The Development of the Baby and Gestalt Therapy

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a Gestalt perspective on early childhood. The cycles of early child development are described using the phenomenological-existential approach. Basic principles of Gestalt theory and the Awareness Cycle are used. These ideas were developed in São Paulo, Brazil. This paper was written in Portuguese originally, in 1997.

Introduction

When Gestalt therapy training was initiated in our country in the early 1980s, it was oriented towards adult therapy. However, attracted by the theory behind this approach, by the dialogical and phenomenological methods, and by the possibilities for child therapy from vivid and spontaneous contact with children, several child therapists decided to enroll in a Gestalt therapy course and adapt this
knowledge to their practice.

This context provided the background in which a study group was created. We came together to exchange experiences, doubts, and ideas related to therapeutic work with children. Throughout these years it has become clear to us that despite having embraced the methodology and theoretical framework of Gestalt therapy, it has been impossible for us to overlook our backgrounds in child development which provide an essential basis for the comprehensive diagnosis required for therapeutic interventions when working with children. We believe that the study of child development is fundamental for the work carried out by both child and adult therapists.

We do not pretend to be formulating a theory of development, nor do we intend to present any conclusive results of scientific research; however, we would like to bring up the questions and discussions that we covered in our attempt to understand child development from the bases of our knowledge and perspectives on Gestalt therapy theory.

**Basic Ideas**

We conceive of child development as circular and successive processes of creative adjustments that embody action and reaction, expansion and contraction, differentiation and abstraction, analysis and synthesis, destruction and integration, and disorganization and reorganization.

As experiences of contact are assimilated, they create the structure of the self and, at the same time, they are the support for new changes. We understand self as described by Perls, Hefferline & Goodman (1951):

[T]he complex system of contacts necessary for adjustment in the difficult field, we can call “self.” Self may be regarded as the boundary of the
organism, but the boundary is not itself isolated from the environment; it belongs to both, environment and organism. Contact is to touch something. The self is not to be thought as a fixed institution, it exists wherever and whenever there is in fact a boundary interaction [p. 151].

For instance, these interactions, or contact episodes, between mother and baby are developed through orderly processes that lead to the configuration of specific patterns. At any moment, however, a disturbance can take place bringing unforeseen, unexpected events. The existing patterns will change. Some patterns will cross over, others will become crystallized, and still others will dissolve, allowing the configuration of new patterns. These patterns will recur successively.

If we think about child development as a process of differentiated opposite aspects in the contact field and how they relate to each other (for instance: cold and hot, pain and pleasure, tension and relaxation, etc.), we can also understand why a person has complex “facets.” It is as if life could be represented by a kaleidoscope, in which simple but different forms create and re-create figures that don’t repeat themselves. This metaphor demonstrates how complex the process of human development is. And, owing to this complexity, it is difficult to describe all the possibilities of contact experiences once we assume that there are no limits to them in the experiential world.

We can say that differentiation and integration are processes present in the assimilation of experiences, and that this assimilation of experiences provides the support for new differentiation and integration. For example, a baby is sleeping in his crib, alone in his bedroom. He wakes up in a silent room. He moves his body and starts making some vocal sounds. His mother comes into the room and talks to him. She takes him in her arms for some minutes, puts him back into the crib, and leaves the room. The room is silent again. The baby is moving rapidly and starts crying. Mother takes him in her arms for another couple of minutes and puts him back into the crib. The baby starts crying the moment the mother lays him down again. She picks him up and leaves the room with the baby in her arms. We can say that the baby is experiencing crying as an opportunity for attention and the mother is in the process of making a meaning of her baby’s discomfort.

The dynamic organization and reorganization of these patterns, coupled with expanding awareness, will favor a new expansion of boundaries. Growth will take place during the process of identity construction. Development occurs as a dance-like movement and as noted by Perls, Hefferline & Goodman, (1951):

[T]he field as a whole tends to complete itself, to reach the simplest equilibrium possible for that level of field. But, since the conditions are always changing, the partial equilibrium achieved is always novel; it must be “grown to.” An organism is only by growing. Self-preserving and growing are polar, for it is only what continually assimilates novelty that can preserve itself and not degenerate. So the materials and energy of growth are: the conservative attempt of the organism to remain as it has been, the novel
environment, the destruction of previous partial equilibrium, and assimilation of something new. [p. 151].

Again, they note that “we can interpret this growth to responsibility, again, as organism-self-regulation in a changing field” (p. 80).

The Development of the Baby

Even before conception, the child’s parents have constructed beliefs, dreams, aspirations, fantasies, and ideas during the course of their lives about how to be a father or a mother. All the experiences, which refer back to their relationships with their own parents, will turn into a system of beliefs that will influence their choices and attitudes in raising their children. We are emphasizing the personal mythology of each member of the couple, who brings with him/her the myth of his/her family of origin. When the two people meet, they develop specific dynamics in their relationship that depend on the resources they have and on the creative adjustments they must make to start their new family. (See Ciornai, 1995 in reference to the work of Feinstein and Krippner.)

Therefore, we may ask:

- What is the meaning of this child’s arrival to the mother and father?
- At what moment in the personal history of each parent, and the family, is this child conceived?
- What role does this child fulfill? Does she or he stabilize or destabilize a relationship? Fill in gaps, or hold a relationship together?
- What are the parents’ desires and expectations regarding this child? Will the child fulfill the dreams that the parents themselves didn’t fulfill?
- What are the apprehensions they have regarding the arrival of this child? Will the baby require a lot of work? Could this affect their projects as individuals and as a couple?

In short, there are many possibilities regarding the anticipation of the baby’s arrival. Within this field, the parent/child interaction will develop during the period that starts with conception and continues throughout pregnancy.

It should be kept in mind that the process of hereditary transmission is highly random, which means that except for identical twins (and clones!), each human being is genetically unique and biologically different from another being.

The moment the egg is fixed in the uterus wall, the growth process of a new being starts and is supported through the interaction with the mother. During this period, circular changes occur. Changes in the fetus influence the way the mother feels and perceives her baby, and then reorganizes herself according to her new sensations. On the other hand, the fetus is accommodating him/herself inside the uterus and is influenced by the emotional and organic state that the mother is experiencing.

In conception, the embryo provokes hormonal and biochemical changes in the woman’s body, which undergoes some difficult transformations such as breast rigidity, nausea, sleepiness, and so on. Emotional and organism reorganization often includes
fantasies and anxiety. The woman’s body is constantly adjusting in order to welcome the new human being that is taking more space and becoming more and more present inside her.

First Interactions

During the pregnancy, it is the mother who mediates exchanges between the fetus and the outside world. These exchanges take place on both physical (hormonal changes) and behavioral (talking with the baby) levels. The way the mother is experiencing the exchange with the environment also will influence the fetus.

As the fetus receives nutrition, the cells multiply, and organs continue the process of differentiation and functional organization. Sensory and motor functions are developing at the same time. Research (Wilhelm, 1992) demonstrates that the intrauterine environment is not as calm and quiet as we might suppose. The combined internal noises of the mother’s body, such as cardiac beats, intestinal sounds, and blood streaming, produce sounds equivalent to urban traffic. The fetus senses and reacts to light and sounds from the external environment.

We are assuming that the mother/father/baby contact boundary is narrowly linked to the quality of the contact established by the fetus with his or her environment; that is, the fetus’s ability to receive stimuli. So we believe that if the mother’s boundary is sufficiently strong to filter and select the stimuli that affect her, and at the same time is sufficiently permeable to permit new stimuli to affect her, the fetus will then be receptive to new situations that favor his or her growth, while being protected against invasions of stimuli that are potentially toxic.

If the mother’s boundary is weaker, the fetus will be subject to additional invasions, and disagreeable sensations may occur and somehow register. We assume that if, on the contrary, the mother’s boundary is extremely rigid and impenetrable, the fetus will be protected by a barrier that may isolate him or her from the environment, thus suffocating or severely limiting growth.

Recent studies by Wilheim (1992) assert that the baby is not a passive receiver of external stimuli, but rather a being that constructs himself or herself with his or her own characteristics during the months of intrauterine life, through interaction with the mother. Well before birth, the fetus perceives sound and light; she/he is capable of swallowing, tasting, reacting to bitter substances, making faces, smiling, dreaming, choosing favorite positions, recognizing the mother’s voice, playing with the umbilical cord, reacting when stimulated, and showing intelligent behavior. We believe that these behaviors are linked to the ability to adapt and conform to new situations, and to select conditions and profit from experiences—all of which imply learning and memory. We can also say that the first creative adjustments already exist in this phase. We illustrate this statement by referring to experiments reported by Wilheim (1992), in which pregnant women read the same story aloud to their babies twice a day. Three days after the babies’ birth, when the mothers read the same story and another story aloud to their babies, they observed that the babies showed evident preferences for the story that was already known by sucking more frequently while it was read. The same experiments
also were made using music and maternal and paternal voices. They yielded the same outcome.

Since the sensory organs and motor functions of the fetus have already developed, she/he is ready to be in contact after receiving stimuli. However, maturation of the central nervous system at this point permits only the subcortical structures (reptilian and limbic brain) to function. The neocortex is not yet developed enough to be able to perform the cognitive activity necessary for establishing relationships and accurately comprehending phenomena that occur at the boundary. Nevertheless, the fetus shows responses that are appropriate relative to its biological maturity.

Contact During Pregnancy

We believe contact is made via energetic sensory-motor support, although at a primitive level. A specific dynamic is characterized this way: Sensations emerge and are interwoven by movement and withdrawal. The fetus promptly mobilizes energy, emits a motor response, and retracts as a newborn might. Let us imagine, for example, a mother changing the diapers of her two-month-old daughter. She is holding her legs up and talking to the baby while she cleans her body. Mother puts baby’s legs down on the bed and fastens the diaper. The baby moves her arms and head, following different stimuli in the room with her eyes. As the mother dresses her, the baby starts making some sounds. The mother responds by talking to her, but the baby’s sounds are getting louder. Mother continues talking and starts cleaning the baby’s ears. The baby moves her head faster, from right to left, and also starts moving her upper body and legs. She is now crying.

The mother promptly stops the task and takes the baby girl in her arms saying: “Okay, it is time to eat now.”

We understand that this dynamic is a process of contact, and we can question whether there is any awareness on the part of the baby. Perhaps there may be “awareness,” although primitive at this point. Once the sensation is experienced and in some way registered, this vivid experience is appropriated by both the baby and the mother. The mother interacts with the baby and helps to give meaning to the sensorial expression of her baby daughter.

Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman (1951) assert: “Presumably, there are no primitive organisms in which awareness and motor response are the same act; and in organisms of higher grade, where there is good contact, one can always show the cooperation of sense and movement (and also feeling)” (p. 4).

We can assume that during human development in the womb, there already is differentiation, even if it is subtle, among sensation, perception, and motor response. However, if we use the definition provided by Joseph Zinker (1997), there is still no awareness in the fetus. According to Zinker, awareness refers to the ability to reflect, before moving to action, and also to mentally exhaust all the possibilities for action:

Awareness, therefore, allows me to understand what my body needs at this point in time... Awareness is a blessing because it enables me to under-
stand what is going on inside, and what I can do to make myself feel better [p. 90].

Keeping in mind the description given by Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman (1951), we can infer that the fetus and the newborn baby display a primitive sensorial “awareness” (can we call it fetal “awareness?”). We could say that in the awareness–excitement–contact cycle described by Zinker (1997), the baby may go from sensation directly to action, skipping over the perceptual naming phase of the experience. This action will result in contact and retraction.

Theoretically, therefore, before birth the baby is an “intelligent,” sensitive being who exhibits unique personality traits. The fetus has an emotional life that is linked to the mother. The baby may well be in empathic communication with her, sensing her emotional condition and her affective availability in relation to himself or herself.

We assume that throughout intrauterine life, this internal environment is consonant with the environment that the baby will find after birth. There is a continuity between intrauterine life and life after birth. Characteristics present in the intrauterine life will be further enhanced as the baby grows. In this period, the baby will register his or her experience and, after birth, will have assimilated this process as self-support for future interaction.

**When the Baby Is Born**

Immediately after birth, the baby is ready to interact. Mother and child are active at the moment of birth. There is a sudden change in the field, and new behavior patterns are required from the mother, the child, and the family. While the baby is inside the womb, mother and baby experience the field in different ways. For example, sounds that the baby hears are different from the ones the mother hears; the baby lives in a liquid environment, while the mother uses the respiratory system to survive. At birth, the baby becomes part of the same environment and a process of contact boundary reorganization takes place.

Depending on how the arrival of this new being affects its parents’ field, the parents will feel different emotions. Many mothers and fathers enjoy and warmly embrace contact with their baby, while others may feel invaded and cannot reorganize themselves promptly in the new situation. Some mothers and fathers may go through postpartum depression, and will withdraw from the baby. Many conflicts may occur and be influenced by economic and social conditions. Regardless of the mother’s reaction, however, it is expected that she will be the figure with whom the baby will be in contact more intensively. This child, who still grasps the world in a very sensory manner, will assimilate and memorize his or her sensations primarily in the contact with the mother, father, caretaker, and surrounding people.

The baby is extremely competent in attracting the parents, who normally are enchanted. For example, the father is sitting on a chair, his son is four months old and the father is feeding him. He is using his left arm to support the baby’s upper body, neck, and head. His arm envelops the baby’s little body and his left hand touches the baby’s
belly. The father is holding the bottle with his right hand. The baby’s body is still; his eyes are wide open, looking at his father’s face. The baby’s left hand is touching one finger in the father’s hand. The father is looking at the son’s face, smiling and, at the same time, moving his finger, gently caressing his son’s small hands. The baby blinks from time to time, staying still, looking straight into his father’s eyes. The father has all his attention focused on the baby.

Marshall and Phyllis Klauss (1989) assert that newborn infants prefer high-pitched voices, especially the mother’s. They already move toward sounds, since the nerves that link hearing and vision have already developed. Therefore, they coordinate vision, sound, and the memory of their mother’s voice from the first weeks of life. One can infer that this movement is an adaptive response which insures the possibility of experiencing contact.

Babies perform contact functions. There is no specifically right way to interact with them. Their visual capabilities, and their parents’ desire to admire them, create infinite opportunities for them to experience, discover, and interact with each other. Tuned into their babies, parents soon learn what interests and what annoys the child. Although many of the newborn’s responses infant are called “reflexes,” infants move to the rhythm of the mother’s voice, performing a kind of dance while their mother is talking. The authors believe that in some way the babies’ bodies are prepared to respond to human language and to “talk” much earlier than they can actually formulate words. Daniel Stern asserts:

Choreography of maternal behavior is the raw material from the outside world with which the baby starts to construct his knowledge and his experience of everything that is human—the forms and modifications, the expressions, units and meanings of behavior, the relationship between the baby’s own behavior and that of another person [p. 15].

One could say that the mother/baby field forms the matrix for social development. During daily activities, mother and baby will weave a dialogue: baby talk. For instance, a cry or a smile from the baby when taking a bath or when diapers are being changed will result in a response from the mother, who will interact and organize her responses within a pattern (she will talk in a “regressive way,” in a falsetto voice, leaving spaces between phrases, pausing before continuing the “dialogue”—as if the baby were really answering—making faces, expressing feigned surprise; in short, using expressions that are exaggerated in time and space). The child imitates the mother’s gestures, grimaces, and sounds, and enhances these responses by experimentation.

A choreography is thus formed, impregnated with emotion and affection. A meaning is gradually constructed for mother and child that is associated with each behavior. If, initially, the baby’s behaviors of looking, smiling, and crying are endogenous, they will be transformed by successive interactions with the mother. The child starts to establish his or her first significant relationship, displaying intention in the responses (smiling to approach, and turning his face away from the mother, probably when he wants to withdraw from contact). He or she is learning the social communication code
and, little by little, will form an individual interactive repertoire.

**Interaction and Dialogue**

The mother is present in this relationship not only with her contact channels attuned to perceiving the baby, but also with her cognitive skills which allow her to decode her child’s needs and respond to them adequately. We believe that in this relationship, she is organizing the environmental stimuli for the baby. By selecting stimuli, associating emotions with facial and body expressions, and creating a daily routine in dealing with her baby, she helps the child form clear perceptions. The perceptions are assimilated by the baby and become part of his/her self-support.

Within this child/environment intersection, the mother plays a double role: creating an environment in tune with the baby’s needs, and creating an environment that is in sync with the socio-cultural field in which this child will be raised. Thus, the baby will be able to learn communication codes, and to deal with limits and frustrations; that is, the child will learn to live under the law and rules established by the family and society, create defenses to deal with difficult situations, develop curiosity, invest knowledge, and so on.

Experiencing “no” also allows a child to perceive others. Children who are faced with a limit learn to establish boundaries between themselves and others. The child thus starts forming a notion about himself/herself as someone who feels, desires, and behaves differently from others.

Theoretically, one can state that when saying “no” to the child, the mother interrupts the cycle of contact performed by the child at the moment of transition between energy mobilization and action. Prevented from completing this cycle, the child can either reinvest this energy, subsequently applying it to the same figure, or hold back this energy, reinvesting it in himself. For example, the child bangs his head on the floor, pulling his own hair. Or he may block this energy, and hold it back, thus learning to temporarily delay satisfaction. Perhaps the child can reinvest this energy at a more favorable moment. Therefore, the child will be developing what is called “frustration tolerance.” She/he will be dealing with disappointment. The child will be making creative adjustments and will construct a behavioral pattern. This pattern will become the child’s personal style when dealing with similar situations.

**Becoming Part of the World**

The creative adjustment in this process is derived from both the inclination to tend to the child’s own needs, and from the emotional consequences brought about by the child’s perception of how his or her actions affect people and the non-human environment.

For example, a mother is breast-feeding her six-month-old son. She is sitting on a comfortable chair and has a pillow on her lap on which the baby lay, mostly with his upper body. The pillow supports his head and the mother has her left arm under the pillow. When he starts sucking her breast, the mother’s sister enters the room and they
start talking to each other. The baby is looking at his mother’s face while she is talking
to her sister. The baby starts making sounds. The mother looks at him, and touches his
arms and legs while talking to her sister. The baby boy continues sucking her breasts,
looking at her face and making more sounds. The mother looks at him for a second
and turns to her sister again. In the next minute, the baby moves away from the breast
and makes very loud sounds. Mother stops talking. The baby’s body and face are tense.
Mother looks surprised. Her sister decides to leave the room. The mother agrees and is
now silently looking at her son. He comes back to her breast and starts sucking again.

From the child’s numerous experiences of his relationship to his world (such as frustration,
love, potential realization, and many others) which are recorded in his memory,
he will begin to have a representation of himself in the world. This representation is
charged with emotion. There is a tendency to assimilate and record it within previous
existing “maps.” The child, therefore, plays an active role in constructing a representa-
tion of himself and of the world. When articulating these representations of himself,
and associating them with his own sensations, he will form an awareness of himself.
We must acknowledge that the confirmations and lack of confirmations from the people
who are significant to the child are important in forming these representations.

As the child strengthens his relationship with people who are present as caretakers,
he becomes attached to them. The quality of this attachment will consolidate his represen-
tation of the self, and will interrupt the development and articulation of his patterns
with the world. An example of attachment behavior is this: A girl is eight months old
and spends most her time at home with her parents. She has infrequent contact with
grandparents, aunts, uncles, or cousins. The father’s parents are reuniting the siblings
for lunch before going away on vacation. When the baby arrives at the house, the other
guests are already there. She is in her mother’s arms. Suddenly an aunt gets closer to
them and takes the baby girl away her mother. The baby does not protest and is looking
at this woman’s face. Then, the girl looks around and looks at the aunt. Suddenly her
face changes, she looks scared and starts crying and looking around the room. The aunt
notices that her niece is getting more anxious and she starts walking in the direction of
the mother. The baby sees her mom, stops crying, and jumps into her arms. Then she
turns her face to her aunt and smiles at her.

Building an identity is a process of integration and organization that the child ap-
plies in the continual process of creative adjustments. This construction is a relational
process which forms a personal style and is imbued with the representation that the
child has formed of himself/herself in the world.

It should be recalled that from a very early point in the child’s life, people other
than the mother can assume the function of caretaker: fathers, grandparents, nurses,
nursing room attendants, and nannies. There have been cultural changes in the roles
of both fathers and mothers. Fathers today play a more active part in the care of the
baby, which widens the baby’s field even more. The father’s presence stimulates new
organizations; it can bring new and vibrant emotions that can help the child enrich
his or her perspective of the world. It can also widen the child’s personal response
and resource repertoire when dealing with different situations. Gottman and De Claire
(1997) state that “fathers can influence their children in some ways that mothers can-
not, especially concerning the relationship of the children with schoolmates and their school performance” (p. 170).

For these authors, fathers’ games are more turbulent and full of surprises; they are an emotional roller coaster, metaphorically speaking, while mothers’ games are more classic, calm, and predictable, thus making children feel more relaxed. They report that “the father’s noisy rough style helps children to learn about emotions” such as monster or airplane fun, which lead children to “experience the emotion of feeling just a tinge fear, when they are excited and having fun” (pp. 174-175). Let us remember that although there have been cultural changes during the last thirty years in the roles of fathers and mothers, it is still traditionally a paternal attribute to establish a direct relationship with children, set limits, strengthen these limits, and cooperate with children as they begin to develop self-confidence. Also, the fact that many children now live part of their lives in day care centers creates other implications for their development.

A child lives within an expanded field where dynamic processes take place. They are in contact! Thus, when facing new situations they become disorganized, they go through the experience, they organize themselves, and creatively adjust. The recording of these experiences will be assimilated and will form children’s knowledge about themselves, about others, and about the world; in short, about their relational existence.

They evolve thus, and they construct themselves through many-sided interactions in a world that encompasses thousands of possibilities.

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