

PETER PAN, INFANT REFLEXES, & THE SENSE OF TOUCH

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“You musn’t touch me!”

“Why not?”

“Because no one ever touches me.”

“No wonder you’re crying!”

Dialogue between Peter and Wendy, from the stage version of “Peter Pan.”

Rudolf Steiner tells us that we actually have twelve senses. Seen in a particular order, with fixed and dynamic aspects to one another, these twelve create a cosmology. Following the form and sequence of the twelve senses, we can explore both the developing child, and the shape of the universe. The first sense we encounter is Touch.

The Sense of Touch is the first experience of Self. Paradoxically, it is also the first experience of Other.

Picture the embryo. It moves in a fluid environment, the same temperature as itself. As it grows, and moves, it encounters – something. The flow of unimpeded movement has stopped; *something is different*. When the being encounters its first boundary, the sense of touch is born. With touch is born the first opportunity to exercise the will.

For the developing child, from conception through the age of two, the will is primarily developed through infant reflexes. These instinctual and universal movement patterns are keyed to survival. It is through infant reflexes that babies turn in the womb, crawl out of the birthing canal, suck, bond, turn over, and crawl.

Infant reflexes are connected directly to the autonomic functions of the body in the brain stem. As babies “practice” these movements, the reflexes ideally become integrated into the higher realms of choice. This is the developmental process through which we begin to bring the unconscious forces of the will to the light of consciousness.

The embryo’s first reflexive response to touch is to *recoil*. This reflex can be seen as early as one week *in utero!* Under normal circumstances, after a week, the reflexive response to touch changes: from movement *away* to movement *toward*.

When the touch reflex does not progress to the next stage, we experience the infant who hates to be touched. Normally, if you stroke a baby, it reflexively snuggles *toward* the touch. Movement *away* is appropriate to very tiny embryos, surprised by very first glimmer of Other, and, therefore, Self. When babies and children (and adults, for that matter) continue to move away from touch, it is a signal that their wills are not directed toward incarnating any further. It is simply not safe to have a body.

Peter Pan refuses to *grow up*. Through force of will, he has arrested his own development. He prefers to fly to a “Neverland” of fairies than to accept a human body, and the complicated set of relationships that go along with it. Still, he longs for a mother – the stories, the care, the love. The perceived safety of isolation, versus the “growing up” required to access the touch of human comfort, is the conflict at the fulcrum of Peter’s will.

What is life like with an unintegrated sense of touch, when one refuses to *be* a Self approaching an Other? If Neverland is any clue, it consists of fighting. Before Wendy’s arrival, Neverland was a continuous game of cops and robbers, without a story and a cuddle at other end. Even the pirates are full of longing. Captain Hook schemes, “We’ll make the boys walk the plank and keep the Wendy for a mother!”

Like Peter Pan, many babies experience traumas early in life. When contact is painful, the will turns away from touch. An extreme example of this is the “crack” baby, who is born with an addiction, and whose crying is not comforted by touch.

How do we develop the sense of touch?

First, we make it safe. Physioballs for children to roll on are a good way for them to experience resistance in a safe, fun, and integrating way. Being caterpillars or snakes or lizards or fish on the floor is also a way to get that primal experience of resistance.

Children usually feel safe touching themselves. Create a story about a little mouse running up and down, first one arm, and then the other. The mouse can run all over the body, and up to the head.

Touch the body with different stories. Chicks can peck for grain, rocks can roll down mountainsides, rain can wash away the riverbed, vegetables can be chopped . . . the possibilities are endless.

For touching another, the back is usually the safest spot. One partner’s back is the easel, the other is the artist, drawing a picture. Then the two trade places. The children’s writing-on-the-back-rhyme, “X Marks the Spot” is another excellent way to institute safe touch between partners.*

Observe children's comfort level with touch. Some are only comfortable with firm pressure, while some shy away from any touch at all. Some can't keep their hands off others. Whatever you observe, know that simply finding a comfortable mode of touching is the starting place. If a child is only comfortable touching himself, work this way until you sense an opening. Sneak in the next step – a squeeze on the shoulder, a pat on the back. If a child keeps touching other children inappropriately, he is hungry for contact. Give him a physioball to roll on, lots of hugs, or any form of touching he will accept.

Always remember, when you work with touch, that you are working with the basic substance of the will. Your first task is to help it decide to be embodied. Make it safe, make it fun, make it loving.

In Peter Pan, only Peter opts to stay in Neverland. The Lost Boys gladly give up their isolated freedom for a story and a kiss at bedtime.

Most children are lost boys at heart. Integrating the sense of touch can help them decide to come home.

*"X Marks the Spot" is available in *Rappin' on the Reflexes, A CD, Songbook and Guide to Integrating the Senses through Music and Movement* by Eve Kodiak.