

The Four Foundational Senses and their Cultivation in Waldorf Early Childhood Education

BY VIVIAN JONES-SCHMIDT, MEd



Most people will state with confidence that human beings have five senses—touch, taste, sight, hearing, and smell. The idea that we have five senses has been the common wisdom for so long that it is rarely questioned. However, today virtually all physiologists and psychologists agree that human beings have more than five senses. Some maintain that we have as many as twenty-five senses. Indeed, a human being possessing only the five senses and lacking other sensing capacities that we take for granted—such as the senses that relate to balance, temperature, and the position of our body in space—would not be able to function in the world.

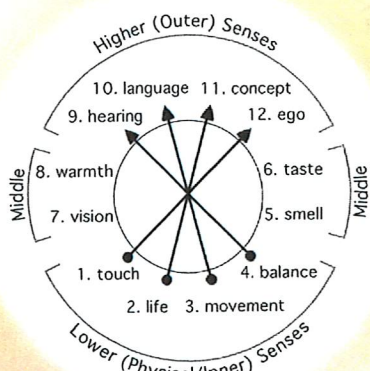
A century ago, Rudolf Steiner proposed that the human being has twelve senses. He divided them into three groups of four. The “foundational” senses include the sense of touch, the sense of well-being, the sense of one’s own movement, and the sense of balance. Steiner referred to these also as the “senses of will” and held that they are related to the extremities of the human

body and to the metabolic organs. What Steiner called the “senses of feeling” include the senses of sight, taste, and smell, and the sense of heat. These are related to the rhythmic system of the body based in the heart and lungs. The “senses of cognition,” located in the nerve-sense system of the body, are the sense of self or “I,” the sense of thought, the sense of speech or word, and the sense of hearing.

Steiner held that each of the groups of senses develops and matures during a particular stage in a child’s growth. During the first seven years of life, the foundational senses are central. Between the ages of seven and fourteen, the senses of feeling dominate and, from fourteen to twenty-one, the senses of cognition. One might say that the first four senses relate to the inner workings of the physical body, the next four to the connections between the individual and the environment, and the final four to our development as social/spiritual beings in relationship with other people.

Steiner’s understanding of the senses and of their development deeply affected the curriculum and the pedagogy that he created for the first Waldorf school. In the elementary grades, for example, the arts and the artistic presentation of academic content is emphasized because the children during this time are primarily beings of feeling and aesthetic sensibility.

The four foundational senses are evident in the newborn child. In the United States, standard medical practice is to evaluate the newborn using the Apgar scale. This procedure in effect evaluates Steiner’s four foundational senses. The health of the infant is judged by the heartiness of her cry (an indication of the sense of well-being) and by her ability to respond to touch and movement (an indication that the senses of touch, balance, and movement are operative).



The twelve human senses as described by Rudolf Steiner

The Sense of Touch

The sense of touch tells us that we are in contact with something external to ourselves. It is operative even in the womb. Cushioned and surrounded by amniotic fluid, the unborn child eventually comes into contact with the mother's womb and has the experience of external boundary, an "other." When this boundary becomes too oppressive, the child is born, leaving the confines of the



The first and dominant experience of touch for an infant usually is his or her own skin against the mother's skin.

womb to be taken up into the mother's arms. A newborn, newly separated from the mother, must become accustomed to this separation. The first task of the newborn can therefore be seen as determining where he ends and the mother begins. After that, the life of the infant—and of the young child—is

a constant alternation between connection and attachment to and separation from the mother.

Touch involves only a tiny awakening of the self at the periphery of the body, an awareness of one's physical boundary as distinct from the outside world. To go beyond the boundary of one's self requires both courage and trust. While the sense of touch gives us an awareness of our boundaries as physical beings, it also grants us a sense of ourselves within our bodies. This sense of touching is thus the foundation for my understanding that I am unique, an individual complete in and of myself.



A future stockbroker in red power-tie uses his sense of balance and experiences the joy of vertical ambulation.

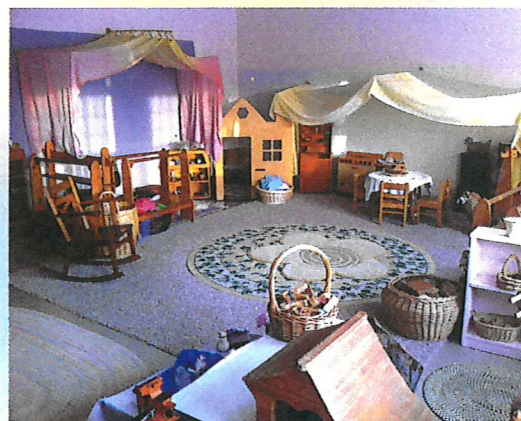
Touching something, while it provides a sense of self, an experience of "in here," also reminds us of the "out there" and of our connection to the world around us. I am a part of something that is larger than I alone am. And the question arises—What is that out there? Who is that other person out there? Touch thus lays the foundation for one's interest in something beyond oneself. And this interest is the basis of all learning—social, motor, emotional, linguistic, and cognitive.

The Sense of Well-Being

The second sense, the "sense of well-being," is also called the "life sense," or the "sense of vitality." Like the sense of touch, this sense is present from birth. The organ of the sense of well-being is the nervous system. When things are going well with our internal processes, we are not aware of it. We become aware of this sense only when something is not as it should be. A well-developed sense of well-being gives one an understanding of self as unity, of comfort within one's body, rather than a perception of self as internally incoherent or inharmonious. The child feels complete, secure, and protected within her body and is, in a manner of speaking, at home.

The sense of well-being provides us with a continual subconscious communication that we are safe and secure within our bodies, and that the

work of establishing a firm foundation for the development of the personality is undisturbed. If we are in pain, the life sense becomes aware of it and works to restore the original sense of contentment and coherence. The healthy sense of well-being distinguishes between "big problems" and "little problems." This life sense regenerates the body when we sleep and restores it to having a feeling of calm and harmony.



A typical Waldorf kindergarten classroom

The Sense of Self-Movement

The sense of self-movement refers to the human capacity to experience one's own movement, albeit subconsciously. We are made to move. From earliest infancy, we move with joy and a feeling of freedom. Picture eighteen-month-olds learning to stand and to walk. They run! And they laugh while they run! Movement is so delightful to them that they cannot contain themselves.

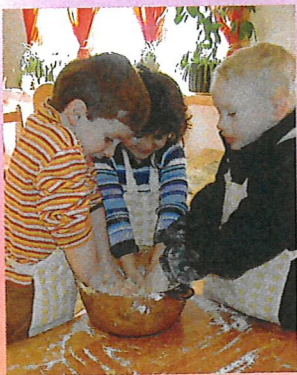
The sense of self as actor and decider in one's own life originates in the knowledge of self as one who initiates movement. We might not be able to control a particular situation, for example, but we can choose how we will respond. Movement, metaphorically, translates into the confidence to change the direction of one's life, or to create something entirely new.

The Sense of Balance

The sense of balance is related to the sense of movement and to the senses of sight and hearing. The organ for balance is located in the inner ear. If we stand still with our eyes closed, we will probably soon start to feel dizzy or to lose our balance. As small children imitating elders, and trying and failing many times, we managed to lift ourselves and stand upright. Then we used our senses of balance and self-movement to learn to walk. The lower body serves the upper body. The upper body with its hands and arms is consequently free. Our arms and hands are uniquely human, allowing us to create, to bring our intentions into activity, to reach out to one another.

The Foundational Senses and Waldorf Early Childhood Education

During the first seven years of life, the child responds to sensory experiences much more intensely than at any other time in life. Steiner described the young child as being “entirely a sense organ.” Consequently, young children are open and vulnerable. They readily and strongly react to sensory stimuli in their environment. If there are too many stimuli or if the stimuli are strong or harsh, the child’s mood and behavior may be negatively affected.



Kneading bread dough together provides a special tactile experience.

Thus in the Waldorf early childhood classroom, great attention is paid to all the sensory stimuli that the children will experience. Natural light or soft incandescent lighting is used rather than harsh fluorescent light. The colors of the walls, floor coverings, and furnishings

are muted and natural. Natural materials such as wood, wool, and cotton are used in the playthings and accoutrements of the room. The teachers strive to speak to the children in a pleasant way, neither too loud nor too soft.

In addition, the special needs of the developing foundational senses are consciously addressed. The children are provided with many tactile experiences—such as warming beeswax in their hands and then modeling it, kneading dough to make bread, playing outdoors with sand (or mud!), and sitting on or lying down on sheepskins.

The sense of well-being is supported by a predictable daily schedule that alternates periods of activity with periods of rest and recuperation. Every day, free play, circle time, snack, and story time each takes place at its ap-

pointed time. Each day, the children take at least one nap, so that the body can restore the internal homeostasis that is the basis of the sense of well-being.



Playing in the forest engages both the sense of balance and the sense of one’s own movement.

Children in Waldorf early childhood groups and kindergartens are in motion most of the day. Each day, there is extended free play, usually both indoors and outdoors, as well as circle games, movement games, and household chores such as cleaning and snack preparation. Walks in nature, work in the garden, and sessions of eurythmy are also regular features of life. Many schools have a child-sized obstacle course that involves activities such as jumping from one place to another and traversing a log or plank. Thus the development of the senses of balance and self-movement are extremely well served.

The proper cultivation of the foundational senses in the first seven years of life is very important. The Waldorf early childhood curriculum is perhaps unique in focusing on the development of these senses. They are the focus of the cycle of the daily activities, though age-appropriate cognitive and social learning also take place. They are the foundation upon which the healthy development of the senses of feeling is based during the preadolescent years. And those in turn are the foundation upon which the healthy development of the senses of cognition is based between the ages of fourteen and twenty-one. The four senses developing in the first seven years of life are indeed foundational in that their healthy development creates a solid matrix that will help the child to grow into a strong, free, self-motivated, compassionate, and moral adult. ☉



VIVIAN JONES-SCHMIDT discovered Waldorf Education when her daughter was ready for kindergarten, and has never looked back. She was a class and specialty teacher at the Charlottesville Waldorf School and the Richmond Waldorf School for over twenty years, and has served on the editorial board of *Renewal* for seventeen years. Originally trained as a preschool teacher, Vivian now substitutes in preschool classes in Charlottesville.