

# *Sense Development Disturbances*

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*The following is not a summary of lecture content, but a reflection on the lecture by Dr. Anthony Underwood from a spiritual scientific viewpoint.* Cynthia Aldinger posed the question during her presentation, “Are we being asked to bring both the Gabriel and Michael qualities in our work with today’s children?”

Dr. Underwood’s opening sentence was, “Autism is a symptom of our times.” In the last decade there has been an increase in the number of autistic spectrum children, as many as one in eighty children are diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders. Symptoms of autism appear in toddlers around twelve to eighteen months old. Often these children seem to develop normally in their first year then, suddenly the development is arrested, or even regresses. What is it that interrupts or arrests development at this crucial stage of development?

The symptoms of autism were characterized. As more and more of these characteristics were described, a picture began to form for me. Very briefly, some of the characteristics are: peripheral gaze; toe walking; hand flapping; apparent deafness to sense of word, yet hearing oversensitive; rigid and repetitive behaviors; oversensitive to touch in head and neck areas; almost impervious to pain in other parts; crawling between the sheet and mattress on the doctor’s examination table; limited range of tastes tolerated—closely linked to smells; balance well developed; sense of warmth blunted; an absence of soul warmth; and people perceived as objects.

As I listened, it seemed as though these characteristics were more like those of a lizard or chameleon, than a child. My mind then leapt from this to a picture of Michael and the Dragon. Are these children here to remind us of our true task in the present? Our modern world seems to be driven by fear and Rudolf Steiner’s well-known words for the Michael Age immediately come to mind:

We must eradicate from the soul all fear and terror of what comes to meet us from the future. We must look forward with equanimity to whatever comes and we must think only that whatever comes is given us by a world direction full of wisdom. It is part of what we must learn in this age; namely to act out of pure trust in the ever present help of the spiritual world. Truly nothing else will do if our courage is not to fail us. Let us discipline our will and let us seek the awakening from within ourselves every morning and every evening.

What lies behind the manifestation of autism? Are these children in a sense making a sacrifice to remind us of our task for the Michael Age? In *The Spiritual Guidance of Man*, Rudolf Steiner refers to the normal course of development in the first three years thus: “This happens because the human soul and entire being are, during the first years of earthly life, in much closer connection with the spiritual worlds of the higher hierarchies than they are later.”

*These thoughts were taken from a lecture by Dr. Anthony Underwood, an anthroposophical pediatrician practicing in Sydney, Australia at the Vital Years Conference, the biennial conference of the Australian Association for Rudolf Steiner Early Childhood Education. Patricia Dougall is a early childhood teacher in Australia.*