

## Allergic Disease and Sensitization in Waldorf/Steiner School Children

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In January 2006, the results of a European medical research project were published in the *Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology*. The research was designed to look at the rates of hay fever, asthma, and eczema in 6,630 European children aged five to thirteen from Austria, Germany, Switzerland, Holland, and Sweden. Within this large group of children, the study compared Waldorf school students with non-Waldorf school students with respect to these three increasingly common allergic conditions and also with respect to blood levels of IgE, an antibody marker for allergy.

The article, “Allergic Disease and Sensitization in Steiner School Children,” has more than sixteen authors, including fifteen European physicians and scientists and one American from the Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston. Most of the authors are members of the PARSIFAL (Prevention of Allergy Risk factors for Sensitization related to Farming and Anthroposophic Lifestyle) Study Group. The article concluded that:

... certain factors in the anthroposophic lifestyle, such as restrictive use of antibiotics and antipyretics [fever-lowering drugs like Tylenol, Ibuprofen, Aspirin] are associated with the lower risk of allergic disease in children. However, the lifestyle factors investigated in our study represent only a selection of various characteristics of the anthroposophic lifestyle. Therefore, we cannot exclude that other factors need to be considered to understand completely the background for this lower risk.

This is the second medical research article (the first was published in *Lancet* in 1999) to be published in a leading, respected English-language academic journal that has found an “anthroposophic lifestyle” to confer protection from allergic illness.

There are at least two reasons why the publication of this research can be warmly welcomed by members of Waldorf school and anthroposoph-

ic communities. First, it validates and confirms what many practicing anthroposophists have long known from experience: that anthroposophy, a path to knowledge, is also a path to health. Second, the acceptance for publication of yet another article on the “anthroposophic lifestyle” in a prominent, peer-reviewed, mainstream medical journal signals that the research was conducted according to the highest scientific and biostatistical standards and that mainstream medical science is willing to acknowledge that such a thing as an “anthroposophic lifestyle” not only exists, but may even be good for you! These are small but significant steps on the road to a wider public recognition of anthroposophy’s contribution to individual and social health.

The problem of increasing allergic disease in today’s children, which this research article gently touches on, is unfortunately merely the tip of a large and threatening iceberg. The larger, more pervasive problem today is the accelerating pace and widening scope of materializing and hardening processes in the world and in human souls and bodies. In the grand scheme of things, the perennial yin-yang polarity, which Steiner portrayed as a balance in humans and in the world between the forces of sclerosis and the forces of inflammation (in Robert Frost’s poetry, between Fire and Ice), is today tipping dangerously toward the hard and cold. A body hard and cold is closer to death; it resists penetration by the Spirit that gives life and warmth.

The Spirit’s participation in our physical world is a flame slowly extinguishing. This manifests in myriad ways, one of them the increase of allergic conditions in today’s children. Despite global warming, human bodies are becoming cooler. How can this be understood? Throughout recorded history, the leading causes of illness and death have been fiery inflammations like pneumonia, tuberculosis, malaria, and childhood inflammations such as diphtheria, measles, and scarlet fever. This began to change in the U.S. and other

developed nations around 1900. Since then, the balance has gradually shifted to the cold, sclerotic illnesses of cancer, heart disease, and stroke, which now predominate, while the formerly common inflammatory killers of children and adults mentioned above have receded.

Allergic conditions were essentially unknown until the twentieth century. Now a large portion of the U.S. population suffers from them. This tremendous shift in our collective health has a spiritual cause: Prior to 1900, spirit and soul worked more strongly in human metabolism and will, but now they work more strongly in our nervous system and thinking.

When spirit and especially soul—ego and astral—work strongly in our metabolism and will, we are inwardly warmer and more prone to inflammatory illness. When spirit and especially soul work strongly in our nervous system and thinking we are inwardly cooler and more prone to sclerotic illness.

Allergic conditions, as chronic inflammations, are certainly warmer than cancer, stroke, and heart disease; but lacking the ego-directed power of fever and pus formation, allergies are far cooler than measles, pneumonia, or roseola. Allergies are on the sclerotic side of the balance.

Researchers find evidence that antibiotics and fever-suppressing drugs seem to promote the tendency to the allergic diseases of asthma, eczema, and hay fever. From an anthroposophic understanding of inflammation and allergy, one could fully expect that antibiotics and antipyretics would increase the tendency to allergies in children. This is due to the cooling and suppressing effect of these drugs on the immune system's production of inflammation and fever in the body. These drugs can often thwart or at least modify the acute inflammatory response that is caused by the intensive penetration of ego warmth into the body's life processes, in response to a need for housecleaning and renewal in the body's household. From the anthroposophic perspective, the immune system is the body's housecleaner, and is an instrument of the ego. Repeated inappropriate, needless use of antibiotics and antipyretics (as opposed to their wise, discriminating use) seems to significantly hinder the above-mentioned players, that is, the ego, the etheric, and the immune system, from fulfilling their appointed task of cleaning house. One could imagine the effect of

these drugs to be somewhat like spreading glue on the floor when the housekeeper is trying to clean. It must be emphasized, however, that on those rare occasions when the immune system-housekeeper is wildly out of control and the excessive inflammatory response is a threat to the integrity of our human household, then we can be grateful for the life-saving, suppressive effect of antibiotics. Health is always a matter of balance.

Thus the increase in allergic conditions in many countries is a symptom that the spiritual balance in human organisms and in cultural life is shifting from the primacy of warm metabolic-will forces to the leadership of cool head-thinking forces. This shift is part of a larger overall cooling and hardening trend in the forces of nature and in the human being at the present stage of our evolution. It carries with it the danger of our becoming isolated and cut off from the spiritual world. On the other hand, this trend toward sclerosis also makes us capable of greater objectivity and individual freedom in our soul life. I believe these changes are part of our Consciousness Soul development.

Steiner indicated that although the light-filled Consciousness Soul seems cold and anti-social as it begins to unfold in us, in its deeper nature it is warm and sun-like. The Consciousness Soul reveals its radiant warmth and loving interest in others and in all creation as it matures and takes hold of the human heart, the human *Gemüt*. We're not there yet, but this is the potential future blessing of the Consciousness Soul and of the present hardening and cooling trend, if we are awake and do our part not to indulge these tendencies without balance.

On the one hand, it would seem that the increasing food and respiratory allergies in our time are a sign that our human spirit is withdrawing from our physical metabolic processes. This tendency to sclerosis is our threatening illness. On the other hand, our increasingly liberated spirit is now available to our etheric processes and to our soul forces of thinking, feeling, and willing with a freedom and a power that are new in our time. This presents us with our possibility for self-healing, which depends on our own activity. In the midst of death, there is a seed of new life. It is up to us to care for it and make it grow. May we have the discernment, the courage, and the initiative to do so.