

Communication with Children

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As the speed and the effectiveness of physical transit over the face of the globe increases daily, the achievement of effective communication between individuals and nations comes to occupy a place of central importance. Every development in facility of transit increases the urgency of the need for mutual understanding.

Between adult and adult and between group and group, language is the main instrument of communication. But language is a double-edged tool and can hide as well as convey exact meaning. Moreover, apart from certain philosophical groups little attention has been given to consideration of the ability of language to convey other than descriptions and definition of fact from speaker or writer to hearer or reader. Reflection upon such words as 'democracy', 'freedom', 'security', for instance, shows how little basis there is for reliance upon language for success in conveyance of essential meaning. Moreover, adults for the most part, in their long apprenticeship in the passage from childhood to maturity, have learned to clothe their concepts, ideas and intentions in terms tradition has long rendered automatic.

Very different is the position of the child, caught in a situation of pain and tension between himself and his surrounding adults and required by them to give an account of himself and his deeds to an adult audience in words.

Within a family, shared experience and shared verbal traditions can make achievement of understanding possible, even in situations of acute distress. For the psychiatrist, confronted by a child, brought to him by family, school, or Court, the position is different. Here no undertones of common forms of phrase, no background of shared experience are available upon which to build. All the aids to understanding which are normally present when adult meets adult are here lacking. Moreover the adult himself comes from a specific background has forms of phrase and of expectation of response which have become part of his personality. His facial expressions, pose of body, tones of voice, assumptions arising from his particular social strata, are unconscious to him. The child brings also to this confrontation his experience and expectations of adult nature and responses.

The psychiatrist will, moreover, in his professional training have accustomed himself to certain classifications of motivation, affect and behaviour, certain accepted patterns of reaction to recurring situations, and will, inevitably, look for these in considering the problem before him.

To the successful handling of this common professional situation a further difficulty is added through the prevalent acceptance by psychiatrists of

the psychoanalytic view of the basic importance of the affective element in personality, and the importance of the translation of affect into language.

A child's experience, however, is compounded of many different facets occurring simultaneously, and words are of little use to him. Interpretation to him, in language, of possible or actual affective states can, at times, only increase his confusion.

A child thus faced by an adult he does not know, tends to become an uneasy amalgam of frozen states of mind and feeling, packed into an unresponsive body. He thinks and remembers, not in words, but in scenes or pictures, conceived or performed, and knows himself only through what he hears adults say about him. If communication with him is to be established it must start from the child's point of view and in the terms in which he thinks and feels: it must meet him where he is and be expressed in modes that are natural to him. He has no experience of accepted ways of verbal expression, no sense of time, or of consequences.

In recent years great attention has been paid to a child's need of affective security, and while this, in itself, is true and important, little thought has yet been given to the process by which that most common of civilisations' distresses, the sense of alienation from one's fellows, finds its germ and its development.

Faulty affective development plays most truly a large part in the germination and development of such a state, but equally potent is long experience of absence of **communication** with one's fellows.

It is to consideration of this factor that this paper is directed. Few facts in a child's life can be more important to him than an experience, even if only a brief one, of wholehearted intimacy of communication with an adult. This can be achieved in many ways, but whatever the method, the process of studying and establishing communication with a child goes through certain stages in which a bridge of understanding is built from the child to the adults around him, and with good fortune, from the parents to him.

Let us look at three cases and consider first that of a boy of 7, eldest child and only son of a solid and respected family in a small thriving town. Suddenly one day some household money is found to be missing. The circumstances are such that no outsider could be involved. After an exhaustive search the missing £1 notes are found hidden under the mattress of this little boy's bed. The consternation in the family is acute, the distress extreme: not only is the whole matter most mysterious, but the parents, people of exceptional rectitude, feel themselves shamed. Under questioning the boy is silent: he will neither admit nor deny. The child and parents reach my consulting room, with an atmosphere of disaster emanating from the three. It is clear to them that the boy must have taken the money, but WHY? "Doctor, will he grow up to be a criminal"? they ask the psychiatrist. The boy is white and silent, moves slowly and stands with a look of terror and of anger in his eyes.

Here is the type situation: the adults with anguish in their souls and their minds frozen into a stereotyped repertoire of ideas and phrases and showing no concept of the personality of their child. It is not Jacques or Andre that they see but a little-boy-who-has- stolen-his-mother's-money-and-who-if-not-stopped-will-grow-into-an-adult-thief. Will I tell them what to do with him?

Having got rid of the parents the process of achieving communication with, let us call him Andre, can begin.

As in all negotiation there are two aspects to each stage, that experienced by the child and that carried through by the adult. For the child it is essential that all that has happened heretofore be put on one side and he become absolutely certain it will not be brought back - unless **he** wishes to, that is. For the psychiatrist the essential foundation of communication is to discover and decide what sort of a child this is.

There are, of course, a number of possible symbolic interpretations for a theft of this nature by a boy of 7, the eldest of his family: but from the point of view of communication, the first essential is to gain some idea of the nature of this particular boy as an individual.

To achieve this we call Kaleidoblocs into our aid. Kaleidoblocs are a set of 26 coloured wooden blocks of varied size and shape closely interrelated with one another in a complex manner. To a child they are intriguing and unfamiliar: to the observer a considerable variety of varied information can be gained from the child's responses. Andre is listless, withdrawn and bored, he moves the pieces about without interest: then his eye falls on a curved block with its suggestion of a boat, and all is changed. His hands begin to move quickly, his mouth loses its hard line, he uses his fingers deftly, he perseveres in a struggle to achieve an objective which does not come easily: he finds that formal trees can be made with the thick triangles; he constructs a scene, not original but observant: he puts one block on top of another and it makes a comic outline; he looks to me for comment; we laugh together.

As a psychiatrist, I now have a good deal of information. I know this boy is of good intelligence, that he has skilful fingers, is observant and capable of initiative; he has a sense of humour and a capacity for enjoyment. It would seem that his parents have made a good atmosphere at home since he can let himself play freely with a strange adult.

It is time to pass to the second stage. This is where, building upon what has been gained, some definite work is given to him to do with a change in my tone of voice, some of the problems concealed in the Kaleidoblocs are put to him. His interest is caught, he can think consecutively and reason clearly.

One problem concerns a birthday party; his face is now mobile and its expression quickly changing. We begin to talk about birthdays and how nice they are and about presents. When this word is mentioned the light goes out of his face, his mouth sets tightly, his whole body appears to shrink. The psychiatrist begins now to talk about parents, how they forget their own

childhood, how easily important things become forgotten, how rigid their ideas are and how dully they live, doing the same things every day, seeming to have so little fun. As talk proceeds, the boy begins to relax, to nod his head in agreement, to look eager. It is probable we have now come to the core of the problem: the disaster can now be directly approached.

I say: "Andre, something bad has happened between you and your parents, I think it is something to do with presents. Parents are difficult people to understand. Tell me about it, I may be able to help". Then the story comes out. Every Christmas and birthday Granny sends him some money as a present. Up till now he has bothered little about it, but this year it is different: "I am big now, I am in the second class". He had watched his mother opening the envelope and seen her draw out a green money note. This she said was a present from Granny: Andre wanted to have it as his own. "No", she said, "she would keep it for him and he could get nice things with it later on"; she put it in her handbag. Later in the morning he went with her shopping - as he continued his face registered increasing horror and distress - "Do you know what she did? She went into a strange big building with a wall down the middle and some men sitting on the other side. She took my green paper out of her bag and, (his voice rising to a squeaky shout) SHE GAVE IT TO A STRANGE MAN THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WALL". "This must have been dreadful", I said- "It was", he gulped.

After a short space of silence for recovery, we entered upon the third phase. I began to tell him what I had found out about him in the play with Kaleidoblocs, how well he noticed and thought, how he stuck to something he had decided upon until he had done it, how good his fingers were and what fun it was when he made the little funny man. His face by now had become quiet and concentrated: he listened intently, and when it was put to him that "You must have felt you had to do something to show Mummy how you felt", he nodded vigorously and to the question "Well what did you do?" his reply came instantaneously "I found some green papers of hers and hid them".

The position was clear. A point to remember is that not only was the immediate problem solved, but the depth of distress both of parents and child underlines the care that should be taken by the psychiatrist or therapist in such a situation to make every stage of their child's thinking, feeling and reasoning clear to the parents. Such an incident and its clarification can also make an important contribution to parents understanding of themselves, and of the way adults regard and react to children. Each disaster, therefore, which is brought to a psychiatrist, should make a positive contribution to the general mental health of the family and sometimes through them to the neighbourhood.

This case has been chosen as an illustration of the steps that can be taken, to create for a child, some at least, of the tools and advantages normal to an adult in negotiation. In this case the problem was recent, the child quick and intelligent and the core of the situation factual.

Quite different is the situation of a child patient, in trouble for a long time, and suffering from a distress for which there is no factual cause but we consider a boy of this sort aged 9, referred by a psychiatrist from a general hospital for stammering, being obstinate and uncooperative at home, and at school working far below his intellectual level, which on examination (L. Form Revised Stanford Binet) proved to be an I.Q. of 130. He had had a good deal of speech therapy without much effect.

Brought by his parents, Thomas was a stocky, well-dressed, good-looking boy with a serious expression. At the Consultation interview he was silent and rather anxious. His stammer was said by the psychologist to disappear when tackling tasks he found difficult. Like Andre he was the eldest child and only son of a solid, industrious, working class family, apt to keep themselves to themselves. Both parents get irritated with Thomas and shout at him, complaining he is disobedient and obstinate. He was popular with the neighbourhood boys and played with them in the street.

Preliminary study of this boy's history and the family situation made it clear that the conflict was between himself and his parents, and his inability to function at the level of his inherent endowment were long standing troubles and composed of many elements. There is no similarity between this boy and Andre, however good the means of communication might be, neither boy nor family in Thomas' case would be able to define what was the nature of their problem.

In such a situation Kaleidoblocs would be of no value; the boy's problems lay in quite a different area of the psyche. The basic rule, however, still held that without means through which Thomas' subjective experience of himself and of the outside world could find expression, no communication with him would be possible. It is for the expression of states of this nature in particular that the World Apparatus and World Technique is designed. (For description see end of paper).

On his second treatment session Thomas constructed the World illustrated below. This was the third World he had made, most of the themes in it had been indicated in the other two, but appeared for the first time clearly in this one.

Thomas' concentration was complete as he constructed this World. It was made as it were in sections, but is quite chaotic. The making fell into six sections.

1. First the soldiers (with army vehicles; the modern soldiers about to attack the old time ones;)
2. Next three buses, full of people and going along; a police car shouting that prisoners have escaped, 'the people will then help to catch the prisoners and shut them up again'. Between these two sections the skier was put in coming down a slope (later a zebra put

in his path; he knocks him down and passes over him).

3. Wild animals now appear, a giraffe, a lion and a crocodile 'just walking around' (the zebra we have already met), to these a horse is added also just walking around, another crocodile, however, is just about to get into a bus and eat all the people in it, and a snake twines around a bus so it cannot go along and then will get into the bus and eat all the people in it.
4. The next emphasis is on pigs: a mother pig is put on the top of the bus and at first a baby pig was to go with her, but Thomas decided to put it on the ground some distance away and two babies with it; a further pig suckling babies, and two mother pigs walking along. Two cows were now added, one astride the crocodile about to get into the bus, but apparently with no connection with it.
5. Finally all the trains he could find were added facing all ways and thought of as electric. Thomas did not know if they were moving or if moving, where they were going.
6. A large tank he had used in his other Worlds finished the construction 'just standing' in the further left corner.

His concentration was absolute, each item was both chosen and placed with care. The chaotic nature of the arrangement in the tray, the presentation of contradictory emotions and the clarity and definition of expression of the feeling within the boy of being 'lost' in a dangerous incomprehensible, chaotic world, is complete. Communication here can only be developed on the basis of the boy's own type of 'speech', i.e. as if a Spaniard were faced in negotiation with the pictographs or glyphs of Aztec civilisation. The one is as readable as the other: - i.e. Aztec pictographs and children's (or adults for that matter) Worlds — once the necessary work has been put in to understand them. Here we are presented with an intricate combination of feeling, experience, emotion and phantasy. Added to these all concepts of a nature basic to many children, which for convenience in reference in my work and with my colleagues, we term the 'proto-system', as it forms the 'protoplasm' of the mind.

With the help both of World apparatus as the 'words' of the child's language and understanding of the 'proto-system' as the grammar of that language, a child can be brought into the normal situation of negotiator, i.e. able to talk in his own language to an adult using his, and gradually come to understand and share the understanding of himself and his problems - being progressively gained by the psychiatrist.

The particular value of the World apparatus is that it can present a subjective situation as it really is at a moment of experience, with elements of different nature and lying at different levels in the psyche actually present at the same time. The presence in the world cabinet of the same objects makes possible a sequential working out in a series of Worlds of the significances

and implications of the statements and stories presented in single Worlds. (Each World, as it is completed, is drawn by the therapist and filed as material for later review and discussion with the maker of them).

Let us turn to another situation. The parents of an 8%-year old boy, Ralph, urgently ask for a consultation. An emergency has arisen. The Headmaster of the boarding Preparatory school the boy is attending has asked them to remove him from the school. The reason is extreme aggressive behaviour against another boy and in relation to furniture of classrooms etc. The boy's parents belong to the group where the men attend Preparatory boarding schools (in this case the same one as that at which Ralph now is), go from there to one of the next prominent Public schools and from there to Oxford or Cambridge. Ralph was the eldest of four children, his father a well-established civil servant. Ralph's mother was of a forceful and dominant personality very much attached to her children, but determined that they should develop the traits she felt admirable. The family was one of a large clan and Ralph as both eldest son and grandson occupied an important position. Both parents were devoted to their children, lived in a country house with large garden, spent much time with the children and always went to the sea for a family holiday. At home Ralph was inclined to fly into tempers, which were controlled by his mother, was dictatorial to the younger ones and had few if any friends outside the family. In schoolwork he was backward, failing to read at anything like his chronological reading age, with very poor writing and spelling.

The crisis at school had developed in his second term. It proved impossible to persuade the school to keep him any longer. As this was the school his father had attended, and he had been entered for the Public school to which his father had gone, dismissal from this school broke seriously into his educational career. The parents and the school were at a loss to account for his behaviour at school: to the parents it was a major tragedy. Diagnosis presented considerable difficulty Ralph's own account of the incidents at school was as confused as was the behaviour itself. There were a number of Possibilities) some of them physiological. A period of careful study was indicated. From the general situation one would have expected the boy to have absorbed the standards and conventions of the family and, in spite of his spasmodic temper tantrums at home, to have been able to fit into the normal schoolboy pattern at school without too great difficulty. This, however, was not the case. His reading was bad because he did not want to read. The same applied to writing and spelling. It seemed unwise at that moment to subject him to a standard intelligence test, so I presented him instead with Kaleidoblocs. Here his response contradicted expectation. In all the problems involving space perception and the manipulation of geometrically related objects, he showed ability far beyond his chronological age, and that of most adults.

His most surprising reaction was to the World apparatus. He made mouldable sand, selected a number of differentiated motor vehicles and studied the marks they made running in the sand. He then moulded sand contours and constructed for himself problems in speed and timing of the

vehicles on the tracks as they crossed each other, demanding that each arrangement be carefully drawn. His reaction was that of a child who had been starved of something essential to his well-being.

It proved impossible to interest his parents in either of these phenomena, the matter of competence in reading, writing and adjustment to school life absorbed their attention. Gradually, with assistance from tutoring these were brought near to normal standards, work on the general handling of the boy at home resulted in disappearance of the temper tantrums and better approximation to expected social norms.

His complete absorption to his sand tray work, however, made exploration of the emotional aspect of his situation difficult. He would talk, when prodded, but used words either as defence or evasion with little relation to factual truth. To get any true response I felt a means of communication would need to be used where fabrication was not possible. We had recourse therefore to Pin Pictures, that is the employment of primitive figures in the current 'newspaper strip' technique to illustrate themes.

As he had complained often about being bullied at school, I suggested as a theme 'A Nasty Fellow'. He set to work at once obviously drawing with pleasure and produced the set of pictures illustrated below. Here he, Ralph, had been standing in a doorway when another boy (unidentified but from his class, therefore round about 9 years of age) came in through another door, walked across the room and knocked the master down. Ralph went to his assistance, helped the master up and hit the other boy. The master then, with Ralph, took the other boy to the Headmaster's study, who then beat the other boy. The story ended with Ralph and the master going out through another door in friendly fashion together.

Nothing about this story struck Ralph as odd, he took it as a perfectly 'real' possibility, was proud of his own action in it and generally satisfied with himself over it. This response together with his performance with Kaleidoblocs gave the clue to the situation and the time had now come for a formal intelligence investigation. This was carried out by an unusually experienced psychologist using the Wisc form. Her report on the central matters ran as follows:

"This boy is of very superior intelligence obtaining the highest possible Score on this test, both for Verbal Ability and Performance, working out slightly higher for Performance.

He is capable of creative and constructive thinking.

He has a very special gift for Mathematics; he solved all the problems including those for subjects of age 15—11 in record time, verbalising what he was doing when the tests became difficult. His way of solving the problems showed real understanding.

His other even more striking gift is that of constructive work with three-dimensional material.

He did all the Block Designs in under 1 minute each (which is a good deal less than is allowed) and he remarked when given all the Blocks

that he now had 9, and that knowing this was helping him with the problem as it meant that each side now had 3 blocks instead of 2. He proceeded to kind of shove the blocks together making the right pattern after one look."

Another test item, which bears this out is the Object Assembly test and here again he scored the highest possible scores, never making a mistake.

(Translated into the Binet Simon scale this would give an I.Q. of around 168 with exceptional ability in space perception).

Of his behaviour during the test interview the report runs as follows: -

"After an initial anxiety he was very free and easy with me. The anxieties showed itself in his request that his mother should come up with us and stay for a few minutes. After the test he no longer cared. He was happily typing away when I went down to fetch his mother from the Waiting Room.

He was extraordinarily distractible; he was also rather supercilious and much too conscious of his own cleverness. He was restless throughout, and inquisitively exploring everything in the room like a four-year-old child. At times he seemed so preoccupied with other matters, playing about with blocks etc. that I thought he had not heard what I had asked; however, this was not so, he always answered and answered very quickly.

This is a very gifted but totally undisciplined boy, used to getting his own way and making very conscious use of his power over adults who have to deal with him.

His school failure is probably due to inattentiveness and "inapplication" and his need to play about rather than work. He behaved like a boy of 4, showed his inquisitiveness at about that age level in spite of his high intellectual ability.

He seemed very self-willed and needed firm insistence of application to the task in hand. This could be due to thwarted creativeness and the lack of sufficient creative outlets in play."

To his parents the whole of this is incomprehensible, a boy who, at (now 10) can read and write with difficulty, is 'a stupid boy', one with a handicap to be taken with kindness: allowances should be made for him and he be guided slowly into the routine of schoolwork. The double standard of behaviour, so clear to the trained eye, is invisible to them as is his increasing ability to manipulate adults. His hunger for opportunity for experiment for tasks that are, to him, really difficult enough to be worth working at misses them altogether. His emotional immaturity and need for help to 'grow up' is likewise invisible to them as is his growing hatred of the discipline which forces conformity upon him. The dangers of the situation they do not see, nor the despair of the boy when alone with his Psychiatrist. There is no communication between them.

Here we have one of the problems that has true gravity. Ralph's exceptional intellectual powers and their unusual nature will inevitably bring him eventually into prominence: If time has not by that time been made up on his social and emotional development, he will present, at the moment when his true abilities become evident to himself that most dangerous of all types of human beings, the man with the ability to appear 'just like anyone else' and that in a particular type of social milieu, who in himself has the undisciplined nature of primitive; and also resentful, child.

12th September 1966.
Description of World Apparatus.

The equipment for the World Technique is a metal tray approximately 75 x 52 x 7 cm. preferably painted blue inside, half filled with sand for use on tables of different height according to the size of the children using them; water should be near at hand; implements for use with the sand such as shovels, funnels, moulds, a sieve; amorphous materials such as plasticine, wooden slats, rubber tubes, tins and oddments of any kind.

A World cabinet with drawers containing miniature objects of the following kinds: -

Living creatures, ordinary men, women and children: soldiers, cowboys and Indians, entertainers, people of other races: prehistoric, wild and domestic animals.

Phantasy and Folk—lore, figures, animals, creatures from outer space etc.

Buildings of many kinds; trees, bushes, flowers, fences, gates and bridges; transport for road, rail and air.

Equipment for school, hospital, farms and gardens, playgrounds, parks and fairs etc.

Miscellaneous objects of any kind.