

From Head to Toe: A Plea for the Free Development of Children through an Appropriate Environment

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‘From head to toe...’ is how Rudolf Steiner's children's prayer begins. From head to toe, you are an image of creation, you are God's image. The prayer reminds children to connect with their archetype in fulfillment of their self-chosen incarnation. This motif has an educational approach based on anthroposophy.

Such a pedagogy, as stated in ‘The Education of the Child’, must continue what nature has accomplished during pregnancy. ⁽¹⁾ The right physical environment is crucial for the organs to develop into the right forms. This is easier said than done. For the child, the inherited body is often rather unsuitable for the spiritual impulses it brings with it from the pre-earthly world. Rudolf Steiner characterises this with the image of a glove: the body the child finds itself in feels more like an ill-fitting glove. ⁽²⁾

Added to this is the modern family environment, in which more and more parents are working. Families are often characterised by excessive demands, with little time for spending time with their children. This is particularly true for single parents and families with a migrant background who are not yet well integrated into society. In addition, childhood and the dignity of children are under threat as never before, due to all forms of media and digitalisation.

How can adults, as the most important environment for children after birth, nevertheless succeed in protecting early childhood with the appropriate ‘forces and elements of the external physical world’? ⁽³⁾ Every gardener strives to create the right environmental conditions for each type of plant so that it can thrive. What happens during this time shapes a person's biography and health in later years. ‘Life is a whole, and we must not look only at the child, but at the whole life.’ ⁽⁴⁾ The organs that develop during this early period react to their environment in the same way that plants react to sunlight.

Current science and research on attachment theory refer to nothing else when they point to the 'structure of psychological security.'⁽⁵⁾ The course for this is set in early childhood.

M. Ainsworth describes the quality of approaching a child's needs as 'sensitivity'.⁽⁶⁾ If adults succeed in observing children closely enough to perceive their needs, a secure attachment can be established as a prerequisite for their later relationship with the world. Empathetic behaviour involves not only perceiving the child's signals, but also responding appropriately to them. Children are dependent on their environment, especially when they are young. Immediately after birth, children perceive adults directly and imitate them physically and mimically.⁽⁷⁾ This significant ability of children is described by the term 'intercorporeality' as an unconscious dialogue between adults and children.⁽⁸⁾ The body is designed for 'intersubjectivity,' which results in its amazing ability to imitate.⁽⁹⁾ Children are able to translate perceived facial expressions into their own bodily sensations and corresponding movements. We know this from early 'smile dialogues' (up to 30,000 smile dialogues in the first six months of life).⁽¹⁰⁾ Children are true artists. They are gifted with 'expressive resonance'.⁽¹¹⁾ Starting from the nerve centre, they gradually take hold of the body, cranio-caudally (from head to toe).

The miracle of becoming human, of incarnation, continues to pose a mystery, according to Rudolf Steiner's description in 'the Study of Man,' for example.⁽¹²⁾ As parents or educators, we must continue the work of the hierarchies prior to conception with regard to incarnation. In harmony with higher beings, the child prepares for its earthly journey in complete freedom. What does the child's environment look like after birth that preserves and promotes these forces? How do we protect the child from disturbances, stress, media and many things for which its perception is not yet sufficient? The attitude of adults, as Rudolf Steiner describes it, is like a 'consecration' with which we must fulfil our educational task.⁽¹³⁾ The child comes from 'perfection,' as Meister Eckhart puts it.⁽¹⁴⁾ It wants to develop freely towards its own self, as is characteristic of its individual earthly biography. According to Rudolf Steiner's description, the third hierarchy, the angels, are there to help it, especially at the beginning of life. With regard to the accompanying adult, Rudolf Steiner even states: 'To recognise the forces at work in human beings in childhood is to recognise Christ in human beings.'⁽¹⁵⁾

Adults have long since fallen out of this context of perfection. In their cognitive observation, they perform a gesture comparable to that of the child, because they then translate their will into actively shaped thinking. It is important to recognise and shape the current situation and to act appropriately within it. Rudolf Steiner describes this process as 'moral intuition,' and it depends on this whether the child feels secure and finds its way back to the context from which it fell at birth.⁽¹⁶⁾ Everything we do in inner presence and freedom is in turn nourishment for the angels.

A look at educational practice

Against this background, we can take a look at educational practice. For it is in the overall development of movement and play that we can see what children are already capable of when they find an environment that suits their development. However, this is only possible if adults hold back. They can and should observe what the child needs, add what is missing and share in the joy of the countless discoveries that the child makes in the world on its own. They also notice sensitively when the child wants to be alone or wants to enter into dialogue. The creativity and uniqueness with which the child, for example, independently sits up is characterised by great concentration and perseverance. Practising and trying again and again is a skill that must be protected at all costs and where premature intervention is harmful. The child follows its nature from head to toe. The process of standing up straight as the goal of creation is repeated over and over again in everything the child does on its own. 'It is the human being itself who gives itself its vertical position, its position of equilibrium in space. It places itself in relation to gravity.'⁽¹⁷⁾

If we provide children with adequate space and sufficient time, both indoors and outdoors, we give them more opportunities to discover and experience their own 'creative will' for their individual path



in life. They need this strength above all in later life to overcome crises or for times when we have to pull ourselves out of trouble by our own bootstraps. In this way, we develop the ability to determine our own destiny at an early age.

Adults are the most important and first environment for children.

What is the significance of adults as the most important and first environment for children? I must allow myself to be guided – as if by a guiding star – by the spiritual and emotional needs of children in shaping their environment. This means that I create an environment for the needs I perceive in children. It means that I learn to observe myself in such a way that I am prepared to abandon my ideas, plans or even demands for the benefit of the children.⁽¹⁸⁾

I perceive the children with complete devotion. Devotion is the key to my actions and thus to appropriate concepts that meet the needs of the children. When I follow this path, I let 'the images of things go completely'.⁽¹⁹⁾ Perhaps at first it is only a breath that moves from the heart to the hands. Do we notice it? If so, then 'I speak with my mouth and follow God's will,' as the third line of the children's prayer says. Then I simply continue what the human soul set out to do before incarnation in its cooperation with the higher beings.

What does this mean for being together with the child?

Of course, rhythm is the fundamental element in being together with children. There is a beginning and there is an end! Children need something to eat, they need care, help with getting dressed and undressed. They rest or sleep, and musical and artistic elements are naturally part of everyday group life for older children. But how can I deal with overwhelming situations, as nursery school teachers complain time and again? For example, the noise level in the room, large age differences and the resulting different needs when it comes to eating, using the bathroom and getting dressed, as well as when talking to the children, all put a strain on the daily routine.

If it is too loud in the group room, does this mean that, if I act consistently in line with a knowledge-based approach, I have to observe and think about why this is the case and then ask myself what I can change? How could I divide the groups that are too large, for example? How would I have to provide different rooms to meet the very different needs of three- to seven-year-olds? How can the outdoor area be used intensively? Some facilities, for example, have great success with letting the older children start outside while the younger ones stay together in the group room – and only joining them

later. Every professional knows that the outdoor area leads to greater calm and relaxation in play and interaction. Numerous studies now show, for example, how noise levels have a negative effect on children's nervous systems and increase their stress levels.⁽²⁰⁾ This is a serious health risk that must be avoided.

Of course, the outdoor space must be designed sensibly. Children want to physically explore all directions of the space, try things out, and this is how their lower senses develop: climbing frames, sandpits with small tables where they can work, hills and secret corners, small shelters, and if there are swings, ones that they can climb up and down on their own and push themselves off with their feet.

Let's move inside: how do the children sit? Are their feet on the floor or dangling in the air? The path of incarnation is from head to toe! We therefore need tables of different heights, no heavy chairs, no armchairs, but light, stable stools that the children can sit on and get up from by themselves. Backrests? What for? If we describe upright posture as the goal of creation, sitting on stools is a wonderful exercise. Just sitting down and standing up again engages all the senses, but especially the sense of movement and balance.

Then the next question: In what group size can children eat together so that the basic conditions for learning to eat independently are guaranteed? Smaller children may still need support, while older children are already looking for dialogue and conversation. In what group size are the professionals relieved of external tasks to such an extent that a relationship can develop between the child and the adult?

Bonding happens when we're together

Freedom, autonomy and creativity are important experiences in early childhood and are key to later self-determination. But for children to feel safe enough to take the plunge into self-discovery and exploration, there are a few things that need to happen: they need to feel secure and connected.⁽²¹⁾ In the past, this was mainly the everyday life of the family, where the child could develop its basic trust. Today, the conditions for this are no longer guaranteed. Apart from the fact that currently in Germany, one in four children has parents with mental health issues⁽²²⁾ who are not always able to offer a secure bond, the place where children grow up is increasingly being shifted to institutions.



Attachment happens where I am with children or where they feel noticed. Anyone who has raised twins knows how hard it is to bond with two kids at the same time. This makes sense for childcare centres: the younger the children are, like one- to two-year-olds in nursery, the more one-on-one situations need to be possible, at least when it comes to care. In kindergarten, we also find that three-year-olds still have a need to be noticed immediately, which is more possible in small groups of three to four children.

Based on attachment theory, many things need to be thought through. For example, the size of the groups at mealtimes. For older children, this might be six to eight children. The children could also eat in small groups one after the other. If the eating area is separate, some children play in the room while others are still eating. This is a matter of habit and has proven itself in practice.

When it comes to putting anthroposophy into practice, the benchmark is: Does the child feel seen? It is not about the adult's perception of having seen the child. Instead, we ask ourselves how the child experiences us. It is not my good intentions that matter, but the actual effect. There are moments, even in everyday life at the facility, when opportunities to bond arise, but these are often simply missed.

With the aim of orienting everyday life towards the needs of the children, one sentence must never be uttered: 'That's not possible!' Everything the child experiences during the day is too important for that. It is up to those who develop the concept to decide how flexible the processes should be. Many of the concepts for kindergartens that were developed decades ago, when they only took place in the mornings for a few hours and children did not start until the age of four at the earliest, had a completely different educational mandate at the time and need to be changed for today's all-day facilities.

Presence is the space in which bonds are formed. It is astonishing to observe that caregivers consistently regain their vitality when they are able to break free from the whirlwind of schedules and to-do lists and focus on the present moment of the encounter. Because '... the unpredictable hour is the decisive hour!' ⁽²³⁾ Many hours spent with children are challenging, but how do we manage to create 'places of belonging' in our facilities? It is not uncommon for children to attend the institution five whole days a week. It is therefore important to design these places in such a way that they become a natural part of life for everyone involved, both children and adults. 'May it be good!' That it brings joy! That I can work in a meaningful way, in line with my goals and, in our case, with knowledge of child development. Children shape their bodies from head to toe – and it is our job to accompany them on this journey through life.

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⁽¹⁾ Rudolf Steiner, The Education of the Child in the Light of Spiritual Science (1907), in: GA 34. Dornach 1987.

⁽²⁾ Rudolf Steiner, The Kingdom of Childhood (1924), GA 311, 1st lecture, 5th edition, Dornach 1989.

⁽³⁾ Rudolf Steiner, The Education of the Child, op. cit.

⁽⁴⁾ Rudolf Steiner, The Kingdom of Childhood, op. cit.

⁽⁵⁾ Karin and Klaus E. Grossmann, Bindungen – das Gefüge psychischer Sicherheit (Bonds – the structure of psychological security), Stuttgart 2023.

⁽⁶⁾ Mary Ainsworth and John Bowlby: Early Attachment and Child Development, Munich/Basel 2001.

⁽⁷⁾ Thomas Fuchs, The Brain as a Relationship Organ, Stuttgart 2007.

⁽⁸⁾ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Berlin 1976.

⁽⁹⁾ Ibid.

⁽¹⁰⁾ Eckhard Schiffer, *How Health Arises*, Weinheim 2001.

⁽¹¹⁾ Daniel Stern, *The Experience of an Infant*, Stuttgart 2003.

⁽¹²⁾ Rudolf Steiner, *The Study of Man (Foundations of Human Experience)* (1919), in: GA 293, Basel 2019. 1st lecture.

⁽¹³⁾ Ibid., 2nd lecture.

⁽¹⁴⁾ 'He created the soul according to the highest perfection ...'. Meister Eckhard, *Mystical Writings, Sermons 'On God and the World'* (translated by Gustav Landauer). Frankfurt/M. 1991.

⁽¹⁵⁾ Rudolf Steiner, *The Spiritual Guidance of the Individual and Humanity* (1911), GA 15, Basel 2023.

⁽¹⁶⁾ Rudolf Steiner, *The Philosophy of Freedom* (1894), Chapter 9, Basel 2021.

⁽¹⁷⁾ Rudolf Steiner, *Spiritual Guidance*, op. cit.

⁽¹⁸⁾ Rudolf Steiner, *Education of the Child*, op. cit.

⁽¹⁹⁾ Johannes Tauler (1300 - 1361), in: Johannes Tauler, *The Way of the Masters*, selected and newly translated by Ermin Döll, self-published, Vienna 1988.

⁽²⁰⁾ Initially, this was investigated as an occupational disease among female educators, but studies and research now point to the damage caused to much more sensitive children.

⁽²¹⁾ Mary Ainsworth and John Bowlby: *Early Attachment*, op. cit.

⁽²²⁾ See the motion submitted to the German Bundestag (Parliament) on 4 July 2024 by all parliamentary parties, 'Strengthening prevention – supporting children with mentally ill or addicted parents' (printed paper 20/12089).

⁽²³⁾ Gospel of Matthew 24:44.