

## *Raising Happy, Healthy, and Capable Children*

the years, though, I have seen fear and uncertainty becoming stronger.

Out of my own experience as teacher, parent, and grandparent, I have found that three cornerstones can serve as trustworthy, bedrock foundations for raising healthy, happy, and capable children. The first is an understanding of children's development, for this teaches us to neither ask too much nor too little of our children as they grow. The second is an understanding of the importance of warmth for the growth and development of our children, to care for our children so that their bodies develop a strong capacity for warmth. And the third is an awareness of the gifts that life rhythms— daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly — bring to our children.

These are the three cornerstones for raising healthy children that I will be describing today.

### **Growing into Life**

Babies take in their environment without discrimination. All impressions go deeply within: an infant takes in sound and color, feels how he is being handled and absorbs even the attitude of his mother as she cares for him. He absorbs all his surroundings as sense impressions, and is unable to judge or filter them. During this time, we must be the protective barriers for our babies.

According to Rudolf Steiner, infants' sense impressions "ripple, echo, and sound" throughout the whole of their bodies. From this perspective, what infants take in as impressions affects their life forces and thereby how their bodies develop and the ability of their organs to function rhythmically.<sup>1</sup> This remains the case particularly throughout the first seven years and most dramatically during infancy.

### *Birth to Two-and-a-Half Years*

Let's imagine we are holding a tiny, newborn baby in our arms. What are our first impressions? Steiner noted that the life forces in an infant work mainly in the head, developing the nervous system. We can see that her head accounts for one fourth of her total length and is as broad as her whole chest; her jaw is small with a receding chin, and her features are rounded and soft. Her arms are short, and her pelvis and legs less developed than the rest of her body.

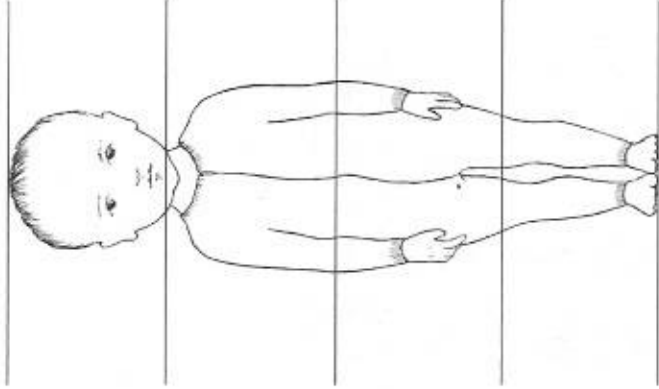
The newborn's organs are still developing both their structure and their ability to function rhythmically. You will notice that a new baby breathes unevenly. We can help our infants develop healthy inner rhythms by surrounding them with the repetitive rhythms of daily life. An infant's movements are also

<sup>1</sup> Rudolf Steiner, *The Essentials of Education*, Stuttgart, April 8-11, 1924, Lecture 2, trans. Jesse Darrrell (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1926), 36.

chaotic. If you watch a hungry baby, you will see tremendous activity and flailing of limbs. As babies adjust to their household's rhythms and begin to imitate adult movements, they gradually become more orderly in their own activity.<sup>2</sup>

During this first stage the most important achievements of the young child are in the areas of speaking, walking, and the more instinctive aspects of thinking. The infant begins this develop-

ment as soon as he is born, for crying is the beginning of speech. As the infant develops, his speech evolves into that universal babbling we all know. Babbling is initially the same for babies all around the world. Soon this babbling differentiates into sounds ending in "ah" such as "mama," "ba ba," and "da da," then into sounds specific to the parents' language. He first names the people and objects in his surroundings and



<sup>2</sup> Freya Jafke, "The Significance of Imitation and Example for the Development of the Will", *Waldorf Kindergarten Newsletter*, Spring, 1990, 1.

communicates with one-word sentences. Then, he adds verbs that bring these names into action. Finally, we hear simple, complete sentences and a sudden blossoming of more verbal interaction: our toddler seems to chatter all day long.

Something similar is happening in our baby's physical body. A newborn child cannot hold up her head without support, but gradually her neck grows strong enough to support her heavy head. Over the next few months, the infant begins to roll over and sit up, and to develop stronger arm and chest muscles. These early movements lay the foundation for walking.

As the legs and lower torso develop, the skill of crawling emerges. Movement and speech development are so interrelated that speech therapists often prescribe crawling exercises to help older children with speech difficulties.

It is quite wonderful to watch the development of a child in these first years of life. He tries over and over to accomplish the tasks of sitting, crawling, and walking. No matter how many times he falls down, he never gives up trying. An inner drive says, "I will do this!" A photo of my oldest granddaughter, so proudly finding her equilibrium in space, says this so well. In the picture, she is walking with both arms up in the air. She had let go of all other supports but was still holding on to heaven:



Still holding  
on to heaven

Imitation plays a large role in speech development. If we speak well around children, they will also speak well. Steiner was among the first educators to ask us to refrain from using baby talk when speaking to young children, and to avoid correcting their speech. Simply speaking properly in the presence of the child leads to proper speech development.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Rudolf Steiner, "The Child Before the Seventh Year," in *Understanding Young Children: Extracts from Lectures by Rudolf Steiner Compiled for the Use of Kindergarten Teachers*, December 23, 1921 to January 7, 1922 (London: Anthroposophical Publishing Company, 1948), 1-7.

We can think back to our newborn baby who had two main activities — eating and sleeping. Then, we can follow her development during the first two years as she learns to sit, crawl, stand, and walk independently. She explores and discovers the world around her through movement and develops speech out of babbling.

We become aware that all these steps are part of our baby's awakening into the world. As our child moves through these ever-changing stages, we need to adjust our ways of relating to her.

### *Two-and-a-Half to Five Years*

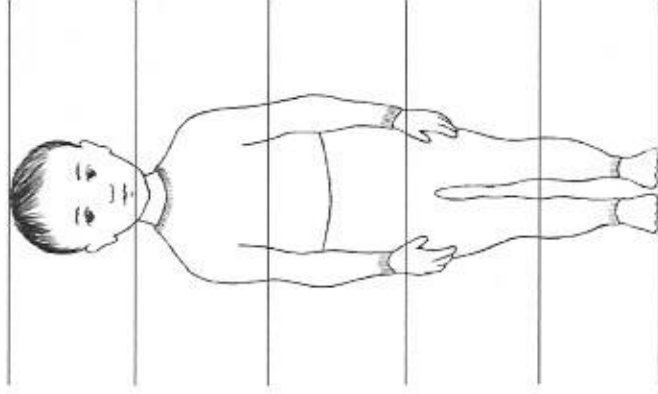
The main physical feature of this middle period of early childhood is observed in the growth of the torso. With this shift in growth, we see an emphasis on broadening and filling out of the trunk area, particularly the chest. Our child's life forces now work mainly in the upper chest area, primarily in the heart and lungs. As the trunk becomes the focal point of the child's growth, the proportion of head to total length changes to one-fifth. What we often call the "toddler tummy" is usually large and somewhat fatty looking, causing the whole torso to resemble an oval. Our toddler does not yet have a clear waistline or visible curve in the back.

What has become of the head in the meantime? Our toddler's chin has come somewhat forward, his upper lip protrudes

slightly over the lower lip, and his face has become more expressive. His neck has also grown longer. His legs and arms have both filled out more, though there is still no strong growth in the legs.

Our two-and-a-half to five-year-old's movements have become increasingly more agile and coordinated. She climbs everything and runs with ever-greater steadiness and speed, as any parent who has tried catching a runaway child will confirm.

We can also see a similar inner development. When our toddler is somewhere around two-and-a-half years of age, we begin to notice his developing memory. According to Steiner,<sup>4</sup> this early memory has its basis in imitation: "A child imitates



<sup>4</sup> Rudolf Steiner, *The Roots of Education*, Lecture 3, April 13-17, 1924 (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1968), 36.

something one day. The next day and the day following, he does it again, and the action is not only performed outwardly but also right into the innermost parts of his physical body. This is the basis of memory."

Children first develop an associative memory. Seeing a cookie tin will trigger the memory of taking cookies to Grandma. However, if you ask what she did that morning your toddler may not be able to recall the events. At the time, she may say she doesn't remember or may say very little. But sometime, days or even weeks later, some object or event will spark the child's memory, and a whole story will come flooding out in full detail. At this stage, it is best to refrain from asking children such questions because it places a demand on them that they are not ready for developmentally.

Around the age of three, a child begins to refer to himself as "I." Until then, he referred to himself as "me," or as his proper name, such as Tommy or Johnny. But one day a parent or teacher may hear, "I don't want to do what you want me to do. I want to do what I want to do."

Your child has reached a new stage. With this first experience of self as a separate being, thinking begins to awaken.<sup>5</sup> She develops a clearer sense of time—yesterday, today, tomorrow —

<sup>5</sup> Karl Koenig, *The First Three Years of the Child* (Spring Valley, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1969), 48–49.

though it will be some time well in the future before she really understands what "We're leaving in five minutes" means. Her newly developed capacities of speech and memory are the basis for this awakening thinking. We used the example of the sight of the cookie tin sparking a memory of taking cookies to grandma's house. Gradually, a young child's memory becomes more independent and does not need visual cues to recall events or experiences.

Closely following the "I" stage is the "no" stage. Even if your son normally would want to do something you have asked him to do, he may now say "no." How we, the adults, react to that "no" is important. If we become flustered or reactive, our three-year-olds will imitate that. If it is time to wash hands, we should simply go with our child and both of us should wash our hands.

We must look a bit past the "no." Our toddlers are trying it on for size, as we would try on a pair of shoes. If we are not confrontational, both parent and child will be happier, though this doesn't mean backing off from a necessary task. But saying a rhyme, singing a song, or doing a task with your child will often bring the resistant will of the three-year-old along. A well-placed bit of humor works wonders during the "no" stage.

At approximately age three, children are able to express their feelings more readily and may now show more affection. Your

child may crawl up on your lap for a hug in a way that didn't happen before. Children also develop more facility with language during this stage and begin to use adjectives to express how they feel about things. Earlier they may have asked for a cookie. Now, they may ask for a yummy chocolate cookie.

Another aspect of this stage of language development is the delightful use of made-up words. Our child plays with language in a very creative way and loves to listen to stories, especially at bedtime. This interest in stories grows out of and helps develop her expanding vocabulary and greater understanding of language.

This is also the age of "why." They will ask, "Why?" over and over but may not be very interested in our answers. They are exploring the fact that they can ask. It is a great temptation for adults to offer complete scientific answers in response. But a simple poetic answer is just fine and is really all they need at this stage. "Why is it dark outside?" "Father Sun is asleep now. He will come back in the morning to wake us up." For a child between three and five years of age, this is a fine explanation of the earth revolving around the sun.

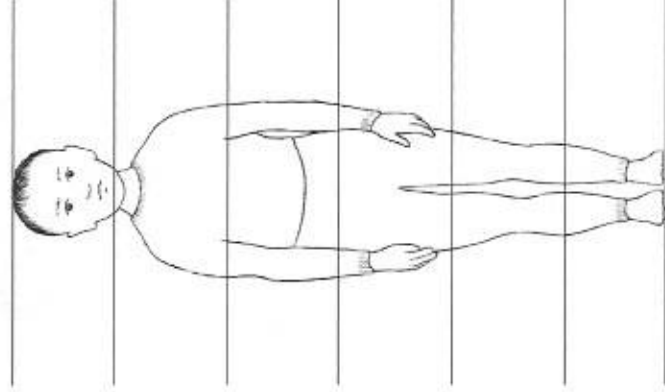
Our youngster's social skills are also developing. He goes from the parallel play of the two-year-old to the interactive play of the three-, four-, and five-year-old. However, the "I" and "no" phases of the three-year-old are often followed by the well-known period of stubbornness around the age of four or four-and-a-half. When confronted or opposed, our four-year-old

can really dig in his heels and be quite a challenge. As much as he enjoys playing with friends, sharing his toys can be hard for him. As he approaches the end of this stage, he enters a more harmonious period. Some educators have even referred to the five-year-old stage as a grace period.

### *Five to Seven Years*

Between the ages of five and seven years, children undergo big changes in physical development, and we see a growth spurt particularly in the legs.

Overnight the child seems to have outgrown all her clothes, especially long pants. At this age, the life forces mainly work in the limbs. The loss of the padding of baby fat makes muscles and joints more visible. The "toddler tummy" disappears with the slimming of her abdomen. The spinal column takes on a maturing curve and a defined waistline appears.



Play is more goal-oriented, more thought out, as the five-



Play dates with chosen friends become very important

to seven-year-old can now better direct his or her own actions. You can observe the purposeful run of a six-year-old as contrasted with the purely joyful run of a three-year-old. After repeated efforts, children acquire real skill on the climbing bars at the playground and want to show their newfound agility to whomever will watch.

Other changes we can see at this stage include greater memory development, which can make it more difficult for parents and teachers to distract children from inappropriate behavior:

now they remember what they wanted to do and will likely persist in trying to do it! Your child's sentences become more complex, and he may even shock you by using slang or swear words heard elsewhere. Expressions of sassy back talk as well as stronger bouts of anger over perceived injustices are all part of this transition period. The six-year-old is approaching school age and struggling to adjust to his newly developing capacities.

Our five- to seven-year-old grows much more aware of her relationships to peers. Play dates with chosen friends become very important. Her play world broadens from home and backyard to encompass the whole block. At dinnertime, parents now have to search in and around neighbors' homes for their child. Our older youngster now plays more sophisticated street games, with rules and shared equipment such as bicycles, jump ropes, balls, and chalk. She has a sense of freedom with her friends, but parents know they still need to keep a watchful eye.

## The Importance of Warmth

Steiner taught that warmth supports life and is, therefore, a foundation of all health and development. We sense warmth even before birth, through the warmth of our mother's womb. As adults, we can generate our own warmth, but infants cannot do this very well. Babies must rely on their parents to provide body contact, proper clothing, and blankets to keep them