

# Thinking and the Consciousness of the Young Child

*Renate Long-Breipohl*

**R**ecently while observing young children in a child care situation, I watched one little boy around the age of two who was totally immersed in moving blocks into various positions. He stayed absorbed in his activity without looking up or saying a word. Was he thinking? Something was happening within this child that I wanted to understand in order to adjust the environment around him so that nothing would disrupt his concentrated activity.

My own study of the subject of thinking set me on a journey: I re-read essential works on the first three years, looked at developmental research, and observed children whenever the opportunity arose. Here I would like to share some aspects of my work in progress that relate to coming to terms with thinking as an adult, the development of thinking as a process during the first three years, and events occurring in the third year of life.

To put it bluntly, thinking is not a favorite activity of our time. While we are surrounded by an endless variety of products based on sophisticated human thought and created by a fairly small group of highly trained engineers and designers, the actual process of thinking for oneself is experienced as stressful by many contemporaries. Students often find it strenuous to pursue a train of thought related to a question, and teachers find it difficult to engage students in processes that require concentrated thinking activity.

In adult learning, more and more visual aids are appearing, and the more they are used, the less we need to engage inwardly in a thinking process. This one can experience as an average

computer user or by perusing a typical student textbook. It all comes down to information intake and information processing, following ready-made pathways or existing mental frameworks. Knowledge is broken up into small paragraphs, the main thoughts are boxed so that one can take them in at a glance and, overall, there is an abundance of accumulated information. Rudolf Steiner predicted that human beings would gradually lose the ability to think, and yet he regarded the human faculty of thinking as the gateway to spiritual development.

## **What is the faculty of thinking in human beings?**

It is important to have an understanding of what thinking is when we approach children. Thinking is an activity that takes place within the inner realm of the human being and, in its highest aspect, is wisdom in individualized form. One can describe thinking as a supersensible faculty, since it does not derive its essence from sense experience. Thinking cannot be perceived directly by others. Concepts are formed and woven together through the activity of thinking, and in everyday life these concepts assist us in ordering, structuring and giving meaning to experiences.<sup>1</sup>

Through thinking we are free to reach toward high spiritual ideals, but our thinking can also be reduced to rationalizing our wishes, desires, and actions. Then it binds itself too deeply to the material aspect of existence and is in danger of hardening and losing its connection to truth. The destiny of thinking is a theme to which Steiner returned in his lectures again and again. In our time many people find it

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difficult to devote themselves to thinking as a spiritual activity, or to think freely. However, one needs to consider thinking as a spiritual activity if one wants to find the key to thinking in the young child, as I will further elaborate in this essay.

### Child development and thinking

In his book *Spiritual Guidance of the Individual and Humanity*, Steiner spoke about the first three years of life and the evolving human being.<sup>2</sup> He described how learning to walk, to speak, and to think is a three-step process in which the growing, incarnating child adapts to earthly conditions, and in which essentially spiritual faculties take hold in the child under the guidance of higher spiritual beings. Through this process, faculties gained in the spiritual world are transformed and reappear as the human faculties of thinking, feeling, and willing. These faculties develop within the bodily processes of achieving an upright position, turning the speech organs into instruments for the expression of language, and molding the brain into an instrument for thinking. Finally, in the third year, an evolving ability to think connects the child to the world community of human beings.

Active within these processes is the “I,” which through walking orients the body to three-dimensional space, and through speech attunes the child’s soul to a specific human community according to the individual destiny of the child. This activity of the “I” can be described as the streaming in of spiritual forces from a spiritual aura around the child. It is a process of which the child has no conscious awareness.

From this picture of human development questions arise regarding thinking in the young child. Why is the development of thinking primarily identified as occurring in the third year of life? Is it not a continuous process? What is our understanding of recent neurodevelopmental research that interprets early responses of babies to stimulation as forms of intelligence and that points to the ability of very young children to communicate from day one? And if there were a major leap in the development of thinking in the third year, why, then, would one wait until the seventh year before addressing the child’s thinking in education, as Steiner has suggested?

### Why is the development of thinking primarily identified as occurring in the third year of life?

### The first and second years in relation to thinking

It is generally acknowledged that thinking develops in the young child in accordance with the maturation and differentiation of the brain and nerve-sense system. It is interesting that Steiner spoke about thinking as a spiritual as well as an earthly faculty; he said that thinking originates in pre-earthly existence as a supersensible faculty of the human being, yet it is also active in and bound to earthly life through sense experience.

There are two aspects to thinking in the young child: The first relates to the supersensible nature of thinking, which is linked to the etheric body. In the very young child these etheric forces are still active from outside, sculpting and fine-tuning the head and bodily organs, without the child’s being conscious of them. “Connecting

threads develop in the brain, and the forces which organize the connecting threads are seen by the clairvoyant during the first few weeks of the child’s life as something that is forming extra sheaths for the brain.”<sup>3</sup> The etheric body is still engaged in shaping the brain and radiating into the rest of the body.<sup>4</sup> This image often appears in children’s drawings in which rays are depicted around the head of a human figure, connecting it to the world beyond.

I remember an eight-month-old child in a restaurant, sitting in a high chair, enthralled with a spoon he held in his hand; he moved it from one hand to the other. He licked it, turned it upside down and moved it faster and faster until the spoon fell to the ground. Does thinking play a part in such an activity?

Georg K uhlewind<sup>5</sup> points out that a young child absorbed in exploration lives naturally in a state of pure attentiveness, which may be achieved in adults only after intense practice in awareness. He describes pure attentiveness as an advanced stage of thinking activity, based on the ability to maintain the intentional quality of the will without pouring it into action. He calls it “soft will,” that is, will purely within the activity of thinking. The child is able to be in this state of attentiveness naturally and is fully devoted to the object of his exploration.

This attitude of surrender is also found in the ability of the young child to imitate, an ability present from the very first stages of life. Steiner points to how thinking is dependent on imitation: “The child learns to think because it is an imitative being, wholly given up to its environment. It imitates what happens in the environment under the impulses of thoughts.”<sup>6</sup> Sense experience and thinking are one. The child imitates and simultaneously is able to understand what is going on the moment the sense perception happens.<sup>7</sup>

Steiner speaks about the work of the “I” in the first three years as molding the brain. Two important influences are part of this process: sense activity on the one side, leaving imprints of sensations in specific areas of the brain (as described by Eugen Kolisko in *The Bodily Foundation of Thinking*), and movement on the other. Steiner uses the term “bodily geometry” for the movement of the young child that allows her to find her place within spatial dimensions. Thinking is prepared through both activities.<sup>8</sup> Thinking and movement, originating from head and limbs, form a polarity that organizes development during the early childhood years. The head pole relates to the etheric forces working from the head downward, and the limb pole relates to the human soul-spirit or “I” working from the lower part of the body upwards. This is the organizing principle that underlies the process of coming into uprightness during the first year of life. The “I” activity of movement has an influence on the healthy development of thinking. Steiner’s spiritual research into this process is now confirmed by developmental research and the therapeutic practice of stimulating thinking through movement.

As the child approaches the end of the first year of life, we may assume that the processes of intensive looking, touching, moving, and exploring have left within him many imprints, mental images which, however vague they may be at first, will eventually be met by concepts formed through the inner activity of the child.

A new quality is added to those early internal pictures flooding through the child once the child

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**– Rudolf Steiner**

can anchor them in speech. Now words become the vehicle for the development of thinking. “Just as speech develops from walking and grasping, in short, from movement, so thought develops from speech . . . and since the child is one great sense organ and in his inner physical functions also copies the spiritual, our own thinking must be clear if right thinking is to develop in the child from the forces of speech.”<sup>9</sup>

Karl König has beautifully summarized the process of speech acquisition in *The First Three Years of the Child*, in which he describes how the child progresses from expressing physical well-being or physical needs to expressing his relationship to the outer world in words (naming) and, increasingly, in short sentences. Speech mirrors the child’s being in relationship to objects and people. It links the child to the fine nuances of feeling expressed in language. How does thinking manifest at this stage of development?

Recent developmental research has described how adults can stimulate memory in children between the ages of one- and two-and-a-half years if in the presence of the child adults verbally recollect recent events of the child’s life.<sup>10</sup> Russian educational psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) suggested that intellectual development depends on the adult’s verbal communications being slightly above the child’s current level of communication.<sup>11</sup> His observations are interesting in that they point to the connection between speech and thinking. Could one say that the child, through the adult as model, is able to imitate memory activity?

Thinking in the child who is approaching age two can be observed in the child’s solitary play. The child moves objects, covers them, puts them side-by-side or on top of each other. The purpose is solely to make contact with the world of objects and to change their positions. Steiner states that it is through this interplay with the environment that the child finds his way spontaneously into thinking. While observing a child engaged in such play, one can experience concentrated attention. If the child has sufficient opportunity to play

without disturbances, this mood will be recreated in play for years to come.

### Thinking in the third year of life

What is the gift of the third year of life? The soul-spiritual forces in the child now complete their work on the foundations of the child's faculty of thinking. The "I" of the child has penetrated the physical body, the limbs, the rhythmic system, and the head. At the same time some part of the etheric forces of the head is freed. "At the age of two and a half, the child's head organization is developed far enough for those forces of the ether body which have been working on it to become released . . . acting now as soul and spiritual forces [available for other developmental tasks]."<sup>12</sup>

What can be observed in the child of this age? A vivid memory, a more elaborate way of speaking, original word creations and thought connections. The child enjoys playing with words, turning them around, inventing new ones—and he can surprise us with his own original ways of arranging syntax or linking sense impressions. Speech develops in leaps and bounds. This stage of development shows new achievements of thinking in everyday life. It becomes easier to follow routines, because the child can understand more of the meaning of what is done. Therefore it becomes easier to guide the child. In conversation, she seems more able to take in what is said. It is fascinating to observe in children of this age that they not only are creative in inventing their own words, but also in producing their own logic. Interestingly, the very individual and unusual thought connections of a three-year-old do not arrive out of a conscious thought process but seem to emerge often unexpectedly, as if from somewhere else.

It is tempting for the educator who witnesses these new faculties as they arise during the third year to approach the child's thinking capacity with formal instruction. The ability of the child to process instructions addressing the intellect at age two has been documented in developmental research and has been utilized in program devel-

opment for early childhood education. The third year is when many early learning programs begin.

One can understand the motivation for using learning materials such as picture and word cards to support concept building, verbalization or memory, since the thinking potential is there in the child and can be called up. But the constant involvement of an adult is needed to keep this process going. What is learned at this age is not

retained unless it is continually repeated. Steiner warned of the consequences of adult intervention and demands on thinking and memory before the age of three: "What then will happen, if we make too great a demand on the intellect, urging the child to think, into thinking as such? Certain organic forces that tend inwardly to harden the

body are brought into play. These forces are responsible for the salty deposits in the body and for the formation of bone, cartilage and sinew—in all those parts of the body, in short, that have a tendency to become rigid. This normal rigidity is over-developed, if intellectual thinking is forced."<sup>13</sup> It is of great importance that those who live with young children understand the spiritual background of the capacity to think. Steiner affirmed that we are to become, and need to become, free-thinking beings in order to develop our humanness.

When the child learns to think—well, in thinking we do not remain in the realm of the individual at all. In New Zealand, for example, people think in exactly the same way we do here today. It is the entire earth realm to which we adapt ourselves, when as children we develop thinking out of speech. . . . In thinking, we enter the realm of humanity as a whole.<sup>14</sup>

In each child this possibility is established and in that respect the third year can be regarded as a culmination point of early development, representing in seed form the essence of the human being. This needs to be acknowledged in everyday life, so that one does not merely familiarize the

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child with thought processes related only to the immediate material environment and mundane situations. Often adults take pride when the child can already express himself intellectually in a way similar to older children or even adults. Yet too much praise and encouragement of the child's intellect can cause the child's thinking to become fettered to fixed thought-forms and prevent the child's thinking from flowing creatively and freely between the two worlds of thought: the spiritual and the earthly.

Only the emergence of consciousness of self around or shortly after age three will bring the child's thinking closer to the earthly realm and change the sense of "It thinks" into "I think." This step indicates that the child has become more conscious of himself as different from others and from the surrounding world. He has to leave the experience of oneness behind; it is the price for becoming an individual. From this time on, the child will feel himself as the originator of his thoughts.

It is important to notice that "I"-consciousness is achieved only after the "I" has been active in the process of brain development and, thus, in establishing the possibility of thought as a universal human activity. Steiner stated that even though the child might use the word "I" correctly already at around the age of two-and-a-half, the appearance of "I"-consciousness happens after the age of three. In developmental psychology, the same phenomenon is called "the emergence of the psychological self" at around age three.<sup>15</sup> Professor of child psychology Laura Berk, a researcher and author on child development, also describes phenomena of "metacognition" in the child, such as the use of the words "think," "remember," and "pretend," and the child's realization that thinking is going on inside his head.<sup>16</sup>

There is a deep wisdom in the sequence of development as I have outlined above. Thinking is not a personal achievement in the first place, but is established within us under the guidance of higher beings. Thinking becomes personal

through consciousness of self, but always encompasses the possibility of expanding beyond the individual into the universal realm of thought. Stimulating self consciousness at an early stage poses the danger of closing the door to the universally human realm.

However tender and immature this consciousness of self may be, there is a general eagerness in educators to use this emerging consciousness of the child for reflecting and reviewing processes, such as making choices and decisions. These may relate to the child's actions, social situations, daily routines, food and clothing. But consciousness of self is a double-edged sword. It requires maturity to handle it, more maturity than can be expected of a three-year-old. In becoming conscious of their wishes and choices, some three-year-olds are overwhelmed by their own desires and become demanding. They also may change their minds quickly and can appear swayed by emotions. In such cases, parents often complain about their child's self-centeredness.

Some children, when made conscious of their actions, become overwhelmed and react with insecurity, lack of confidence in their abilities, or fear of failure. It happens as early as three years of age that children say, "I don't like my drawing," or "I can't do that." Steiner speaks about this early appearance of consciousness of the "I" as a great mystery

and, in a certain sense, as being premature.

### **Some educational conclusions**

Modern education has regarded and used the child's ability to think as an opportunity to introduce early instruction. Undoubtedly there will be more research identifying the potential of the child to think at an ever-earlier age. Programs have been designed for stimulating aspects of the young child's thinking, such as memory, color and form discrimination, and concept building. With this the child's thinking becomes tuned to the particular mode of abstract intellectuality prevalent in our time.

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Steiner recommended strongly that we leave alone the child's capacity for thinking at this stage, avoiding outer intervention. He was not concerned about intellectual progress, but, rather, about morality. In 1906 he wrote, "[Young] children do not learn by instruction or admonition, but through imitation. The physical organs shape themselves through the influence of the physical environment. Good sight will be developed in children if their environment has the proper conditions of light and color, while in the brain and blood circulation the physical foundations will be laid for a healthy moral sense if children see moral actions in their environment. If before their seventh year children see only foolish actions in their surroundings, the brain will assume the forms that adapt it to foolishness in later life."<sup>17</sup> Steiner points to the link between thinking and morality, on which depends the future of humanity. He is concerned with how the quality of adult thought influences the child. Therefore he emphasizes the self-education of the adult. "The education during these first two-and-a-half years should be confined to the self-education of the adult in charge who should think, feel and act in a manner which, when perceived by the child, will cause no harm."<sup>18</sup> And again, "Why have so many people 'nerves' today? Simply because in childhood there was no clarity and precision of thought around them during the time when they were learning to think after having learned to speak. . . . The organs and vessels develop after the models of love, truth and clarity."<sup>19</sup>

How might this understanding change our approach to young children in our care? We may find ourselves paying more attention to our own thinking and how that might relate to the child's thinking. There is already among Waldorf educators an awareness regarding the importance of self-education and self-development, as well as a recognition of how speech relates to thinking. But as yet not enough attention is paid to the detail of the child's play in the third year of life. As Waldorf early childhood educators, we should make ourselves heard in the general field of education, where the child's intellectual development is so heavily emphasized. If we are clear in our own understanding of the child's development of thinking, then other educators will be open to what we have to offer, and more children will

therefore benefit from educational and childcare practices that truly support them.

Let us return to the example of the child playing at the beginning of this essay. This play expresses the child's activity of thinking before the emergence of a consciousness of the "I." This play of the young child marks a specific stage in development and should not be seen merely as a precursor to the "real" play of four- and five-year-olds.

Sometimes one will find that among Waldorf early childhood educators there is too little differentiation in how they approach the play of the child under the age of three versus that of the child over three. Steiner describes the very young child at play as a "hermit," totally immersed in his own world. This play needs to be nurtured by providing a quiet space and adjusting the daily rhythm to allow for the unfolding of undisturbed individual play. Through this play, the child weaves his connection to universal human thought before being drawn into an awareness of himself.

Often the rhythm of the kindergarten day is used as a model for the rhythm of the day in play groups and childcare settings intended for younger children. But is it appropriate for children under three to be interrupted in play in order to make space for group activities such as the morning circle? What is the right daily structure for this age group? How can one create a balance between togetherness and the child's natural desire to follow his own inner impulse? One can find answers to these questions by observing young children and by becoming more and more attuned to the wonderful processes of thinking in the young child.

## Endnotes

1. Michaela Glöckler, *Gehen, Sprechen, Denken* (Walking, Talking, Thinking; not presently translated) (Stuttgart: Internationale Vereinigung der Waldorfkindergärten, 1997), p. 40.
2. Rudolf Steiner, *The Spiritual Guidance of the Individual and Humanity* (Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1992), pp. 3–24.
3. Rudolf Steiner, *Understanding Young Children: Excerpts from Lectures by Rudolf Steiner Compiled for the Use of Kindergarten Teachers* (Silver Spring, MD: Waldorf Kindergarten Association, 1994), p. 55.
4. Rudolf Steiner, “The Child Before the Seventh Year” in *Soul Economy and Waldorf Education* (Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1986), p. 112.
5. Georg Kühlewind, “Learning from the Child to Be Human,” *Kindergarten Newsletter UK* (Issue 36, 1999), p. 5.
6. Rudolf Steiner, *Education and Modern Spiritual Life* (Blauvelt, NY: SteinerBooks, 1989), p. 77.
7. Michaela Glöckler, “The Birth of the Etheric” in *A Deeper Understanding of the Waldorf Kindergarten* (Silver Spring, MD: Waldorf Kindergarten Association, 1993), p. 45.
8. Rudolf Steiner, *The Child’s Changing Consciousness and Waldorf Education* (Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1988), p. 19.
9. Rudolf Steiner, *Education and Modern Spiritual Life*, p. 112.
10. Laura E. Berk, *A Study Guide for Child Development* (Massachusetts: Viacom, 1997), p. 277.
11. Vygotsky’s ideas are outlined in Berk, pp. 247–250
12. Steiner, *Soul Economy and Waldorf Education*, p. 117.
13. Steiner, *Education and Modern Spiritual Life*, p. 122.
14. Steiner, *The Child’s Changing Consciousness and Waldorf Education*, p. 55.
15. Berk, p. 279.
16. Berk, p. 281.
17. Rudolf Steiner, *The Education of the Child in the Light of Anthroposophy* (Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1996), p. 19.

18. Steiner, *Soul Economy and Waldorf Education*, p. 115.
19. Steiner, *Education and Modern Spiritual Life*, p. 112.

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