this three-fold nature. Anatomy and physiology describe and “explain” the body. Psychology explores emotional life—a step toward acknowledgment of soul—but too often from a cold, clinical perspective. Steiner’s understanding of the human being opens a wider picture. Steiner spoke to teachers as follows:

When we perceive the children with our physical eyes once they are born, we need to remember that their earthly life, too, is a continuation [; . . .] our physical earthly existence is the continuation of a former spiritual life; and that as educators we continue the work higher beings previously did without our help. Our teaching will be imbued with the right mood if we bear this in mind: in working with [these children] I am continuing the work done by higher beings before [they were] born. (Steiner, 2019, pp. 21-22)

If . . . we realize that our tasks as teachers are connected to a human soul that steps into earthly existence and, from hour-to-hour and week-to-week, increasingly develops its inner capacities, and if we stand before a growing human being as before a sacred riddle to be solved, a being who has come to us from the endless distances of the cosmos so that we can give that being the possibility to unfold and develop, then many new tasks, outlooks, and possibilities will arise for all of human life. (Steiner, 1911, p. 12)

The individuality newly-born into physical life comes with a biography carried along from the spiritual world. There, previous experiences have been reviewed, sorted, pondered upon, digested, and then carried with insight into an incarnation with a new life plan. It is said that each human being comes into earthly life with intentions and resolves that can only be fulfilled in this time, place, physical body, culture, and *social circumstances*. There are people to meet and things to do. Individuals return in a new incarnation to fulfill a

¹ This article is adapted from a chapter included in a new collection of essays entitled *Becoming and Belonging* and written by members of the WECAN Early Childhood Research Group. The book is a resource for supporting healthy social-emotional development in young children and will be available in the spring of 2024. More information can be found on the WECAN website, waldorfearlychildhood.org.

new life plan in interactions with other human beings, to enter into human social encounter. Fostering healthy social life is one of Waldorf education's intentions. The social encounter with the teacher can be positive and encouraging when the teacher appreciates that these children come with a long story behind them. The child is, indeed, a "sacred riddle" to be accepted and respected.

The child takes on a physical body with inherited aspects and physical inclinations. With this inherited part we are all familiar. There are also aspects brought from the spiritual world, carried by the unseen spirit-soul body, that need to join harmoniously with the physical-life body we can see.

However, these two parts do not automatically or easily integrate with each other.

An unbiased observer will notice, as the children grow into the world, that their spirit-soul is not yet fully connected with the bodily organism. Spiritually speaking, it is the task of education to bring the two together into a harmonious whole, because, when the child is first born into the physical body, the two are to some extent not yet attuned to one another. As teachers we have to facilitate this process. (Steiner, 2019, p. 23)

This union has never been easy, but in our current times it is becoming harder and harder for the soul-spirit to come into harmonious, cooperative relationship with the physical-life-body. The phenomena of restless, fidgety nervousness and anxiety displayed in children by disharmonious movement and dysregulated behavior has been growing and growing. The pandemic years intensified the challenges children display in finding comfort in their bodies and peacefulness in mind and heart. More than ever, the child is a "sacred riddle" or mystery standing before us. Where do we begin to carry on the work that higher beings guided before the children were born? When do we escort them into social life?

This is where the role of the senses steps into the forefront of our attention and appreciation. It is through the senses, primarily the foundational four senses of touch, well-being, self-movement, and balance, that the soul-spirit and the life-bodily contributions are integrated.

The spiritual world has sent to us the blessing of these children. And, fortunately, it has also sent each human being with twelve senses as gifts carried by the physical body. These senses are gateways to finding one's way into earthly life. When they work together in reliable, mutually supportive ways, they tell us about our own bodies; about the external, created world; and about other people.

Understanding these twelve senses allows us as educators to better behold the child. When we learn to appreciate the importance of each sense and observe how each sense serves the child, we have twelve new windows allowing us to look into the child's personal experience of the world and sense of comfort and security in living in the physical body. It is well known that feeling secure, comfortable, competent and confident in the physical body is a prerequisite for healthy social and emotional life. The strength of the four foundational senses are the corner stones for this secure, happily inhabited physical body.

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A general description from anthroposophical perspectives of the influence and experience each sense provides is helpful here. Steiner has pondered the physical, social, and spiritual importance of each sense over decades and arrived at this listing of the twelve, starting with *touch, life or well-being, self-movement, balance, smell, taste, sight, warmth, and hearing*. These first nine are more or less familiar to us. But the sensory list goes further to include three more. There is also a sense through which we recognize and

understand language named *word or speech*. Another sense enables us to grasp the *thought* of the other person. And the crowning sense is one by which we can recognize and acknowledge *the I-being of another person*. The list below shows how Steiner presented the senses to the first teachers according to an order in which recognizing *the I-being of the other* is at the top as the highest spiritual sense, while the sense of touch, at the bottom of the list, appears as the first foundational sense.

Highest / Social / Spiritual Senses

- **I-being**—sensing the humanity and individuality of another; sensing the I-being of another person

- **Thought**—recognizing that words expressed by other people are sequenced to convey thoughts; perceiving the thoughts of other people
- **Word / Language / Speech**—sensing that sounds, hand movement, or gestures in particular sequences convey meaning. Sense of word takes sound (or hand movement) and gives it meaning
- **Hearing**—experiencing sound through the mechanism of the ear. Attentively focused hearing is listening

Middle / Feeling Senses

- **Warmth**—sensing temperature as warmer or cooler in comparison to our own body temperature
- **Sight**—taking in visual impressions through the eyes; connected to light
- **Taste**—experiencing sweet, bitter, salty, and sour by taking in substances through the mouth with help of watery element (saliva)
- **Smell**—experiencing outer world through airy element in smells, aromas

Foundational / Will Senses

- **Balance / Equilibrium**—sensing uprightness and body position in relation to the earth and gravity
- **Self-movement / Proprioception**—sensing the cooperative movement of one's limbs and coordination, learning body geography
- **Life or Well-Being**—sensing the health and balance of inner organic life
- **Touch**—experiencing boundary between self and world

Through the first *Foundational / Will senses of touch, life or well-being, self-movement, and balance*, we experience over-all well-being and stability, reliability of posture and coordination of our own physical bodies as we relate to the earth's gravity.

The *Middle / Feeling senses—smell, taste, sight, and warmth*—give us information about the nature and qualities of things external to ourselves in the world. Experiences through these senses often result in feelings of sympathy or antipathy toward what we encounter—do I like it or not?

The third section of senses, called the *Social, Highest*, and even *Spiritual* senses, stand as new identifications of subtle sensing capacities born to each human being.

Through these, we can recognize and come into relationship with other human beings. These senses are the familiar sense of *hearing* and newly described senses of recognizing meaning through *word* and *gesture*, recognizing meaning in the *thought* of another, and *sensing the I-being of other human beings*.

Young children from birth to the change-of-teeth are working to form, grow and strengthen their physical bodies. Waldorf education sees this as the fundamental task of the first seven years as children strive to claim ownership of and find comfort in their bodies through posture, movement, coordination, and speech, for example. During these years, Children also make the first steps into social life, using their senses to encounter others who are also on their own sensing journeys to find their place and purposefulness in the world.

Supporting healthy development of the Foundational Senses is a primary educational responsibility for Waldorf early childhood. These senses engage movement. Current neurological research is now confirming that physical gross and fine motor movement and building of neurological pathways are related. What is accomplished in neurological development through movement (especially well-ordered, purposeful, rhythmically repeated movement) and opportunity to explore the environment in the first seven years prepares the foundation for future cognitive, emotional, and social life.

The importance of these senses cannot be overemphasized. As we understand and appreciate how vital these are to the child's immediate and long-term development, observing each sensory domain opens up a new window through which we can behold and appreciate the child.

First of all comes *touch* or the *tactile sense*, the first to be awakened in the birth process. The strong uterine contractions massage the baby and awaken and tone up the sense of touch. When touch is understimulated, sometimes through a C-section delivery, or from lying naked in an incubator as a “premie,” the child may be touch sensitive. What is normal touch experience for most of us can feel as an assault to this child. The

child will avoid typical exploration of the world through touch. He or she is often fussy and finicky about clothes, textures, and temperature. On the other extreme, if the tactile sense is over taxed, the child's touch may shut down in a gesture of self-protection. Such a child may be unaware that he has touched another child, that his

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hands are crusted with sand and mud, or that his shoes are on the wrong feet. One often hears complaints from other children, such as, "She is holding my hand too tight," while the child who is doing this it is not aware of her friend's experience. Steiner explains that touch gives us our experience of boundary, telling us where we stop and where the rest of the world begins. A healthy sense of touch lays the foundation for a sense of social boundaries as well.

We support and educate the sense of touch in the early childhood classroom through kneading bread dough, washing dishes and cloths, digging in the sand box, touching different textures and natural materials, and so on. In circle work we also strengthen the sense of touch, encouraging more touch tolerance, for the too-sensitive extreme, and awaking at the opposite under-responsive pole. Holding hands with other children, crawling on the floor with an open palm, feeling the length of the body when rolling or tummy crawling on the floor, and walking in soft soles over uneven river stones are all strengthening and integrating the sense of touch.

Through the *sense of life* we experience our organic well-being. We become aware of this general sense when the body is disturbed by feeling unwell or out-of-sorts. Our awareness of this sense is usually asleep when all is calm and tranquil. Disturbances in the life sense demonstrate themselves in the child's rhythmic life of waking and sleeping, eating and elimination. In the classroom, we encounter difficulties here with food allergies and narrow, restricted dietary choices. Children with a diminished or disturbed life sense may lack vitality and cannot participate with true enthusiasm in many of life's activities. The strong rhythms we maintain in the kindergarten through each day and week are essential in supporting the life sense.

The life sense is supported in movement work as well. Improved sense of balance helps to heighten a sense of well-being. Some children with hyper-sensitive balance may actually feel vaguely motion-sick all the time. Since it is how they always feel, however, they do not know that this is unusual. Strengthening balance gives the child an experience of standing on the earth more securely and confidently. When balance works harmoniously with the other senses, an improved sense of well-being results. Feeling more secure in this realm, the child develops better tolerance for other things in life. This may include becoming more venturesome in

trying new foods and expanding one's diet. Supported by improved nutrition, the life sense is further fostered.

The sense of self-movement or proprioceptive sense gives us awareness of body position. It informs where the body parts are in relation to one another. It also gives us the framework for developing body geography. Information about the body's position is provided by the contracting, stretching, and compression of muscles and tendons in the joints. Without a healthy sense of proprioception, the child may truly be unaware of where the limbs are in space, sincerely incredulous that an arm has just "struck" another child or

knocked down a classmate's house. Healthy proprioception provides the ability to begin and arrest movement with control. Holding appropriate muscle tension in a task, such as lifting up a glass of water with the right force, comes from this sense. Sustaining upright posture is also a function of proprioception. With difficulty here, often a child would collapse onto the floor at circle time, as standing upright is such a chore. Children who often bump into objects and other people, or who seem a little clumsy, or who slump or collapse may have difficulty with self-movement/proprioception.

Children find support for this sense whenever they experience tension or pressure in the joints and limbs. Carrying a heavy stump, pulling a wagon loaded with classmates, hanging from a bar, swinging on a trapeze, pushing or pulling something heavy, jumping, hopping, being on the bottom of a pile of other children all stimulate and satisfy the need for proprioceptive input. The child whose sense is weak will crave these kinds of activities. In movement work, starting and stopping with control (galloping horses then whoa!), kicking up heels like a donkey, wheeling on hands as a wheelbarrow, holding up the feet and legs of another child to wheel him as a wheelbarrow, jumping, hopping, jumping off a table or tree stump, or touching and naming body parts in an imagination (to strengthen an experience of body geography) all strengthen self-movement.

Balance or the *vestibular sense* gives the experience of stability and security in relation to gravity. Working along with proprioception, the vestibular sense tells where the body is in space. The vestibular sensory organs, the semicircular canals, lie within the complex of the inner ear. Chronic ear infections have placed auditory and vestibular health under attack. This may be one reason why we see many children with vestibular insecurity in our classes. Children are also commonly

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deprived of chances to move freely to experience the body in space because of adult fearfulness about injury. Children with vestibular weakness can be of two extremes. They can be very movement sensitive, avoiding spinning, swinging, inverting the head, all of which stimulate the vestibular system. In short, such children avoid movement.

On the other extreme are children who crave movement at all times. They spin on the tire swing and never get dizzy. They fidget and rock in their chairs. They may be daredevils who lack appropriate sense of caution. The vestibular sense of these children is under-responsive, requiring a constant stream of stimulus to keep informed of where the body's center of balance lies. The importance of this sense cannot be over emphasized. A. Jean Ayres in *Sensory Integration and the Child* (Ayres, 1995, p. 37) states that the vestibular is the unifying system and provides a framework for other aspects of our experience. It seems to "prime" the entire nervous system to function effectively.

A kindergarten equipped with swings, a tire swing, landscaping timers or logs to walk along and balance on, rocks and stumps of uneven heights to climb over, trees or play structures to climb, hills for sledding or rolling, and slides to whiz down offers healthy possibilities for vestibular stimulation. In general, balance is simulated whenever anyone swings, spins, slides quickly down an incline, lowers or inverts the head, or goes round and round in a circle. Walking on a beam, whether leveled on the floor or inclined, challenges the balance, as does walking on uneven river stones. Circling in a ring, spinning by oneself or with a partner, turning and twisting also provide the right kind of stimulation. These you will all see used extensively in the movement experiences designed to emphasize strengthening of the foundational senses (Blanning and Clark, 2016, pp. 8-10).

Healthy sensory development has been increasingly challenged in recent decades, particularly by the prevalence of screens and other distractions that keep children from knowing the world through movement and free, child-directed exploration. These restrictions deprive children the opportunity to develop themselves. When we now see children's restlessness, agitation, and anxiety, a study of the senses opens our eyes to more compassionate understanding of what children are dealing with. Observing the health or distress of sensory systems gives clues to what children need in order to feel secure and confident in their bodies, a basic requirement for social-emotional health.

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Regarding social-emotional development, the anthroposophical view of the Foundational Senses reaches even deeper and more profoundly into aspects beyond physical life. In his study and spiritual research into human twelve-ness, Rudolf Steiner also recognized that there are direct connections between pairs of senses. Specifically, he noted that the four basic senses of touch, life, self-movement, and balance have individual relationship to the four highest senses of ego, thought, speech/word, and hearing (these upper four are deliberately reversed in this listing, as will be explained). The four basic senses establish the foundation for the rest of development. Through these basic four, we are able to come

to uprightness, speech, and thinking (Steiner, *Child's Changing Consciousness*, lectures 1-4). These accomplishments are essential for being able to enter into social life as well. Through movement, listening, speaking and acknowledging the being of the other person, we become social beings. *The first four senses provide the foundation upon which not only physical but social life is formed.* Each of the highest senses is a transformation and a non-physical metamorphosis of a foundational sense. The pairs are:

- **Sensing the I-being of another** is a metamorphosis of **Touch**
- **Sensing the Thought of another** is a metamorphosis of **Life/well being**
- **Sensing the Word of another** is a metamorphosis of **Self-movement**
- **Directed Hearing** expands itself to become listening as a metamorphosis of **Balance**

The important implication here is that the health and strength of each of these highest senses depends directly upon how fully and reliably its partner foundational sense has developed. (This is described in many lectures and by other authors, notably Willi Aeppli, *Care and Development of the Human Senses*.) Strongly developed foundational senses are a prerequisite for the possibility of healthy, sensitive, adept social senses. Deliberate, intentional, aware attention to the foundational sense in the child's first seven years becomes even more crucial as a pedagogical priority when we can appreciate this long-term view.

These alone are big guidelines to consider. Yet there is one more step we can suggest into this human structure of body, soul, and spirit. From time to time we experience that our response to sensory stimuli affects our

emotional and psychological state. If our body systems are working in balanced ways, we tend to feel optimistic and tolerant. If we don't feel well, we may withdraw and feel "touchy," sensitive, irritable. If we feel overwhelmed by too much noise, crowding, demands for our attention and energies, we may find ourselves feeling self-defensive, intolerant of daily ups and down, and lacking in an attitude of generosity to life and to other people. Rudolf Steiner and other researchers after him, particularly Henning Köhler, have looked deeply to the correlation between sensory health and states of soul—our feelings and states of mind.

Köhler, in his book *Working with Anxious, Nervous, and Depressed Children*, describes the virtues and positive outlook that accompany a healthy foundational sense. He also observes accompanying states of distress when the basic sense has not unfolded in a healthy, reliable way that serves the child. Köhler develops a full picture of these relationships in his study. Below is a summary of these correlations. The positive virtues of a healthily developed sense are a joy to see. And the counter-pole of emotional distress is an inclination commonly seen in our times. Köhler sees the senses of self-movement and balance so intimately connected that he treats them as an indivisible pair when considering the virtues. While noting the particular virtues of each one, he sees that the child with a "brooding" disposition will benefit from attention to both senses at the same time.

that difficult, perplexing behaviors often arise out of stalled, "stuck" or insufficient sensory development. Children are looking to their care-givers to offer a pathway toward health because their current environments are not providing what they need.

Here is Köhler in his own words:

[A] compassionate approach should be the prevailing one all through children's schooling! It too often happens that an awkward, timid, or confused child is taken to task, in a moralizing tone, for being lazy or for being deliberately obstructive or ill-behaved.

There is no such thing as a deliberately mean, lazy, or rebellious child! Every one of them longs from the bottom of his heart to do well and to be praised for it. It is we who turn them into lazy bones and rebels by reproaching them in their need. (Köhler 2000, p. 122)

If we picture that healthy foundational senses metamorphize in healthy social senses, we can picture that the positive virtues accompany the actual sensory capacities. Trust, tolerance, compassion, and a sense for justice and equanimity are available as social virtues. Working with children in these ways through movement is working foundationally and subtly to develop trust, tolerance, compassion, and a sense for justice and equanimity in social encounters.

Henning Köhler— <i>Working with Anxious, Nervous, and Depressed Children</i>		
Sensory domain	Virtue if Well-developed	Emotional Distress if Under-developed
BALANCE	EQUANIMITY JUSTICE	BROODING, DEPRESSION
SELF-MOVEMENT	COMPASSION TACTFULNESS	
LIFE/WELL-BEING	TOLERANCE PATIENCE REVERENCE	NERVOUSNESS
TOUCH	TRUST SELFLESSNESS TRUE CARING FOR OTHERS	ANXIETY

Henning Köhler was an advocate for children. He saw that there was no "bad" or difficult child. All children want to be healthy and happy. He did not see children as malicious or intending to harm. Rather, he observed

Yet Köhler also observes that, to the contrary, when the senses are insufficiently developed, negative qualities of anxiousness and timidity, nervousness, broodingness, depression, disappointment, and cynicism arise.

These anti-social expressions of suspicion, distrust, fearfulness, defensiveness, restlessness, and intolerance are a world-wide phenomenon of our time. In considering these associations, a door opens to what we can offer pedagogically to support healthy social life through work with the senses.

Waldorf education is based upon this unique picture of child development. Experience comes first through the physical body. When this is sufficiently mature, the human being ventures out into the world and begins the development of a conscious feeling life. And, finally, trust and security in the world achieved through the body senses becomes social and emotional virtues and capacities in wider human encounter. A Steiner aphorism (whose source has not been discovered to cite here) is that we cannot understand anything conceptually that we have not experienced through the bodily and feeling senses first. Children sense their way into uprightness through touch, self-movement, and balance. The life sense experiences ease and comfort in regular body rhythms and when these other three senses give the child feelings of security in the physical body.

We can also understand that the first three great accomplishments—standing, speaking, and thinking—are socially dependent. These can *only* be achieved when there is a human imitative model. These first achievements are literally the first steps toward social life. A healthy social life is the ultimate destination for humanity. We want to make each step strong. What comes first physically prepares the way for the subtle and superior goals of social life, as this unique understanding shared by Steiner reveals. Physical security, emotional stability, and social harmony begin with the young child's movement. Healthy development of the foundational senses lay the groundwork for what is possible in emotional inner stability and equanimity and social tolerance for the whole of life. We are working to support humanity's social future every time we hop, skip, dance, spin, sing, and jump for joy.

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