

# Conferences & International Meetings

## The Education of Feeling in Early Childhood: Laying the Foundation for Social-Emotional Capacities

— Renate Long-Breipohl, based on notes by Nancy Blanning

*This article is a partial and abbreviated summary of the lectures given by Dr. Long-Breipohl at the February 2013 WECAN East Coast Conference. Due to space limitations much of the deeply researched content of the lectures had to be omitted. We plan to publish these lectures in a more complete form in the near future.*

It is good to take a spiritual adventure in working into the theme of educating feeling life in the young child. Feeling as a developing soul force usually comes to the fore in the elementary school years. Early childhood focuses upon healthy will development since it is the first soul force [of Thinking, Feeling, and Willing] to arise. But if we look closely, we see a lot of preparation for the development of feeling during early childhood. How different aspects are supported during early childhood will have consequences for social-emotional capacities later on.

The terms “feeling” and “emotion” are often used interchangeably. When Rudolf Steiner speaks of feeling, he does not mean emotions but speaks about feeling as a force. Feeling appears as a dynamic of the soul and radiates into the body. But it is not a sum total of emotions. It is a force rather than a content. In the 1911 lectures on “Psychosophy,”\* Rudolf Steiner speaks about two currents or force streams encountering each other in the inner space of the soul (represented as a circle diagram in the 1911 lecture.) One stream comes from the past and one from the future.\*\* The stream from the past, associated with the ether body, he names as the stream of mental images; from the future comes the stream of desire, associated with the astral body. These have a meeting point in the soul. Where they meet or overlap, he speaks of consciousness of feeling arising. These two streams enable us to have a realm of feeling. The other two bodies, the I-being and physical body, are also part of this picture. The physical body is pictured below this circle, being our earth foundation and physical instrument for sensory experience. As we encounter sensory experiences, we respond to them with love or hate, sympathy or antipathy. Streaming down from the cosmos is the I of the

human being. Through the I we develop judgment and discernment.

As adults we have developed consciousness of self and, therefore, experience feeling as a capacity of the soul. Through feelings we participate inwardly in all we experience in the world and with other human beings. Adults discriminate a more developed, conscious form of feeling from a spontaneous form which we call “emotion,” for example when we say, “I reacted emotionally.” Our feelings are an expression of our general soul disposition and our way of relating to the world. We may be more inclined towards happiness or sadness, peace or turmoil, inner satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

In contrast emotions are often immediate reactions to experience and close to our sentient nature; when we speak about feeling, we mean inner soul reactions which already include the involvement of thinking and the I. Feeling is digested experience that is brought into relation with our aims, ideals and convictions.

It is different with young children. Rudolf Steiner explains that the young child’s soul forces are still hidden in the functions and capacities of his physical body. Thinking, feeling and will are not yet emancipated from bodily functions and, therefore, are expressed and experienced by the child indirectly within action. We can see thinking in the young child expressed through playing, anger in throwing oneself on the floor, joy in dancing around. Steiner named this state of feeling within action “feeling-will.”

Young children act more or less out of pure sympathy, however strange this may seem; all that the child does, all its romping and play, it does out of sympathy with the deed, with the romping. In this sympathy towards the environment, the child’s behavior may sometimes remind us of puppies or kittens. Yet the child is never animal-like, because of the spiritual nature of the human being and the connection with spiritual beings. The child still has access to experiences of the spiritual world and is still a little clairvoyant. Therefore mental images in the child are not formed only out of sense experiences (the normal way of learning on earth), but

also through experiences streaming in from the time of “unbornness.” Therefore the attitude of infants and children under two is usually trusting towards the world, a gesture of sympathy. Yet if something is not wanted, there is immediate crying and rejection, and we see will in action as instinct and drive, a reaction which is different from anger later on.

At the age of two-and-a-half, however, the child has developed a dim sense of an inner space. At that time the desire nature becomes noticeable as the child verbally expresses its wants and cravings, no longer only through physical reaction. Once a new desire arises, the previous one loses importance. We also find a strong love-hate reaction to experiences and people. The life of feeling in the young child shows a constant flux of sympathy – antipathy, love – hate, with little consciousness and judgment involved. The desire stops when it is satisfied by some action. It is important for us to realize that desire, love-hate, and sympathy-antipathy are objective realities or forces, different from what are usually called “feelings.”

When the child says “I” and shows the emergence of consciousness of self, previously unconscious experiences can now be linked to the child’s own self. But where does consciousness of self come from? It is a mental image but not one that enters from the outer world externally as do other mental images. There arises now a contrast within the soul life between the inner experience of being an I and sensations based on physical, outer sensory experiences.

If we go back to a pictorial image of these different streams, we have the past/mental image and the future/desire flowing toward one another horizontally and overlapping. Then there is the I streaming down from above. Where these three streams meet, I-consciousness arises, differently from the rest of our experiences, because nothing has entered from the outer world. From this time onwards, at about the age of three, when there is a new experience of self, the relationship to the outer world changes. It is not an experience of oneness anymore, but of duality: here am I, and here is the world. At this point imitation changes, and the character of relationships changes. It is the time in which the child begins to discriminate his inner world from the outer, and it is the point of time when one has to deal with this inner space of the child, the time that begins the “education of feeling.” Only then will the child be able to process sensations and unconscious love-hate reactions further through the soul’s ability to put concepts to the experience. Only then will we see the first small beginnings of the activ-

ity of making a judgment linked to the experience.

At this time, after age three, the child is especially vulnerable to being caught in the inner soul dynamic of desire, of sympathy and antipathy. Desires become more persistent because they have mental images attached to them. Also memories of desires rise up in the soul and these memories are able to intensify the longing in the child. There are only two ways for any desire to be put to rest: either through the decision not to pursue the desire or to redirect it, which relies on the capacity of the I (usually the adult needs to help with this) or fulfillment of the desire.

If we now look at the faculty of the I within the soul to make judgments, we see that the child can make judgments only to a small extent. What we see in the little child is just a glimmering of this future capacity. But the ability to make judgments which arise out of one’s own soul will mature only after age fourteen and the birth of the astral body. Developing judgment will require transformation which loosens feeling from willing and develops a non-egotistical love for thoughts and ideals. But at the time of early childhood, it is developmentally appropriate when we observe feeling of the young child linked to desire and to the stream of will.

How do we support healthy development of this “feeling-will” with young children? First and foremost we must not squash the desire nature of the child’s soul. Desire is the “power house” of the soul. Desire is at the foundation of and the first step to developing connection to the world that will become enthusiasm, interest, and love. Without those the child will not be able to counterbalance intellectual activity sufficiently and the child’s thinking will be in danger of losing its liveliness, and may become dry and devoid of imagination. We have a lot of mainstream advice telling us that young children should be able to manage their feelings and desires. But it is done through curtailing the desire, by addressing the mental image / verbal approach. The child is to learn to manage his own emotions or feelings through a process of thought and intellectual understanding. This leads to mental images and concepts; to intellectuality, not to healthy feeling. Our first task is to take this feeling-will seriously in the child. We want to work *with* and not *against* the desire of the child so we do not squash it, deny it, or explain it away.

To establish a solid base for future feeling life, we have to take care of the physical foundation for the realm of feeling, the rhythmical system. This system has its cosmic counterpart in the moving stars, the planets,

which move together in such a way that harmony is created between them. Similarly it is the task of the rhythmic system to maintain harmony between all organs and processes in the body, and to mediate between the nerve-sense system and the metabolic-limb system. The way the rhythmical system works can inform us about the ways of educating feeling, about finding a supporting balance between the different streams.

We can observe at bedtime how important it is for young children that the day is completed in harmony of feeling and restfulness of will. The breathing becomes deeper and more regular; the child is able to let go and sleep. Children have trouble going to sleep with unresolved issues. If the child is unsettled, we approach restoring balance from the outside only; we do not go inside the child to sort out what started something, and so on. We want to bring the child into harmony with the environment. This applies to nap time as well, when activities should gradually fade. This is what we try to achieve when we introduce nap time rituals of physical care for the child: cocooning, warm wash cloth, lyre playing, and then silence and sleep.

We can observe during waking times how important it is that harmony prevails between the different activities of the day, with each activity having its rightful place, even that within the process of each activity there is a harmonious sequence. We can think of the rhythm of the day as a harmonious yet lively progression. Through this striving for harmony we are supporting and caring for the life forces of the child as well. What makes activity harmonious does not arise through the will. It is the feeling in will, which lets the adult and child experience harmony. In German there is a wonderful word, “*Zusammenklang*,” which means “sounding together.” We can use this as an image and work with imitation to move toward this “sounding together.”

Harmony is one aspect of music. Music speaks directly to feeling, in that the heart is involved as the organ of perception for harmony. Think about harmony and balance as being at the center of the education of feeling. [Dr. Long-Breipohl’s second lecture presented mainstream views and research regarding emotions and the prevailing attitude that emotions have to be managed by over-riding them through the intellect. The following picks up at this point in the lecture.]

With young children we see a lot of immediate reactions—joy, frustration, anger. These are not processed in the higher parts of the soul. Our fellow mainstream researchers have also noticed that soul development is not complete and that there is not

enough thinking. There are many spontaneous actions that can lead to trouble in the social context. These researchers have tried to form ways to mellow the reactions of the child that are carried by the stream of desire. They look to bring mental imaging and concept formation into the realm of sensation.

But in Steiner/Waldorf education the education of the will precedes the education of the intellect. Steiner warns that anything that does not link to desire and will remains alien to the young child. So here we part ways with the mainstream. What are our alternatives if we do not use this “thinking path”?

We aim to involve all soul faculties. We want to befriend ourselves with the desire and the feeling-will of the young child. Yet, we don’t want to trigger the shortcut reaction of sensation passing over directly into instinctual emotional reactions. How do we do this?

In Steiner early childhood education we use the word “mood” to describe the overall quality of experiences which we are providing: “mood of the fifth” in the musical field, mood of joy in the experience of color, the dreaming mood that prevails in free play, the mood created by the domestic work which we do, mood of the days of the week, or the seasons. What we mean is the etheric quality of a space or an activity in which the soul of the child can nest.

Some fundamental requirements for creating the right “mood” are:

- The days should be well planned and unfold rhythmically without rush.
- Avoid exposing the child to situations that demand quick responses.
- Try to lower the alert level in children by cutting back on verbal communication and using a more non-verbal approach through working with imitation and example as much as possible.
- Remember that little children are naturally sympathetic. But when sympathy is too weak, pervade the atmosphere of the kindergarten with joyousness and laughter, which expands rather than contracts and cramps.

When there is disharmony among children and strong desires expressing themselves:

- Observe what interests the child and direct that interest into the world around him, awakening interest for what life holds in store every day.
- Model the processing of sensations through the higher aspects of the soul. In conflict situations, be slow. Look, listen, pause, and feel into what we see happening. This pondering gives the complain-

ing child the satisfaction of being heard. The adult models how one can get away from the emotional short-cut and come to inwardly process what has happened.

- Avoid giving too much attention to emotions. Emotions are made bigger by trying to deal with them through extensive dialogue.
- Use fairy tales with their wonderful unity of imaginative pictures and the flow of desire in the dynamic of the story. Fairy tales put into play images, wishes, and the I learning to make the right judgment through trials and dangers, achieving a state of harmony in the end. This is the education of feeling at its best.

Feeling has to do with the overall soul dynamic, not just emotion in immediate reaction to sensation. Emotions as such cannot be changed; they come and go. But we can try to harmonize the dynamics within the soul of the child, the interplay between desire and mental image. We have to do this indirectly from outside. The inner soul space of the child is sacred for us, and up to the age of five is closed to admonition and teaching.

We can harmonize the dynamics of the soul through consciously slowing down, through mood

and rhythm, and through making the kindergarten into an “island of peace,” a cradle for the emerging feeling of the child. This is what I would like to call the foundations of the education of feeling. ♦

## Notes

\* The reader is referred to the “Psychosophy” lectures in *A Psychology of Body, Soul, and Spirit*, lectures of Rudolf Steiner, particularly Lecture 4. Limitations of space cannot adequately convey the content from these lectures which Dr. Breipohl worked with intensively. Only a very simplified summary of the content is included in this article.

\*\* Rudolf Steiner gives a different picture of this diagrammatically for teachers in Lecture 2 of *The Study of Man (The Foundations of Human Experience)*.

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Renate Long-Breipohl speaking at the 2013 WECAN East Coast Conference. Photo by Bill Day