

Singing Games and the Young Child

~ Daniel Udo de Haes

Singing games may have evolved from ritual dances for adults, developing into games for schoolchildren, and in turn, “naturally” developing into games for kindergartners. If we really see this development as “natural,” then the next step would be to toddlers. Don’t forget, however, that such developments always have their lows and highs. If this were not the case, we would see it evolving further to babies and then. . . ? This development is unthinkable without a change in direction.

In our opinion there seems to be a strong relationship between this change in direction and a much larger change that has been going on in the development of mankind. This is happening through the

devaluation and materialization of man’s inner spirit that is reaching its lowest point, from which lost soul content must be found again. Human beings are longing to rediscover their humanity. Human consciousness, which has become rigidified by the intellect, can now be enlivened and take on new forms.

In ancient times, initiates in the mysteries led people inwardly through ceremonies, myths, and legends. When these leaders withdrew, their position was only partly taken over by the church. The more “cosmic” knowledge of the initiates was not adopted, with the result that the consciousness of humanity became much more rational and intellectualism,

while materialism had the chance to spread widely. But there was a deeper meaning behind the withdrawal of the initiates. When they were no longer led, human beings were given the chance to become spiritually independent. By becoming spiritually independent, they became more and more aware of the fact that their deeper, inner life had been lost. Through this consciousness, and because of this new independence, a search for the lost inner meaning began.

We can now follow our own lead in our search for inner meaning, but only if we want to. A spiritual science that stems from the same deep sources and cosmic guidance as the early mysteries now has a completely new character, which leaves human beings in newly-acquired independence. Thus it can school us in discovering and redeveloping our own deeper humanity.

When considering the young child, we believe that the awakened adult consciousness could free the child within. We are seeing a growing necessity to safeguard and guide that inner part of a child that is in danger of perishing in our modern world: the small measure of cosmic soul life still in him. And when that child carries this small seed through his life and allows it to flourish as he gets older, we hope that it will create a foundation for a new future, at first only for those searching but later for more widespread circles.

In *The Education of the Child*, Rudolf Steiner describes how the human spiritual being receives a threefold dwelling place on earth. Aside from the physical body, it also has an “etheric” shell, the “etheric body” or “life body.” This body carries life, growth, and formative powers as well as the rhythmical element of our being. The third sheath is our “astral” or “consciousness body,” in which cosmic forces work and all soul functions have their foundations. That which we call the birth of a child is actually only the birth of the physical body. The life, or etheric, body is born with the change of teeth and announces that the child is ready for the start of formal education. The astral body presents itself in adolescence as a need for independence. This is when puberty sets in. Our soul body itself, also called the “I,” formed in ancient times, enters the physical body around our twenty-first year (although nowadays sometimes earlier) and is experienced as a more pronounced consciousness; in other words, the I is “born.”

Saying that the etheric body is born when a child begins the change of teeth does not mean that it is not already active. The opposite is true. The etheric body is active “behind the scenes” in the formation of the organs and in the unparalleled physical growth of the first years of life. The first tooth that falls out gives the sign that the organs have been completed so that the etheric body can come forward and start its work. Rhythmical awareness, new interests and thoughts about the outside world, and the desire to learn through new activities and possibilities show that the etheric body has arrived.

Thus, to promote a healthy development of the child, we are encouraged to wait to introduce such elements (including active rhythm) until the first teeth are changed. We should be careful not to be tempted by circumstances and requests by kindergartners to be awakened from their “dream” and brought to “active” rhythm. This being said, however, we should consider each child individually. If certain children are very precocious in their development, yearn for something new, and no longer respond to activities fitting their age, it will be difficult to divert their attention. We cannot correct such a development by force, however much we would like to. In terms of rhythmical development it will be best to go along with such a child’s wishes until it is possible to direct the course back to healthier channels,

without being misled by the eagerness of the child. The forbidden fruit tasted good for both Adam and Eve! We must be aware that in their eagerness, these children are skipping a step in their development. Their precociousness, their will to grasp the external part of life, means that they are neglecting to connect their inner being with earthly life. Through this rift much of their deeper soul content will stay “unborn.” It will pine away and may cast a shadow on the rest of their life.

A great deal of responsibility and insight is demanded from us when dealing with a whole group of children in the kindergarten who have already come into contact with these strong rhythmic games. If even part of the group has tasted the forbidden fruit, it will not be easy to guide them back, however gradually. And if forced, we risk creating tensions that could hurt the group beyond measure. Still, as mentioned before, we can safeguard new children coming into kinder-

*We are seeing
a growing
necessity to
safeguard and
protect that
inner part of
a child that is
in danger of
perishing in our
modern world.*

garten from the still-too-strong rhythm by asking our helper to do something else with them, possibly together with some of the “less rhythmic” little ones. Further, when we do let these little ones carefully participate in the games, it is of the utmost importance that we let them participate freely, without asking for rhythmic clapping and stamping. In this way, slowly but steadily, the whole group will regain its level of health.

Modern society generally pulls young children out of their dream world too soon not only through the things around them (radio, television, modern technology, traffic) but also through the way adults and older children live modern life. Alarm clocks go off everywhere! We must do our best to protect the inner development of the child from this danger. By doing this you are not “spoiling” the children, much as infants are not “spoiled” when given milk (preferably breast milk), instead of scrambled eggs, finely ground meat, or clear soup because we think that this will give them more nutrition and they should get used to it. Everyone understands that if we were to give newborns solid foods their system would become completely unbalanced. But not everyone understands how harmful it is for a child’s spiritual constitution if it is given spiritual food that accelerates movement to the next life phase. It is only through compassion for the inner development of children that we will be able to give them experiences that fit where they are in life. If we give them nutrients that will accelerate their growth we will rob them of deeper soul content. The pedagogical foundations brought by Rudolf Steiner are largely made up of an exact account of what is needed and of what one should be careful of in each phase of childhood.

When observing how young people develop with more and more haste, we often hear people say, “He is a child of his time!” But is this true? Shouldn’t we say, “We are adults of our time”? Doesn’t that mean, much more so than before, that we should acquire a consciousness for these new developments? The growth of awareness for the danger of something such as traffic is apparent, but as modern people we must understand that exposing children’s inner being to these dangers is even worse. Destiny has put their future in our care and it is up to us to guide them through the threats that may stand in the way of a healthy life.

In the rest of this book we will consider and attempt to answer the questions of why accelerating development is so harmful, what happens when the right soul food is given, and how we can do this, especially when looking at singing games.

We would like to avoid sticking “passive” or

“active” labels on the various rhythmic experiences of the toddler, kindergartner, and schoolchild. The sleeping rhythmic experience of the toddler is outwardly “passive,” but the inner self may be very lively and active. Instead of inactive, we could speak of a “dream rhythm.” Dreams, without becoming reality, can be very lively. Then, to distinguish between the inwardly active “dream rhythm” of the toddler, we should not see the rhythm of the school child as “active” but rather as “deed rhythm.” The kindergartner lives in the transition between the toddler’s “dream rhythm” and the “deed rhythm” of the schoolchild.

The question is not whether rhythm should play a part in the kindergarten group, but rather how and to what degree, considering all the phases of transition, and how we should act and lead the group. The group should never arrive at the full active rhythm of a schoolchild, but we should be careful not to completely avoid rhythm, however dreamy the youngest member of the group is. It is up to the leader to find her subtle way around all the obstacles so that she can lead each child individually, as well as the group as a whole, down the rhythmic road that the children must take.

For the youngest children, the rhythms of the cosmos and of their own families and homes form the foundation, and remain so throughout kindergarten. Children experience life’s rhythms through the changes from day to night and season to season, and through life at home in general.

For example, Father leaves for work in the morning, comes home again in the evening, and plays with the child by bouncing her rhythmically on his knees. An older sister plays “Row, row, row your boat” with her. From birth, rhythm is passed on to the infant by the mother through the alternation between waking and sleeping, nursing and changing. Children who do not receive this primitive rhythm in their first months and years can be seriously hurt and disadvantaged in their will system, and suffer detrimental consequences both physically and mentally.

All people experience cosmic and life rhythms. But the young child, and especially the infant, experiences them even more—although more out of instinct than consciously. The different relationships to forms of rhythm are present and are important in pre-school and kindergarten groups. Cosmic rhythms (night and day, the seasons) are automatic, but motherly care, and the daily rhythm of parents or siblings, should be reflected by the group leader as much as possible during the day. If the leaders can create a balanced environment, full of imagination and geared to the various ages of the children, we can expect that the

children will develop their own healthy human rhythm that will become “deed rhythm,” ready for school and continuing to grow during the rest of their lives.

Silently present through all the phases of development described above is the will to imitate everything that a child sees in other children and adults. For adults this brings responsibility. A child will imitate everything, that which is seen or unseen, good or bad. Therefore it is of the utmost importance that the adult set a good example.

Among infants, imitation takes place subconsciously. Everything that happens around them is internalized and only becomes visible much later. However, it forms the basis of all aspects of their development. Even after the baby years, this subconscious imitation continues to be important.

The inner, dormant imitation plays an important role in every kindergarten group, not just for the children but also for the leader. Although these processes are concealed from us, it is important that we as adults get a feel for them and try to see the formative meaning they have for the children.

In order to see the line of development of rhythm in early childhood, we should find songs and later singing games that can be used from cradle to grade school to accompany children in their development. The earliest songs should be soft lullabies that have a dreaming rhythm as well as melodic character. Such songs can also be sung with toddlers while on our knee, and with kindergartners we can slowly add the game element without being too “awake.” Songs with a somewhat more awake rhythm—we’d rather not speak of “more joyful,” as the dreaming rhythm is joyful in its own way—can be used for slightly older kindergartners. Finally, we can venture upon songs that have challenging fourths and strongly accented rhythms. We should envelop them with much care to soften the hard, almost sharp edges, even for the older kindergartners. In spite of this, these singing games have such valuable content that playing them is definitely worthwhile.

Of course, it goes without saying that the nature of the rhythm in the singing game depends on the way it is presented by the group leader. One and the same game can be presented with a more cosmic or earthly orientation, depending on the occasion or on the age of the children. But even so, some games are better for the one than for the other and it is important that we develop a consciousness for the various rhythmic forms in order to be able to use them in the various kindergarten age groups. To start with, it is important that we try to put aside our own active adult “deed rhythm” so

that we can understand the still-dreaming rhythm of the kindergartner.

Another important point is the mood created through the musical tones used. Almost all folksongs are written in the “normal” diatonic scale—mostly in major keys, a few in minor—while the kindergartner, and even the schoolchild until the ninth year, should actually not have to conform to these elements. However, the melodies of these old songs are often so dreamy that the major or minor mode is not too apparent, or they can be sung in such a way that this element becomes less important. They leave the children in their dreamy state.

There is one scale that lingers in the cosmic element, playing an important role in early music, and that can now again become of importance through its floating, dreaming character: the pentatonic scale G-A-B-D-E. This scale, which is already being used in anthroposophical circles in new kindergarten songs and singing games, should be studied separately. Suffice it to say that this scale is the basis for melodies most favorable, suitable, and beautiful for the “dream rhythm” of the small child.

The above considerations about the still-cosmic disposition of toddlers and kindergarten-age children and their “childhood dream” could lead to misperceptions. We could have the impression that these children are far-off beings who have not yet woken up, and in the usual sense of the word are “dreamers” instead of “dreamy.” It should be obvious that neither is the case. Everyone knows how lively and spontaneous the still-so-changeable moods of young children may be in their outward expression: skipping or jumping with pleasure, crying in sadness or screaming in rage. Still, everything arises from an inner “dream-like” state. As soon as a conscious wakefulness is desired from young children, they will automatically withdraw and turn away.

The inner “dream-like” state is so crucial to kindergarten-age children’s development that we can only understand them if we find a connection with the hidden essence of this “early childhood dreaminess,” which is of such importance in their daily life. ♦

Daniel Udo de Haes, a Dutch educator, wrote several books about early childhood including the classic *The Young Child*, recently republished by WECAN as *The Creative Word: The Young Child’s Experience of Language and Stories*. This article is adapted from Chapter Three of the new WECAN translation of his book *The Singing, Playing Kindergarten*.