

From the book, Singing and Speaking the Child into Life, Songs, Verses, and Rhythmic Games for the First Three Years

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article in the Appendix:

THE PRIMITIVE REFLEXES by Jane Swain

In working with infants and very young children, it is helpful for early childhood teachers and caregivers to appreciate the child's unique relationship with the spiritual world. At no other time in life does this relationship exist in this way. Interestingly, study and reflection upon the child's path of integration of the primitive reflexes can give us an inkling as to what is going on here.

The integration of the primitive reflexes plays a key role in the child's path up to verticality and walking. One may even be so bold as to say that sublime intelligence is at work in each of the primitive reflexes, and also in their sequencing. The *duration* of reflex manifestation may vary from child to child. However all typically developing babies have the same *sequence* of reflex development, and each reflex is foundational for the next step of development, so that the child is well prepared to eventually stand and walk. The integration of the reflexes is one of the earthly tools that the spiritual world uses in the first three years of life to bestow the first of the three gifts of walking, speaking and thinking.

Without the primitive reflexes, the baby would be lost-figuratively, and in many cases also literally. They serve vital functions in the womb and in early life. The Moro is thought to activate the first breath of life. The primitive stepping reflex is thought to help the baby walk around the womb in order to get into the upside-down position for birth. It is the baby who initiates labor, and various kicking reflexes of the legs are thought to be used in this process. Rudolf Steiner indicates that the timing of the baby's birth may be an important factor for the entirety of the individual's life. The kicking reflexes serve to give the baby a say in this timing.

In contrast to an animal, the human baby is born *without* coordinated movements, and *without* balance. A horse for example, is able to stand and

walk shortly after birth, and is trotting within hours. By the next day, most are galloping. In contrast, it takes the human being months and months to come to standing and to walk, and then it takes years to master running and jumping.

It is striking that the human being has great *potential* to develop, and a *long period* of development. During this extended and vulnerable period, the primitive reflexes help to ensure protection and survival of the physical body. As motor development proceeds, proportionally, the reflexes are no longer needed. The primitive reflexes are indeed primitive movement patterns, and as they are replaced by more sophisticated movements, they are said to be *integrated*.

The gross manifestations of the reflexes are usually integrated by six to twelve months, however their more nuanced manifestations can take up to six years to become more fully integrated. When the primitive reflexes are integrated, this does not mean that they are obliterated. Instead they are restrained and always ready to manifest during conditions of stress.

When babies are born, they don't understand the world. Their organs are not completely formed. Their nervous systems are not processing sensory information as an adult's would. They have percepts, but no concepts. Without the primitive reflexes, this would be an overwhelming situation. The primitive reflexes give the infant a predetermined way of responding to earthly, sensory life, and this provides an important mechanism for the forming of foundational anatomical pathways in the brain.

The primitive reflexes perform other important functions as well. They are spatial in nature and provide initial orientation in the three planes of space, including coming into relationship with gravity. They increase muscle tone, and this is an important early mechanism for building body scheme. Examples of primitive reflexes include: the palmar grasp reflex, the Moro reflex, the tonic labyrinthine reflexes, and the asymmetrical tonic neck reflex.

There are early oral reflexes as well. These help ensure that the baby receives nourishment in a safe fashion, without food going into the lungs,

which could cause problems such as a blocked airway or pneumonia. The oral reflexes include the rooting and sucking reflexes. An exaggerated gag reflex is also present. They are described below:

The rooting reflex is a food-seeking pattern. If the lips or cheeks are gently stroked, the infant will turn his head in the direction of the touch and open his mouth wide enough to latch on to the nipple.

The suck reflex is a primitive sucking motion whereby the jaw, tongue, lips and cheeks move as a unit, without differentiation from each other, in an up/down type of motion. The stimulus is touching the roof of the mouth. This reflex is gradually replaced by differentiated, coordinated sucking.

With the gag reflex, the stimulus is tactile input to the back of the tongue or back of the mouth. The response is opening of the jaw, up and down movement of the tongue, and contraction of the muscles of the throat to expel an object out of the oral area and stop the object from going down into the lungs. In the newborn the gag reflex is more sensitive in that it can be stimulated further forward on the tongue. As the baby gains more motor control, he sucks on his hands and mouths toys, and the gag reflex is gradually desensitized. It persists throughout one's life in this less sensitive form, protecting us from an errant piece of food going down the "wrong pipe."

*Perhaps the most essential aspect of motor development to grasp is that we can trust development. Very high spiritual beings are guiding and guarding the child's development in the first three years of life. It can be a relief to know that it's actually not up to us to teach little ones to move. Our job is more to get out of the way so that this sacred work can occur. One tremendously helpful way to support this work is to provide an inviting, safe, developmentally appropriate environment into which the child will be drawn to self initiate his own movement explorations. For more information on this topic, please see Jane's article, "Understanding and Supporting Sensory-Motor Development in the Infant and Toddler through Appropriate Furnishings" in the WECAN publication, Creating Connections, Perspectives on Parent-and-Child Work in Waldorf Early Childhood Education.*

We can also support the integration of the primitive reflexes by offering a protected environment and providing sensitive caregiving. For example, do we notice whether we contribute to setting off the primitive reflexes through the manner in which we handle the baby, and then do we alter the way we are moving the baby accordingly? The reflexes are present at the start of life for important reasons, but they need to become integrated, for smooth development to ensue.

If the primitive reflexes are not integrated in a timely fashion, they are said to be retained, and unfortunately this is occurring very frequently now. If the reflexes are retained, the child may be negatively affected in body soul and spirit. For example, if the tonic labyrinthine reflex is not sufficiently integrated, the child may not come into a comfortable relationship with gravity, and may be anxious when walking on uneven ground. If the asymmetrical neck reflex is retained, later the individual may develop neck pain, or even curvature of the spine. If the oral reflexes are retained, this can negatively impact speech.

Fortunately there is much that can be done to help in these types of situations. Spacial Dynamics® offers unique and effective insights and therapeutic practices. The primitive reflexes have an underlying spatial component to them. If the spatial component is recognized and skillfully and artistically addressed, then the primitive reflex may lose its footing and will give way. Jane is currently writing more articles on therapeutic interventions based upon Spacial Dynamics® principles for children whose reflexes are retained. Please look for these in [Gateways](#).