

## *Caring for the Life-Forces of the Young Child*

*Renate Breipohl, Samford Valley Steiner School*

*Brisbane, Australia*

### **What are "life forces"?**

One may be inclined to connect the concept of life forces with the amount of energy, of liveliness, of physical activity displayed by a person. Certainly life forces may manifest somehow within these phenomena. Yet one can get to a more precise description by considering life forces in nature first and then look at the human being again. Nature in its mineral content has been investigated thoroughly through natural science. Nature as far as the plant world is concerned embraces water, air, light and the warmth of the sun. These elements make life on earth possible and are the necessary conditions for plants, animals and humans. Scientific research has not been able to explain the phenomenon of life. Yet we may get an inkling of it by observing plant growth: the unfolding from seed to flower, the balance of forces which pull downward and push upward. Many secrets are hidden in the growing child. Let us call "life forces" all that works behind the scene in sustaining a living organism, making it grow and preventing it from falling into the condition of the mineral world which is the condition of death.

In Steiner education we look at the life forces as a part of the spiritual world working into the human being. And we look at the human being as connected by his life forces with the world of the plants, and its rhythms.

### **Why is it important to be conscious of life forces in young children?**

Unique processes of forming, shaping and growing occur in the body of a young child between birth and the 7th year. Bones, inner organs, senses and the brain have not yet achieved their final shape at the time of birth. The brain refines in form up to the age of 4, the eye matures only at the age of 8, heart and blood circulation are still developing until the age of 16 and bones grow until the age of 21. There is a specific emphasis on shaping bones and inner organs in the first seven years of life, followed by growth up to the 21st year with another strongly formative time around puberty.

From a spiritual viewpoint it is most important not to disturb the functioning of the life forces during early childhood as they work towards the completion of the final individual shape of the physical body. Care has to be taken that life forces do not recede before this work is accomplished. A weakened physical body will result from this and make it difficult to support the intellect, the feeling, and the will forces of the child later on.

### **How can we recognize the working of life forces and discriminate whether they are strong or weak?**

It is easiest to see some of the effects of the life forces in a baby. We are met by great softness, we see the rosy skin color and feel the special atmosphere in a baby's room: a glow around the baby that radiates life and warmth. Babies and young children may be delicately built, or sturdy,

this depends on a variety of factors. But they should not have anything bony, hard or angular yet. The roundish shape and the "juiciness" characterize a child up to school age when the life forces have finished their major tasks in the physical body and are mostly set free for new ones. Compare facial features of a class one child early in the year with a child at the end of class two and it is obvious how much more distinct, angular and individual the faces have become.

The older we get, the more we dry up naturally. But some children do that early, they seem to have lost the glow of warmth, the watery quality, they seem somewhat hardened, tense. It is important to put one's attention to these phenomena, as they often derive from conditions of modern life that may be changeable. Yet it is also important to discriminate a weakness of life forces from individual features of size, build and temperament. It is not the case that a child with strong life forces would run around more and be more sporty than a child with weakened life forces. The amount of physical activity depends also on the physical constitution and aspects of the emotional and social development. Quite often it is a much more reliable sign of healthy life forces, if a child gives the impression of inner activity in play, of absorption, of being self contained and self directed. On the other hand, early developed speech and intellect may be a sign of life forces having already receded from their task in the physical body. and being used within the life of the soul.

Among these early intellectually developed children one often observes a paleness in skin color and a lack of naturally flowing, graceful movement. These children seem to be stifled and are often unaware of what their feet and hands are doing. This phenomenon conveys an important message - thinking and intellectual work uses up life forces. Anybody who has observed students learning for exams, can confirm this, they look drained, life forces being drawn out. As such, this is just a confirmation that there exists a polarity of forces: forces of life and death. This is a fact of life on earth. Yet concerning the young child anything that lends to a hardening or deadening has to be carefully monitored and possibly minimized. Modern life has too many death forces.

### **Where are death forces at work which affect our children?**

#### **1. Death forces work in anything which restricts the child's natural desire to move and be active.**

- Where there is life there is movement, rhythmical movement.
- Look at television from this aspect. Only the eyes move, the rest of the body is inactive.
- Look at riding a bike in the early years. A limited range of movements is performed where the whole body should still be active as in walking.
- There is a lack of rhythm in daily life which pulls the child into consciousness instead of allowing him to flow along and be active within a consistent structure of family life.

There is nowadays the great emphasis on verbal communication with children in early years and on an early display of intellectual abilities. If the child is thus pulled out of the dreaming connection with the life around him, the vitality of the child may suffer from it. Yet the mere advice, "Go outside and play," may not cater to the child's vitality either. Surely, there is space to move, but there is no guarantee of the quality of movement. It needs the caring adult who provides protected space, preferably inside, offering a variety of stimuli and opportunities for

play which comes from inside the child.

## **2. Death forces meet us and the children in modern technology.**

One could describe a computer as preserved human thought. Its invention and refinement in recent decades is the outcome of a rapidly increased intellectual capacity of the modern human being. Compared with thinking, dealing with computers uses up more life forces. The purpose of such a statement is not to go back to the past but to create an awareness for the need to recompense for the time spent in front of a computer. And definitely, computers and the entertainment that goes with them are poison for children. It counteracts the work of the life forces in the physical body and also counteracts the development of creative thinking which at a later age relies on strong life forces. In a less spectacular way we have technology around us in the form of household machines. The push button has replaced a wide range of varied movements and actions. For the sake of the children and their natural need for doing we may have to bring some of the "handwork" back into the household and thus meet the child's developmental stage.

## **3. Death forces are at work in what is sold as entertainment for children.**

Certainly this is most obvious in the wide range of toys related to war and aggression, but also less obvious in "educational" toys designed to early on steer the child's thinking in the direction of abstract concepts.

Entertainment in form of television and video compromises the child's discrimination between reality and illusion. It connects the child to a world that is unreal and alienates him from real life experiences and the natural desire to actively respond. Children become passive, "dead", or restless and aggressive as counteraction. This phenomenon is widely acknowledged and of great concern for many educators.

## **4. Death forces are at work in the. global destruction of the environment, in wars and destructive processes within society.**

It is amazing how young children absorb these phenomena of destruction seemingly "through the air" even if they have not watched the news or overheard adult conversation. There is no way to protect a child entirely from this, but the contact can be minimized and balanced by experiences which convey the love and morality of spiritual forces working in the world as well.

## **How can we care for the child's life forces so that they may remain strong to serve the child's health and well-being?**

### **1. Rhythm (the need for rhythm).**

One of the first things one has to look at for strengthening the life forces is rhythm in daily life. Nature is full of rhythm: in the plant's growing and dying, in day and night, the sequence of the months, the season of the year; but also in man's physical body, in breathing, heartbeat, digestion. Rhythm in daily life does not happen naturally anymore and yet, children need rhythm

as much as daily bread for their physical and emotional health. They cannot set and maintain a rhythm for themselves. They need the ego of the adult to do this as their own ego is not yet the "master of the house." In the preschool the teacher takes responsibility for ordering the day, the week, the year; for the rhythms of inbreathing and outbreathing in daily activities; and the gesture of contraction and expansion in the course of the year. At home a mother or father can do the same in structuring family life so that there are times and routines for getting up in the morning, going to bed, for "how things are done in our family" and for the celebration of festivals. Rhythm allows us to breathe, to feel secure, to open up and unfold.

## **2. Meals are festivals.**

Meals are another opportunity for nurturing life forces. A family, being a living organism, needs the polarity of dispersing and coming together. Going one's way seems to be easy. Holding a family together and caring for the nurturing of each family member needs to be taken up as a special responsibility. Mealtimes, especially the dinner, are wonderful opportunities for this and can be made into the little festivals of the day.

If children are fed in the kitchen while mother is still cooking the father's dinner or doing other housework, there is much taken away from the joy of eating and the involvement of the whole being of the child. How a meal is presented, the atmosphere around it, will influence the child's life forces as well as his emotional well being. A shared meal is a social event and should not be disrupted by other things such as television watching or radio. Certainly working conditions or specific circumstances can make it difficult to arrange joint meals, in which case it would still be preferable if one adult ate with the children rather than leaving them alone with their meal. Many bad eating habits like getting up from the table and running around, eating only half or eating irregularly, can be related to the way meals are organized in a family. In consequence, a number of eating disorders can arise in children.

## **3. Keeping the "etheric sheath" intact.**

Let us look again at the major task of the life forces in early childhood; the final shaping of bones, senses, inner organs and the brain. In a pictorial way one could say that until the appearance of the second teeth at the age of 7, the child needs to be protected from damaging influences on the life forces in the same way he was physically sheltered in the mother's womb before birth. We can call this protection around the young child the "etheric sheath, a kind of spiritual womb out of which the child emerges at the end of the first seven year period of his life with newly' independent soul forces, with thinking, feeling and willing. Although they are present already before that stage, these soul forces were not ready to be accessed from outside - similar to the fetus who cannot yet exist outside the womb. Parents of children before this "second birth" must help prevent life forces from being born prematurely.

Even though parents may be proud of early verbal or intellectual capacities in their child, they may consciously choose to abstain from stimulating these abilities by adultlike conversation. The intellect of the child can emerge too early from the etheric sheath. The child awakens to consciousness prematurely and is drawn out of the unity of I and world. Children who have experienced this, often have difficulties imitating. They cannot adopt into their inner being what

is going on around them or transform it into their own activity. Through play, intellect and speech are practiced within the etheric sheath. Then speech accompanies the process of play which still happens in the dreaming mood.

One can give children the experience of enjoyment of speech without waking them up. Reciting nursery rhymes and poetry suitable for children is a wonderful way to do this. Young children live into the rhythm and sound of poetry, not so much into the meaning. Thus they absorb art deeply but unintellectually into their being and form the emotional basis for later intellectual comprehension. As the first step in such a process which takes care of the life forces, one could assess which kind of verbal communication is happening at home, what part would be taken up by explanations, negotiations or arguing. From there one may make a conscious effort to meet the child's developmental level in communication. Family life may become easier by eliminating lengthy discussions about what may be right, "or what to do or not to do", and "why it is so." A simple "we do it now this way" may be a relief for a child who anyway wants to trust and follow a beloved person.

In preschool we rarely approach the children directly. Language lives in stories, rhymes and poems. There are no questions asked about what a child has done and not many explanations given. Neither is a child made to think back to past events or recall stories. Some children may know a whole series of poems by heart but not speak them until suddenly, with memory triggered by a word or sight, they will recite the entire morning circle. Through our patience and respect for the child we wait for such a time and do not ask the child to recall what we want to know.

Our young children are such a wonderful gift. Without them we would increasingly experience death around us. With each child a new life impulse is brought into the world which sustains us and the world as well. We have a great responsibility in helping children to rightly use the life forces which they have brought with them from the spiritual world.

\*\*\*\*\*