

Guidance Through Play



From the Institute of Child Psychology

In earlier groupings of society, the guidance of a child was a fairly straightforward undertaking. Lord Chesterfield's Letters to his Son, Smiles' 'Self-Help', and many other books of maxim show that the elder, looking back upon his own life and out upon the life about to be lived by his children, found the laying down of rules for their conduct a task, delicate it is true, as it is all careful relating at moral principle to action, but not pretending my insuperable difficulties. The reason for the comparative simplicity of the task was, first, the rigid and definite code of morals and behaviour, widely accepted by people of the same social standing; and, second, a clearly defined social structure to the health of which these rules were to be adjusted.

The New Position

All this has gone. There is neither any longer a fixed code of morals and behaviour, nor a fixed framework of society. It would be a bold man who would predict for his son or daughter today the conditions under which they will live out their mature lives.

In the face of this situation many perplexities arise, and these are reflected in the proportion of children who today fail to achieve an adequate adjustment to the circumstances of their own lives. Since these circumstances may change at any moment, and since there is no knowing what requirement any child may have to meet in ten years' time. It is clear that some principle of guidance of youth must be achieved which is different from that of the preceding decades.

It is out of the power of any of us to foresee what will be the nature of the social world in which our children will have to find their success.

One thing is clear, that the man who has come to know himself, has come to recognise his strengths and weaknesses and to make terms with his own character is the man who will succeed. The Institute of Child Psychology aims to put its children in a position to achieve these ends. How does it set about its task?

A Child's Chief Difficulties

A child finds itself beset by three difficulties: the difficulty of understanding the nature of the world in which it finds itself; the difficulty of coping with its passions and

desires in relation to the objects of that world, and particularly to the human beings who people it; and finally, the difficulty of arriving at any understanding of its own self.

The first problem arises very early, and is met to a certain extent by education, but owing to our ignorance of the child's mind, and owing to the curiously logically-illogical workings of the child's way of thinking. at least half of its difficulties entirely elude us as educators. This is not because of lack of good will on our part, but owing to the nature of the subject. A small child who has confused 'daughters' with 'tortoise' (her family possessing both), 'tangerines' with 'dangerous'—the doctor having prescribed one, is not susceptible to ordinary lines of help when the ultimate complications, which have been built upon these misconceptions, come to light. Similarly, many of a small child's paramount interests run counter to necessary economic conditions and to training in cultural habits. The child will easily acquire the necessary training if it starts with a fundamentally affectionate character, but too often gives up its own curiosity in the process.

As regards his relation to the people who surround him, the child is in even worse case. It is a curious feature of our civilisation that we give so little aid to children, or indeed to ourselves, in the understanding of our emotions: for example, adults dimly feel that between love and hate there is more kinship than between love and indifference, but very few children are helped to understand this, and the feelings of rage that overcome them in relation to loved objects cause an inner perplexity and anxiety which inhibits the whole power of natural emotional growth. The child receives no more help in his struggle to understand himself and his own powers.

Play: a Revelation of the Self

It is notorious that we are able with our educational system to test only that which has already proved itself to be valuable in the world as it used to be. Our tests lag twenty years behind our needs of living. Who can tell what qualities are going to be necessary for success ten years ahead? How are we to know which of our children possess these qualities and in what measure?

What is needed is a mirror or a screen whereupon the child can throw pictures of himself and his mind as he works—so that we can become aware of his perplexities as they present themselves to him, and use his own thought language to disentangle them; a field where a child's own urgencies and desires can find space to work themselves out, and where he can become aware of them unrelated to any system of teaching or examination.

Such is the aim of that play therapy method, used in the Institute of Child Psychology. It does not attempt as do certain other forms of play technique, to approach and evaluate the child's play from pre-conceived theories of the nature of the mind; it does not use play, as it is used in many other centres, as an attempt to socialise the child (although indirectly such socialisation does come about); it attempts instead to give a child a stage upon which it may play out its own self, and, with the aid of workers specially trained to this end, gradually come to know that self.

The Institute of Child Psychology

The Institute of Child Psychology of 26 Warwick Avenue, W.9, was founded in 1928 for the purpose of treating and studying delicate and 'problem' children. The principal part of the treatment is effected by means of a technique of Play Therapy devised by the Institute and carried out by its trained workers.

Four types of children are accepted for treatment, and, in the majority of cases, it is found that they are so improved as to become capable of living a normal childish life again, having lost those symptoms of disease or failure of adjustment to life, for which they were referred. These four types consist of the following:—

1. Educational failure or general backwardness, (but not mental deficiency).
2. Neurosis, e.g., anxiety, night terrors, sleep-walking, inhibitions, phobias, etc.
3. Social maladjustment, e.g., lying, stealing, hooliganism, bullying, destructiveness, truancy, etc.
4. Chronic medical complaints, e.g., chronic debility, constipation, catarrhs, enuresis, asthma, epilepsy and other conditions.

One of the principal tenets of the I.C.P. is that emotional disturbance in childhood can as readily manifest itself in physical complaints as in psychological maladjustment or educational backwardness. Similarly, it is acknowledged that emotional disturbance can often encourage the persistence of these physical complaints where they already exist. Therefore provision is made for dealing with this class of problem children. We all know the weary, discouraged mother, who drags her chronically sick child from doctor to clinic and from clinic to hospital, with only temporary improvement, or even none at all, in spite of medicines, accessory food factors, vaccines, massage, manipulations, light treatment, or, in a few lucky cases, country holidays. It is the aim of the I.C.P., by its special methods of treatment, to enable the child to discover the source of vitality within itself, and to bring about its own recovery, while not neglecting also the usual methods of medical or surgical treatment if these have not already been tried.

Charles the Aggressive

How then does this work out? Let us take for example the boy of nine, sent to the Institute because he is a storm-centre in every community into which he goes. He is a nice-looking lad, well set up and well developed, whose clothing showed maternal care and interest, and a reasonable economic margin at home. His mental age is above his chronological age, and his general abilities are good. He is neither bullied at home nor over-mothered, and his natural temperament is not explosive. The school can give no coherent account of the trouble they find with him— the story of each individual occasion is confused and there is no direct line of bad conduct to which exception can be taken. He is not exactly unpopular, and neither masters nor boys have anything definite to say against him. He is, however, always the centre of a row. and whenever there is a lot of trouble in the school, Charles is certain to be in the middle of it. Ordinary disciplinary measures have failed, and both home and school are worn out with the constant friction.

Charles, on a preliminary interview with one of the Institute's Directors, is friendly and easy in manner, and states that he has no idea why he gets into trouble, but that he feels both the masters' and boys' hands are against him. He is unresponsive and it is clear that conversation will produce no results. He then goes into the playroom. As has been explained above, this playroom is so equipped that scenes can be played out in miniature or carried out in person with dressing up clothes and in the form of charades.

Charles's work shows itself mainly to be dominated by an idea of conflict—battles follow battles at all points, and for a time no logic emerges. Gradually, however, an element of personal aggression appears— Charles begins to make unprovoked attacks upon other children. These children are absorbed in their own play and do not hit back—a fight does not develop, and the automatic sequence that Charles is accustomed to does not develop either. Instead, the matter is conversationally taken up with him by the worker, who chances to be allocated to him, when Charles indignantly denies that anything of the kind has occurred. In conference among the workers, it becomes clear that these acts of aggression leap out of Charles without his consciously willing them— they come from one part of his personality, and the other part is not aware of them.

Play then develops with water, and Charles shows himself to be emotionally retarded, his interest in water has a keenness which belongs to a good many years earlier than his age—he finds aggression with water delightful, and this time it is a willed aggression. The worker now directs a stream of water against certain parts of Charles's own person, and a surprising result takes place—the reaction to this aggression, mild though it is, is partly moral in that Charles at that point plays the role of the parent

reproving for wilful destruction of clothes. Partly it was bewilderment. Charles was not being naughty, and could see no reason for the worker's aggression against him. A conference among workers showed that it was clear that to Charles there was no necessary connection between a hit from him and a hit back from the other person: as was already clear, there was a dissociation between the aggressive side of 'his nature and his cognitive side, and now there seemed to be a further split between his capacity to see objective reality and his capacity to understand.

The light so far mined made it possible to explore again his mimic play, and to see that this showed the same dissimilarity. The question here came up as to whether the evidence was serious enough to suggest early psychotic trends, and if so, what line of action should be taken. By examining with Charles his own play, and pointing out to him its discrepancies we awakened so much interest in the boy himself that it became possible to plan a course of reeducation.

So long as the means of guidance used for a boy of this kind involved reality, his prickly hostilities made it quite impossible for him to recognise any of the factors described. Playing them out, however, in circumstances divorced from reality enabled the elements to be separated the one from the other, and the boy was gradually brought to recognise each in turn. As each element was recognised, it was related to reality.

A Sick and Timid Child

A little girl of five was referred for extreme debility; she had had an uncounted number of illnesses since her birth, came from a very poor home; the father had died and the mother suffered from constant melancholy and was unable to prevent considerable bullying of the child by an elder brother. The child was of normal intelligence, but so cowed in manner that at no time could her voice be heard in the class, and it was impossible to form any idea of her natural endowment.

On admission to the Institute, she presented a picture of extremest misery, wan and heavy-eyed, shrinking into a corner, and hanging her head when spoken to, unable to look anyone in the face, or to take any part at all in playing games.

It was a long time before she was coaxed into any form of play. but once she began, her themes steadily developed. In real life she was the little girl who was at the bottom of the tree and the Cinderella of her family; in her own mind she was a lovely lady, a powerful distant person, full of all sorts of wishes and ideas. Her feelings of revenge against her brother, her feeling of wonder about her absent father, her puzzles about the

nature of life, and the things she saw around her, which had all been crushed under a sense of absolute helplessness, now began gradually to come out. By drawings, by mimic plays, by water and plasticine play, millimetre by millimetre she ventured to give expression to her real desires. Finding at each state that these were welcomed, and even more than welcomed, enjoyed by the worker who played with her, her daring increased. Soon she was sliding down the banister rail to the playroom, hiding on top of the doll's house to show she was 'King of the Castle,' drawing more and more impertinent images of her family; her colour increased, her eye brightened and her voice began to make itself heard.

She now began to make up and play out stories in her miniature world, which showed how great her perplexities had been about the death of her father. how ambivalent was her attitude to her mother because of his going away and for many other reasons, and how bottomless was her fury against her brother. Once again, as these were recognised, they were encouraged by her play-comrade, and so the intensity of her sense of guilt for harbouring such feelings for her relatives was lessened. With every step towards reassurance, her actual relation to her family improved, and the improved relation showed itself again in her play. By this time the mother was complaining of her too great animal spirits. and of the difficulty of satisfying her energies; her schoolmistress wrote to say that her progress was marked. and that her general vivacity was becoming normal. The Institute was able to arrange for her to have a holiday, and when she came back she looked the picture of health: she had played with boys while away and had learned to share evenly and well with them, She went happily back to school.

During the time that she had been under treatment, it is particularly interesting to note that there had been several epidemics in the neighbourhood in which she lived, and in the school which she attended. but in no case had she caught the disease. She was weighed and measured and was found now to be nearing the normal height and weight, and when 1 year after her discharge from the playroom she was invited to return to report, an indignant message was received from the mistress in charge of her class. stating that since she was one of the healthiest girls in her class, and quite one of the brightest, she could see no need why she should come to any clinic. This is some years ago now and there has been no backsliding.

Physical debility of a generalised kind, anti-social attitudes, lack of personal adaptation to school work. apparent dullness of mind, yield in a most interesting manner to this approach through play.

The Institute is unique in that it receives for treatment children suffering not only from maladjustment to educational and social demands, but also children Who suffer from chronic physical ailments that hospitals and medical practitioners have failed to relieve.

There is a long chapter yet to be written about the relation of the emotional states to physical disease in childhood, but it seems from the Institute work certain to be true that a very much larger proportion of childish ill-health is due to emotional cause: than has ever been even dimly recognised.

It is the Institute's secondary aim, not only to attempt to relieve the distresses of the Children referred to it, but to study the conditions in such detail and consistency as shall throw a permanent light upon the nature of the conditions themselves.