"Button Up Your Overcoat!"
Warmth and the Healthy Development of the Young Child

By Thomas Poplawski

There is a folk wisdom that remains alive in the Waldorf community but that is increasingly neglected in the larger society. It concerns how children today need, on many different levels, to be protected. Waldorf parents are encouraged to shield their children from the mass media and technology, from adult fashions in clothes, and from junk and convenience foods—not too many sweets in the lunch box, please. They are also encouraged to protect little Trevor or Fiona from one thing that seems less insidious—the cold. Waldorf wisdom says to keep infants and children physically warm.

The fetus at birth leaves the totally protected, warm, dark environment of the womb. It enters a relatively cold world full of dazzling lights, harsh sounds, and other often chaotic stimuli. The newborn, expelled from paradise, needs a period of transition to get used to its new environment. Thus a mother will instinctively hold the infant close, enveloping it physically in her arms. In doing so, she is enveloping it on a more subtle level, within her aura, within the protective covering of her life energies and soul warmth. If she needs to set the baby down, she should wrap it warmly, cover its head with a knitted cap, and lay the infant in a warm, secure place.

Keeping an infant warm is important because its ability to regulate body temperature has not yet been established. The newborn has a very large head in comparison to the rest of the body. Since most body heat is lost from the head, it is crucial that the infant’s head be covered with a wool or cotton cap. The cap also serves to cover the vulnerable fontanelle, that place at the top of the skull where the bones have not yet come together. It protects too from the direct rays of the sun, which for the infant also can be too extreme.

This wrapping and covering of the baby—which has its parallel with the older child—has to do not only with physical warmth. In many religions there is a tradition of covering the head when in church or temple. At play here is the intuition that to protect and keep the head warm is to keep the soul “warm,” to keep it from hardening. In the child, this protection of the “warmth organism” supports the development of emotional flexibility and fluidity. On a warm, sunny day, a mother may feel she does not need a head covering, but it is still important to protect the much more sensitive baby.

The newborn must also be guarded from a too rapid exposure to the bright lights, activity, and commotion of the everyday world. Traditionally, a mother observed a “lying-in” period, during which she and the infant remained in a curtained room where light was dim and filtered. This gave the infant’s eyes time to develop and to be able to focus. (Placing a rose-colored silk cloth over the crib as a canopy also can give a similar protection.) This period of relative dark and quiet usually lasted a number of weeks—forty days was a commonly observed length of time. During this period the mother rested and devoted herself to the care of the infant. Distractions were avoided. Only the closest family and
friends came to visit, and it was unthinkable to take the baby out during this almost sacred time.

Alas, what a far cry from the situation today! Now one often sees a two- or three-day-old infant, dazed and vulnerable, being wheeled around beneath the glare of the fluorescent lights in a noisy shopping mall, or taken to the mother’s place of work to be displayed for the benefit of colleagues. We have largely forgotten and lost the old practice of sheltering the newborn.

Fortunately, many mothers today retain an intuitive sense that the newborn must be protected from cold, from the direct rays of the sun, and from sensory overstimulation. Few realize, though, that this “gesture of the womb” continues to be an important need for the growing child, especially in relation to warmth.

As the child matures, the body has a finite amount of energy to use for growth, both for the growth of the body as a whole and for the development of the brain and inner organs. Keeping the body warm allows the greatest amount of these energies to be devoted to this task. When the child is not sufficiently warm, the growth forces are used up in maintaining body temperature, and the processes of outer and inner growth are affected. Making sure that Johnny’s hat is on, his scarf wrapped, and coat buttoned are thus important for more than just fending off colds. They allow the child to devote all available energies to its healthy growth and development. Whether hats are in or out of fashion at the moment, the growing child should wear one and should otherwise be kept warm.

Some pediatricians advise that you dress your child with as many layers as you feel you yourself need. The problem with this is that an adult has much greater control of body temperature and, often, a greater store of bodily fat than a child and thus needs less clothing. A child tends to be more like an elderly person, someone who is in “second childhood” and who does not retain body heat. The difference, though, is that a child can be turning blue with the cold and have chattering teeth and not even realize that she is cold.

Temperament is also a factor. A choleric or fiery-natured parent may be relatively insensitive to cold, while her melancholic (introspective, slow-moving) child will need extra layers. The melancholic child needs extra clothes both to warm his often spare frame but also—since he is often anxious and overly sensitive—to provide an extra buffer against the world—a security blanket. All children through the age of thirteen or fourteen can benefit, especially in their more vulnerable moments, from an extra layer of clothing. It is no coincidence that we speak of the loving care we give to others as warmth.

One frosty March New England morning when I took my two sons to school, one of their classmates took off his winter coat to reveal that all he wore underneath was a tee shirt! As the door opened again and another chilling blast of wind swept into the room, I inwardly shivered, though this little fellow did not seem to notice at all. Then a seven-year-old girl came in wearing a thin and unbuttoned cardigan, and a thin, short skirt that left her bare legs exposed. Brrrr!

One Waldorf school doctor recommends that, when the temperature is below 60 degrees, children should wear—in addition to their coats—at least three layers above the waist and two below. All layers, however, are not created equal. Wool (long favored by Europeans for underwear as well as for outer layers) is superior to all other fabrics in promoting warmth. Thus optimally a child might wear cotton short underwear, wool long underwear, and then warm pants (or skirt) and a warm shirt. On very cold days, especially for the slimmer, more delicate child, a woolen vest or sweater might be worn as well. Socks and caps should be of wool.

“What is so special about wool?” you may ask. It is not available at local stores, requires special care in washing and drying, and so on. Wool is an amazing fabric, though. It can absorb up to 30 percent of its own weight in moisture without feeling damp. Also, it wicks moisture
away from the skin and insulates even when wet. Thus a child with wet wool socks will still have warm feet. Duofold, which is generally available and which has an inner cotton layer and an outer woolen one, is an excellent option.

Synthetic fabrics such as polypropylene and polyester fleece have some of wool's characteristics, but they impact the environment negatively in their manufacture and disposal. Also, as artificial fabrics (fleece is made from recycled plastic soda bottles) they lack wool's natural aesthetic appeal. They just feel "unnatural" and "peculiar." And, as synthetic products, they may thus, on a more subtle level, be detrimental to the proper development of the child's senses. (Please see my article "Losing Our Senses" in the Fall 1998 Renewal.) As one art therapist put it, expressing a totally nonscientific but deeply intuitive view: "[Synthetic] fleece is entirely dead, and carries deadening vibrations. It is not what you want to wrap your child in if you can help it." And most of us can help it.

The archetypal image of the robed Madonna holding, enveloping, and protecting her young child is an image we all need to hold and nurture as we go about our own not-so-archetypal lives. Keeping our children well covered and warm from head to foot can be a struggle, but it is an important aspect of our protecting them. In the words of a popular tune of the 1940s:

Button up your overcoat,
When the winds blow free.
Take good care of yourself—
You belong to me.

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