

Rolfing® SI for Babies, Children, and Families

Fulfilling Dr. Rolf's Vision

By Robert Toporek, Certified Advanced Rolfer™

Introduction

Starting in 1975 with one of Dr. Ida P. Rolf's grandchildren, I have worked with hundreds of babies, children, and whole families. My intention and commitment is to see Dr. Rolf's vision realized in our work and thereby create fundamental changes to the world we live in. In the last year of her life, Dr. Rolf was no longer interested in seeing how Rolfing SI could help someone stand up straighter, relieve chronic pain, or feel and function better. Instead, she was interested in seeing how our work can impact the behavior of a group. This is why I rarely work on a baby or child without having done Rolfing Structural Integration (SI) for one or both of the parents. In many cases, my work has traversed four generations, and begun with children as early as one day old.

The Beginning for Me

To get into this story, I have to go back in time to how it all unfolded.

My path to working with Dr. Rolf was not a straight path. Following a two-year stint serving as a soldier in Vietnam, I returned to Charleston, South Carolina, and pursued a number of odd jobs throughout my twenties. During this time, I realized my commitment to study directly with Dr. Rolf, and become a Rolfer.

Dr. Rolf did not work in a vacuum. I first met her in 1971 at Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California while on a leadership development fellowship from The Ford Foundation. I was in Esalen's leadership program and was learning how to lead encounter and Gestalt Therapy groups. This was all part of a bigger conversation called the human potential movement. She went there to work on Fritz Pearls. He was so impressed with the emotional results as well as the physical results that he began recommending people to her. This is where she began training laypeople. She trained a number of the Esalen leaders to become Rolfers.

One thing led to another and a few years later I ended up studying in Dr. Rolf's final elementary course. After the class, Dr. Rolf, Joe Heller, and a number of other members of the selection committee introduced me to and highly encouraged me to stay in Santa Monica and take what at the time was called Erhard Seminar Training (EST), now known as Landmark Education. Dr. Rolf had taken the course and found it personally as well as professionally beneficial and began recommending it to everyone she trained. Werner Erhard, on the other hand, was introduced to Ida and Rolfing SI and began having as many of his leaders as possible go through the Ten Series. He also substantially financially supported a number of Dr. Rolf's projects and they became close friends. This connection with EST/Landmark proved to be critical to my success as a Rolfer, and especially my work with babies and children.

After Dr. Rolf's final beginner's class, I moved in with her son, Dick Demmerle, and apprenticed with him in Turnersville, New Jersey. He supervised me doing Rolfing SI on three people a week, while I spent the

rest of my time observing him at work, and discussing his and Dr. Rolf's vision for the future of Rolfing SI.

Dr. Rolf worked on many children, including members of her family – that is part of how the work developed. So it was natural that I was also interested in what the work could do for children. One of my mementos of Dr. Rolf is shown in Figure 1 – before and after photos that she gave me of one of her infant clients.

Once I completed my internship with Dick, he asked me if I would be willing to work on his youngest son, Michael. Dick and his mother had worked on his two older children, but he did not feel as though he had the emotional separation to take Michael through the full ten-session series. Dick coached me in the beginning, giving the same advice he and Dr. Rolf often did: Do not try to fix anything, just follow the 'Recipe'. After going through all ten sessions with Michael, I had the confidence to begin doing Rolfing SI with more children.

I moved to Philadelphia, began my practice, and became very involved in the world of EST. Many of the people I came in contact with became clients, and I wound up doing Rolfing sessions on their children. I also worked on Werner Erhard's mother and father, some of his aunts, uncles, and cousins, and most of the leaders of his programs. From time to time I would do a session on Werner. My work has had his full support. This became a critical part of my success – because these clients had a

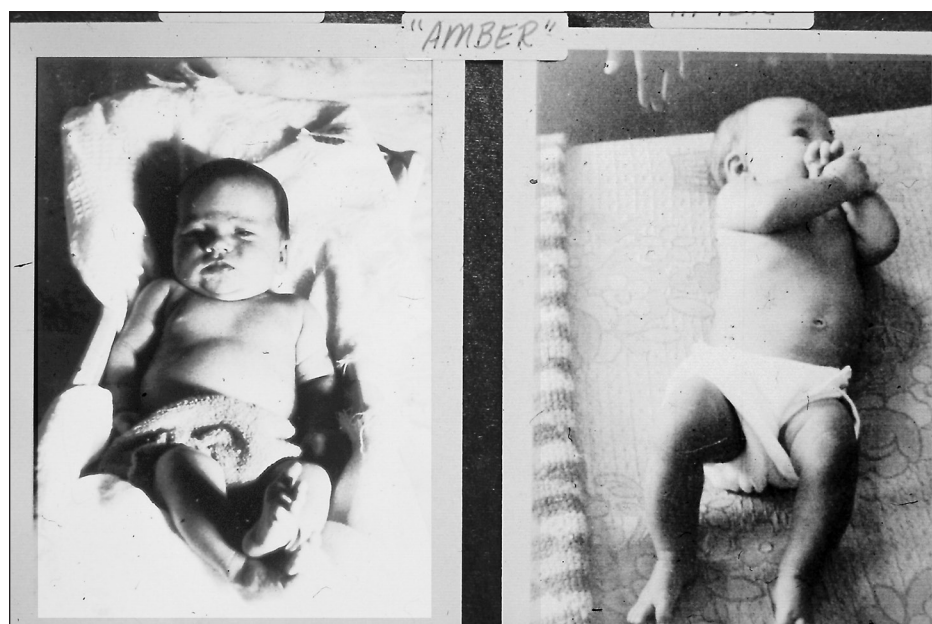


Figure 1: Before and After photos from Ida Rolf's work on a baby.

personal experience both through Rolwing SI and their transformational work of letting go of old patterns. I also took many of EST/Landmark's leadership development programs and this helped me with my relationship with Dr. Rolf and her family.

Around this time, Dr. Rolf returned to Philadelphia. I picked her up from the airport and offered to become her East Coast business manager. Over the next four years, I provided her with administrative help, traveled up and down the East Coast, flew to board meetings, and went to a conference in Los Angeles where she asked me to sit in for her at a dinner with Alexander Lowen and Moshe Feldenkrais. During that time, I grew to know Dr. Rolf as a person, and got to see just how much Rolwing SI meant to her life. In the last year of her life, all of her classes were held in my house in Philadelphia.

The Children's Project

From 1975 to 1978, my practice grew tremendously, and my work with babies and children continued to expand. I still wanted, however, to continue working with Dr. Rolf. In 1977, she began talking about doing a project to document and promote the benefits of Rolwing SI for babies and children. I begged her to do it in Philadelphia, and she accepted my offer to help implement, manage and complete it there. In a fundraising letter for this project, Dr. Rolf (1978) wrote the following:

For the past few years, I have been wanting to do a special [project] which would demonstrate the beneficial effects of Rolwing [SI] on children . . .

The purpose of the project is to gather good photographic material of ten to twelve children showing the beneficial changes that Rolwing [SI] produces in the short period of time of three weeks. . .

For me, one of the greater satisfying and joyous areas of my work has been my work with children. I can think of no better way to move us further down the path in having Rolwing [SI's] acceptance and recognition in the world expand than to present to the world what Rolwing [SI] has to offer to the younger population. Rolwing [SI] releases those traumatic incidents of birth and childhood that prevent the child from achieving complete wholeness – physically, psychologically, and emotionally. It provides for all children a “good foundation to stand on and grow up from”, namely a balanced, supportive, physical body. And that is where it all begins.

Early that next year, Dr. Rolf and I did a demonstration project at my house to a room full of my clients, their children, and their friends who were interested. The results were enormous, both physically and psychologically, and we documented them photographically, as well as psychologically. The project lasted about four weeks, we did the ten-session series for eleven or twelve babies and children. Ron Thompson did the photography, Andy Crow was one of the Rolfers, and a number of other Rolfers contributed in many other ways as well.

Throughout the project, Dr. Rolf kept preaching that anybody at any age would benefit from a series of Rolwing work following the Recipe. The results demonstrated by the babies and children receiving the work were obvious: the kids' posture, psychology, confidence, and well-being dramatically improved, as did their relationship with their parents.

Legacy

Dr. Rolf was supposed to finish the children's project, but around that time, she was battling colon cancer. She did a small advanced class in my home, a few months later, but she was unable to complete the children's project as she became too ill. A few days before she passed away, I promised her that I would complete and carry on the children's project, which I have continued to do.

After many trials and tribulations, I produced a monograph and a thirty-minute award-winning video, both entitled *The Promise of Rolwing Children* (Toporek 1981a and 1981b). At the time, however, this did not move the meter with other Rolfers, so Rolwing work for babies, children, and families is still not fundamental to the teaching of Rolwing SI as Dr. Rolf had envisioned. I hope that this article may help to change that.

A Detour into Anthropology and Evolution

As my Rolwing career continued, my work with babies and children continued to grow, and I also had interesting adult clients. In 1983, the anthropologist who discovered the link between apes and humans, Raymond Dart, became a client. He distinguished that as we humans evolved toward verticality, the size and shape of our skulls changed along with our neurological development. During his sessions, we had amazing conversations about verticality and evolution. We began

to question whether evolution is part of the DNA of all humans. Could this explain why, after Rolwing sessions, clients stand up and say that they feel taller and lighter? There is no doubt that Dr. Rolf would have had much to contribute to this conversation. After all, she said, “It is possible that we are seeing the first conscious attempt at evolution that any species has ever evidenced” (Rolf 1977).

We can see a thread of this type of inquiry running through Dr. Rolf's work. She was interested in how bodies organized and responded to the environment, including gravity, as seen below (all Dr. Rolf, quoted in Toporek 2012 on the pages indicated):

The word posture, in its physical sense, has been commonly regarded as a static alignment of body parts, one above the other, rather like stacked suitcases or boxes. Posture, in its broader sense, is the momentary, ever-changing balance of body components in space as they relate to the force of gravity . . . at any given instant, and in any given position (2).

In a healthy organism, proper balance might be thought of as a resting state, a capacity and preparedness to respond appropriately and efficiently to a wide variety of stimuli (23).

And she did not see the human journey to being upright as evolutionarily complete:

We are not truly upright, we are only on our way to becoming upright. This is a metaphysical consideration. One of the jobs of a Rolfer is to speed that process along. We want to get them into the place where gravity reinforces them and is a friend, a nourishing force (17).

Partly in this spirit of inquiry, in 1984 I began videotaping every baby and child I worked with.

Babies and Families

Through all my years of practicing Rolwing SI on children – those who are developmentally ‘normal’ as well as babies and children with conditions like Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, bowed legs, club feet, scoliosis, and other developmental challenges – I keep believing the best time to start is in the beginning.

Imagine placing your hands on the abdomen of a newborn baby and getting in touch with a lifetime's worth of patterns. The patterns we see in our clients come from

generations ago, both physically as well as psychologically. By working on a baby we can interrupt the pattern before it can reinforce itself. (Usually, with adults, we initially are working on the *reinforcement* of patterns of tension, the 'body armor' that Wilhelm Reich speaks of.) The earlier we begin, the more profoundly we can create the promise of the ten sessions and the longer that baby/person enjoys the benefits. I oftentimes do the first fourteen sessions (Ten Series plus a four-session advanced Rolfing series) in a child's first three years. Then from time to time with babies I do a maintenance session to deal with growth spurts and common injuries.

Imagine that baby's body relaxing and allowing your hands to communicate a sense of love and safety. Imagine the immense opportunity that lies beneath your fingers to make a lifelong difference in that baby's life physically, psychologically, and socially. Imagine the confidence and comfort you are feeling, the baby is feeling, and the parents are witnessing. Imagine the fascia beneath your fingers melting into a new possibility.

A baby's brain grows at a faster rate from birth to age five than at any other time in its life. I began working on my son, Bryan, from the first week of his life, and it made a remarkable difference (see Figure 2). As a result, he grew up with amazing posture, presence, and balance. All the things Dr. Rolf had to say about Rolfing SI's potential for babies unfolded before my eyes.

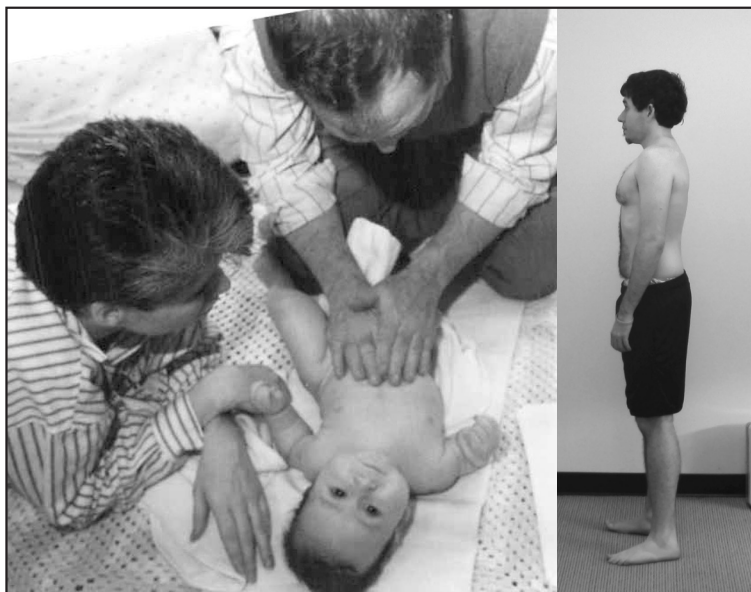


Figure 2: Rolfing work on my first newborn baby – my own son, Bryan (left, with his mother Mary Murphy), and Bryan twenty years later (right).



Figure 3: All three of these families have been through at least ten sessions of Rolfing SI. Each of their babies started receiving work in about the first week of life.

As my clients saw how my son turned out, more and more parents wanted me to work on their babies in the first few weeks of their lives. Somewhere along the way, I met a mother who asked me to do Rolfing SI on both her and her daughter. She then asked whether should bring her mother and grandmother. Each week, we had a family Rolfing session. Why work on a whole family? Because the past persists if not interrupted. It is never too early or too

late to transform the predictable future. We all have predictable futures; we just have to look toward our parents to see the patterns. I did Rolfing session on my mother, my father, my sister, and a few of my cousins. I worked on my son's mother, a few of her siblings, and her father, who suffered a severe brain injury late in his life. This allowed me to transform the patterns I inherited, and allowed me to provide an unprecedented place for my son to grow up, both physically and psychologically.

Some of those babies and children from years ago have grown up, gotten married, and had me work with their babies. In Figure 3 you see three families I have worked on. In Figure 4 you see Akiva, who had his tenth session at four months of age. I had done Rolfing SI on his father as a baby, along with his father's two brothers and sister (as babies), and his paternal grandparents; I have worked on his mother as well, but that has not yet translated into her side of the family getting Rolfing SI.

I work on babies because it is beneficial for humanity as a whole. As soon as you free one body from a pattern of tension, it has a ripple effect throughout humanity. The benefits also last a lifetime.

The Promise of Rolfing SI for Children

If a baby does not get to experience Rolfing SI at a young age, there is already a pattern



Figure 4: Avika getting the First Hour at six days old; pictured with his father David Shinefield who also, as a baby, received Roling sessions from me.

taking hold – he is simply a younger version of the adult client’s structure you would meet down the road. Newborn babies, they are simply younger versions of our adult clients.

From the moment we are conceived, I believe flexors overpower extensors. Birth is a wonderful event, it is also the start of dealing with life and gravity outside of the womb. It is our first break in belonging, and an introduction to the tension and challenge to survive. We inherit patterns of tension and posture genetically, specific to our family patterns. We must know ourselves in order to know the world, because the world begins in our selves. We cannot overestimate how important it is, especially for children, to understand this concept. Through this knowing, we can begin to understand the impact our own existence can have on the existence of others. We often forget that childhood is charged with these concerns and traumas; these we can only dimly recall, or perhaps suppress completely.

When a person experiences trauma, both physical and emotional, the effect is felt throughout the body and fascial tissue responds by shortening and thickening. Over time, this pulls the body out of its balanced vertical alignment, and an unbalanced body will then compensate, causing more energy to be expended. When a child falls on his knee, he favors the leg to ease the discomfort. Neighboring muscle groups are then used to support the change in weight bearing. The fascia in this area thickens, or sticks together, to support

the increased load on these muscles. Over a lifetime, these bumps and bruises will cause a body to lose its vertical alignment and natural grace.

Emotional trauma has a similar effect. If a child is yelled at often, he may carry his head tipped downward. Over time, this reaction becomes chronic, as the fascia in the neck thickens. Unfortunately, this posture can become set and, as a result, the emotional feeling that caused it will persist along with it. Roling SI can work on releasing these past traumas and associated patterns to help a child begin working with gravity, rather than against it.

Control, confidence, and understanding of how one’s body truly works – its limits and its strengths, a trust in its essential fluidity and resiliency – these are the aspects that give us confidence about the operation of our individual selves. Through Roling SI, we can begin to fall into a more fluid existence – one that honors the individual as a whole, and integrates all of our past trauma, and our future radiance. Getting Roling sessions at an early age helps babies and children address these concerns and gives children ease with their own bodies. It allows them to develop the confidence that they carry their own state of grace within themselves. As their lives are just beginning to unfold, there is no way to separate the physical child from his mental and spiritual self. A child who slumps physically also slumps mentally and emotionally. Conversely, a child whose body is balanced, and who moves gracefully and confidently, reflects an inner grace and confidence.

As conscientious parents are all too painfully aware, not all children carry their bodies well. It is possible to read those timid, tense, or distorted bodies as expressing needs that are not otherwise being communicated. As parents, one of many concerns is to produce a balanced child. Roling SI is an effective, immediate means of addressing this objective.

Stories of Some of the Children

In addition to my Roling practice, I run a nonprofit organization manned mostly by volunteers aimed at distributing inexpensive refurbished computers to families, schools, and organizations. Justin (Figure 5) began volunteering when he was thirteen. He was diagnosed in the autism spectrum; he was brilliant and enthusiastic about technology, but lacked social skills. His body shook when he spoke, he did not make eye contact, and because his mouth operated as fast as his brain, people tended not to listen to him. Over the next seven plus years, he continued to volunteer, and receive Roling sessions. I believe Roling SI was part of what allowed him to develop and flourish: he recently graduated from Widener University and has a full-time job; his social skills are off the charts; and he continues to demonstrate amazing communication and leadership skills

Lauren began her Roling session when she was around three years of age. She was diagnosed with Down syndrome at birth. (Her parents also received their initial sessions, and later received four advanced sessions.) Lauren graduated from a four-year college, majoring in dance and theatre. She is now living in Ohio with her husband, has a job, drives a car, and is living far beyond the future that would have been predicted for her. Her parents attribute Roling SI as one of the key things that made a difference in her life.

Dominic was referred by his aunt, a Rolfer on the West Coast, for a serious case of toe-walking. While I initially wanted to go off the map and try and fix the problem, I kept hearing Dr. Rolf say, “Follow the Recipe”. After his first ten sessions, he was better but far from perfect. The next summer, he came in for his four advanced sessions, and that made a difference. I recently had another session with him, and did a video interview. He said, “Not only do I feel a lot better, but kids do not make fun of me anymore or bully me. I am starting to stand up for myself.”

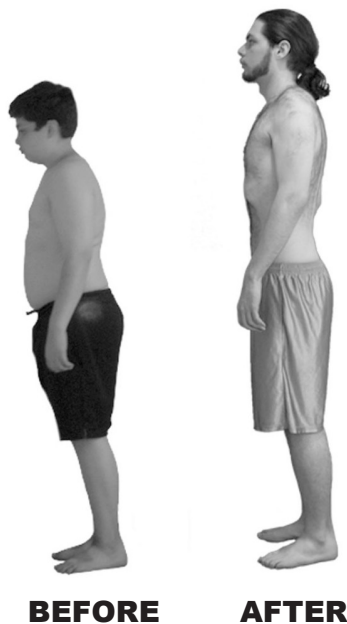


Figure 5: Justin at ages thirteen (left) and twenty (right).

Another child was brought by his parent because he suffered from cerebral palsy and had very stiff movements. His muscles were often so stiff that it was hard to even move them. He wore braces and did not have good balance. Roling SI helped restore the balance between flexion and extension in his body. He was better able to move in a more balanced way, and his arms were consequently not as stiff. His speech even improved as well.

Two brothers, Jesse and Reginald, had a series of sessions, and each noted marked improvements in both their physical and emotional health. According to their mother, Reginald was previously disruptive, and had a bad attitude toward his brother. Roling SI, however, changed his disposition. Where he was once hyperactive, he became calm. Jesse experienced positive results as well.

Giving to the Community

Dr. Rolf always emphasized the importance of giving back to the community. As such, in 1997, I took my Roling table to one of the worst poverty-stricken, drug-ridden neighborhoods in Philadelphia (see Figure 6). Knowing no one, I set up my table on the sidewalk with a before-and-after poster and offered sessions. It was a mostly Hispanic neighborhood, and I did not speak Spanish.

I discovered touch and healing are universal languages. The first kid got on the table, and when I was done, she answered the question,

“How do you feel?,” with a resounding “Muy bien!” This began a twenty-year process of going to that neighborhood and making a difference. One of the kids in that first family just graduated from Millersville University. He is the first one in his family to graduate college, and he is one of the only kids from his neighborhood to do so.

Conclusion

Dr. Rolf noted that the birth process generally distorts the body. Roling SI works to mature an individual in both physical and emotional ways. It helps people become more vertical, so that gravity is no longer the enemy. Through her practice, Dr. Rolf was able to bring greater well-being into her clients’ lives, and she passed that gift on to me. My self-appointed job is to now bring that to everybody and every bodyworker.

Robert Toporek has been a Certified Advanced Rolfer since 1975. He studied directly with Dr. Rolf during the last four years of her life, and also supported her in many other ways. He also studied with Dr. Rolf’s son Dick Demmerle, In 1978, at Dr. Rolf request, Robert helped pioneer her work with babies and children. He has videoed and/or photographed Roling SI for over 300 entire families since 1975, and has done extensive long-term follow-ups. He is also republishing and rebranding a book, Hands on Parenting: A Guide to Massage for Happier, Healthier, Smarter, Kids. Robert has studied personal growth and development for over fifty years. He describes himself as a “down-

to-earth, pretty cool dude.” To find out more about Robert’s work visit www.rolfingkids.org and view the video and ebook resources in the bibliography below.

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Figure 6: Community work in a neighborhood that used to be called the Badlands of north Philadelphia.