

Destructiveness in Children

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Destructiveness in children is one of the forms of wanting to know about things. This sounds odd, but it is true. Children do not differentiate as we do between things and people. Teddy Bear is alive to them—just as alive as their parents. A rolling ball, because it moves, has to them the same sort of life as a dog, which runs. The wind blows, the moon rides up the sky; and the child feels that they are alive as people are alive. They are mysterious; he would like to know what they are. We often confirm this idea: when a child cries, we say, to distract his attention, 'Poor chair. Tell the chair how sorry you are that you knocked it'. In fact we treat the chair as if it had feelings like ourselves; and the child himself constantly attributes feelings to things in this way. To him, the dolls and toys he loves always feel as if they were alive. Other things, clockwork toys, for instance, behave just as if they were alive; yet somehow he knows dimly that they are not. But some things, like flowers, that do not look alive to him, are alive, we tell him; and we scold him when he pulls them to pieces to see inside. This is all very puzzling for the child.

Destructiveness and Curiosity

A little boy of seven, called Gerald, was sent to a children's Clinic for destructiveness. He always pulled apart everything that was given to him. His mother was an eager gardener, and it exasperated her to find him tearing open the buds of her flowers just before they were ready to bloom. Another child of twelve, called Charlotte, would perpetually pull the edge of her skirt to pieces and pick holes in her stockings. At home, nothing was safe in her hands; she seemed to break whatever she picked up. Both were rather silent and secretive children and very difficult to get to know.

Lawyers say that in extracting information, the way a question is put is half the battle— but children do not even realize what it is they want to know. They cannot express the questions they most want to have answered; they are only aware that they are perplexed and puzzled. An intelligent child wants to know the reason for everything he sees round him. He can only apply to us for information; he wants to know clearly why we are living beings, how we came there and what makes us different from each other. He does not know how to ask, so he determines to find out. The mechanical toy intrigues him; it is so like life. How does it go? What makes it go? He wants to find out, but small hands are clumsy, and the toy comes to pieces. Then we say: 'Tommy, there you go again, breaking your toys before you've had them more than a day or two, and I can't afford to get you new ones'.

He has had a rebuff again. It does not really stop him; he still wants to know as much as ever. Sometimes he determines to ask and tries his best, but too often, an entirely untrue answer is given. Most children know when we

are not telling the truth; it hurts them badly and throws them back on themselves. In desperation, they do what they can to satisfy their curiosity; they break open everything in sight, in the hope of finding a solution.

Telling Children the Truth

So many people still feel that they cannot be honest with children, but many facts about life, which are complicated and difficult to us are simple and straightforward to the four or five-year-old. We must answer children's questions truthfully, for if we do not, sturdy children will try to explore for themselves; and exploration inevitably leads to destructiveness. The best way of dealing constructively with the destructive child is to start by giving an honest



Tearing open the buds of flowers just before they were ready to bloom

Answer to his questions. Evil curiosity only arises when the truth is withheld. A small boy of my acquaintance, whose mother always answered his questions frankly developed into a delightful child, constructive in every way. His cousin, who had been punished for curiosity and rebelled against it, became the most violently destructive child in the neighbourhood.

When a child has started on this road, it is not easy to check him. Once we have spoken untruthfully about things that are important to him, he will not easily trust us again. This was the trouble with Gerald and Charlotte. When they had been carefully studied in the Clinic, we found that both children were possessed with the desire to know. But both had been denied knowledge.

Through wash with plasticine, clay and sand, they gradually played out their queries, and when we had truthfully answered their questions, the destructiveness disappeared and they both became normal, happy school children; there are many others. Curiosity is not the only reason for destructiveness in children; there are many others. One day, a small boy called Teddy came to the Clinic. He broke everything he touched; he kicked the door paint and chipped bits out of chairs; he broke all his toys, and when he helped in the house, things came apart in his hands. He did not want to be careful, and it was useless to scold or punish him. Some time afterwards, a little girl called Mary joined him at the Clinic. She was not only destructive but also violently rude. How well we all know that type of child; they are rude just when it is important for them to be polite; they tear up and spoil all the toys we give them and never seem content. Both children came from good homes and had been carefully brought up, and yet when they had been closely studied, we found a reason for their destructiveness, and this time it was not just curiosity.

The Value of Destructiveness

In itself, destructiveness is not necessarily a bad quality. In fact, many of us find ourselves shut in and unable to enjoy life just because we lack this power to destroy, and so are unable to keep pace with life. It is very important that we should be able to clear away at each stage the litter that the past leaves behind it. But many people find it difficult to embark on a new venture or even to start doing an old thing in a new way. These are the people in whom the destructive impulse is too weak; the pleasure in destruction and the freedom that destruction brings with it has been crushed out of them and they do not grow. Sometimes the impulse is not absolutely killed but merely drum underground. Instead of appearing on the surface it begins to sift through into everything so that in adult life the man or woman becomes a rebel, who is only happy when working against the established order. These people are rebellious merely for the sake of being rebels. And the destructive energy of the rebel is useful, but only when it is the preliminary to constructive work. This is also true of children.

Guiding the Destructive Child

Since the impulse to destroy is not in itself harmful, a destructive child should never be punished. His desire is a sound one; make use of it and teach him what to do with it. There is generally only one way to get any impulse under control, and that is to give it free rein first, under suitable conditions. If a child wants to do something very much and is never allowed to do it, he will keep it in his mind long after- indeed all his life. There are many ways in which a child can indulge his joy in destroying with benefit to himself and without inconvenience to us. Plasticine, glitter wax, pieces of dough, can all be played with for hours, made into figures, pulled to pieces, pinched into very tiny pieces and then rolled together again. Scissors and paper are the next stage, and some corner of the room can always be found where the child can cut up to his heart's content. Breaking coal serves the older child, or tearing open parcels, ripping up newspaper for fire-lighting, and making

bonfires in the garden. Give the elder boy firewood to chop, the elder girl all the unpicking you can find to do. Let her tear cotton into strips or dig up plants in the garden. There are many things that can be found in a house and garden to give outlet to the destructive impulse without the risk of any real damage.

This is what happened to Mary and Teddy. Teddy had become a rebel because his explosive energy and destructive desires had been given no outlet. Mary had been short sighted and much laughed at for her clumsiness before its cause was realized. So she wanted to get her own back on life, to destroy everything within sight in order to console her wounded feelings. This sequence of events was not clear at first; it took some time to piece things together. In the mean time, both children were given many opportunities to hammer and break up as much as they liked. At first, the desire tended to get a little out of control, but this phase was soon over, and then pulling things to pieces became a game, and a game in which, little by little, the real troubles behind the destructiveness came to light. Then constructiveness grew out of destructiveness, from cutting up for the sake of cutting up, they moved on to putting together the pieces they had cut up, and finally, they only cut up in order to put together something new.

Both are now happy, cheerful, school children. And with a little wise guidance, this transformation always takes place. Heads cut off figures from newspapers can be arranged into patterns; limbs can be made into new figures; pieces of wood chopped up and built again into new boxes. With wisdom, construction will always follow destruction, and the destructive child will turn, like these two, into a satisfactory school child. It is so difficult to remember that the strength of the oak is in the acorn; that the energy, emotional force and potential qualities of the grown-up are in the small child. And the child's nature must be allowed to expand if he is to grow up into a vigorous and happy individual. Destructive and explosive energy are the raw materials of enterprise and initiative, and if we want our children to have these qualities when they grow up, we must see that the early manifestations are not repressed. It is so easy to force a child into a behaviour, too old for his years, which suits his adult surroundings. But it is not best for the child, and it is perhaps for our good and their future happiness that some of our children



escape, break through all the rules we have made for them, and insist on being explosive and destructive in spite of all our efforts to control them. A love of destruction in small children should encourage us to look for a strung and vigorous character, and wisely guided, it can be the foundation of some of the most valuable qualities of adult life.

Point for Parents to Remember

1. Before you make up your mind that your child is backward, be sure that you are not judging him by the standard of clever brothers, sisters, or friends. Each child has his own individual gifts, and the boy who is behind with his lessons may be very good at practical work.
2. There is a great difference between backwardness in general intelligence and backwardness in school subjects. The first is much more difficult to deal with, while the second may only be a temporary difficulty which can be easily cured.
3. In any case, it is useless to try and cure backwardness without understanding its causes. There may be many factors at work, and it is not enough to tinker with the obvious one.
4. Backwardness may have many causes:
 - (A) It may be caused by some slight physical defect: poor hearing or sight or the after effects of some illness.
 - (B) It may be due to some mental difficulty which can probably be overcome: the child's memory may be bad or his imagination weak
 - (C) It may be caused by some psychological difficulty which hampers the child in his work and general development; the child may be over-excitabile or he may suffer from anxiety and nervousness
5. Laziness is often treated as the cause of backwardness; but it is quite often a measure of self-protection.
6. Undue pressure or scolding from parents and teachers will never cure backwardness and will almost certainly aggravate it. If the child is two or more years behind other children of his age, parents should consult a trained psychologist. He will be able to discover the real cause and suggest a line of treatment, which may overcome it and help the child to develop all the ability he does possess.