

Parent Letter - The Four Lower Senses

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Dear Early Childhood Parents,

There are many capacities that we as adults hope to cultivate in our children, both as parents and as teachers. We want them to feel secure in their bodies and move with confidence. Socially, we hope that they relate well to their peers and are accepting of differences. We watch for a developing awareness of the world around them that leads to interest, attentiveness and healthy interaction. How does the kindergarten support this development and what can parents do at home to strengthen these qualities? It will be helpful to look at four building blocks that are foundational for healthy child development. These building blocks are known by different names, but together they can be referred to as the four bodily senses. Three of them are senses that are in addition to the five that we are familiar with; we usually don't recognize them and aren't aware of their importance, but they provide an essential foundation for the development of the capacities listed above and many others as well. Our senses provide a gateway to the outer world and are also the path that the world takes to impress itself on our inner life.

The first sense is one that is familiar to you—the sense of touch (it is also referred to as the tactile sense). Through the sense of touch we experience where our body ends and the world begins—we are 'awakened' to the world. We feel our skin as the boundary between ourselves and what is outside of us and gain a sense of self that is separate from what is being touched; we never enter this outer world but instead experience its impact on us. As the child grows, the touch sense builds up an inner map of the body that is the beginning of self-identity. If the sense of touch is nourished in the child, it will lead to a feeling of security and trust in the physical

world. Children also learn to trust in the judgment of the adults around them and later in their own judgment. This trust leads to inner flexibility and acceptance of boundaries.

There are many things caregivers can do to strengthen the sense of touch. It is, of course, important to hold and cuddle the child, but wrestling and deep pressure touch are also wonderful teachers! Allow the child to be the guide as to how much is enough. Hard work and chores, using the body, allow the child to exercise touch and experience physical boundaries. Surrounding the child with interesting objects from the natural world and encouraging them to engage actively in nature provide nourishment for the senses and can lead to an understanding of what the environment is ‘telling’ us. Dressing a child in natural fibers such as wool, silk and cotton and providing toys made from natural materials gives the brain an engaging experience through the senses, via the nervous system. This experience develops parts of the brain and thereby is ‘written into’ the physical body. The young child is deeply connected with sensory experience, really united with sensations, so the integrity and quality of those experiences lay an important foundation for future development and should be worthy of that task.

The next sense, called the life sense, may be unfamiliar (it is also referred to as somatic awareness). With this sense we experience our constitution, or how we feel, and it is spread throughout our entire body. It teaches us about the condition of our inner life processes, and when all of our systems are functioning properly we have an unconscious feeling of well-being or contentment. We have the ability to monitor how we feel; without this sense we would not know when to rest, eat, drink or take care of ourselves when we are sick. A healthy sense of life can lead to patience, resiliency and problem-solving abilities. It gives self-confidence to try new things, accept differences and work with contradictions that are faced in the world.

This sense is connected with nutrition and so a healthy diet is important, as is an environment that is supportive of the digestive process. Rhythm and routine provide security and help anchor parts of the day such as breakfast, dinner and bedtime so that the child can rely on those times of warmth and connection with parents and family. The aromas of the food that is cooking begin to engage the digestive system before the food is eaten and a calm atmosphere during the meal allows the child to relax so that the digestive organs can do their work. Engaging in processes, activities that follow an order such as cooking, are very nurturing for the sense of life, especially if they are repeated rhythmically such as baking on the same day every week. Taking time to bake and then setting up for a tea party can be a joyful and warming experience for parent and child.

Not only do we have the capacity as human beings to move, we also have the ability to notice that we are moving, what parts of our body are moving and our position in space. We can control certain parts of our body using our muscular system and we sense this movement so that we can be aware that our movements match our intentions. We also perceive movement and form in the outer world. This is called the sense of self-movement (it is also referred to as proprioception). Sensing our movements accurately gives us a feeling of freedom and allows us to express our inner selves with gestures. We feel the connection between our bodies and the earth; we experience where our own space begins and ends. If the sense of movement is healthy, a child is very imitative. Being aware of this leads to the realization that as adults we have the responsibility to provide the child with healthy, purpose-filled movements that are worthy of imitation. We can see in the infant that movement gradually develops from chaos to control, but in order for children to maintain this control, they need regular, rhythmic periods of rest.

Daily life activities, including 'heavy' work, engaging in free play and active games, and imitating slow deliberate movements help to develop this sense. Experiencing the impact that the child can have on the environment, such as with water and sand play, is also important. Some movements that can be encouraged and incorporated into games are push/pull activities or games that involve a change of direction, crawling, rolling and jump rope. Making, and then walking, an obstacle course is an exciting and challenging activity that children never tire of doing.

The last of the bodily senses is balance (it is also referred to as spatial orientation and is mainly reliant on the vestibular system in the inner ear). We can only keep our balance in reference to the outer world, so this sense is connected to our perception of that which is outside of ourselves. When a child stands freely, gravity is overcome and the three dimensions of space are conquered. When an infant stands for the first time, this is a moment of triumph! Our sense of balance helps us to maintain uprightness in relationship to the earth's gravity and feel centered. With a healthy sense of balance, we feel confident to fill whatever space we are in with ourselves as the center point. Regardless of our position in space, we can experience ourselves as a unique individual. This security in our own experience of balance helps us to learn to share space with others. In contrast, seasickness takes away our equilibrium and we lose ourselves, almost wishing we did not exist. In this state, we certainly cannot take others into account. If a child is constantly experiencing a lack of equilibrium, learning becomes difficult.

We know from studies of children being raised by animals that role models are required to attain the uprightness that we associate with the human being. We can model our own inner balance to children through self-care and our ability to find resolution in situations of imbalance.

Discernment and a sense of justice result from a healthy sense of balance. To nurture these

qualities, we can tell or read stories to children that demonstrate polarities and then come to resolution by finding the middle ground or balance point. Activities that engage the vestibular system support the development of the sense of balance—skating, sailing, cycling, swinging, rolling and stopping, and entering the ‘upside down world’ (having the head lower than the waist). These experiences not only support the development of outer balance, but also cultivate the ability to come to inner balance so that the child can be an active listener and have a sense of appropriateness in different situations.

The healthy development of these four bodily senses is the foundation for the unfolding of important human capacities that support the child throughout a lifetime on earth. Children crawl into their bodily houses with the sense of touch, experience their bodies with the sense of life, and then live in their house with the sense of movement. With the sense of balance, they receive the confidence to venture into the outer world to experience and learn from all the various relationships that they will encounter on their journey. They are free to become centered human beings who can actively and creatively engage with the world around them.

Sources

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