

How can we care for the child's life forces so that they may remain strong to serve the child's health and well-being?

1. Rhythm (the need for rhythm).

One of the first things one has to look at for strengthening the life forces is rhythm in daily life. Nature is full of rhythm: in the plant's growing and dying, in day and night, the sequence of the months, the season of the year; but also in man's physical body, in breathing, heartbeat, digestion. Rhythm in daily life does not happen naturally anymore and yet, children need rhythm

As much as daily bread for their physical and emotional health. They cannot set and maintain a rhythm for themselves. They need the ego of the adult to do this as their own ego is not yet the "master of the house." In the preschool the teacher takes responsibility for ordering the day, the week, the year; for the rhythms of inbreathing and outbreathing in daily activities; and the gesture of contraction and expansion in the course of the year. At home a mother or father can do the same in structuring family life so that there are times and routines for getting up in the morning, going to bed, for "how things are done in our family" and for the celebration of festivals. Rhythm allows us to breathe, to feel secure, to open up and unfold.

2. Meals are festivals.

Meals are another opportunity for nurturing life forces. A family, being a living organism, needs the polarity of dispersing and coming together. Going one's way seems to be easy. Holding a family together and caring for the nurturing of each family member needs to be taken up as a special responsibility. Mealtimes, especially the dinner, are wonderful opportunities for this and can be made into the little festivals of the day.

If children are fed in the kitchen while mother is still cooking the father's dinner or doing other housework, there is much taken away from the joy of eating and the involvement of the whole being of the child. How a meal is presented, the atmosphere around it, will influence the child's life forces as well as his emotional well being. A shared meal is a social event and should not be disrupted by other things such as television watching or radio. Certainly working conditions or specific circumstances can make it difficult to arrange joint meals, in which case it would still be preferable if one adult ate with the children rather than leaving them alone with their meal. Many bad eating habits like getting up from the table and running around, eating only half or eating irregularly, can be related to the way meals are organized in a family. In consequence, a number of eating disorders can arise in children.

3. Keeping the "etheric sheath" intact.

Let us look again at the major task of the life forces in early childhood; the final shaping of bones, senses, inner organs and the brain. In a pictorial way one could say that until the appearance of the second teeth at the age of 7, the child needs to be protected from damaging influences on the life forces in the same way he was physically sheltered in the mother's womb before birth. We can call this protection around the young child the "etheric sheath, a kind of spiritual womb out of which the child emerges at the end of the first seven year period of his life with newly' independent soul forces, with thinking, feeling and willing. Although they are present already before that stage, these soul forces were not ready to be accessed from outside - similar to the fetus who cannot yet exist outside the womb. Parents of children before

this "second birth" must help prevent life forces from being born prematurely.

Even though parents may be proud of early verbal or intellectual capacities in their child, they may consciously choose to abstain from stimulating these abilities by adultlike conversation. The intellect of the child can emerge too early from the etheric sheath. The child awakens to consciousness prematurely and is drawn out of the unity of I and world. Children who have experienced this, often have difficulties imitating. They cannot adopt into their inner being what is going on around them or transform it into their own activity. Through play, intellect and speech are practiced within the etheric sheath. Then speech accompanies the process of play which still happens in the dreaming mood.

One can give children the experience of enjoyment of speech without waking them up. Reciting nursery rhymes and poetry suitable for children is a wonderful way to do this. Young children live into the rhythm and sound of poetry, not so much into the meaning. Thus they absorb art deeply but unintellectually into their being and form the emotional basis for later intellectual comprehension. As the first step in such a process which takes care of the life forces, one could assess which kind of verbal communication is happening at home, what

part would be taken up by explanations, negotiations or arguing. From there one may make a conscious effort to meet the child's developmental level in communication. Family life may become easier by eliminating lengthy discussions about what may be right, "or what to do or not to do", and "why it is so." A simple "we do it now this way" may be a relief for a child who anyway wants to trust and follow a beloved person.

In preschool we rarely approach the children directly. Language lives in stories, rhymes and poems. There are no questions asked about what a child has done and not many explanations given. Neither is a child made to think back to past events or recall stories. Some children may know a whole series of poems by heart but not speak them until suddenly, with memory triggered by a word or sight, they will recite the entire morning circle. Through our patience and respect for the child we wait for such a time and do not ask the child to recall what we want to know.

Our young children are such a wonderful gift. Without them we would increasingly experience death around us. With each child a new life impulse is brought into the world which sustains us and the world as well. We have a great responsibility in helping children to rightly use the life forces which they have brought with them from the spiritual world.

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