

Helping the Child to Understand

The Institute of Child Psychology

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In helping the child to understand, there are three points to bear in mind. A child comes into a world which is for his purposes peopled with three forces: first, the material Universe, all those things around him, those curious, odd, unaccountable objects that he has to cope with. Second, the people whom he meets, and particularly his own intimate environment. Finally, that which is nearly always left out—himself. Remember that the child knows nothing of himself when he comes into the world. If you get startled by the strange behaviour of your bad young boys and girls. I assure you the child is even more startled. There is nothing that is so confusing and perplexing to a small child as to find himself suddenly lying on the floor in temper tantrums. You can sometimes see the look of surprise, which comes over the children's faces as those rages seize them. It is as much a surprise to them as to us. So that a child has from us three things to expect: that we will act as interpreters between himself and the material Universe, himself and ourselves, and himself and himself. In helping the child to understand, there are three points to bear in.

Let us now consider the first. It is a constant amusement to me in connection with children brought to me, to find how often the solution of a child's apparent naughtiness lies in something so exceedingly simple. I saw a small child whose mother complained that he was quite impossible in his bath. It did not matter how much they tried to outwit him, he would manage to get into the bath somehow beforehand and turn all the taps on full; he would manage to distract nurse's attention so that she did not turn the taps off when the bath was nearly full. Whatever they did to prevent it, he would splash so that a great deal of water went over on to the floor. No matter how much his attention was distracted or he was punished, he would remember for two or three days, and then break out again.

I had the child in my room, where we have a tank and various water possibilities. The matter was clear in three or four minutes. That boy of about six years of age was possessed with immense curiosity about taps. Nobody had ever explained to him how out of those shiny things there came water. He was a little backward in general intelligence because he had been ill for a long time. What he wanted to know was, supposing one never turned the taps off, would they turn themselves off in the end? After all, most of the things he knew did spontaneously do something with themselves in the end. If the taps did not turn off, would the whole house fill with water? He had a vivid memory of recent flood pictures, and could see the whole house filling up with water,

and mummy and daddy having to go about in boats. It was too good to forego that idea. After all, perhaps next week it would be possible to outwit nanny and see it that would actually happen!

The same thing happened a little while ago with a small boy and paint. His nurse and mother had tried very hard to get him to be reasonably tidy in his nursery. He had paints and could make colours on paper; he wanted to know if paints would colour the carpet. Under the guise of spilling paint, he made little experiments under the corner of the chair to see whether if he put blue on the carpet it would do the same to it as to paper—colour the carpet blue.

It is necessary to realize that to the small child the outside world is full of the most entrancing problems. Where does water come from? It comes out of the taps. Where does the gas spark come from? That nasty smell that everybody is so anxious about it you turn the tap on and go anywhere near it, where does that come from? Out of a tap, too. And why does that nasty smell suddenly come? In the house of one small boy I know, there is a switch that turns the telephone on, another turns the light on, and there is, on the floor, a switch that turns the electric fire on. To him they are all switches, and of immense importance, because he cannot believe that they always turn the particular one on. He thinks if he only caught them napping, he could turn the telephone on with the fire switch. Nobody explained to him that there were wires in the wall, and so on; he thinks the switches have choice as to what they do, as he himself has.

Up to about 11 and 12, you will find that children, if you really get their point of view, are full of queries as to the why and wherefore of the mechanics with which they are surrounded. The child from 14 to 16 has much the same attitude with regard to growing things. I do not know how much you are able to do with your children in connection with agriculture, or manures, or ways of growing, but I have found that most children, if you get them to look on, are fascinated with such things as pruning and budding, when you can and when you cannot transplant, and why. Unfortunately, most botany is taught in a dry-as-dust way, and children cannot get the thrill of excitement out of it. If you can get them to look at the things as a problem, or an adventure, if you can get them to make cuttings and plant them and experiment with them, they realize that that strange bit of stick that meant nothing at all will actually grow. Once you have done that, you have given a child something, which is to him a permanent clue to the wonder of the Universe.

Now the next point—himself. One of the chief problems in connection with children's lives is to understand why they keep on feeling different. In a civilization such as ours, which discourages outward expression of emotion and tends to make strong claims upon serenity and equability of temper, in a civilization such as that, it is difficult for the child to get used to the fact that he is constantly being swept by storms of emotion. He sees grown-ups around him, and apparently the same thing does not happen to them; if he is among happy, cheerful people, they seem to remain very much of the same temper all along. If on the other hand, he goes amongst children of his own kind,

gusts of rage, gusts of desire and of temper, gusts of happiness and gusts of depression are always sweeping over them. Speaking for my children friends, they find it very difficult to explain to the grown-ups their puzzledom. Often we have sat on the floor and discussed this altogether and the children have said, "It's so funny; mummy never looks as if that happened to her." When at school, children get heady, but they do not get these other kinds of emotions. Why?

As we grow up it is, from my point of view, the grave task of education to conserve the power of enthusiasm. Only too often the gulf between the vividness of the child's emotion and the apparent static state of the grown-up's emotion leads to the child disapproving of his own enthusiasms, and thereby even of himself, till he becomes the rather blasé young person we are becoming only too accustomed to to-day, who feels that emotion is rather old-fashioned and that one ought not to be enthusiastic about anything. People who show that temperament in adolescence are, to me, educationally failures, because the greatest joy in adult life is that of whole-hearted self-surrender to some task that can carry our emotional force. It is the task of the educator so to form a bridge between the spontaneous action of childhood and the self-control of later life that driving force of emotion is conserved.

Unfortunately, most grown-ups in talking to children about emotional outbursts, tend to use the negative approach. They say, "You must not do that. You know Tommy has come as a visitor; you cannot snatch his things away. You are his host and you must be nice." That is perfectly correct. That is the way that they ultimately should behave, but what you do not do for Jimmy is to tell him how to accomplish this, how to stop feeling angry and cross with Tommy, or feeling furious when somebody is given the toy he wants; how to stop feeling depressed when he thought he had succeeded and finds he has not. It is no good telling him to cheer up. He wants to know how. It is that "how" which is exercising the attention at present of the child psychologist. We want to learn how to give you the right kind of instruction in order to enable you to help the child to conserve his emotional force in a firm and healthy way.

There are a few hints I can give. The first is to think about it yourselves. We have an exercise that we give our students which sounds, to begin with, very childish, and later comes to be one of the most valuable pieces of training. We ask them to write down for us definitions of things like anger, spite, jealousy, cowardice, courage, loyalty, self-sacrifice, and so on, and then to make up short illustrative stories; little dramatic stories often drawn on the board with pin people, illustrating these qualities. The first shock you get when you try to do it yourselves is to discover a number of qualities you cannot illustrate. They are only words to you, or, if you do illustrate them, you do so in a far-away, heroic fashion on some heroic theme that you have never personally had anything to do with. You often hear of people who do all sorts of things that are not the common, ordinary, everyday experience of most of us. One wants to get a kind of picture in one's mind in the terms of everyday children's lives. What are the kinds of stories you have for pride, envy, jealousy, self-consciousness, and so on, and also for the finer qualities,

heroism, loyalty, self-sacrifice, generosity, and so on? You need to think them out beforehand, so that you have in your mind clear pictures of the positive exercise of these qualities, in terms children can understand.

Then when the children get seized with emotions of various sorts, the first and most important thing to do is to give them a name. Until we have a name for a thing we cannot do anything with it. It is, as everybody knows, the first law of science that until you have your terminology of classification it is not possible to handle your task properly. It is the same with such an ordinary thing as making an inventory of a house. I had a most dramatic example of that recently. A very intelligent and able Chinese girl came to help a friend of mine making an inventory of her house. The girl kept on coming and saying, "I have ten things here. I do not know what they are. If you tell me where they belong, I will put them in their proper category." Not having used quite a lot of the articles, she had no idea as to the pigeonhole into which they should go. A child is in the same position. Instead of telling him not to do the thing, which he is spontaneously driven to do, you have to know, first, what it is he is feeling. Try to be accurate but not always to give the worst picture, which is so much the tendency. You say, "Don't be jealous," when quite possibly the child is not that. Having seen what is the emotion, then be patient and say, "Well, you see, Johnny, what is happening to you is called anger or pride, and it makes you feel so and so." Let us first get that clear, and what the child is feeling is so and so. That is enough for that particular moment. Wait then for a moment when you have time for a quiet chat, and then say, "Let us see, we have been talking about feelings. How many feelings have you been experiencing? Have you felt gratitude? Have you been spiteful or envious?" Make a kind of atmosphere in which the child can recognize that we all feel like this every week or so, and so grow to tolerate and be familiar with his emotional life.

The difference between the child and the adult is that the latter can manage the emotions, the child cannot. Get it discussed among your children. You will find, to begin with, that children are calling these feelings and emotions by wrong names. The most delightful and fruitful discussion can come out of taking a single school incident and trying to discover the motives and feelings at work in that particular incident; taking it in the same way as you would try to dissect a historical problem or a geometrical rider. When you have got a little familiarity with all the various human emotions, then try yourselves to face the child's problem first. Say to yourself, "I am now eight. I am feeling furiously jealous of Tommy. What am I going to do?" If you do not know what you ought to do, how is Tommy to know? Put into it the sort of things that you would feel at your own age, and decide what you would do about it. Then if you can find a positive expression, if you can find something instructive to do, instruct your children. As a matter of fact, one of the most positive things you can do is to help them to express emotion properly. If instead of telling people to do what they cannot do, which is to stop feeling certain emotions which they do feel, say, "Let's work that out." Pin pictures are most helpful. Any child can do them. You can tell him if he feels like so and so, to work it out, make a story of it, really express the way he feels, because in the working out of such a thing one gets control of it; one gets control

because one begins to understand, to see what it is one really wants to do, and the whole personality comes in to criticise and control. You say, "It was only part of me that would do that; the other part would not—then I must do so and so"; and so you are building up an integrated character.

So that perhaps the task of the future as far as child psychology is concerned in its relation to education, is the task of the study of the emotional life, and the gradual understanding of the nature of the emotions, their interaction with each other, and how, as I say, the force of the emotional life of childhood can be conserved and brought to act as a permanent dynamic behind the considered action of the adjusted adult.

Finally, let us take the child's other problem, that of understanding us. The really troublesome point about children is that they so often understand us far too well. A child has a penetrating insight which is often much more reliable than the far more kindly judgments of the grown-ups. It is difficult to deceive a child, and one of the facts, which are so striking when watching the reaction of children to human beings, is how the outside appearance so often does not matter. A child will see straight through to the real natural goodness of the person. One of the most touching examples I had of that was of a little girl with an exceptionally plain mother. We were talking about grown-ups and various things, and about women, and the girl said, "Of course, women are always lovely, aren't they, like my mummy?" I thought that really remarkable. It is quite true the mother was an exceedingly nice person, and just the type that particular little girl wanted; but anyone with a less penetrating mind, particularly as the child herself was most attractive, would have a kind of feeling of humiliation and felt, "Oh dear, I wish mummy were nicer to look at."

So that I do not think we need ever be afraid of any kind of exterior obstacle to children's penetrating insight. They will see us for what we really are. But there are many conventions, which we have all grown up to take for granted, and which are extraordinary difficult for a child to understand. I would like to take as a single example the question of truth. Every grown-up expects every child to tell the truth. It is difficult to understand why that should be so in every instance; why we should be so angry when a child, first of all, does not accurately perceive the truth, and then does not tell it. But we are angry. We know that among ourselves, and particularly in our type of civilization, in relation to certain facts we tell the truth, but we also know that we have all agreed among ourselves that in relation to vast areas of ordinary life we never tell the truth. We never tell, that is, what the child perceives as truth.

For example, what we call hospitality, and good manners and politeness, is by the child seen as a direct misstatement. How many times does a child hear "Oh dear! So-and-so is coming today. I suppose we cannot do anything about it, can we?" "No, dear; you know we cannot." Then mummy sighs and gathers her papers together, rises, arranges the day, and later goes forth to meet So-and-so. Does she meet her and say, "How-do-you-do? I suppose you could not help coming, could you?" No, she prepares for her visitor, dresses herself carefully, and, as one child remarked to me, "Mummy then goes and takes her happiness mask out of the drawer and puts it on."

What she says is, "So glad to see you, my dear. How charming of you to come." Then often later in the afternoon she says, "Tommy, how could you tell me the teacher did not talk to you about that exercise, when you know the teacher did?" Well, Tommy goes up to bed feeling very perplexed. He cannot understand the difference, not having any conception of the social organization of humankind. It all seems to him an absolute contradiction in terms.

Another sort of standard insincerity is the apparent attention grown-ups give to things the child knows the grown-up is finding boring. Again and again it is said to a child, "You don't mean to say you don't like your school? Why, I loved school." The child thinks, "Did he? I wonder." Then he goes to some kind of meeting with daddy, and he looks along the benches and sees what another child has described to me as "the dead-rabbit face that daddy always puts on," and he thinks to himself, "Daddy says I ought to be interested in my school, but he does not seem to be interested in his." And then he goes home and in thinking it all over he wonders why there should be this double standard; "Why should there be a thing for which grown-ups punish us if we do not do it, and yet they never seem to punish each other?" That is a fundamental difficulty, which cannot be bridged. It is useless to try to get a small child to understand that these things are necessary. To try is only to make him more confused. What we can do is to be quite honest with ourselves; to own to ourselves that we have grown up in a social organization- it is the same all over the world in, which certain formulae have been agreed upon, as expressing certain things, and that these are outside our individual power.

I call your attention to a charming study in Trotter's *Herd Instinct in Peace and War*. Two English ladies in a new town take tea with each other, and during the course of their conversation there is a series of sentences which amount to little more than such sounds as "Um" in various tones, but as a result of which they are ultimately able exactly to place each other. They know where they are going to have sympathy, where opposition, where they can join together, whether or not it would be wiser not to bring a subject up again. In fact, they have laid the foundations for the next step in the enterprise of living together. The child who sits by and listens to such a conversation really thinks the words are meant in their literal form. The child does not realize that the words are only a little reaction just to see whether the right thing is said by the other side, rather like a gambit in chess, a feeling around to see what the other person is going to do or say. If you can realize that, then you can have a bridge between yourself and your children. For the following excellent idea I am indebted to a colleague of mine, Dr. Effie Wharton; she carried it out in her psychological home for children. It makes a bridge for a multitude of difficulties. Every child likes play, likes doing little dramas and acting charades. If you say, "You know, grown-ups have agreed upon quite a lot of plays that they always play. When they put on _their 'happiness mask,' so to speak, they are 'personating,' entering into a part, and they and the people around them are playing out one of the traditional dramas." Dr. Wharton says to her children. "We are going to have lunch to-day, all being French," and she encourages those who have been abroad during the

holidays to express the difference in manners between French social life and English social life. They may spend an evening as ladies who have come to visit each other, and the children enter into it all with the greatest possible delight. That they understand as something which is necessary, real and wholly delightful, and it takes the social relationships out of the category of truth or untruth, and the children come to see that social life has set itself into certain forms, just as the Greek plays set themselves into certain forms of stories that the whole audience knew, In certain Roman Catholic countries there are still town festivals, holy dramas which the whole town knows, and in which everybody takes part. So children come to realize that social life is a drama, that it is entertaining, and that it has its own rules and laws; that it has been developed during the ages; that none of us is responsible for the fact that the Englishman shakes hands one way and the Chinese another. No individual Chinese or Englishman could alter that habit. That is their national drama; their national social expression. Once a child realizes that, it will enter into the social dramas with the greatest delight, and you will find that instead of having an unruly little person who is apt to ask inconvenient questions at the wrong moments, you have a little friend on whom you can rely to move with you in the social organization, which will leave you with your real relationships, the real parts of life, untouched. So that you can demand from the child a morality, which the child will realize as one you yourself can conform to.

[In response to a question by Miss Picton-Turbervill as to whether it really helped a child, swept by gusts of emotion such as rage or jealousy, to know the name of the ugly thing, which had possessed it, Dr. Lowenfeld said:]

I am glad the question has been asked, because it shows I have not made my point quite clear. First, I think it is fatal to condemn a genuine emotion. Rage-it does not matter whether you call it pretty, ugly, wise or unwise-is a reality; a reality that arises from inside the individual, and the first thing is to get the individual to tolerate the fact that it does exist in himself. It is my belief, based upon nearly fifteen years' intimate contact with children and some 700 cases, that there is no human emotion which is really fundamentally bad; that is to say, rage is a good thing, *provided it is directed against the right objects*. Supposing we could get all the rage of this country mobilised against the idea of slaughtering our fellow-citizens by war, we might get something done. Supposing we could get the jealousy of our own good name, whether as a group of people or anything else, so mobilised that we could not tolerate those things which lower our good name, it would be a good force. There is no force in life or human nature which has not an absolutely, profoundly right, real and helpful dynamic, if properly used. What we want to do is to give the child the name, saying for instance, "That is jealousy. How do you feel it? No hocus-pocus, you are feeling jealous, and it is no good telling me you are not," but that must be said sympathetically. "What is this jealousy?" And then comes the task of the educator to, as we say, maintain the direction but deflect the aim; that is to say, maintain the dynamic but deflect the aim from the personal jealousy ultimately to the wise and sound social jealousy. All these emotions are good. They are not any of them really bad. What is bad is the aim to which they are directed. Rage is awful if it

means I am going to knock Tommy down because he has taken for his use a particular thing, which is mine. That is the demon of possessiveness, perhaps the ultimate evil in our modern world. But rage, if it can be directed against cowardice in self or against something that is bad; rage that will not stand this, that or the other social condition is a magnificent and noble dynamic.

That was what I meant when I said that it was the present and future task of the child psychologist to understand emotion and give real instruction upon it. Our anti-social children come to us the prey of every kind of bad emotion, the prey of every sort of emotional morbidity, and provided that circumstances are right, which means that we get sufficient contact with the child, in nearly every case it is possible to disentangle those emotions and redirect them so that the passionate, bad-tempered, hot-tempered child remains passionate and hot-tempered, but the passion is now directed towards a constructive end; the 'bad temper is deflected from just being a storm, and is directed towards a constructive end. In the same way that the exhibitionist, instead of being merely a nuisance, becomes the child who is capable of responsibility, because that brings him into the limelight; the destructive child becomes the child who is capable of construction, because destruction has been proved to be directed towards the satisfaction of sound curiosity and so can become constructive as well. The child who wishes to smash, but smashes aimlessly, comes then to smash with direction in a way that becomes constructive, as a woodchopper, and a sawmill, and a gardener weeding are destructively constructive. He uses his love of destruction to a constructive end.