

Strengthening Our Senses to Soothe and Reassure Our Pandemic-Tattered Souls

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The pandemic is an unexpected guest to all our lives. We hoped it would go away, disappear, and let us get “back to normal.” We have grieved of times and opportunities lost, felt disappointed, dejected, angry, and depressed. Yet COVID-19 is still with us. We are wise to anticipate that more surprises and challenges lie ahead.

People commonly report that they feel “touchy,” “disoriented,” “imbalanced,” “unsure of one’s place,” “out-of-sync” with time, “isolated,” “spacy,” or “weighted to the earth,” to name a few. Additional descriptors referring to our emotional life are “anxious,” “nervous,” and “depressed or brooding” (which will sound familiar to those who have worked with Henning Köhler’s work and his book in English titled *Working with Anxious, Nervous, and Depressed Children*.) Köhler’s work describes that when the foundational senses of touch, life, and self-movement/balance are disordered, we enter into these troubled soul-states. In one way or another, each of these descriptors refers to the four foundational senses as characterized by Rudolf Steiner. The pandemic has impacted our sensory health and confidence as well.

As Steiner/Waldorf educators, we are lucky to have knowledge of the senses. We not only know about them but have insight into what helps to soothe, strengthen, and nurture each sensory realm. It is through these senses that we find our experience of security, confidence, reliability, and resilience while being in a physical body on earth. Offering to our students experiences of healthy sensing is a path of support and healing to body and soul in these disrupted times.

Of the twelve senses,¹ the first four foundational senses most important to early childhood are **touch**, followed by the **life-sense**, **self-movement**, and then **balance or equilibrium**. What follows here are some summaries of what each sense provides to us to feel contained and sheltered as well as safe, secure, and confident in the physical body. Suggestions for supporting sensory health are also given. Many of these suggestions will be familiar. Yet in times of stress and being ourselves disoriented, we can easily forget the wisdom of what we already know. Reminders reassure us that we do have a beginning repertoire of healthy movement activities that support sensory development which can also be healing to the children at this time.



¹ Rudolf Steiner listed the 12 senses as consisting of: touch, life-sense or sense of well-being, self-movement, balance, smell, taste, sight, warmth, word or speech, thought, and I-being of the other.
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During the birth experience, **touch** is strongly stimulated. The baby has a first physical experience of the wholeness of the body through touch. Everything is squeezed and compressed in a reassuring way, confirming that the body is one, whole entity. Babies like to be wrapped, embraced with their limbs tucked in, and held in secure arms to be calmed and reassured.

COVID fears have deprived children of the reassurance supplied by touch. Even though extreme caution is lessening, we have been traumatized by the warnings about touch, feeling cautious to touch another and to be touched. One important thing that teachers can do is to emphasize to parents how important it is to give their children lots and lots of touch at home. Cuddling, hugging, squeezing, wrestling—not too rough but firm—are all reassuring and calming touch experiences. Wrapping up tightly in blankets as a cocoon can make a child feel safe, as can having a cushion or a large inflatable ball firmly rolled down the length of the body. Vigorous rubbing with a towel after a bath can be a fun game that stimulates the skin and calms the nerves. All of these can be “home therapy.” Massage at bedtime is also a potent helper at any time but especially now. Families can give each other massages. Parents need loving and reassuring touch, too.

At school, we need to become more inventive. If our cultural and school guidelines allow touch, squeezing the limbs—arms from shoulders down to the individual fingertips and legs from thigh (appropriate for parents) or knees down (for teachers) to foot and toes can be soothing and reassuring. This kind of firm touch affects not only the skin but reaches down into the fluid domain of blood, muscle, and soft tissue, the etheric realm. As guidelines allow, holding hands or linking elbows are familiar forms of touch. Draping arms over each other’s shoulders while sitting on the floor in a circle to become a swaying, rocking boat is a fun and imaginative game to stimulate touch.

Thinking of imaginations for touching oneself is another avenue. Clapping hands together, slapping on thighs, rubbing arms and legs, squeezing and hugging oneself all have restorative value. A particular advantage here is that children can touch, squeeze, and pat themselves with just the right amount of pressure and energy. The children have a natural self-regulation to give themselves just the right amount of satisfying stimulation.



Clothing and how it fits is another source of touch reassurance. It is now especially important for us all to feel adequately layered and sheathed by clothing that warms and embraces our skin. We all know that sufficient layers and natural fibers always soothe, comfort, and reassure.

Now let us move on to **self-movement** and **balance**².

When we look at the developmental sequence of movement acquisition and body control of the first years of childhood, we see the child's goal is to come into uprightness to stand firmly on the earth. The baby goes through all kinds of reflex movements to explore these different directions inscribed in the balance organ in the inner ear. The baby instinctively explores right and left, above and below, and front and back. These directional polarities are physically inscribed into the petrous bone of our skull. A divine wisdom created the inner ear's semicircular canals to be the organ for uprightness. To get on one's feet to stand and find balance security, the child has to move and practice balance stimulating movements over and over. Regular repetition and practice of these movements strengthens and tones what has been accomplished.

In these COVID times, the opportunity for movement has been stifled in many ways. Quarantining and sheltering in place have kept everyone inside. Thus, there is limited chance for the kinds of movement that reassure and confirm balance security within the earth's gravitational field. Any and all activities that stimulate the balance organs in the inner ear and move the body through the three planes of space are supportive. In offering the children movement circles and games that imaginatively guide them through space, balance security and orientation in space are being supported. These simple-seeming games subtly step the children back to an earlier developmental stage and recapitulate the sequence that matured the strength of this neglected system in the first place.

A few examples are:

- Expansion and contraction—guided by holding hands in a ring and moving out and in together (forward space/backspace)
- Stretching high and crouching down low (above and below)
- Jumping and squatting (above and below)
- Rocking forward-and-back and from side-to-side (front and back; right and left)
- Creeping on hands and knees (coordinating above and below, alternatively engaging right and left)

The following is an imagination that includes the three spatial planes. It is a simple but potent sequence for finding and holding equilibrium in space. This can begin sitting or standing.

The sun is rising in the sky,

Hands and forearms at chest, in a small arc, then slowly raise arms into full sun gesture.

And with him we rise high, high, high.

If sitting, rise up to standing. Lift arms up to gesture the rising sun.

The moon is cradling down low

Arms held low in cradling gesture, left elbow rounded to suggest crescent moon.

And down, down, down we also go.

Sink lower by bending knees down into a crouch if you can manage it. Then slowly rise to standing again, moving slowly.

Behind us the stars,

*Raise arms, extending/leaning into the back space
Fingers "twinkle" like stars.*

Before us the dawn.

Slowly bring arms/hands forward into the front

² Self-movement is commonly known as proprioception in mainstream terminology. Balance is also known as the vestibular sense.

And we, like the sun, moon and stars
circle on.

*space to greet the dawn.
Quietly and gently take hands and begin to circle
in the ring.*

In summary, the **development of balance** is stimulated by **circling, spinning, swinging or rocking movements**. Movement of the head in any and all directions stimulates movement of fluid in the chambers of the semicircular canals in the inner ear. It is through this sense that the human being can know where one is in the **three dimensions of space**.

A secure and efficient sense of balance gives the human being security and confidence in orientation in space and provides a secure sense of “center” out of which the human being can act out into the world. These pandemic times have denied children the opportunity to keep this secure sense of center strong. All these vestibular stimulating games will help to fill the deficit.

Self-movement is defined as our ability to know that we have moved and to know where each part of the body is in relation to the rest. Through educating self-movement, the child learns body geography and sequence of limbs movements to accomplish a certain task. It is pressure experienced by receptors in the joints that give the experience of the limb itself, how it is moving, and limb position. Sometimes we have a foot or leg “fall asleep” and feel numb and “prickled by pins.” This is a strange and disconcerting feeling, as though we have lost a part of ourselves. Commonly we stamp the foot hard on the ground to restore the feeling. That is an example of a need for extreme pressure, but we all require the sense of pressure into the joints to feel where all of our body parts are.

The opportunity to stimulate self-movement has been stifled similarly to balance. Children need all kinds of chances to jump, stamp, carry heavy loads, wrestle, collide with things and with one another, to feel the reality of the body. Some children need much more pressure than others to have a satisfying and confirming body experience. They will seek out heavy pressure wherever they can—and do, often not in socially accepted ways! Both the legs/feet and shoulder/arms/hands and fingers seek this pressure input. Boisterous moments in ring time with jumping, stomping, clapping, pounding hands and fists on the floor in a lovely rainstorm, and so on, followed by a quieter lull, will be nourishment for this under-served sensory system. Hanging from a bar or trapeze will do the same for the upper body. Best of all is practical work that requires effort and limb involvement—hammering, sawing, drilling, scrubbing, wringing water out of wet towels, etc.



Both balance and self-movement give capacity for experiencing oneself within the body and for spatial orientation in our environment. Pandemic restrictions have compromised their usual healthy activity, resulting in disorientation, insecurity, and anxiousness. All of these classroom activities can truly help restore equilibrium for body and soul.

Balance and self-movement are intimate partners. The spinning/circling/rocking that balance craves put us into movement; self-movement brings motion to a stop. Traditional ring games generally alternate between these two. It is amazing how satisfied little children can be with playing “Ring Around the Rosie” again and again without tiring of it. An intuitive wisdom embedded in the game alternates these two to give a satisfying experience of “Here I am!”

Adults are also experiencing disorientation, fuzzy thinking, feeling lost in space and time. These same principles can be applied to our adult lives as a remedy, too. Whenever we are doing eurythmy I, A, O with their gestures, we are subtly moving through the three planes of space. This is a pathway to finding one’s way back to equilibrium. The I-A-O is always a good way to begin the day. For all of us now, it can be potent sensory and soul medicine. May all be well.

Resource sheets with suggestions for strengthening the **Balance/Vestibular Sense** and **Self-Movement/Proprioception** are included below.

ACTIVITIES TO SUPPORT HEALTHY BALANCE

BALANCE / VESTIBULAR SENSE

In general, **balance development** is stimulated by **circular, spinning, or rocking movement**. Movement of the head in any and all directions stimulates movement of fluid in the chambers of the semicircular canals in the inner ear. These canals are the sensory organs that inform human balance, i.e., the position of the body in relation to the earth and its gravity.

Through the vestibular sense, we experience the relationship between the human being’s physical body and the gravitation of the earth. It is through this sense that the human being can know where he or she is in the **three dimensions of space**. This orientation of the human being in these planes of space is already inscribed by the positioning of the semicircular canals of the inner ear. These are oriented so that each canal indicates a spatial plane—right/left, front/back, and above/below.

A secure and efficient sense of balance gives the human being security and confidence in orientation in space and provides a secure sense of “center” out of which the human being can act out into the world,

Outside, gross-motor activities:

- Climbing on a jungle gym, trees, rope or chain ladder
- Swinging—in a seated swing or swinging by one’s arms from a bar
- Swinging in circles, such as on a tire swing
- Hammock swinging
- Riding, walking, and/or balancing on a seesaw
- Spinning like a top (esp. if a child craves it and/or has a history of ear infections)
- Jump rope (also for proprioception)
- Jumping from a higher to a lower surface
- Leap from place to place
- Bouncing and catching a ball
- Skating /rollerblade skating
- Scooter riding (also proprioceptive)
- Swinging on a rope (hanging by arms—also proprioceptive)
- Sliding down a “fireman’s pole”
- Sliding down an inclined surface (playground slide), sliding down headfirst when safe

- Merry-go-rounds
- Hand-over-hand bars
- Rolling down hills
- Sledding
- Hopscotch (also for proprioception)

- **Inside or Out:**
- Climbing up and down stairs; walking up and down an elevated beam
- Traditional children's ring games
- Obstacle courses
- Walking on uneven surfaces, such as on river stones, "tippery" rocks
- Building and playing in snug "forts"
- Balancing and walking on a beam, low fence, large rocks, a log, etc.
- Trampoline jumping
- Somersaulting
- Running in circles
- Logrolling
- Rocking, such as on a rocking horse or rocking chair
- Jumping over a rod
- Walk across a rocker board
- "Sky chairs" (cloth swinging chair hung from a swivel)
- Hanging bar

Note: Many of the activities listed here also involve other sensory realms, such as proprioception/self-movement, full-body coordination and motor planning, and integrated movement of the spatial planes. Traditional ring games and practical work naturally connect many of these experiences together at one time. These are a rich source of fun and easy ways to encourage and support healthy development.

ACTIVITIES TO SUPPORT BODY AWARENESS (PROPRIOCEPTION)

SELF-MOVEMENT / PROPRIOCEPTIVE SENSE

In general, we stimulate proprioception when we **jump** [coming down the important part here], **push, pull, carry heavy objects, hang by the arms, apply pressure to joints in our limbs, etc.**

Self-movement / proprioception gives us our experience of **body geography**—this means knowing where the body parts are in relation to one another. Through body geography, we can connect the names of body parts and touch specific locations when asked to in a game. Proprioception helps us to sequence body movements and move with smooth coordination. Proprioceptive sensing helps the human being to move with efficiency and coordination. When self-movement / proprioception has developed well, the child can accomplish a sequence of movements without applying conscious thought and without having to watch the body move. An advanced example of this would be to tie apron strings in a bow behind one's back.

Outside / gross motor activities:

- Playing catch with a ball or bean bag (esp. slightly heavy) -
- both tossing and catching
- Tumbling on the ground
- Hammering nails into wood
- Sanding
- Sawing
- Hanging from monkey bars

- Pushing or pulling a wagon
- Gardening—digging, shoveling, pulling weeds
- Raking leaves
- Pushing a heavy broom
- Heavy work in general
- Pogo stick jumping
- Building snow forts
- Angels in the snow
- Playing horsey
- Handling /pedaling tricycles and bicycles
- Walking /hiking
- Block stilt walkin

Inside activities:

- Building with heavy blocks, i.e., hollow blocks
- Crawling through tunnels of boxes or other confined spaces
- Walking with a bean bag on the head or heavier ones draped on the shoulders
- Walking in an adult’s boots or walking with shoeboxes on the feet
- Making a child “sandwich” between two cushions or nap mats; apply pressure on top
- Playdough or clay modeling

Practical tasks / Domestic tasks:

- Self-care in putting on boots and heavy outerwear (also orienting body to get clothing on)
- Opening doors without help
- Carrying or moving heavy objects, such as grocery bags, pails full of water
- Laundering heavy cloths on a washboard
- Wringing water out of heavy cloth, such as a towel
- Carrying a heavy laundry basket
- Hanging wet laundry on a clothesline
- Pouring liquid or dry beans from one container to another
- Pouring water or tea from a pitcher into cups for snack time
- Grinding grain in grain mill
- Stirring a heavy dough or batter
- Kneading bread dough
- Washing and drying dishes
- Heavy work—mopping, carrying mop buckets, etc.
- Washing off the table with a sponge or cloth
- Watering garden plants with a heavy, water-filled watering can
- Scrubbing the kitchen sink or bathtub
- Scrubbing mud off boots
- Washing a floor with a large sponge
- Washing car with a heavy, sopping sponge or rag
- Wiping down the car with a towel after it is washed
- Household tasks appropriate to the age
- Carding wool

Fine motor activities:

- Tying bows, shoelaces
- String games
- Artistic activities - such as drawing, painting, modeling, cutting, gluing, etc.

- Sewing and other handcrafts, such as knitting and crochet

One-on-one or for the home:

- Rolling up in a blanket (“burrito roll”)
- Brushing a shaggy dog
- Having a pillow fight
- Hugging / gentle roughhousing

Note: Each of the activities listed above involves proprioception. Some also involve other sensory realms, such as balance, eye-hand coordination, motor planning, crossing midline, gross motor coordination, integration of body spatial planes, etc. Common playful and, especially, practical work activities naturally combine many of these aspects. The more practical life activities are available to the children’s experience, the more multiple aspects of the developmental process are supported.

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