

Strengthening the four lower senses

By Laurie Clark and Nancy Blanning, from the Newsletter of the Association for a Healing Education (AHE). This newsletter is an excellent resource for pedagogical insights and suggestions. To learn more, go to the AHE website.

Strengthening The Inner / Lower Senses

All who work with children today see that they are changing in ways that concern and even alarm us. In the pre-school and kindergarten classes, we often see tired children, thin and pale. Children are nervous, cannot sit still, and frequently fall out of chairs. Movement and play do not come so easily as they once did. Many children are disorganized in their movements and can appear clumsy. Some propel themselves forward with unconscious and

uncontrolled abandon, smashing and crashing into their playmates. Others find a quiet corner from which they do not move, playing timidly and avoiding movement at all cost. The trained eye also sees indications of retained immature movement patters/reflexes, which should have disappeared in the

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child's first year. Many children are "touchy", often over-acting to an innocent brush with another child, and are emotionally fragile. Dietary choices are limited as well; children often reject the healthy whole foods the kindergarten offers and insist on a narrow range of foods.

In the social realm, the healthy hum of free play, which once filled each kindergarten day, is harder to create and sustain. Children have difficulty engaging harmoniously with their classmates. The children act out the TV and movie characters they have viewed as an effort to digest this experience through play. These media images are often "indigestible," however, and cause disharmony in the play-time. Circle time, the crown of the kindergarten morning, finds children easily distracted and unable to imitate the teacher's gestures. And when story time offers its food for soul and spirit, some children cannot attend to the language nor create the mighty imaginative pictures inwardly. In simple terms, we can say that children are having difficulty finding their way into physical life in a comfortable, harmonious way, into a sense of well being.

In a study of the Twelve Senses as described by Rudolf Steiner, we see that the soul and spirit of the human being find their way into the physical / structural body through the four lower senses – the senses of touch (tactile), life, self-movement (proprioception), and balance (vestibular). Touch or the tactile sense is 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 under-stimulated, sometimes through a very short labor, C-section, or lying naked in an incubator, the child can be very touch sensitive. What is normal touch experience to most is an assault to this child. Typical exploration of the world through touch is avoided. The child is often fussy and finicky about clothes, textures, and temperature. On the other extreme, if the tactile sense is over taxed, as in a long and stressful labor, the child's touch may have shut down in a gesture of self-protection. Such a child may be unaware that he has touched another child, that his hands are crusted with sand and mud, or that his shoes are on the wrong feet. Steiner describes 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.

The life sense gives us our sense of organic well being. We are aware of it mostly when we feel unwell or out-of-sorts. Disturbances in the life sense demonstrate themselves in the child's rhythmic life, waking and sleeping, eating and elimination. In the classroom we encounter difficulties here with food allergies and narrow, restricted dietary choices. The strong rhythm we maintain in our kindergarten day helps here. We can also encourage the child to widen his diet with tiny, non-stressful encouragement to try new foods.

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 and stretching of muscles and by compression of the joints. A child with weakness here may move through the room like a tornado, bumping into people and things. This may be the child who loves to be at the bottom of a pile of other children to receive the proprioceptive pressure he craves. Without a healthy sense of proprioception, the child may

truly be unaware of where the limbs are in space, sincerely incredulous that his arm has just knocked down the house that others spent the last 20 minutes building. Healthy proprioception also provides 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 proprioception. Sustaining upright posture is also a function of proprioception. With difficulty here, often a child will collapse on to the floor at circle time, as standing upright is such a chore. Children who often bump into other objects and people, who seem a little clumsy, who slump or collapse, may have difficulty with self-movement/proprioception.

The sense of balance, known in the mainstream as the vestibular sense, gives the experience of stability and security in relation to gravity. Working 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 ear. With chronic ear infections having replaced childhood inflammatory illnesses, auditory and vestibular health are under constant attack. Vestibular health can be compromised by the infection itself. Some antibiotics used to treat the ear infections are actually damaging to the inner ear as well. Children with vestibular weakness can be of two extremes. They can be very movement sensitive, avoiding spinning, swinging, inverting the head, each of which stimulates the vestibular system. They 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, seeming to need constant motion. They may also be daredevils who lack any appropriate sense of caution. The vestibular sense of these children is under-responsive, requiring a constant stream of vestibular stimulus to keep informed of where the body's center of balance lies. The importance of sense cannot be over emphasized. A. Jean Ayres in "Sensory Integration and the Child" 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.

Movement Enrichment with Young Children

The healthy strength and integration of these senses lay the foundation for all the higher-level skills, cognitive, social, and spiritual, for the rest of earthly life. When the lower senses are healthy, the individual has pleasure and joy in being in the physical body. Movements are balanced, coordinated, and integrated. Children are eager to explore the world, welcoming new experiences in all the sensory realms, being neither reckless nor timid. The child has

good balance, both literally and metaphorically, and also understands appropriate physical and social boundaries.

Yet when we look at behaviors of the children we meet each day in our classrooms, we see that incarnation into the physical body through these four lower senses is disturbed. Many offer suggestions as to why this is so. Audrey McAllen states in "The Extra Lesson" that the stress caused by over-stimulation and over-stretching of our sensory life is the fundamental problem. Joseph Chilton Pearce elaborates on this theme in describing the "startle effect". He states that because children go essentially "catatonic" watching TV, producers found they could inject unexpected noises and sudden changes of volume and light in programming to shock the child viewer back into attention. These shocks cause the sympathetic nervous system to release, to the body and brain, cortisol, an adrenal hormone usually reserved for emergencies. The nervous system tries to readjust to this cortisol dosage, accepting the higher level as normal. Higher and higher numbers of startle effects become necessary to hold the child's interest, which media producers have done. Children who view media are thus saturated with cortisol, which Chilton Pearce connects to the increases incidence of anxiety and over-stimulation in children.

Added to the daily sensory bombardment of modern life, we also see that children's opportunity for free, playful movement is restricted. We drive more, walk less. Children spend long periods of time in car seats. Children's safety while playing in our neighborhoods is no longer guaranteed, so unrestricted play and exploration with friends is a thing of the past. We have also become a society of convenience and passive entertainment. The kinds of work and chores that once gave a natural opportunity to train and strengthen the lower senses are no longer a part of daily life.

So how do we address this situation in our kindergartens? The daily experiences in the Waldorf kindergarten remain even more critical than ever for the children's health. Yet these activities, which used to be enough to foster healthy development when coupled with a healthier family and community life, are no longer sufficient for too many of the children. The "ecological" balance of childhood has become skewed. The children need us as teachers to become "ecologists" on their behalf, gently trying to reduce stressful experiences that deplete health – which is where our strength as kindergarten teacher advocates has always been – and supplement and enrich areas where children are not getting enough of what they need.