

# PARENTING THE NOT TOO HOT NOT TOO COLD WALDORF BABY

Parents everywhere remember the story of "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" from childhood: the image of the porridge of the Little Bear that Goldilocks ended up eating because it was not too hot, not too cold, but just right resonates in our minds and hearts.

Parenting is much like finding that balance of what is not too much, what is not too little, but what is just right. Parenting can provide us with an impulse that tells us to follow our own hearts toward what is just right, although these impulses can often be counter to what society currently tells us that babies need.

I have worked as a developmental and feeding specialist for over ten years now in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. The babies in our care need just the right amount of protection of their senses, a certain amount of pleasurable stimulation through the sense of touch, and the warmth of real human hands to help them on their journey in a place where things are not at all like a mother's womb or like home. Much of the emphasis is on protection of the baby's senses due to an immature nervous system that cannot deal well with multiple stimuli, and the education of parents to understand that once a baby becomes "full-term", their senses still need protection from the environment.

From this standpoint, it makes perfect sense that if we are born as neurologically immature beings, our senses would need protection. We often think of only the five very obvious senses we can readily observe, but Rudolf Steiner postulated in his lectures that there are actually twelve senses. Modern science has confirmed this; in some scientific literature one finds references to these as "systems" instead of "senses" but they are talking about the same thing!

We can group the twelve senses into three groups of four, including the following: the Lower Senses of touch, life, self-movement and balance; along with the Middle Senses of smell, taste, visual sight and warmth; and finally the Higher Senses of hearing, the speech of the other, the concept/thought of the other, and the recognition of the other person's individuality and "I". All of these senses are vital, and without the complete development of all of these senses, the child cannot fully develop into being a healthy, functional sensory being.

With the rates of autism, autism-spectrum disorders and sensory processing disorders skyrocketing, I am wondering why society and the media are not picking up on the need for protection of the senses. Why has the information we use to protect and take care of premature infants not being

filtered into general parenting for all children – after all, all children are born neurologically immature! When we see the way we are raising our children in this country and look at the health of our children, something is obviously not working well!

New parents are inundated with information regarding what “products” they need to buy for successful and stimulating babyhood, and there is a widespread perception that the baby needs plenty of stimulation in order to develop properly. Babies, toddlers and preschoolers are all seen as miniature adults with the need to experience life, to be incessantly talked to and provided with explanations of life.

Even things that the established medical community has accepted as not healthful for the baby, such as [the American Academy of Pediatrics' statement](#) that children under the age of 2 should not be watching ANY television at all seems to be falling on deaf ears within the American public. For example, Disney's “Baby Einstein” videos are now grossing over \$200 million dollars a year! Oh, if new parents only knew and understood what babies really need!

It is easy for newly pregnant couples or new parents to think the baby needs all the things the media and other well-intentioned parents and family talk about. What we seem to be missing is the fact that many of our great-grandparents and grandparents were not raised in this “new” way of baby

stimulation the way our current generation is being raised. In many ways, if today's child-rearing philosophies were in the science or medical world, they would be seen as risky treatments that could be causing harm at worst and as unproven and unsubstantiated at best.

The Waldorf parenting of the baby views the baby as a spiritual being on a spiritual journey and that the baby (and even toddlers and preschoolers) possess an entirely different consciousness than adults. We see the lack of logical reasoning, the dependency on adults that the child has and will have for many years, and the need for adult protection for matters of safety and health. These are not things to be fought against but things to work with during the time our children are small.

I can quickly think of several examples new parents could consider taking to heart as part of their parenting practices in light of the scientific evidence of neurological development within the framework of the twelve senses. For example:

The Sense of Touch – occurs through the organ of the skin. This includes what is inside of me and what is outside of me. Important ways to boost this foundational sense include vaginal birth, swaddling, holding, positive and active tactile experiences!

In the Neonatal Intensive Care Environment, we know that Kangaroo Care (holding a baby skin-to-skin against his or her mother's bare chest with a light blanket covering them both) provides the infant the opportunity to stabilize their physiological systems off of the mother's system. This is very important, and the consequences of not nurturing the sense of touch can be seen in infants who are too sick to be held for long periods or whose parents are completely frightened to hold them can turn into "touch-me-nots" who are medically ready to be held for feedings and to be out of bed but cannot tolerate it well from a physiological standpoint. We also extensively use swaddling to provide a baby with boundaries and for calming.

The take-away message for new parents: The most important thing to do is to hold your baby, and to also learn and employ swaddling techniques. This stimulates the nervous system in many beneficial ways. Other ways to achieve this include breastfeeding, and employing many of the tactics of ancient cultures in baby-wearing and proximity in sleeping. Picking your baby up when he or she cries is the natural thing to do!

Breastfeeding is worth trying to get right! I am reviewing Hale and Hartmann's "Textbook of Human Lactation" and this book provides this rather shocking fact:

"Lactation probably evolved initially to protect the young against infection and

subsequently took on a nutritional role. However, infant formula is focused on nutrition rather than protection. Therefore, it is not surprising that the mortality rate of formula-fed infants in the USA today is at least 21% higher than breastfed babies."

Again, I do not think parents in our society are being armed with the information they need to raise healthy children. That is why I so wholeheartedly believe in The Madonna Cloak Project!

The Sense of Life or sometimes called The Sense of Well-Being – this sense encompasses such things as if you can tell if you are tired, thirsty, hungry. The best way to boost this sense is to provide your children with a rhythm to help support this whilst it is developing. Some children have great difficulty recognizing their own hunger or thirst cues, their own need for rest or sleep. A rhythm can be a great therapeutic help in this regard.

The take-away message for new parents: babies do not need a strict "schedule" per se, but as they grow a rhythm of naptime at the same time each day, a walk together outside at a certain time every day, provides their small bodies with physiological stability. This is very important for such physiological systems as digestion and respiration, along with endocrine function.

Breastfeeding cannot be strictly "scheduled" as this can lead to failure to thrive in infants, but certainly many aspects of the day can have a consistent flow!

The Sense of Self-Movement – this is probably more familiar to therapists like me and in scientific literature as the "proprioceptive system". This sense encompasses the ability to move and the ability to hold back movement, and can also encompass such sensory experiences as containment (which can be a form of massage for premature babies) and also swaddling.

The take-away message for new parents: Times for active play once the baby is old enough is a positive experience and can in no way be replaced by passive activities. The older baby should be trying to move against gravity and should be learning how to live in their bodies!

The Sense of Balance –this is not only the ability to balance through use of the semicircular canals of the ears for midline balance so one can cross midline but also refers to the balance of life and being able to be centered, which again goes back to rhythm and the idea of in-breath and out-breath. Donna Simmons calls this one a gateway to The Middle Senses.

The take-away message for new parents: Rhythm and active movement are again important here!

Some other important senses for babies

include The Middle Senses, which strongly need to be protected. The sense of smell, the sense of taste and the sense of sight take years to fully develop. The best way to assist these senses is to provide protection from over-stimulating experiences. The staff in the Neonatal Intensive Care unit work hard to limit jarring smells, provide good sensory experiences for taste and to limit over-stimulation of sight. Many premature infants will immediately "shut down" with strong visual or olfactory stimuli.

This is why staying in the home environment is so important for young babies and children. There is no need for field trips, or for multiple excursions to big-box retailers with overwhelming smells and sights. A rhythm for a baby is based upon the child being in his or her home, surrounded by familiar things! Predictability and familiarity are beneficial in children's health. If you ever do visit a Neonatal Intensive Care unit, some of the older babies that have had long hospital stays have rhythms posted by their bedsides that all staff honor and respect. I treated an infant who unfortunately had to stay in the Neonatal Intensive Care unit for an entire year, and you can imagine how important this sense of rhythm, the ability to have time to play and to socially interact with other people, along with the need for rest and protection, was to this child.

Yet again, this tends to be an area which we neglect. In the region of the country in which I reside, it can almost be a badge of honor that women can give

birth and then go to a museum or to a birthday party five days later with the baby in tow. The baby has NO sensory filter, and should be surrounded by the soothing sounds of home for optimal health. Some families work together so that one partner can run errands without the baby, and when well-meaning neighbors, family members and others ask what they can do to help you, provide them with a list of the items you need them to pick up when they run to the store.

An important way to stimulate these senses appropriately is to include plenty of time outside where the beautiful colors of nature are ever-changing, the smells are natural and not synthetic, and your child can hear the birds calling and other sounds of nature.

The take-away message for new parents: Consider being outside and providing a connection to nature as a vital part of raising babies and small children, and realize that your home and your natural surroundings are the most important experiences for your baby to experience. As mentioned above, work together as family to limit your child's exposure to places outside the home and neighborhood. This is a truly radical notion for this day and age, but well-worth exploring for the health of your child!

A small but important note involves the last of The Middle Senses:

The Sense of Warmth - Donna Simmons calls this sense a gateway to

The Higher Senses mentioned in the beginning of this article. This sense does not fully develop until age 9 and lack of complete development can literally cause a hardening of creativity and new thought as the child matures, but also can refer to a literal inability of the child to be able to tell if they are hot or cold on a physical level. Warmth implies not only physical warmth, but warmth on a soul level. Joy, humor, love, connection are all important developers of this sense along with PROTECTION from extreme and garish sensory experiences that would cause hardening. This is a very important sense, and often one that requires parents to work on themselves. We tend to take everything with parenting very seriously these days and every way our children behave seems to be cause for micro-analysis. Many parents are coming to parenting later in life, and are used to having a strict schedule that revolves around their own needs, "getting things done", seeing how many things can be crammed into one day. It takes our own will forces to be able to develop a rhythmic day that involves being present with our children, and the centeredness to create a peaceful home. It takes time to develop joy, patience, humor, and the ability to be calm when our baby and small child are not. These are all important characteristics of providing soul warmth to our children.

Children need assistance with protecting their physical warmth until the age of 9 or 10, so much longer than many parents think! Think about the fact that

in the summer places are air-conditioned and much colder than one might think and that babies need layers and hats even in the summer! In the winter, babies need socks and hats and warm layers. This is very important for their physical and soul health.

These are all techniques and things a parent can do to provide their baby with the very best start in life. The twelve senses are what unites the inner and outer world of the individual and what allows us to have healthy interaction with other people at the highest developed

levels in adulthood. It takes a long time for these senses to be developed, and the Lower and Middle Senses especially need to be protected and supported during babyhood and the first seven years as these are the foundation for later healthy development.

Babies are a wonderful gift, and parents can do a great job with the right information regarding what a baby truly needs. Hopefully these are some ideas that will stimulate discussion within your own family!

Carrie Dendler

<http://theparentingpassageway.com/>