

The Soul-Spiritual Nature of Human Life and the Three Phases of Childhood

Inspired Family Life's parent education work is grounded in the recognition that human beings are soul-spiritual as well as biological beings and that human life unfolds in seven-year phases. While we share many approaches with other parenting educators, what is most unique in our work is the understanding that childhood consists of three distinct periods of growth, each with a special purpose for human development. In each phase of childhood, all of us develop an important set of human capacities that we will have for the rest of our lives! In childhood we develop three important dimensions of our humanness--and it matters whether we get it right then or not.

Habits of action, or behavior, are developing in the years from birth to seven as children find their bodily orientation to, and effective interaction with, the physical world.

Capacities of feeling, values and attitudes are developing in the years from seven to fourteen.

Ideas, beliefs and judgments are developing in the years from fourteen to twenty-one.

The health and completeness of development at each stage enables the same at the next stage. The patterns created in the world of actions in early childhood greatly influence the development of feelings, values and attitudes in the grade school years. The habits of behavior and feeling values gained before age 12 strongly affect the kinds of thoughts, beliefs and judgments that arise in adolescence.

What does this really mean? If habits of behavior and orientation implanted in the early years are positive and healthy -- and the child learns to be helpful, hard-working, kind, imaginative, active, reverent, and tolerant -- then the child will more easily develop wholesome attitudes and values in the elementary school years -- such as responsibility, caring, fairness, openness, resourcefulness, creativity, honesty, and ethics or conscience. If a child internalizes positive and effective habits of behavior and feeling values such as these in the first two periods of childhood, then adolescence may more easily be a time of idealism, positivity and inspiration rather than of cynicism, disappointment, frustration, anger, or even despair.

The patterns of action, feeling and thought that children develop during the first twenty-one years are like a "vessel" of capacities for the rest of adulthood. It is into this vessel that the spirit-essence or individuality of the young person enters as captain at about age 21. If the young adult's vessel includes wholesome habits of behavior, sound attitudes and values,

and creative, wise and flexible thoughts and beliefs, the young adult's "I" will be rich in resources for a resilient, creative and fruitful life. To the degree that this is lacking, the young person may have difficulty steering a healthy course in life and have to work hard to change his or her childhood habits, attitudes and beliefs in order to have a rewarding and fulfilling life.

Children's Need for Loving Authority

What is also unique about the Waldorf approach to childhood, as distinct from almost every other educational or parenting program, is the emphasis on the adult as a loving authority. Many modern parenting and classroom management programs recommend that parents and teachers engage in collaboration and negotiation with children, beginning as early as the preschool years. Such democratic approaches are seen as a healthier alternative to older forms of family and classroom discipline which relied on strict or harsh authority, such as yelling, scolding, blaming and physical punishment.

What we have learned from our experiences working in Waldorf classrooms and consulting with other Waldorf teachers is that children have a deep need for adults to stand before them as guides along the path of life. Their need for guidance from adults changes in character as they move through the three phases of childhood. In the first seven years, children need to imitate the adults who are caring for them. The task of adults is to be worthy of children's imitation. This is easier said than done! The loving authority that parents provide in these years helps children master their impulses and learn self-control. In the second seven years, children need to admire parents and teachers and to be guided by our firm and loving direction. The loving authority that adults provide in these years helps children internalize healthy values and attitudes and the beginnings of conscience. In the third seven years, teens need to individuate from us and we can begin a more collaborative style of parenting, offering adolescents the clarity and wisdom of our mature judgment as they develop their ideas, beliefs and judgments. It is the adult's relationship to the child as loving authority throughout all of childhood which gives children the template for the relationship to their own spirit-essence, or "I" -- their inner captain -- which may begin to steer their life beginning in their twenties.

Parenting and Moral Development

All children are born without a developed morality. They do have an inclination towards goodness which shows as an affinity for goodness in the first seven years, a feeling for goodness in the second seven years, and enthusiasm for the good in adolescence. To have their inclination towards goodness activated, children depend on moral influence from the world of adults.

Perhaps the most important task of the adult world is to foster morality in the children who will become the next generation to guide our world. Healthy discipline is one important factor in the moral development of children. We think that the secret to healthy moral development lies in four essential factors:

* *Goodness is learned primarily by example throughout childhood.*

This means that how we adults behave and what we think and feel towards all of life are the most potent influences on our children's behavior, values, attitudes and thoughts.

* *Self-knowledge and self-development are essential!*

We need to examine our own habits of action, feeling and thought so that we can become more adequate, living examples of goodness for our children.

* *The capacity to maintain or regain an inner sense of well-being and calm is perhaps the most important skill for adults who wish to instill goodness in children.*

Our own capacity to rebalance ourselves when we are out of balance is one of the most important habits we can cultivate and one of the most important teachings we can offer to the children in our lives.

* *The capacity to be present and attune with a child's experience is also essential.*

Presence and attunement help children grow a resilient nervous system and a healthy sense of self, both of which are fundamental building blocks for healthy moral development.

The Five Most Common Pitfalls in Parenting

The five most common pitfalls in parenting involve misunderstanding about what really motivates children's behavior in each of the three phases of childhood. These common parenting practices lead to distress for parents and children alike! These common parenting pitfalls are:

* *talking to children without sufficient presence or attunement*

and so missing the impact that your disconnected style of communication has on your child's ability to respond positively;

** assuming that children under 12 are motivated by logic and reason*

and so talking a lot to children under 12 about what is wrong in what they are doing, why it is not good for them or you, and why they should stop and do what you want them to do;

** overlooking what does motivate a child in each phase of childhood*

and so missing opportunities to ask for cooperation in language and approaches that align with the child's real motivations;

** modeling negative qualities when you are asking for positive qualities or behavior from the child*

and so failing to see the power of your example as a determinant of your child's subsequent behavior;

** relying on yelling and punishment when all else fails*

and so overlooking the fact that yelling and punishment may have unwanted side effects which can result in an increase in negative behavior and deterioration in trust between parent and child.

We have found that parenting with an understanding of the seven-year phases of development helps parents avoid these common pitfalls, which contribute so much to suffering and conflict in the family.

Taking the Long View

Children come into the world with an immature orientation to life -- "all about me" -- and do not reach maturity until the twenties, if then! Throughout their years at home and school, they are learning how to act, feel and think in ways that balance their self-focused wants and needs with interest in and concern for the well-being of others.

Take the long view -- you are the guide for your children's growth towards adulthood over many years! Cultivate patience. Help them learn what they are ready to learn and try not to expect more. Perhaps the most important help you can give them is your own balanced, mature, responsible, caring ways towards them and everyone else in your life, including yourself. If you think about the impact your own parents have had on your life, you will realize that it is your way of being, feeling, thinking and living that is the greatest influence on your children, now, and far into the future.

Opportunities on the Path of Parenting

Our work as parents is so vital! It is up to us to help our children develop soundness in their habits of behavior in the early years, wholesome attitudes and values in the middle years, and beliefs and habits of thinking that are creative, flexible and wise in adolescence. Of course we are assisted in this work by other adults who influence our children, but we are the most important and enduring influence on their development!

As children are growing and changing through the three phases of childhood, parents and other adults can also evolve in our ways of relating to children. Changing how we relate to children helps them to develop the unique gifts that belong to each phase of childhood. If we match our way of relating to children's stages of development, we will more likely help them construct a vessel full of the resources for a rich and rewarding journey through adulthood.

We recognize that children are often mysteries to their parents! We support parents in working with the mystery of parenting by helping them access guidance from the spiritual dimension of life. We offer practical suggestions for connecting with the higher world that parents of diverse religious backgrounds and beliefs have found useful and effective.

In our workshops, support circles and publications we offer you parenting approaches that change with each phase of childhood so that you can:

- * more easily and fully understand your children;
- * gain insight into and develop confidence in your parenting;
- * become more deeply and supportively connected to your children;
- * communicate so that your children will be able to be more attentive and receptive;
- * help instill positive habits of action, feeling and thought in yourself and in your children as they develop through the three phases of childhood;
- * use discipline strategies that are loving, effective and positive for parent and child;
- * cultivate a connection with spiritual resources for ongoing help in parenting.

We hope that by sharing the fruits of our research and life experiences we might help you create more success, positivity and grace in your day-to-day life with your children and more inner peace and confidence in yourselves.