

The Sensible Child?

• Kevin Avison

The following article is an excerpt from the introduction to Rudolf Steiner and the Twelve Senses, a collection of extracts from Rudolf Steiner's lectures on the subject of the senses. It was compiled for the 2008 Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship Easter Conference at Ringwood Waldorf School in England. The compilation was revised and re-edited from an original collection based on the work of Elisabeth Grunelius, Cornelia Hahn, and Helmut von Kügelgen, compiled for 1992 Kolisko Conference with introductory commentaries by Kevin Avison.

In the first epoch, before the change of teeth, we may describe the child as being wholly "sense-organ." You must take this quite literally, wholly sense-organ.

—Rudolf Steiner, *The Kingdom of Childhood*

If the very young child is "wholly a sense organ" that has enormous significance for every aspect of the way we live. Sense organs are not merely passive, but neither is their development "pre-programmed." The senses interact with the environment and are modified by that environment. In the 1990s a leading neuroscientist, Dr Alan Schore, frustrated by the well-patrolled borders of conventional scientific disciplines, set out to integrate the findings from neurology (how the brain works), biochemistry (the chemistry of the body), endocrinology (hormones), child development and psychiatry in effort to create some joined-up thinking on the subject of the development of young children. His work has led to a rewriting of the conventional map of human development—and the most important finding is that what babies need for optimal development is affection! (See Gerhardt's *Why Love Matters* for the best general introduction to Schore's work.)

When barricades around the former Soviet bloc finally fell during the 1990s, the personal fiefdom that was Ceausescu's Romania gained a new notoriety for the large number of orphanages where young children were discovered to have been kept in appalling conditions of abuse and neglect. Some of these orphans found their way to the west, where their development was studied. A shocking discovery was made. Children who had been left without affection or human interaction during the critical first three years presented as crippled in their learning, social skills, and their sensory capacity. MRI scanning revealed whole areas of their brains that had failed to develop, interior wastelands that appeared now to be off-limits to learning. Though we cannot always trace the causes so readily, we also know that scans of the brains of violently aggressive criminals frequently show similar neural black holes, especially around the prefrontal lobes, invariably accompanied by restricted or otherwise abnormal responses to stimuli.

All this confirms older research and what most people still instinctively know: that particular care is needed for the developing senses of babies—though rarely do they know it coherently or act on it consistently. Of all the senses, touch is probably the most crucial, and babies thrive on human touch; this sense is a gateway into the social world. All that tickling, jiggling and talking to, which is at first a sort of touching with the voice often leading actual touching (Pat-cakes, Insey-Wincey Spiders and all!), is as important as good nourishment for healthy growth and learning. As Steiner suggested, touch is the basis of all our foundation senses, and we are only now beginning to understand how all this "touching activity" triggers corresponding surges in growth hormone, the immune system, skin and muscle tone, and cell growth in the brain. Not surprising, then, that infant massage and massage in schools are beginning to be recognised

for the contribution they can make to better-adjusted children and readiness for learning.

When baby is first born, sensing is the prime waking activity. At first the child only seems to know simple things and immediate needs: hungry/full, comfortable/uncomfortable, secure/insecure. The response to these brings immediate reaction, one way or the other. Very early on, however, sensation unites with emotion. The whole child is sense organ, and the only language that sense organ has at first is the language of feeling: every need a young child has is also an emotional need. A language of needs calls forth the child's emotional bond with the world, and provided it is met by the "mother-tongue" of the parent (whoever actually speaks it), all is well. As we now know—and this reverses previous understandings of cognitive development—Goethe was right that "feeling is the gateway to thinking"; our emotions are the heart of our intellect. To put it in another way: "Just as speech arises from walking and grasping, in short from movement [which we should see as "e-motional activity"], so thought develops from speech" (Steiner, *A Modern Art of Education* 112). But if there is a right way to stimulate the development of the child, the senses are also vulnerable to abuse, whether it is through deliberate act or unintended consequence. The "Toxic Childhood debate" is only the most recent of a large number of attempts to draw attention to changes in the nature of childhood (and sensory development) that show every sign of undermining the "nerve centers" of positive human evolution and civility. Unfortunately, the history of this research and its influence on practice and policy is one of indifference, ignorance, or the intellectual equivalent of a Gallic shrug: "What can you do?"—often followed by a justificatory, "Things have always been bad"!

In the 1960s teachers working from the University of Tübingen noted what they took to be a severe reduction in sensory awareness in their students. A few years later, American researchers made a similar observation. Students appeared less alert to information from their environment than previous generations and this was adversely affecting their learning. Following these observations, the German Psychological Association set up a joint research project

with the university aimed at quantifying the phenomena. Tests were carried out on some four hundred undergraduate subjects per year over a twenty-year period. The conclusions of this longitudinal study are staggering and it is a matter of enormous significance that they have caused so little comment: "Our sensitivity to stimuli is decreasing at a rate of about one percent a year," their report states, adding that increasingly "brutal thrill" is needed for our brains to register stimuli (see Kneissle).

In two parallel studies, an independent child psychologist, Marcia Mikulak, examined children from a number of cultures, including pre-literate societies in Brazil, Guatemala and Africa as well as Europe and the United States. She found that, on average, sensory acuity and sensitivity to the environment were twenty-five to thirty percent higher in the children from so-called primitive settings. A further research project carried out in the late 1980s indicated that children from preliterate societies in Guatemala and similar countries where standards of living were deemed "low" showed prodigious capacity for learning. When these "deprived" children were given learning environments equal to those provided for North American and western European children, they demonstrated ability to learn estimated to be three or four times that of their "more fortunate" peers and far superior attention, comprehension and retention.

As Waldorf teachers we tend to be very sensitive and easily exercised by real or perceived threats to our practice, our curriculum. But those things are not important in themselves. The curriculum is strictly speaking not a curriculum at all, but a framework for an evolving practice which consists in creating and recreating translation between archetypes and the culture of the time. That means too that we cannot enjoy the luxury of wringing our hands over the damage that culture (or lack of culture) is doing to children, but that we are given the task to reinvent Steiner's indications in the light of each new challenge; and our core and essential purpose is to preserve and enhance the development of children, physically and socially and spiritually, by learning to work in such a way that what the children learn resonates throughout the twelve senses: "The real aesthetic

conduct of humanity consists in the enlivening of the sense organs and the ensouling of the life processes” (Steiner, *The Riddle of Humanity*, quoted in Lissau, 26). For this to happen, we must become increasingly artistically pragmatic, multi-disciplinary in our approach and logical (or, one might say as well, coherent) in our demeanor. Perhaps the best way to achieve this is through cultivating capability in an art or craft; in short, by doing all we can to become skill-full communities.

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