

Play as Therapy

By Margaret Lowenfeld, Co-Director, Institute of Child Psychology

Every small child stands in a double relationship to life. On the one hand he is ignorant, helpless and entirely at the mercy of the surrounding adults. On the other hand, because of that very ignorance and helplessness and because also of his power over the physiological functions of his own body, the small child is often in the position to exert very considerable power over his environment. Moreover, this power is exerted through the very love for him and responsibility concerning him, that his guardians feel.

In favourable circumstances, in situations where the child has brothers and sisters to play with, open country spaces to roam in and animals to study and tend, understanding parents and inspiring teachers, his life rhythm moves securely among a myriad tiny happenings in each of which some of his interest can be expressed, his experience increased, and: his knowledge of himself and of the nature of love and living deepened. Such children take to play as naturally as fishes to water and find their instruments for play in the circumstances of their lives. A child's energy, if it is to develop and remain vigorous and healthy, demands space, air and leisure, trees to climb, brooks to explore, earth and fire and water to play with, and a spontaneous participation in the outdoor and indoor activities of grown men and women to make for him a natural bridge to maturity.

Results of scientific study of early childhood make it clear that a child's brain is at work realising, combining and interpreting its experience, almost from the moment of birth. Some think even before that date, but the data they have to work on is as yet too inadequate to judge. Every tiny baby feels himself the centre of his universe; he cries and his mother rises to attend to him; he smiles and the world smiles back at him.

Using very similar mental processes to those he will employ in later life, the growing child builds up a picture of his universe. As he cannot speak, as for some time he cannot even move about confidently on his own, he has no means of comparing or checking his conceptions with the views of other people. His ideas, therefore, stand to him as absolute.

As time goes on external experience and the growing capacity to talk and later to read, puts the child in an embarrassing situation. The world revealed to him by speech and reading is so strikingly different from the world he had built up. The sun does not wait for him to come out of his house in order to go down the street—he had (as Professor Piaget has shown) thought that it did. His mother does not make the rain come by hanging out the

washing. He cannot by touching every third railing down the street really make his birthday come three days earlier.

Children's desires are very powerful. They differ from adults in three crucial ways. When a child wants a thing, when a child is happy or sad there are not in him, as here are always in an adult when he says "I am happy," "I am sad," two parts of himself, one saying "I" and one knowing itself happy or sad. In a young child the feeling swamps every corner of itself and for the time being the child is the feeling. Secondly, an adult feeling sad knows in the very moment of the feeling that there was a moment—and there will in the future be other moments—when he did not feel like this. The child has no sense of time, his emotion is eternal, timeless. Finally, there rarely comes to any grown-up an emotion so overwhelming that he will not at the same time rise to answer a telephone bell. He is able to shut off a little piece of himself in answer to an external demand to answer to that thing. This the young child cannot do; there is no part of him he can split off spontaneously to answer an external stimulus.

As a result, the child's emotions terrify him. They tend to overwhelm him, to drive him into actions of which the other part of him does not approve: they send him into self-condemnation, they bring him into conflict with his environment.

Further, we are slowly coming to realise that emotion is the great driving power of human character and that emotion itself undergoes necessary stages in development. In those happier days when children had free space and air and country possibilities many of these emotions could find their own ways to maturity and through interest in dirt and muck and smearing, intimate contact with live animals and his own reactions to them, a child could rise to be a successful farmer or farm hand; through interest in destruction and skill in aggressiveness, a good knight or a good stone mason; through joy in power and the exercise of power over many external forces, a good housewife or first class domestic servant.

Industrialisation and the terror that mechanisation of transport has brought upon the roads have robbed children of these basic necessities. City life, restricted opportunity, increase in cleanliness and luxury have increasingly put children at a disadvantage in their early stages. Large school classes and purely theoretic teaching do nothing to mitigate these bad effects.

Emotional energy is indestructible, but if it cannot find legitimate expression and an outlet in creative living, it sinks, as it were, into the body itself and produces fatigue and irritability, slowness in learning, lack of interest in school subjects, sleeplessness, night

terrors and timidity, or in the other temperaments over-excitability, fidgetiness, aggressiveness, and in the active energetic boy truanting, pilfering and crime.

What is to be done? One thing is necessary, and necessary with an urgency measured only by the prevalence in our schools of debilitated, dull and delinquent children, and of restlessness and dissatisfaction in our adolescents.

We must put back into children's lives that bridge between their early phantasies, their early emotions and desires and the outer reality, and give them again that outlet for joy, adventure and experiment that earlier made them pioneers of this great civilisation.

This can be done in three ways—

Firstly, by provision in all schools and throughout all ridges of opportunities and apparatus for free indoor creative play. Play that is with earth, water and sand; moulding, cutting, making and destroying; the sort of play that is natural in a primitive country with outdoor adult occupations going on all around. Secondly, by adequate provision for play space out of doors, group games, sports, and the natural joy and fun of give and take with one's fellows. Finally, by the provision of men and women trained in the curative use of play and centres where this can be carried out, for children who have left the track of health and become anti-social, debilitated, dull, frightened or nervous.

Play Therapy is a new and vitally important means of treatment for the sick and nervous child. It demands a special kind of personality and very special training. Play therapists must be persons who have had good grounding and adequate practical instruction and experience under competent and experienced teachers. It is not a thing that can be attempted lightly. The emotional life of a child is intricate and delicate and every child should be protected from inexperienced handling.

Play is the natural language of childhood. In play a child can work out his phantasies, express his emotions and reassure himself as to their harmlessness and provide for himself that scaffolding of emotional growth that enables him to climb to emotional maturity.

Play is the life line of health in childhood. Without it, a child's nature is crippled and deformed. With it, used therapeutically, even the most unsatisfactory child has a good chance of reaching normality.

The Institute of Child Psychology is a pioneer institute in the use of play as therapy. It carries on research into the nature and mode of action of this form of therapy and from

time to time holds lecture courses on the findings of its daily work. It trains men and women for the profession of play therapists.

Three courses of training are given by The Institute of Child Psychology. A one year's course for non-medical men and women of suitable personality and of adequate previous experience in the nature and origin of the emotional and psychological difficulties of children. A one year post-graduate course for suitable qualified medical men and women, to enable them to take up work as children's psychological physicians, and a three years' course for lay or medical men and women to train them in the profession of play therapists.

A certificate is granted to successful candidates at the end of the one year course and at the end of the three years' course,- a diploma; in each case the respective examinations are carried out by external as well as internal examiners. A fundamental requirement of the diploma is evidence of the proved capacity of the candidate actually to have carried through curative work of this kind with children.

The Institute of Child Psychology does not emphasise greatly the bringing about of changes in the environment of unsuccessful children. It lays stress instead upon the possibilities of bringing about changes in the child itself which can enable the child to develop well and remain healthy,- even in an unsatisfactory environment. Play, intimately understood and wisely guided, is the instrument for such readjustment.

Let us have play therapists, well and soundly trained and fully experienced in our Hospitals and Welfare Clinics, Child Guidance Clinics and Children's centres, and many of the difficulties of childhood will pass into the limbo that has received the "Swounds and the Declines" of our Victorian ancestors.

EDITORIAL

It was good to learn at the summing-up of the London Conference of Child Guidance Clinics in January that Play Therapy was approved by the Conference and the appointment of Play Therapists to all teams undertaking the psychological treatment of sick and maladjusted children was advocated. About 34 clinics from all parts of the country were represented.

The I.C.P. originally used this method of treatment of children suffering from maladjustment to life, because we believed that play was the natural medium of expression in childhood and that only through free play could the physician penetrate to the innermost mind of the child. Further, we also believed that through play the child could

be guided to a satisfactory adjustment. As time has passed results have shown that we were right.

The Institute of Child Psychology is the only institution at present offering training in this profession. Some of our earliest students are now doing good work elsewhere or working on the staff of the I.C.P. But this is not work that can be taken up by young people just leaving school. Previous qualifications and experience are essential. For example, the teaching profession or a degree or diploma in psychology is a good preparation for intending Play Therapists. But, above all else, the personality of the trainee is of the greatest importance in work of this kind and it is a fixed rule that applicants must work for a short period in the Play Therapy rooms before their final acceptance as students is considered.