The Twelve Senses article by Carrie Dendtler

Steiner postulated in his lectures that there were not only the five most obvious senses that we think of, but actually twelve senses that required development. This has been proved in the medical community, although sometimes in medical literature and therapy literature you see reference to “systems” rather than “senses” although they are truly talking about the same thing!

The twelve senses are what unites the inner and outer world of the individual and what allows us healthy interaction with other people at the highest developed levels. It takes a long time for these senses to be developed, but the foundational senses needed to develop some of the upper senses are most developed in the first seven years. There we are, back to my soapbox about the first seven years!

_The Lower Senses are seen in our will forces, they are unconscious, and they manifest in the metabolic-limbic system. These include:_

**The Sense of Touch** – 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 tactile experiences (NOT PASSIVE experiences, like through media or Baby Einstein! Active experiences!) The lack of completion of this sense is strongly related to ADHD according to Daena Ross.

**The Sense of Life or sometimes called The Sense of Well-Being** – this 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 while 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 Sense of Self-Movement** – this is probably more familiar to therapists in some ways as the “proprioceptive system” in some ways. This sense encompasses the ability to move and 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. Childhood games that involve starting, stopping can also affect this sense.
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The Sense of Balance – This is balance in two separate realms, from what I gather from the Daena Ross presentation. It is not only the ability to balance by 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 Middle Senses are seen in our feeling lives, involve us reaching out into the world a bit, they are seen as “dreamy” senses and manifesting in the rhythmic system. THE CHILD HAS NO FILTER TO FILTER THESE SENSORY EXPERIENCES OUT IN THE EARLY YEARS. In the later years, the arts build these senses, which is why the Waldorf curriculum includes teaching through art in the grades. These senses include:

The Sense of Smell - strongly correlated with memory. This can be an ally in education of the grades age child, but beware of scented everything when your children are in the foundational first seven years.

The Sense of Taste – Not only on a physical plane, but an emotional plane in naming experiences (a “putrid” experience, a “sweet” experience)

The Sense of Sight – with two different ways to visualize something: one is the ability to distinguish color, and the other is the ability to distinguish form (which Daena Ross says is more related to The Sense of Self-Movement). The best way to help this sense is to protect the eye from media while developing. A way to bolster this sense in the grades, but not the Early under 7 Years, is through form drawing.

The Sense of Warmth - Donna Simmons calls this one a gateway to The Higher Senses. This sense does not fully develop until age 9 and 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. 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 children need help with protecting this sense until the age of 9 or 10, so much longer than many parents think!
The Upper or Higher Senses develop during adolescence and require a strong foundation of The Lower Senses and The Middle Senses to come to maturity. These senses are associated with awakening of the individual, with being concerned with other people and are seen as being centered in The Head. These senses include:

The Sense of Hearing (which Daena Ross calls “a bridge between The Middle and Higher Senses” in her presentation) This requires completion of The Sense of Balance – both of these senses involve the organ of the ear.

The Sense of Speech or The Sense of the Word (this is the speech of another person, not yourself) – Requires completion of The Sense of Self-Movement as you must be able to quiet your own speech in order to really hear another person.

The Sense of Thought or The Sense of Concept (again, of the other person, not your own thoughts!) – Requires completion of The Sense of Well-Being. Rhythm builds this ability to quiet oneself in order to hear someone else’s thoughts.

The Sense of the Individuality of the Other (Donna Simmons also calls this the “I-Thou” relationship of boundaries) – This requires integration and completion of all senses, but particularly involves The Sense of Touch according to Daena Ross.

The most important take-away point for my parents of children under the age of 7 is that children need rhythm, a balance of in-breath and out-breath and protection of the senses from too much stimulation, from media and boundaries set by the parents to wear clothes (VERY difficult with some little nudists!). The development of these senses is also profoundly related to sleeping and what occurs during sleep to build all of this up.

Waldorf Education is first and foremost about health and the twelve senses provide a glimpse into some of why things are done in Waldorf the way they are! I encourage you to investigate the twelve senses on your own. In this age and day of skyrocketing ADHD/ADD, autism spectrum disorders, sensory processing disorders, this should be mandatory learning for all parents.

Article by Carrie Dentler of http://theparentingpassageway.com/

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