

The Socially Maladjusted Child

by MARGARET LOWENFELD, MRCS. LRCP

Medical Director of the Institute of Child Psychology Ltd.

A small boy stands at the edge of the school playground looking longingly at a group of children playing twos and threes. He would so like to join them; he kicks the wall behind him and feels miserable then he drifts off aimlessly by himself. He is an isolated child, a boy with no friends a boy who seems somehow always to get left out when group activities are planned. In another part of the playground, a girl darts in and out, teasing slyly, pinching one child, pushing another. She is a spiteful child and the bane of her teachers. Neither kindness nor punishment seems to have any effect on her. A shadow moves swiftly in and out of the classroom as the bell rings for lessons, and later a treasured pencil is missing or a penny from a coat pocket. It is the shadow of a tall thin boy with quick silent movements and a gift for trading with other boys. These boys and girls who are at war with the world around them and with themselves are incapable of making friends, are socially maladjusted children. The interesting thing about these children is that so often the efforts made to help them fail to bring results or a change in their behaviour. In spite of the efforts of parents, teachers, club and guide leaders and the children themselves, nothing seems to succeed. The child remains isolated, exasperating and in some cases delinquent.

What is wrong? After twenty years work with such children I am convinced of one thing. They do not want to be the odd man out. In their innermost hearts they want to be liked, they want to be like other people, to be successful and happy, but they just can't manage it.

Why is this? There are a number of reasons, and no one reason covers more than a certain number of cases. The main root of the trouble is that the child does not understand himself; he is aware of processes stirring within him that he cannot explain. He finds himself pulled and driven several ways at once and impelled by something within him to do things that he does not desire to do. His helplessness in the face of his own impulses makes him miserable, and to cover this up he becomes truculent or sullen.

The main cause lies in the difference between the outlook and standards of the adult world and the world of thought and feeling that is within the child. Too many adults feel that a child is a kind of brother to a lap-dog, something with a blank inside its mind into which thoughts have to be put, and to whom forms of behaviour have to be taught. Partly of course this is true, but it is only a small part of the reality, the rest lies in the individuality of the child himself.

The child as an individual

Children, even infants, as Dr. Winnicott has so vividly shown us, are not blank paper, or nice little brothers to the lap-dog. They are separate individual selves, each with a good deal that is special and particular to himself. It is this that makes getting to know your child worth the trouble.

For example, take the special senses. Most children start off with one or more senses more acute than the others. Smell, touch, hearing are the common ones. One mother perhaps has a harsh unpleasant voice, or the baby is put into clothing that irritates its delicate skin. Another baby, bound by tastes, smell and feel to its mother, has its security shattered suddenly by having its mother replaced by a stranger, often for reasons that no one can help.

Such babies start off with the feeling that life is against them and that the world they have come into is harsh and persecuting world, always liable to hurt them when they least expect it. Thus they lose their trust in life and feel themselves against it. Some children withdraw; they watch from the outside rim, they cannot trust themselves to face renewed rebuffs; they decide that attack is the best form of defence. They steal “ in symbol ” what they long so much to possess—power, independence and loving affection. Once started on this road, habit asserts itself until as the child grows up his false conception of the world and of himself is confirmed by the world as he really finds it.

When one gives these children material in which they can express their inner thoughts and attitudes, they represent the world as full of wild animals, things that may stalk and spring. They counter this by aggressive and destructive action. Another factor that contributes to this state of mind is the lack of creative opportunity.

Grown-ups tend to feel that asocial children must be disciplined, and so they should, once their cooperation has been gained, but first they need to have the chance to express their own point of view, and it is here that the difficulty arises. Adults talk in words and expect children to use the same medium. But words are a cultured medium and children have only a slight knowledge of words. The speech of children about themselves is monosyllabic, ungrammatical, a gangster speech with which the American films have made us familiar. A child's true medium is play, and play played with people who understand its meaning.

Freedom, and bars

A child who was truculent and troublesome and always making a nuisance of himself was asked to make a “ world ” in a sand tray. He set out an arrangement of horses (he greatly admired the policemen's horses) and ice cream carts, which the horses were enjoying. Then some distance away he placed a mule and in front of it a five-barred gate. He was the mule, he said, and the ice cream carts and the horses were freedom barred to him. He never saw that he had only to change his direction and then he could find his way round the gate.

Children do not want to be antisocial, they want to find a way to communicate their power to the common good. But to do this we must help them to discover what these powers are. We regiment our children too thoroughly. Our clubs and our children's centres tend too much to have organised programmes into which the child must fit, or feel (and be considered) left out.

Freedom to express oneself in the presence of an understanding adult and the experience of a warm appreciation of what is expressed can work wonders in making a child become friends with himself. In being friends with himself he becomes friends with other people, and in doing so he discovers unexpected powers.

As an illustration of this a boy and a girl, members of a club run on these lines, had been the terror of the neighbourhood truculent, untruthful and dishonest. In the club they found an interest in beauty that was individual and spontaneous in the form of improvised dancing and acting. This gave them an outlet for the vigour and power that was in them. They began to find leadership abilities hitherto latent in themselves and they are now among those members of the club upon whom the adults can depend. Not only do they now contribute valuably to the general club life, but also to initiating newcomers.

In a brief sketch it is difficult to do justice to the complexities of the situation in which these maladjusted children find themselves. The one thing many years' work has taught me is that the child who becomes socially maladjusted is for the most part a thoroughly worthwhile individual. It is possible to assist him to find his own powers and his way out from himself to integration with some normal part of life around him. I say some part, advisedly, because one of the constant causes of difficulty of this sort is the strange persistence with which parents tend to give birth to children totally unlike themselves.

The practical, dominant, adventurous little girl with immense desire to savour life for herself can be born of a mother so gentle and retiring, or so wholly immersed in her own domestic circumstances that the battle is declared from the start. Or the self-reflective boy, interested in sensations and in interior experiences, arrives as the son of a practical businessman. Whichever way the disharmony arises, adult attempts at dominance is followed inevitably by rebellion, and the child, sick of being continually in the wrong, turns his hand against society.

There is the case also of the child with poor inherent intellectual ability. Such children simply do not understand the demands that adult life makes upon them. It is hard enough for adults these days to comprehend the multiple regulations and restrictions that constantly hamper their movements, but for children of low inherent intelligence it is palpably impossible. Such children only too often start with bewilderment and a vague feeling of injustice. A general dumb resentment begins to grow, which when a suitable opportunity appears, or life becomes too difficult, breaks out into maladjustment or delinquency.

What can we do?

We owe these children proper classification. If we know what their difficulties are we can help them to understand. We are their debtors, because they cannot understand either themselves or the demands that society makes upon them. It is our responsibility therefore to see that society makes honourable use of them.

The study of children is fascinating, and of maladjusted children it is doubly so. We need more training centres as well as more study and more understanding. With these aids our socially maladjusted children will become children who have something special to contribute to society, a something they have learned as a result of the difficulties which through our help they have overcome.