

Irrational Fear

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Everyone feels afraid sometimes, for fear is a valuable part of human life; fear of accidents leads to caution in traffic- fear of fire to care with gas taps. These are rational fears, but the fears of children are often quite irrational: they are afraid-terribly afraid - but they cannot give a name to their fear or a reason for it: a little child is often afraid of strangers, shrinks at the sight of a dog, buries his head in the bedclothes when he wakes in the night, and cries at the thought of going upstairs in the dark.

Fears of this kind arise in several ways. Recent work on early childhood has shown that fear is not as normal as we think, and that most of the fears in children, formerly looked upon as natural to and inevitable in childhood, can be prevented. There are only two things, which always and inevitably cause fear in infancy- the feeling of falling, and a loud noise. The feeling of being insecurely held arouses in all infants a sensation of acute helplessness, and therefore of fear- a fear which remains sometimes as a pattern in after-life. Noise to an infant is like an onslaught from a fierce and unknown world, and, if loud and sudden, rouses in it fear of a terrifying unknown. Both these fears are avoidable; but there are many others which are less easily escapable and which when aroused need careful handling.

Man has won his civilisation hardly through countless generations: he inherits from his ancestors many abilities and aptitudes which he has slowly gained from age to age, but with these abilities he inherits also some of the difficulties of his ancestors, and, chief among these, primeval fears- fears of dark jungles and of things that lie in wait behind trees. These were real and actual to his ancestors and many traces of them remain within his spirit. Today the reality has passed away, but in the hearts of children the fears remain. Moreover, it is now known that factors once set in motion tend to repeat themselves over and over again. So fear once felt engenders fear again: once frightened, a child grows more and more terrified with similar circumstances occur.

Children's fears should be very gently handled. No child *wishes* to feel afraid- most children struggle hard with themselves before they allow any signs of their fear to show at all. To laugh at children for their fears is criminal, and only adds resentment and a helpless sense of failure to the original torment endless encouragement given to the child to help him with patience and cheerfulness to overcome or control his fear. Some fears have to be born-fear of pain, or of unknown experiences- but a little intelligent care and forethought can prevent the formation of or easily overcome the unessential fears or of school. Every child who shows "the slightest sign of fearing the dark should be allowed a night-light, its soft glimmer keeps the darkness at bay without disturbing his sleep. It reassures him when he wakes from a bad dream that he is back in that comforting, friendly place—his own little room. When children feel that there are lions in the passage, their own superiority to these lions should be taught them—thus, that if they say "Boo" with

determination, they and not the lions win, for every strange animal can be defeated in this way by a truculent mien. Grown-ups themselves are a source of many fears to their children. Thus, Tommy is delicate and catches cold easily, so Mother implants in him a paralysing fear of winds. Mother has once fallen down and cut herself badly; Mary if she falls will perhaps cut herself too. Mary's life is only too easily surrounded by Don'ts— don't run too fast or you may hurt yourself—don't climb upstairs lest you fall down—don't get near the railings or you will get dirty. A child catches fear from the atmosphere: it has no means of understanding what is the reason for the fear, but Mummy is afraid, and it must indeed be an awful force that makes even Mummy afraid—the child screams in terror at the thought. It is impossible for a child to resist the suggestion of fear around him, and the less he understands it is more gripping in his terror.

The only way to overcome or get rid of this fear is by powerful suggestion of its counterpart. Caution must exist, and children must be protected from the dangers of their own heedlessness, but this can be done with thought and skill by prevention of the actual risks and a sense of proportion about minor dangers. Cheerfulness and well-thought-out orders counter many risks, and a happy child does not venture undue dangers. The final source of these emotions is that which lies deep within the human spirit. Civilisation makes heavy demands upon small children. Pleasure and displeasure to them are violent and turbulent emotions, frequently at war with each other; the joy in mud and water, in scribbling and destruction, rises urgently within them; rage is strong and with it the desire to hit their smaller fellows when their path is crossed, and these emotions fight against their love and kindness and their desire to show affection. Grown-ups are used to these emotional battles—we grow accustomed to them, and know that with time each emotion will pass—we have experience of ourselves in combat with them and know that we can win, and we are not therefore unduly disturbed when they arise, and only rarely feel afraid of their force within us. No child has any of this experience: emotion to him is vivid and overwhelming: he has no yesterday and has not yet grasped tomorrow, what he feels now he thinks he will feel for eternity, and the strength of the emotion outstrips all his powers of control. His experience can suggest no way of coping with the drive within him, and several things may occur in his attempts to deal with the situation. Many children, faced with this kind of situation, retreat into shyness, the conflict is forgotten, pushed to the back of the mind; the child manages itself by putting all its energies under lock and key—at night this lock is opened in the magic land of sleep, and out creep the horrors one by one; sleep is disturbed, is broken, and the child is wakened by hearing itself scream. There are many ways out of this jungle. It is only very recently in civilisation that we have ourselves become sensitive to cruelty. Less than 100 years ago many things were considered social entertainment, which would arouse our horror now—bear baiting, cock-fighting, and cruelties of the penal system have only recently been discontinued. In many countries still, cruelties are permitted to adults that would raise a sense of horror if seen in our children. Only recently too have we become sensitive to sanitation. We ask our small people to become grown-up too soon—a child will struggle with its anti-social and its dirty wishes, and will wish terribly hard to overcome them, and, if wise help is

given him by his adults, this wish will be fulfilled, and the child will not be frightened of its impulses. If too high a standard is imposed too early, the child becomes afraid of its own nature, shy, timid, and has no wish to play, no ability for concentration, is frightened of itself and of every new experience. There is one way out of all these difficulties—to give a child enough prohibition to encourage him to pass from one stage to the next, to provide such scaffolding of material as shall make it possible for one stage to develop easily into the next, and to accept and turn to social uses all these impulses which we normally call naughty. Difficult? Yes, but possible. Every house has newspapers that can be torn up for firemaking, boxes that can be broken for the dustman, calico that can be torn into rags. Every piece of mending that can be done with nails or paste gives outlet to noise or the desire to make a sticky mess—every ordinary kitchen can provide endless outlets for cutting and smearing.

Put a child in contact with his world and he ceases to be a frightened child- give him legitimate outlet for his primitive; self and he ceases to be a frightened child—give him support for the disciplining of his anti—social self, and he comes to be a harmonious child. A harmonious child is not a frightened child, and if we can refrain from imposing our fears upon him and can surround him with an atmosphere of confidence, we shall go a long way towards making him what we want him to be—a happy human being and an effective citizen.