

*“The development of the body is such that its functions are carried on as though unconsciously. It is only when faculties work unconsciously that they are right: they are reliable only when what I have to do is implanted into the dexterity of my hands and is accomplished of itself, without the need for further reflection. When practice has become habit – then I have achieved securely what I have to achieve through my body.”*

*From: The Art of Education by Rudolph Steiner*

As a young and inexperienced class teacher I struggled with understanding just what Steiner meant above and in understanding it in relation to what he meant when he said we must try to bring everything we teach into movement. That is easy enough to imagine when rhythmically stepping and clapping the multiplication or division tables or other series of number facts, but for me it was a little harder to understand how movement worked in other areas of ‘academic’ work. Fortunately I had strong mentors to help guide me.

Like many, I soon came to the realization that virtually everything we do or think is related to movement in some way and that the sense of self-movement, being closely linked either directly or indirectly to many other of the twelve senses, is in many ways central to our work with children. Consider how the the sense of self-movement depends on balance/vestibular development and on proprioception. These in turn depend on vision, hearing and the sense of touch. Remembering also that the word ‘emotion’ has its origin in the word ‘motion’ we can begin to see that when the sense of self-movement is stressed and either under- or over-active a child may react in an ‘unbalanced’ way to what is going on in her or his environment.

When considering that the soul and spirit communicate and work through the body and physical space, we realize how important it is for children to develop healthy movement so that they have the potential to grow into ‘free human beings’.

We know too that for children, developmental delays or dysregulation of any of the senses can result in academic, emotional and behavioral challenges and can cause delays or challenges in subsequent developmental stages as well. The development of the primitive and postural reflexes is an ideal example of this.

It is important then as teachers or therapists to understand movement and how to use it in our work with children (and adults too!) to encourage, support and where necessary remediate movement challenges. This can start with understanding what Steiner tells us at the end of the book, *The Foundation of Human Experience*, (formerly ‘*The Study of Man*’) that the movement of the limbs is drawn by the periphery.

What does that mean? What does that look like when it does or doesn’t happen? What does it feel like when it does or doesn’t happen? These are hard questions to answer, but the study of Spatial Dynamics®, which works deeply with the fluid relationship between human beings and the space around us can be a wonderful starting point. One key objective of Spatial Dynamics® is actually to cultivate the sense of self-movement in the individual. (see the Spatial Dynamics® website for more information)

My work in Spatial Dynamics® has had a profound effect on my professional development in many ways over the years, both as a class teacher and as an Extra Lesson teacher. It has provided me with a 'movement vocabulary' which helps me in recognizing and helping to remediate movement challenges in the children I have worked with. In addition there are activities that I came to understand in a deeper way through my work in Spatial Dynamics. Activities that I have found invaluable in encouraging the overall general development of healthy movement in all children.

I would like to offer a few of the activities that are still the most significant for me in my work as a mentor and Extra Lesson teacher.

**The Balance Beam** is the first as it became an indispensable part of my classroom from first through eighth grade. I used it regularly in a rotational sequence with other morning circle activities.

The sense of balance is one of the four lower senses that we work with closely in the lower grades in Waldorf Schools. Working with the balance beam is important for helping develop the vestibular, but also because developing the sense of balance/vestibular incorporates the development of a number of other senses as well. Obviously the sense of self-movement is needed for balance and balance beam work but so are the senses of touch and most importantly the sense of sight. "80% of the nerve endings in the muscles are connected directly, via proprioception and the vestibular system, with motor nerves to and from the eyes." (Hannaford, Smart Moves, Great Ocean Publishers, 1995, p.102)

In addition, by asking the children to develop the balance skills needed for walking on the balance beam we are asking them to bring the ego into activity in order to bring a new form into the physical.

These new forms can have a positive effect on their posture, their gate and their overall confidence. Steiner says that the ego anchors into the physical through balance. When the ego creates changes in the physical body the physical in turn results in changes in the soul. We can say that, in a way, the sense of balance brings a certain centering or 'balance' into our lives. This quality of balance can be seen as recognizing balance in all aspects of one's life as well as being able to maintain your uprightness in the world. It can be as simple as recognizing when I need a glass of water or when I have had enough running and need to sit and rest.

It is easy to see then, how balance beam work is in many ways a whole body experience and as a movement activity positively affects many parts of the human being.

**String figures/string games** have long been and still are a favorite activity of mine. In close to thirty years of teaching them to children I have yet to meet a child who was not interested and excited about learning them even when they struggled with the spatial and fine motor skills needed to do them.

String figures have been practiced for millennia by almost every indigenous culture. Their value goes far beyond their use to teach a story or song and brings new meaning to the old saying “Nimble fingers, nimble mind.”

Consider briefly some of the skills required to learn string figures:

- Fine and gross motor skills - hands often but do not always mirror each other and proper tension between the two must be maintained. Fingers must often move independently of each other.
- Proprioception - the sense of self-movement is needed to move individual fingers, hands and arms in all the different planes of space, at times simultaneously.
- Sequencing, Concentration and Perseverance - The steps in creating a figure can be many, and are not always simple and they always require the proper sequencing and sustained focus.
- Collaboration - leave a group of children alone while they are still learning a string game and see how they very naturally begin to work together.
- Other - of course touch and balance (of tension between the hands), vision, and general spatial awareness and spatial orientation are also developed.

**Hand Clap and Rhythmic Games** are yet another significant set of activities for sensory development in the child. Here we have activities that were probably ‘invented’ by children that have significant and positive effects on the development of many foundational movement skills.

Almost any poem or song can be set to a rhythmic clapping game. They can be simple or complex and can even be done at varying speeds, just for fun.

Consider some of the skills developed and needed when playing handclap games:

- Socialization - most handclap games involve a partner with whom one actually makes physical contact (sense of touch). Working with a new partner requires an awareness and appreciation of the other, even if it is as simple as adjusting to a difference in height.
- Midlines and Laterality - Though some handclap games do have homolateral moves most require crossing of the sagittal plane and sometimes even the horizontal plane. Most games require a specific hand to start, encouraging an awareness of laterality as well.
- Gross motor movement - Hands are the primary focus of handclap games but simpler ones can be done with the feet. Some games involve both hands and feet and many can be done while walking forward or backwards as well.
- Rhythm - Rhythm is movement in time and space. Whether done to a song or a poem or done in silence (this is something I often liked to do once a game was learned well) the rhythm must be maintained. Some ‘rounds’ (songs) can be easily turned into rhythmic handclap rounds.

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