

Planetary qualities in child development: an independent research project

A detailed exploration of the planetary qualities as they manifest in the six stages identified by the Gesell Institute research

Introduction

Child development is complex. The child does not develop in a simple linear way, getting gradually bigger, with everything in its place from the start. There are metamorphoses, times of increased growth, times of consolidation, times even for pruning back what is already there. The brain, for example, has growth spurts as well as times when the least-used nerve synapses are chemically dissolved away, with significant loss in brain weight. Children have times when they are well coordinated and graceful and yet, within months, can be falling over a piece of string. In social emotional growth too, there are times of calm and times of turbulence, times of cooperativeness and times of resistance. All these things are also affected by the child's individual temperament and tendencies.

Yet there are archetypal patterns to be found in this development which, when recognised, are very helpful in understanding children and their needs. Two sources of information and inspiration regarding these patterns in growth are addressed in these essays: firstly the work of Arnold Gesell and his colleagues at the Gesell Institute of Child Development; secondly the insights of Rudolf Steiner and all those who have worked with his ideas over the last 100 years in Steiner Waldorf education, in anthroposophical medicine and Biodynamic agriculture particularly.

Neither of these sources of ideas is broadly recognised today yet both provide a profound understanding of children and shed light on each other. They also, when examined together, reveal yet another element in the patterns of development – archetypal influences associated in tradition with the planets. This essay serves as the introduction to the series of essays that explore all of these: the work of the Gesell Institute, the seven year stages described by Rudolf Steiner and the six planetary influences and qualities as they can be found in child development.

For more information on each of these areas see the accompanying essays: *Brief descriptions of the planetary qualities*, *The Gesell Institute and their six stages* and *An esoteric perspective on the planetary qualities*. For the research supporting the integration of the six Gesell stages and the six planetary types see the essay for each individual planet.

I accept that the idea of planetary influences in child development may be challenging for many, but I try to show in more detail in this set of essays that there are good reasons for this proposition, though they are not to be found in mainstream theories or practice. All I ask is that you be as open as any true scientist should be and observe the phenomenon of children in this light.

Arnold Gesell, the Gesell Institute and the Six Gesell Stages

As early as 1911, Dr Arnold Gesell (1880-1961), psychologist and paediatrician, began research into children's development by conducting detailed normative studies of young children in the Yale Clinic of Child Development which he founded and lead as director

until 1948. This research was continued over the next hundred years by his colleagues in the Gesell Institute of Child Development, which today still advocates strongly for children's development to be a basis of all decisions affecting young children in the U.S.A.

The Gesell researchers' detailed observations of children from birth to sixteen years, enriched by over a century of research, are a treasure trove for phenomenological study. They observed that children went through predictable changes in 'mood' or 'tendency' in different stages, where behaviour seem to alternate between being in equilibrium and in disequilibrium. Some stages were more expansive, some more inward, some more amenable, some outright challenging! They observed that there is a pattern to these changing behaviours and identified six stages which repeated in cycles throughout childhood, with the stages increasing in length incrementally through the first seven years at which point the stages became one year in length.

For convenience in these essays I have referred to these stages as the 'Six Gesell Stages in child development' and to the team of Gesell Institute researchers over the years as 'Gesell' or 'Gesell researchers'. More about the Gesell Institute, their research and how they discovered these stages is described separately in the essay *The Gesell Institute for Child Development and the Six Gesell Stages in Child Development*.

Over the years in my own work with children, parents and teachers in Australia it became clear that these Gesell Stages are still very evident and useful for a better understanding of our children and their needs. As parents we at first might assume that easier or more challenging times, or more inward or expansive times in our child are just a consequence of the environment and other straightforward factors like the child's temperament. But then, if we have more than one child, we may remember that our first child showed some of this same behaviour at this same age. With consequent children, and comparisons with other like-aged children, similarity in behaviours in the different stages becomes even more clear. As teachers we may at first also assume the changes from year to year are reflections of the nature of each individual class, but with experience, we also begin to see recurring themes – the Sixfold Gesell Stages. Knowing these stages better, helps us to see what is developmental in children (and will pass) and gives us more insight into how to support the children better in each stage. This also provides helpful insights to health practitioners and others caring for children.

What underlies the Six Gesell Stages?

I pondered for years what could underlie this six-fold pattern in child behaviour which the Gesell researchers had observed. It seemed that it could also be an archetypal pattern, some kind of blueprint in development, like Rudolf Steiner's observation that physical growth in childhood occurs in seven year cycles. What intrigued me particularly was that in the Gesell descriptions of the stages written about in the 1970s, they placed birth at Stage 6. This stage also occurred at Nine years, that delicate time when a new sense of separate self is occurring and (if one extrapolated further than the sixteen years of the Gesell studies) at twenty one years, that time of maturation celebrated historically in the west as adulthood. Thus, twenty one years after birth represents the culmination of three seven year cycles described by Steiner, and six Gesell Stage cycles (the latter of these having occurred in incremental increases before establishing themselves as a full year in length at seven).

So I searched for some bigger pattern of influence behind these stages, not a pattern I could just theoretically impose on the years of childhood, but a pattern which could be seen to arise out of the behaviour of children as described by the Gesell research and observed through my own work with parents, teachers and children. I found this pattern in the archetypal qualities associated in tradition with the planets: Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn, in that order.

Deeper study of the planetary qualities and the detailed Gesell observations of the children in the associated stages has revealed a remarkable congruence between the two. The stages are most clearly seen in comparison to the behaviour in the stages before and after. This can only be illustrated very simply here.

Gesell Stage 1 (includes 2, 5, 10 and 16 years) is described as a point where children are in *equilibrium* and have relatively little difficulty with themselves and the world. This has a relationship with the planetary qualities of, and the planetary personality associated traditionally with, the Moon: they are sociable, loving and often good, more interested in breadth than depth.

Gesell Stage 2 (includes 2½, 5½ and 11 years) is quite different, marked by *disequilibrium*, and appears to be broken up, disturbed and troubled, an age where they describe the children as at odds with their environment. The children demand freedom to move and be independent; they are sociable, lively, interested, sanguine, all qualities associated with Mercury.

Gesell Stage 3 (includes 3, 6½ and 12 years) is a period of relative *equilibrium* again when life's forces seem to be in good balance. The children are happy both within themselves and in their environment. They love people, artistic activities and nature, live very much through their feelings and are amenable, all qualities associated with Venus.

Gesell Stage 4 (includes 3½, 7 and 13 years) is characterised by *disequilibrium* and a very pronounced inwardising or drawing in of outer impressions and experiences, to be mulled over, thought about, and digested. At the younger ages they show an emotional and physical instability, and the older ages a certain moroseness and more pessimistic attitude towards life in general. The children showed the vigorous outer movement as well as the assimilative, inward qualities associated with Mars.

Gesell Stage 5 (includes 4, 8 and 14 years) is one of extreme expansiveness, expressed in their interests, big thinking, adventurousness and in their bravado, dramatics and independence. They are versatile and have a certain inner *equilibrium*, thoughtfulness and moral striving. All of this is consistent with Jupiter qualities.

Gesell Stage 6 (includes 4½, 9, and 15 years) is a stage in *disequilibrium* which Gesell researchers felt they did not entirely understand. Nevertheless, they describe a more sensitive, thoughtful child, of deeper thinking, more ordered, inward tendencies consistent with Saturn, who in defence of freedom, is more reclusive and consequently more difficult to know.

So the behaviour observed in the Gesell Stages reflects the qualities associated in tradition with the six planets in the series. The deeper one understands the planetary qualities the more connections with the detailed descriptions of Gesell stages one finds. It may be that the

Six Gesell Stages merely show the characteristics associated with the traditional planetary influences but it is also possible that there are active principles involved, such that archetypal influences, traditionally described as “planetary”, could be influencing the way children develop in time. These essays describe such planetary qualities and influences in more detail, including from an esoteric perspective, and compare them with the Gesell descriptions of children in the associated stages. The intensive study involved in this comparison has only reinforced my initial belief in the validity of these links. For more on this see the essay *An esoteric perspective of planetary qualities*.

Rudolf Steiner and an understanding of planetary qualities

Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), Austrian philosopher, social reformist, architect and esotericist, also gave helpful pictures of the way children develop in predictable, rhythmical ways. He described seven year growth stages, where the emphasis in physical growth proceeds from the head and moves down the body towards the feet in each stage. The descriptions of development in the Gesell research provide confirmation of this seven year downward pattern in growth. Steiner’s own observations also confirm, as the Gesell researchers point out, that growth is not an incremental ‘enlargement’ but a rhythmical process of advancement, establishment, temporary regression, and transformation.

However, the most relevant observations of Rudolf Steiner to these essays lies in his recognition of planetary influences as active forces in our world, in mineral, plant, animal and human. Steiner, and those who have worked with his ideas in very practical ways, enrich the traditional understanding of the influences of the planets coming from astrology and other sources. Biodynamic agriculture research demonstrates that there are clear, if complex, relationships between plant growth and planetary influences. Anthroposophical medicine, which has a methodology based on Steiner’s insights into the nature of the human being, also works with the concepts that the planetary influences are working in the body in very specific ways, and therapies based on this understanding are used for healing. Steiner education, social development and biography work also include the planetary influences in the seven year cycles in human development. Observation of the level of consciousness associated with each planet in the series— with the first Moon (the most dreamy and least conscious, most young and associated with early childhood) and the last Saturn (the most conscious and associated with age and maturity)— adds to our understanding of the life stages and the qualities of the planets.

An understanding of some of these more tangible manifestations of planetary influences which are found in the Steiner inspired work, can help in our understanding of children. For example, why nine-year-olds (in a Saturn influenced stage) are interested in deeper, more penetrating, ordered serious thinking about the world. Yet ten-year-olds (in a Moon influenced stage) – a year older and surely more mature than nine – are not so interested in deep penetrating thought, but prefer the broad surface explorations of things (Gesell’s observations). Saturn, at the more conscious end of the planetary spectrum, wants to go deep and serious. Moon at the less conscious, more youthful end of the planetary spectrum prefers the social and lighter surface interactions with the world, even in thought. Gesell even advises us not to be concerned about Tens’ lack of deep thought for it is, after all, a characteristic of that stage— and of Moon.

For summaries of the qualities associated with the mature personality type for each planet see *Brief descriptions of the planetary qualities*. The longer planetary essays contain more detailed characterisations as well as advice on how to support children of each planetary type and stage.

The opportunities that experience of different planetary qualities offer

What would development in childhood gain from recurring stages with such different planetary qualities in the six Gesell Stages?

The repeated experience of the six Gesell stages in six complete cycles through childhood provides an opportunity for children to practice many ways of being in the world. Practice at meeting the world with very different priorities and underlying drives; extroverted or introverted; big picture or detail; broad thinking or deep thinking; self-promoting or self-denying; task centred or people centred; conservative, cautious or adventurous, courageous; and so on. They offer different spheres of experience through being primarily motivated by the need for *love* or *power* or *freedom*.

The most detailed descriptions in these essays are of the psychological, emotional-social manifestations of the different stages. However planetary influences may also drive some physical developments, which those with more intimate knowledge of medicine and physiological development might recognise and be able to elaborate on in the future. The essays include some possible examples of this.

Living with children in the different Stages offers considerable challenges to us as adults caring for them. But when we can identify the opportunities for different experiences that is offered by each Stage, we are more able to find ways to maximise the learning from these experiences. To hold the boundaries for our children for health, safety and wisdom without stultifying their experience because of our own fears and concerns.

Often this will challenge our own personal tendencies and ways of living. If we tend to be safe, conservative, sensible people, we may find it a challenge to allow our children to be bold, adventurous or outrageous. If we are adventurous or socially outgoing we may find it hard to watch them be more shy, sensitive or socially reserved. Our own taboos and preferences may tempt us to want to change our children. But what is best is that we just wait, allow them to be what they are at that stage and observe what unfolds. See if it passes. Give support. Give protection and boundaries for safety, for physical and emotional wellbeing, but at the same time allow them the inner and outer experiences that the different Stages offer.

When we understand the Stages and their planetary influences more fully we have more guidelines to follow in how to support our children better. Expansive stages need more room. Inward stages need more privacy. Social relationship-love priority stages need more support for social interactions. Stages where freedom and power are priorities need our careful management to support experiences which allow autonomy and independence, while ensuring safety and successful experiences, with more responsibility being taken by the children as they get older. We need to be open, imaginative, innovative and flexible in our responses or we may meet full blown rebellions or silent stand-offs (especially in adolescence). As adults we have to find ways to meet their needs with wisdom, love and

inner strength, with consciousness, creativity and courage. In understanding the planetary influences behind the stages we get clues on helpful ways to manage the challenges.

The planetary descriptions will also help to identify if your child has a particular planetary type as their natural disposition. Sometimes we are combinations of these—just as we can be combinations of the four classical temperaments, choleric, melancholic, sanguine and phlegmatic.

Conclusion

I am proposing that there is considerable evidence that the Six Gesell Stages describe qualities and influences traditionally associated with the planets. These stages and qualities provide children with the opportunity to experience the many aspects of being human, as thinkers, doers, socialisers, carers, adventurers and so on.

This series of essays is written in support of this proposition. They aim to give a picture of the planetary qualities, influences and types, and see how they manifest in the descriptions of the relevant Gesell Stages in the different age groups, quoting as much as possible directly from the Gesell research. The essays end with suggestions on how to support children in these stages or with that particular planetary type of personality.