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Developmental Signposts of Adolescence

by

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We are traveling through a landscape—our life is like a wonderful river that flows through this landscape. We, as teachers, are fortunate to be able to study and know the developmental stages of the children we teach.

When we look at the young child we see the magnificent presence of a cosmic sun when a baby looks at you and begins to smile. All a baby's consciousness, all his or her soul attributes come to expression, initially, in the face, and then this consciousness descends to the hands, the legs, and finally to the feet. We can observe this as we watch the stages of locomotion and increased coordination of the digits and the limbs. The limbs are in constant movement and this movement is a requirement for speech. Without movement, speech would not develop.

Youth has three developmental signposts. We see the first ego birth around three years of age. This is the beginning of earthly memory when a child begins to recognize his or her physical body and refers to himself in the first person singular, "I." At 5, 6, or 7 the first dentition or "milk teeth" are pushed out by the emerging large permanent teeth. This developmental time was especially significant for many Native American tribes. The young were asked to raise their right arm over their heads and touch their earlobes with their fingertips. If they were able then they were capable of abstract reasoning and the arm has achieved the adult proportion found in the "Golden mean." This proportion arrives around the seventh year. Once achieved the children begin to have a dim recognition of their own formative forces or etheric body.

At approximately at the age of 9 we observe a wonderful cosmic harmony take place within the child's body. The heartbeat slows to a more-or-less constant 4 to 1 rhythm with the breathing. This is the also the time that children experience what

psychologists refer to as “the tail of the snake.” The astral is descending downward and they start to be more conscious of their viscera. They complain about stomachaches especially when nervous or frightened. At age of 9 the vision stabilizes, hearing stabilizes, and their intersensory responses have become harmonized. The child begins to recognize himself or herself and start to recognize their individual life of soul. At this point we are able so observe premature glimpses of their adolescence. This is an experience that we are trying to understand at this conference.

As a high school science teacher, I urge kindergarten and elementary teachers to exercise the senses of your students as much as possible. Allow them the experience of finding their balance, experience different smells, tastes, and sounds, allow them to live into the flowing color of their watercolor paintings, and to experience levity and gravity. These sense experiences in the early stages of development transforms into clarity in their observations when they meet the sciences in the middle grades and high school. The education and exercise of the senses gives rise to an ability to explore more deeply into phenomenology.

The neurophysiologists tell us that nine is the age when children are properly able to carry tasks. Gesell says that at the age of nine we have the emergence of self-motivation. This leads to the ages of 10 and 11 where we find incredible soul balance. Research informs us that at this age we have the lowest incidence of childhood death both natural and accidental.

It is the calm before the storm. The meandering river of life has passed through the tranquil stillness of a high-mountain lake and now descends on a downward slope. It twists, turns, develops speed, and suddenly starts to boil and froth. You notice ahead that the air becomes moister and you notice that the first rapids are coming. The peak of childhood has been reached—puberty—the gateway to the rolling rapids of adolescence.

Rudolf Steiner describes adolescence as a time of, “a gentle sprinkling of pain that never goes away.” Puberty comes from the Latin “pubescere” which means to “be covered with hair.” Puberty is very individualized and development occurs at different times for different individuals. It is often a painful and self-conscious period that one simply has to pass through.

Statistics indicate that girls reach puberty between 9 and 17 although I’ve known it to happen at 8 and heard stories of younger. The average age is 12 years and 4 months. Boys reach puberty later—10 to 18. The average age is 13 years 2 months. It is interesting to note that the beginning of menses in girls is dependent on race, socio-economics, nutrition, culture, and it occurs later, interestingly, at higher altitudes, in rural areas, in large families and in Waldorf schools. Thus, Waldorf education is part of the protection against the onset of early adolescence.

Jerome Bruner from Harvard and Jean Piaget concur with Rudolf Steiner that the cognitive awakens between the ages of 12 to 14. This is the emergence of true thinking. What is thinking? It is unconscious antipathy. In Shakespeare, Hamlet says, “Nothing is good nor bad but thinking makes it so.” In our classrooms we observe young people who are beginning to pull away as they enter their own world of thoughts. At this age the teachers and parents become the wet-stones upon which the young people sharpen their ability to reason. This is a wonderful and developmentally necessary time, it is not a problem; embrace it with joy, do not fear it. The capacity we need to strengthen within ourselves is that of empathy. We have to hold back our own reactions/opinions and enter

into the being of the adolescent with interest, and compassion, while exhibiting a warm sense of humor.

Some of the outward signs to identify puberty are: first, the feet begin to grow followed by the hands and finally the legs and arms. Observe teenage boys—all of a sudden they appear unintentionally in high water pants. Skin is visible between the socks and the bottom of the pant leg. The legs are in a growth spurt before the parents can purchase new trousers! They assume a “row-boat” walk and display gawkiness. The new adolescents stretch out with both their arms and legs and there is an incredible resultant awkwardness. They also can lumber more aggressively and roughhouse more frequently, all in a subconscious attempt to get into touch with their own ego by bumping up against each other, against tables, chairs, and doors. This is the time when the lower schoolteachers might say, “Why can’t those teachers in middle school have their children behave?”

Girl’s voices fall one tone—the boy’s voice fall one full octave. The center of gravity in adolescence falls from the second cervical vertebra to the sacral vertebra. The jaw noticeably drops and appears to jut out.

On the inside what is happening? The lungs increase in size from the age of 10. The breathing changes—the boys’ attain an inbreath which fills 3/4 of their diaphragm and a girl’s breath becomes more costal or shallow. The blood pressure increases and the heart while not changing in size becomes denser almost doubling in weight. The lymphoid system decreases and there are frequent complaints of sore throats. There is a high incidence of infection in the tonsils. Twenty-four major and 200 minor hormones are released. In Greek the word “hormone” means to excite. These children don’t call it forth but, all of a sudden, they have all these things going on in their bodies. We don’t refer to it as the “age of raging hormones” for nothing. The once balanced youth can now show signs of depression, aggression, and loneliness—completely different behaviors than exhibited in the joy-filled days of childhood.

In young ladies we notice that fat becomes redistributed—lips thicken, hips and thighs take shape, and breasts develop. The skeleton shows an interesting pattern. Growth both accelerates and decelerates. Young people experience aches in their bodies as the bones grow. This is why they need so much sleep; they need it in order to grow without pain, because during sleep the tendons and muscles relax their grip on the bones. There was a boy I knew at High Mowing and we had to order a new bed for him after a few months of school because he abruptly grew 5 inches and no longer fit in his assigned bunk.

Other secondary sexual characteristics start to appear throughout the body. Then, finally, the teenager recognizes a higher sense which Rudolf Steiner referred to as the “sense of life”—that higher sense we have where we experience wellness and sickness, a conscious whole-body monitoring. Along with this adolescents possess an invigorated endurance which constantly seeks to demonstrate its strength. Now the youth begin to seek out challenges and obstacles to overcome—competitive sports, rock climbing, vigorous dance, and so forth—they are positively charged with emotional energy. Just thinking that all of this is going on at one time makes me want to go to bed and rest, but we put them in a classroom and say sit. They are asked to sit an awful lot at this stage of their life.

We are challenged to bring new form to the education of our adolescents and hopefully this conference will be a seedbed for new possibilities.

* Members of the Waldorf High School Project core group have edited this article and the speaker has reviewed it, however, it is considered to be in draft format lacking a complete edit. It is provided so that AWSNA schools can make use of the content.

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