

Creating Healing Movement Activities  
Through Observing and Understanding Children's Movement

by Robyn Brown

Takesome time to go out on the playground and observe. Pay particular attention to how the children move, and within that observation look extra closely as to how they walk and how they run. What are their arms and legs doing? How many can you see that can truly move in cross lateral movement; the right/left, forwards/backwards and above/below planes all in sync. Twenty years ago it would have been the vast majority and only in the rare exception would you see something out of sync. Now it is rare to see a child who truly can move in sync in the context of the three planes, and the rarer it's become the more we have accustomed ourselves to seeing movement that should be telling us something and passing it by. Now it is only the extremes that get our attention, but almost all of the children are trying to tell us something and we have lost the ability to listen.

Rudolf Steiner says that when we observe a child walking or running we are really observing the condition of the three soul forces; thinking, feeling and willing. That means that when we learn to read the language of the child's movement we can fluidly understand the condition of the child; not in a superficial way, but in a deep, instinctual, unspoken way that really calls on us to think with our hearts, not our heads. So, first step, go watch some children. Ask yourself if you notice anything in the three planes. Do they lean too far forwards, or do they seem to be tilted backwards. (Or is some parts of them more forwards and other parts more backwards.). Watch the arms. Do they swing freely in cross lateral juxtaposition to the legs? Or do you notice that the right or left arm moves out of sync? Either crossing in front of the body, or behind, or hanging at the side. This can be subtle. It can also be glaringly apparent to the point of looking like flaying. Subtle or not it can mean something. Perhaps both arms are swinging in front of the body, moving in a separate plane from the legs. Here again, there is a message. Steiner tells us that the right/left plane is connected to thinking. The above/below is connected to feeling and the forwards/ backwards plane connects to the will. This can be dangerous information if we don't know how to use it. If we use it to form a quick conclusion we will miss the real point. If we can learn to observe it, notice it, and then let it go, let it sink into our much wiser unconscious the meaning will come to us in the right way when we really need it.

Rudolf Steiner says, "The anthroposophical approach begins by looking at the human being as an entity, an organization of body, soul and spirit. It attempts to comprehend the human being, not in an abstract and dead way, but through a living mode of observation that can recognize and comprehend with living concepts the human totality of body, soul and spirit.

It would surely not be proper for teachers to first acquire theoretical knowledge and then to think 'what I have learned in theory I will now apply in my teaching, one way or another.' With this attitude they would only distance themselves from the child's true being. Teachers need to transform their knowledge of the human being into a kind of higher

instinct whereby they can respond properly to whatever comes from each individual child. To achieve this, one's knowledge of human nature must be capable of becoming pedagogical instinct the moment one has to deal with a child, so that in response to all that comes from the child one knows instantly and exactly what must be done in every case."

Observing the planes is the first level of learning to read the walks and runs. The next level is even more intuitive. As you are observing pick a child who you feel particularly curious about. Watch them move very closely, and memorize their movement. Later on, when you are on your own, move as the child does. Feel in your body what the child must be feeling. Where do you notice contraction? Where do you notice expansion? What is the child telling you about their relationship to the earth by how their feet touch the ground? Where is their attention? Are they living way out around and above their body in their attention or are they focused so internally that they are not really aware of what is around them. Move like the child and ask yourself how you feel? How would it be if this was your daily experience? Can you imagine this having an effect on their ability to succeed academically, socially or emotionally? If you moved like this how would it effect your balance? Again, just notice. Live with it. Bring a picture of the movement into your meditation on the child, but without a judgement and without forming a conclusion. This will become a way to acquire a deep understanding, that will lead you to where the child is asking for help and help you to understand what to do about it. This can become the instinct Steiner speaks of.

So, step one is just observing the movement. Step two is to place this observation in some sort of context. What are we really seeing? If you reread what I wrote above you might notice that I mention certain things, that are not arbitrary. I talk about the ability to walk, to move with ease within the three planes of space, and also I began to point to the importance of the right relationship to gravity and levity, expansion and contraction, and balance. Where should the genesis of all of these things ripen? In what year of life? Think of an infant. The infant is a gravity bound being. They are a horizontal being. Gradually they begin to develop the ability to overcome that gravity and form the right relationship to levity. This means they can stand upright. It begins with the lifting of the head, and then the trunk. The baby can roll over, they can sit, they can crawl and then they learn to stand. When they can stand they are at the cusp of walking. In order to walk the child has to have found an unconscious, inarticulate, but deep and real relationship to the planes of space. Of course the child cannot and should not verbalize it, but it is there. It is this achievement that allows for imitation. They also have come to a real relationship to balance and they are ready to move in space.

Also within the framework of the first year the child learns that they can be in charge of their limbs. They can consciously expand or contract an arm so that a toy, a cookie or anything else that looks interesting can be brought in closer. When the child can expand and contract with consciousness the reflexive movements of the infant have been overcome and the child is able to move freely and with awareness. This is the foundation for a healthy sense of their own movement, and all of these most important components are developed (hopefully) by the end of year one.

The reality of what we observe in almost all of the children's movement today is that year one has not yet successfully been completed. You can see it with your eyes, you can feel it with your body. As you learn to do this you are learning the "letters" you will need in order to begin to read the child, and just as in any learning to read, the "letters" have to become an unconscious experience. If we only looked at a page and merrily pointed out the letters we know we would not be reading. This is part of why it's so important to learn to stop ourselves in our observations before we jump to conclusions, in general, those conclusions are just the pointing out of letters, they are not reading the whole picture.

When we look at that first year of life, and see what has or has not been achieved we see where most of the child's blockages could have occurred. Steiner gives us a big clue about this. The first one is when he talks in Curative Education about gymnastics. If you look closely at what he is saying in chapter three of Curative Education you will notice he mentions working with balance, and working with the conscious movement of the limbs. He gives us a second clue when he brings in the biographies of the children and makes a point to say in several of those biographies that although everyone assumed that all was well in the first year of the child's life it couldn't have been because by years, three, four and beyond things were not in order. He tells us that something must have been awry in the first year to have caused this. If you need a personal confirmation, think back to your experience when you moved like the child and I asked you to feel in yourself where there was too much gravity or levity, too much expansion or contraction and to notice the effect on the balance. If you moved in this way, would your path through the world be an easy one?

If we want to bring the children movement work that will meet what they are asking for we have to look at first year of life activities, gravity/levity, expansion/contraction and balance. These are the primary ingredients in our pantry.

This is the "what." But much more important than the "what" is the "how."

For many years now I have been teaching workshops on Steiner's Curative Education. I always include the movement work. I try to bring prototypes of things that people could do in their own classrooms. Often people run to their notebooks, and try to write down everything I do with an avaricious look on their face. (Finally! She's telling us what to do!). There is a problem with that. First, if people are only focused on the "what" they miss the "why" and the "how" and it is the why and the how that matter the most. If I begin with "imagine you're the trunk of a tree, or an egg," the trunk and the egg are meant only as examples. They are not meant to be new recipes. To try to mitigate the temptation for people to copy what they think I am doing I have come up with a new trick. (Pun intended.). Just like a two bit carnival magician I ask my audience to give me examples of things that expand and contract. I take the pictures they give me and, right there in the moment, abracadabra, watch me pull an exercise out of my hat! This has gone very well for the most part. It really illustrates the creativity and freshness that has to be part of the work, and frees people up to realize that any picture they start out with, pictures which contain the essential ingredients, can work. The only time it was awkward was the time someone suggested child birth. Well, yes technically....

What do I see if someone takes only the "what" home with them? If I were to visit a

classroom and someone had just taken the image they saw me do, let's say rolling like a log, if the teacher only brings the "what" you will see a large group of children rolling 90 miles an hour down a mat, totally out of control. Logjam! A whole class of wiggling and giggling logs, crashing together at the end of the mat, arms and legs flailing and pretty much out of control. The teacher might try this once or twice and then decide it doesn't work. Nope. It doesn't. Not that way. Without the holding them to form through consciousness of what it is their arms and legs are doing there won't be anything therapeutic happening. It might be fun! I can even imagine letting them do it from time to time just to blow off steam, but it will not be the exercise that we intended.

I see similar things on the balance beam. In order for the balance beam to serve the child the work must be very, very, very slowly done. The arms must be at a 90 degree angle from the trunk and the eyes must be looking straight ahead. This is the picture of physical, emotional and spiritual balance we are trying to foster. (Again, through an image, not directions.) Often I will see teachers bring in a balance beam, and allow the children to move over it rapidly and with no thought to the arms and head. When the children do this they are practicing what for the most part they already have; poor balance. They don't need more practice in this. Only when the balance is slow and accomplished with awareness are we building up the vestibular balance.

What is the most important thing we need to bring to any exercise? Over and over again, Rudolf Steiner gives us the answer. In his work with Otto Speck he brings the seeds of probably all of his pedagogical and curative work. In his description of how he worked with Otto, Rudolf Steiner is adamant, "I brought attention to the movement of his limbs." He says this again in Curative Education. "Let them live into the gesture of their arms and legs." When he describes the gymnastics curriculum he reiterates this "from within to without" gesture. (One he actually repeats in his words about reading, writing, math, handwork, painting and really everything we do with the children, but that's another essay for another time.) Remember that Steiner says that anything that comes from the outside of the organism (by "organism" he means the child) is poison for the organism. In order to be healing whatever we do with the child has to come out of them.

To facilitate this we start with an image, one of our own creation, but one that contains those elements from the first year; expansion/contraction, gravity/levity or balance. We create an image and then comes the important work; the "how." The images can fit very beautifully into the child's development. In early childhood, several images can be combined to create a narrative. In addition to the narrative you can even add in a pentatonic tune or song if you would like. The most important thing is that you bring the image in such a way that the child has to form their own inner picture and move out of that. This can be hard for early childhood teachers because so much of the early childhood work is based on the foundation of imitation. Steiner gives us a key to understanding why sometimes we have to start on a different path to get us where we want to go when he tells us that when the child has not yet completed the first year of life they can't truly imitate. We have to go through those steps to bring the child to where they will be able to imitate.

What I see over and over again in Kindergarten circle times confirms this. There are three things I see. First, the children who are doing nothing. People may say, "It's OK,

they're doing it inwardly." No, they are not. They are not doing it because they can't do it yet, and because they are not doing it quietly we are often alright with overlooking what we are really seeing. They are not disturbing us, so they are not a problem for us. Then there are the children who are actively not participating and instead are "clowning." We sometimes are tempted to assume they are clowning on purpose, but again that's not it. They have just chosen to clown so that no one will know they can't do what we are asking. Better to look comical than incapable. These are the ones most likely to be asked to leave the school or sent for a diagnosis. The last group is more or less doing it, and we assume all is well, but again all is not well. Steiner mentions in one of his pedagogical lectures the importance of beautifully formed gestures in the early years. He tells us that the child who can't form the gesture beautifully, fully and correctly will struggle later in the grades to learn to read and write and later on will be challenged with higher math and sciences. What we see everyday in the grades classrooms, the number of children who are struggling, could be changed and supported by a new look in the early years to the importance of gesture.

With the older children I will again work with image, but without the narrative. By third, fourth or fifth grade they are very engaged if there is a challenge and by middle school mixing in an appropriate amount of healthy competition along with the challenge is a good idea. Again, think of the curriculum. What are you doing in Main Lesson that contains images that expand and contract? (Farming, animals, botany, chemistry?).

Back to that image. I don't bring it by demonstrating, I bring it through a picture I ask the child to live into. I might say "show me a star." I say it, and then I wait. I look. I make sure I have a whole room full of beautiful stars before I continue. I do not do it with them or for them. Whatever the image is I build into my movement work with the children must come from the inside out, so I don't demonstrate, I also don't correct when they are doing it. I let them finish and then I might say, "Which part of your work on the mat was the most beautiful?" Or, "Tell me why I'm asking you to try that again?" I let them tell me, and then I give them an opportunity to do it again and fix it. I also, never ever physically manipulate their arms or legs nor do I tell them how to fix it. I might say, "What should your arms have been doing?" But again, they tell me. This is bringing awareness to their movement and it's the awareness that creates the healing. In this way I am building up the will, which then supports the individuality body to overcome the heredity body. I am giving them what they need to build up their sense of their own movement and their sense of balance, and everything they need to succeed in the classroom and on the playground are rooted in these two things.

In the Sense of Our Own Movement, it is the awareness of the movement that brings sense to the movement. It is not the movement in and of itself. When the child can begin to follow the movements they are making outwardly and replicate them inwardly they will have built up the capacities they need for everything we do in academics. Following the shape of a letter requires an understanding of up and down, right and left, a sentence, paragraph and essay all have a beginning, middle and end; they move. All math is movement. Understanding movement is also the foundation for healthy social interactions; reading the

room, understanding social cues and understanding the structure of play. In order to follow directions we have to understand inwardly the movement of the tasks we are given. We have to be able to make an inner map.

When we create what is needed in the vestibular system through the right kind of balance exercises we are creating the ability to form correct speech, and also to listen. Listening is the ability to hear while in balance. Sometimes we call this “auditory processing.” Through building up physical balance we build up emotional and spiritual balance, and because an element of our Sense of Balance has to do with the feeling for self continuity it is also an important part of the ability to go through transitions without melt downs.

One other thing to consider; some of you might think, OK, I observe this child has too much contraction, so I will bring expansion exercises. Or too much gravity, or, or, or. Actually this is not how it works. (Another reason not to jump to conclusions). Imagine an exercise involving a trampoline. You might think this is good for a child with too much gravity. It is, but it’s also good for the child with too much levity. In order for the child with too much levity to do beautiful work on the trampoline they have to temper their levity with the right amount of gravity, just as the child with too much gravity has to find their way to enough levity. For every child we are striving to help them find their own middle ground, to help them bring themselves back to their own center. This is how you can create a movement program that meets every child in the whole class and calls on them to create their own healing.

When Rudolf Steiner speaks about the gymnastics curriculum that he intended to be included in every Waldorf School he said, “Space is something concrete and something physically felt by a human being, the human being feels themselves within space and feels the necessity to place themselves in space rightly. When they can place themselves within the space through balance, then they are experiencing gymnastics. This is how the child can orient themselves in space. If they do a gymnastics exercise where their arms are stretched out horizontally, then they experience the horizontal. If they jump they get an experience of upwards. That is gymnastics.

The child experiences inner space in Eurythmy. Eurythmy is the revelation of inner space. Here the child experiences what they can through breathing, and the circulation of the blood, as far as these things can be experienced through the soul. Through gymnastics the child experiences the possibilities of the space around them, the directions of space and their placement within it. As the child jumps into space they can position themselves so that everything else falls into place.”

As part of the curriculum Rudolf Steiner recommended working with running, jumping, bouncing, climbing and hanging. He talks of using parallel bars, uneven bars, climbing apparatus and rings. He also recommends swimming, both in the Curative Course and in his remarks about the pedagogical curriculum. He mentions all of these things, and then leaves it to us to develop our work with the children,

through understanding founded on observation that can evolve to true instincts. Waldorf Education was meant to be healing education. Within every realm, including the healing realms, of Waldorf Education we need to become artists; people who work out of a deep understanding of the child and of Anthroposophy to create something that resonates with our own joy, our creativity and our own vision.