

The Emotional Life of the Child

By DR. Margaret Lowenfeld
24th September 1934

At the end of the last chapter we found that the child's position is a reversal of the adult. Whereas the adult is convinced that the material things of life are the real ones, and is apt rather to give his own emotions a second place, the child on the other hand feels his own emotions as the real world and the one with which he is familiar. To him the outside world is so continually changing that he gives it second place in his thoughts.

Working from this point of view we can divide the emotional life of the child into three parts. And here I must confine myself to giving you headings more or less, as the subject is too vast to do more in a single lecture. There are three aspects then of the emotional life of the child:

- 1) His emotional needs.
- 2) His emotional impulses.
- 3) His emotional desires.

Needs. These are facts that we arrive at by deduction. No child can tell you what he has need of. They can therefore only be arrived at by deduction and one of the most important things done by the workers at the Institute is finding out these needs from careful observation and study of the children under their care. As a result of this painstaking deduction we find that the primary needs of the young child are:

a) Security. Most people have seen the unhappy state of the child who is at odds with the world. We saw last week how quickly and bewilderingly the world changes for the child. And we talked a little about the need for the child to have something secure and permanent because his own emotions are continually shifting and he is conscious of insecurity inside. All children have this hunger for stability and security. (Illustration of Child who was referred to the Institute for boisterousness and anti-social behaviour and who had gone through so many changes of environment that this bad behaviour was her only defence.) If you find a child behaving in this way there must be a reason since the whole of our work is based on the belief that a child's behaviour is logical and that the child wants to be good. In relation to its emotional state the child is an extremely logical person. If you can put yourself in imagination in the circumstances of this child and if you are a logical person you will see that the bad behaviour is the outcome of the situation and you would behave in the same way yourself. The child in this case feels that the world is pressing too heavily upon him. he is being taken out of one environment and put into another without being consulted. The child's reaction is perfectly logical. Moreover it is the reaction of an intelligent child, for another in the same circumstances might have become at school either a "sucker-up" to those in authority or completely crushed into someone who perpetually felt inferior and had a grudge against the world. Her boisterousness was rather a

good way to behave in trying circumstances. Children who find it difficult to settle into social life are usually those who have been deprived of their essential need for security. In this case, lack of consistent discipline, the break-up of her home, the continual change of school, all these factors made it almost impossible for the child to behave other than aggressively.

In examining these cases what we need to know is the back-ground of the child's life and I would ask you to put to all concerned the question, what has the child's environment been and is its conduct a logical outcome of its surroundings? We grown-ups do not consider that the child is justified in its behaviour and therefore we do not try to see what circumstances have induced the behaviour we deplore.

b) The second great need is the need for approval. It is awfully hard to stress this point sufficiently. Grown ups never realise how terrifying is the grown-up censure and blame to a child. We are all the time trying to mould them into what we would like them to be and we tend to put the weight of restriction upon them until they are unable to hold their own and are prevented from being themselves. (Illustration of child who had been expelled from her school for swearing and who had not any idea of what the words she used meant. She simply liked to say them; they expressed her feelings and they were nice words to say.) There are thousand things that children do of which we do not approve. And if you disapprove it is usually because your mother disapproved of you when you did similar things as a child and in the meantime you have given the child the feeling of disapproval of itself, the feeling that there is something wrong with itself and it is extremely difficult to replace this confidence in itself once it has been taken away.

c) The need for dominance. This is a very simple and usually neglected fact. It took all of us at the Institute some time to see how this came about, but yet it is so simple once you do see. If you consider what we said last time about the child's helplessness and its difficulty in controlling its material surroundings, you will see that if it is to keep any personality at all, it must have this desire for dominance on its own side. The child sees that if it is to be subjected to the control and discipline of grown ups, it must have soothing or someone in its turn over which it can dominate. You all know the reaction to the discipline of drill sergeants and schoolmasters is to "take it out of" those of the lesser people to whom one can dictate. Witness the attitude of boys in their second year at school to those who are new boys. The reaction is natural and universal. Every one has suffered in some way from this desire to dominate on his own part in order to avenge the dominance of those in authority.

The second classification that I gave you 13 the emotional impulses that the child itself feels. Now every child will talk to you about these and he will use the same words so that you will be able to talk to him about them in your turn. It is true that these impulses may seem a little odd and bizarre to the grown up.

1) The need for sensuous experience 15 among the foremost of emotional impulses. What the child wants to say is that it likes sucking and tasting things. It is the child's first experience and it is pleasant because there is sensory pleasure and it gives a nice tasting substance. As nature has decided that the Child's first experience shall be that of receiving a pleasurable sensation, it starts the child off well and induces the belief that this is a nice world which gives one nice things, and so it wonders how many nice things there are in the world, and puts everything it can into its mouth to see if it also is nice. From this the child goes on to discover its fingers and its toes and other parts of its body and to like touching and sucking them where it can. This desire to have sensuous experience is one of the strongest of childhood, but the whole subject is so hag-ridden to many of us, who still live in the memory of Cromwell and the Puritan heritage that it is difficult for us to believe the entire naturalness and necessity of this infantile desire for sensory gratification.

2) Curiosity is another of the child's primary emotional impulses. For a child not to be curious is evidence that there is something wrong with it. This curiosity is sometimes troublesome. Who has not suffered from the 'why, why, why' of childhood, but the child who does not question things is not normal, the experience gained through his sensory experience is made use of in gratifying this fundamental need to know about things.

3) Destructiveness. It seems odd that this should be a good activity, but it is. It has its root in the desire of the child to see how things are made, what makes them go and is the foundation of the scientific attitude in later life. When the child destroys the card house, builds it up again, destroys it again, he is experimenting with the material world. Destructiveness in the child, when it is the legitimate expression of an emotional impulse is almost always a virtue. It becomes a vice only when other things get linked up with it. For instance when the desire to see the inside of mummy's watch and to take it to pieces to see how it goes becomes a desire to destroy mummy's watch because it is a fine thing to do. The thing that is wrong here is that the watch should have been there for the child to destroy. And constructiveness is a combination of the child's impulse for sensuous experience and his impulse to destroy and is linked up with the fourth emotional impulse.

4) The desire for power over environment. This impulse is very powerful and one of the most interesting things is to see how this impulse works itself out in various children. It is the result of the child's feeling of helplessness and his gradual assimilation of sensuous experience that makes him desire for power over his environment and particularly his material environment.

5) Pleasure in movement. The desire for movement in children is unusual and exceedingly powerful. And I personally think there is not a single charge that can be brought against the educational system that carries such weight as the compulsion to make children sit still in classes. Children have a natural and necessarily vehement desire for movement. This necessity for sitting still in classes often deprives a child of the capacity to learn at all. Many

a child will learn a lesson and repeat it word for word, but has not the slightest idea what it means or who the characters, say, in a history lesson really are; and who separates bits of knowledge into water tight compartments, without ever relating them to each other. And until some means is found of satisfying this desire for movement the knowledge will remain sterile.

The emotional life of the child as lived through his experience of those surrounding him, his family and those with whom he comes in contact is profoundly important. And a most important part of the work in dealing with children is concerned with what happens to the child in his relations with his family and with other people. I would recommend a book that has been published by Chas. Baudouin "The Mind of the Child", which is an attempt to put schematically the sort of problems that come upon the child in regard to his relations with his family. Here the child comes upon strains and difficulties in which we can give no help at all. And here the grown up so often falls into the mistake of thinking that because the child is small, therefore these emotions and feelings with regard to other people are also small. In reality these are far more powerful and overwhelming because they are unchecked by experience. What is merely bad temper in a grown up in a child is often an overwhelming emotion of rage. And a child in a rage is entirely a child in a rage to the exclusion of every other consideration. His emotion is so powerful and overwhelming that it excludes everything and is to him an eternal and all pervading thing. A characteristic of childish emotion is this feeling of timelessness. His emotion to him is eternal. A child does not say, "I am happy today", whereas a grown up may think this, assuming it means that he remembers a time when he was not happy and looks forward to a possible time when he will not be happy in the future. A child cannot do this, for he lacks the necessary experience and to him the feeling of happiness or unhappiness has the quality of permanence and is therefore correspondingly overwhelming for him.

It is most necessary finally to remember that the child is entirely identified with his own emotion and feelings. He is utterly unable to separate his ego from his emotion. He is completely and all the time "Tommy unhappy". No small child has the sense of separateness between "I" and "Tommy". He is unhappiness personified and completely identified with it.

Closely connected with this identification is the complete unity of the child's body and mind. This is a very important point to remember in dealing with young children and one that often complicates the situation when dealing with their illnesses the child cannot say, "I have a pain in my head, he merely knows that he has a pain. In fact, he feels at the moment that he is the pain and the pain is him. It is practically impossible unless it is a very localised pain, for him to tell you exactly where the pain is or what it feels like. As a result a child who is Sick and has a temperature may be sickening for measles or may have recently suffered an acute disappointment. As a further result a child who is neurotically ill is often treated as if physically ill and it is difficult to distinguish between the two conditions. It also may be dangerous if a neurotic child is treated, as physically ill; by treating the illness as physical you are apt to make the child think you think it is physically ill. It must be

remembered that since all emotion in children is extremely powerful it is just as likely to take a physical expression as an emotional expression.

Next week I want to try and relate the foregoing with the characteristics revealed by children in play and to discover what further knowledge of the child's mind can be gained by so doing.