



Why does Waldorf education talk about warmth so much?

By Adam Blanning M.D.

Waldorf education talks about warmth so much because warmth needs our attention. Warmth holds a very special place in the life of the developing child, because it works throughout the entire spectrum of human experience. There is physical warmth, emotional warmth—the warmth of love, of generosity, of true morality—and all of these “warmths” pour over and merge with each other. Perhaps most importantly, warmth is the essential ingredient in transformative work. Without warmth we cannot change, and the life of the small child is consumed with processes of growth and adaptation. Warmth helps us be healthy human beings on many different levels.

We actually already know warmth very well, but it is far from mundane and again, it really deserves our attention. Think of your kitchen and how we cook. Warmth allows different objects and ingredients to be blended, to develop whole new flavors, and to become well integrated. While this may seem like a simplistic example, Waldorf education understands that a child is indeed actively striving to integrate: to learn to feel comfortable in her body, to find the means for expressing outwardly what she feels inwardly, to develop a sense of security and understanding about all the new and unusual experiences brought by the world around her. To bring what is in, out; to make what is foreign, one’s own. Warmth helps that process.

Waldorf teachers and Anthroposophic physicians have been talking about the importance of warmth for almost 100 years, out of the understanding that fostering physical warmth helps a child better integrate on physical, developmental, emotional and spiritual levels. But instead of this being an old-fashioned idea, it is really actually cutting edge: In a study last year at Yale University, researchers, (while riding in an elevator) asked undergraduate test subjects to briefly hold either a warm cup of coffee or iced coffee as they (the researchers) wrote down information. The subjects then arrived on their floor, where they understood the research was to take place and were given a packet of information about an individual and then asked to assess his or her personality traits. Results showed that the participants assessed the person as significantly “warmer” if they had previously held the warm cup of coffee rather than the iced cup of coffee. On personality scales unrelated to the trait of “warmth,” the researchers found no difference in how participants who held an iced, versus hot, coffee responded.

In a second study, participants held heated or frozen therapeutic packs as part of a product evaluation study and then were told they could receive a gift certificate for a friend or a gift for themselves as a thank you for participating in the study. Those who held the hot pack were more likely to ask for the gift certificate for a friend, while those who held the frozen pack tended to keep the gift for themselves. The researchers interpretation of this study: "It appears that the effect of physical temperature is not just on how we see others, it affects our own behavior as well," "Physical warmth can make us see others as warmer people, but also cause us to be warmer - more generous and trusting - as well." (Science, October 24, 2008)

We can perhaps understand this to mean: warmth enriches our moral experience of ourselves, and of other people, as human beings.

In study published in Pediatrics, fever—which we could consider a very strong warmth experience—was shown to be associated with improved behavioral changes in children with autism spectrum disorders. These children exhibited decreased irritability, hyperactivity, stereotypy (the persistent repetition of words, posture, or movement without meaning), and inappropriate speech. This was a consistent finding, but was unfortunately limited to the time of the fever itself. When the temperature went down the old behaviors returned. This means that there was something specific about the fever itself and how the felt and expressed him or herself. (Pediatrics, Vol. 120 No. 6 December 2007)

We can perhaps understand this to mean: the children were more comfortable in their bodies, and more comfortable in their environment. Anecdotally, many parents relate their own stories to me of how their children went through developmental shifts through the course of a fever, such as more fluid speech or being able to independently sleep outside of the parents' bed. This is also consistent with the frequent observation that children, all children, are more restful and less distracted when there are really dressed warmly. All children are better able to settle into themselves when their bodies are warm. Try it with your own child and you will see that it is true.

Third, a study published in the Lancet, September 20, 2008, looked at the association between Paracetamol (the European equivalent of Tylenol) and the risk of asthma, hay fever, and eczema at age 6-7 years old. They studied 205,487 children in 31 countries and found that the use of Paracetamol use in the first year of life increased a child's risk of asthma symptoms at age 6-7 years, by about 45%. Current use of Paracetamol (at age 6-7) was associated with a dose-dependent increase in asthma symptoms, with high use more than tripling the risk of asthma symptoms, compared with not using any Paracetamol at all. The researchers conclude that "use of Paracetamol in the first year of life and in later childhood is associated with risk of asthma, rhino-conjunctivitis [hay fever], and eczema."

We can perhaps interpret this to mean: suppressing warmth affects how the child is able to meet, digest, and properly transform the world around her. Allergic illnesses are inflammations, but cold ones, without warmth or fever. Warmth is an essential ingredient

in transformative work, and something the child needs in learning to meet the world around her.

Warmth is helpful in the realm of physical illness and allergy, in our sense of individual strength and contentment, and in how we live with each other. What a wonderful gift!

So what can you do to foster your children's warmth?

Hug them—share your physical warmth

Give them warm foods and drinks.

Make sure they are really warm when you put them to bed, and dressed to that they can stay that way. Room temperatures usually drop in the early morning hours, just when we are often entering some of our deepest sleep. Layers on the body can't be kicked off in the night but covers can.

Dress them in extra layers. A good rule of thumb: whatever layers of clothes you are comfortable in, a child needs at least one more. Children lose heat much faster than adults because of their relatively increased body surface area, and they really do not properly sense their own warmth, so waiting for them to tell them you they are cold does not work. Another rule of thumb: dress the child so that he or she can't catch a chill, while walking into school, playing outside, whatever the setting. This usually means layers on the chest and belly. You have to be conscious of warmth for them. We could say one of the tasks of a parent is to be a guardian of his or her child's warmth.

The best gift—from personal and professional experience: buy them two sets of wool or silk long underwear tops. These can be changed daily, laundered weekly, and will help keep the child from getting a chill. These are often much cheaper if they are ordered in bulk, so gather your friends and neighbors and help a whole group of children all at once. This would build warmth in the community on multiple levels at once.

The very best gift: love them with all the warmth you can muster. But the wool and silk really helps too.