

## Understanding the Child

Margaret Lowenfeld

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Behind every child's failure lies the failure of a parent and one of the most frequent causes of this tragedy is the gulf of misunderstanding between the child and the grown-up. If this gulf is to be bridged, we must learn to understand the child, and the beginning of all our difficulties lies in the fact that we so often look upon the child as a grown-up only smaller. But the difference between a child and a grown-up is not merely one of scale; the child's mind is completely different; it differs from ours in quality, in perception and in the way it works. If we are to understand children, we must know the structure of their minds, and this knowledge must be reinforced by imagination, insight, and a vivid memory of our own childhood.

### **The Child's World**

In the first place, the world as it appears to the child is quite different from the world as it appears to an adult. A grown-up's world is made up of the things to which he attends; he has sufficient knowledge of his surroundings to enable him to choose, more or less deliberately, to what part of his world he will give his attention, and he remains comfortably oblivious of the rest. But the child has no knowledge of the world around him, and his approach to it is therefore quite different from that of a grown-up.

Yet in spite of this difference between the child's outlook and the adult's outlook, there are certain characteristics common to both; otherwise, there would be no point of contact between infancy and maturity. But their very similarities make us disastrously apt to overlook the differences between the mental processes of a child and those of an adult.

The child shares with us at least three definite characteristics. First, every human being tends to assume that everybody thinks and feels as he does. So does the child. If we see a person behaving oddly, we say to ourselves: 'There is someone who thinks and feels as I do. If I were in his place I should not behave like that. How odd'. But we entirely overlook the fact that the person is not feeling in the least as we do, and that therefore, his behaviour, which expresses his own particular feelings, is not odd. Secondly, we tend to

be unaware of any thought or feeling that we have always had, because we have never had an opportunity of appreciating its opposite. This also is equally true of the child. We who have grown up through childhood, are aware of being children no longer; but the child is totally unaware of being a child, and like ourselves he assumes that everybody thinks and feels as he does. He regards adults merely as larger editions of himself, and if he could express his idea of us in adult terms, he would explain that though we can do many things that he cannot, we are no more important and no wiser than he is. To his mind the only difference is that his behaviour is reasonable and ours is odd.

Thirdly, we all tend to project our unconscious emotions or feelings (especially if they are discreditable) upon the people about us. A bad tempered or jealous person is always convinced that the people around him are bad tempered or jealous. This tendency is so marked in children that we are often inclined to consider it a peculiarity of childhood, and consequently to overlook it in ourselves.

### **Characteristics of Childhood**

These characteristics we share with the child, though we often fail to understand the way in which they work. But there are certain others which are peculiar to childhood, and because we have forgotten our own childhood, we do not recognise them.

The conviction of omnipotence is the first of these. To the adult, the baby is clearly a helpless creature, but the baby, unaware of its own helplessness, knows only that it can produce a cry which will make giants come and minister to its needs. As the child grows older, he has to relinquish this omnipotence and to accept limitations of his power. The feeling of omnipotence is exceedingly precious to him, and when he is faced with a loss of power, he struggles to retain it. Obviously, he is too small to keep it by force, so he resorts to strategy. It soon becomes clear that there are certain things by which the adult sets great store, but which he cannot compel the child to do: no grown-up can make a child eat or sleep or empty his bowels. The child therefore refuses to eat or to sleep and retains his faeces and his water within him. There are other causes for this kind of behaviour, but it is enough to note now how skilfully and successfully the child can make the entire household revolve round his meals, his acts of evacuation, his hours of going to sleep.

Secondly the child differs from the grown-up because the material available for the formation of ideas is exceedingly small—in fact, he relies on adults for most of it. But adults are apt to forget that many words, meanings and processes, which are familiar to them, are quite unknown to the child. They turn a switch or a tap, and the lights go up or water runs. They have some idea of the system of wires and pipes in the walls, and some

conception of the chain of cause and effect which is set going when a switch is turned. But the child has not; the switch is to him the direct and magical cause of light, just as in his babyhood his cry was the direct cause which brought giants to his cot.

Then there is the question of size; from the child's point of view adults and their equipment are disproportionately large. Many of the child's outbursts of temper are due to not being on a level with the thing which is trying him. None of us would be at our best if we had to crane our necks at an impossible angle to put our point of view before an opponent twice our size. Another characteristic of childhood which we often fail to appreciate is the element of constant change in the child himself and in his relation to his surroundings. To a growing child, nothing remains the same for more than a few months. Even material objects look different, while his position in the family group with its fluctuating permissions and prohibitions is always changing. Grown-ups expect him to understand that he is now too big to do one thing, but not big enough to do another, and they demand from him a constant readjustment of which they themselves would be incapable.

### **The Centre of the Child's World**

Clearly then the world inhabited by the child is a very different place from the world an adult inhabits. And the centre of the child's world is himself and his feelings, which seem to him eternal. He does not know as the adult does that his feelings of happiness or pain or excitement will pass. Nor does he distinguish between his body and his mind; a pain in his body colours his whole outlook, and a mental pain reacts at once on his body. Again, he does not distinguish between animate and inanimate objects; it has been proved that to a child motion means life; a running child, a rolling ball, a moving tram, the wind—all these are alive to the child in the same way, and grown-ups are only alive in the same way as the tram or the ball.

### **The Child's Scale of Values**

In this shifting and changing world the child himself, at its centre is permanent; and the most insistent and lasting things about him are his own desires. What he desired yesterday, he desires to-day. What seemed good to eat, to feel, to play with, yesterday, seems good today. In trying to gratify these desires the child comes up not only against the barrier of circumstances—which he can generally understand, but also against the barrier of adult prohibitions which to him appear quite unintelligible. So many of the things which seem important to an adult do not matter to a child. The grown-up insists that clothes must be folded, doors must be closed quietly, hands must be washed—and the

child has no natural desire to do any of these things. In fact, he would not care in the least if no one in his environment did them. Yet these regulations lay the foundation of good habits and manners which will be invaluable to the child when he is older, and therefore they must be enforced. But their performance can only be secured by inculcating a habit, or obtaining the child's goodwill, or by using that other weapon, the terror of adult discipline and punishment, which so often marks the beginning of neurosis.

A child conforms to these adult regulations not because he realises the importance of what he is told to do, but because he has learnt by experience that disobedience produces adult displeasure which subsequently interferes with more important affairs of his own. When this association breaks down, or when an opposing influence is at work, the child will usually disobey. For instance, a child may behave well at nursery meals because he has learned that, if he does, the atmosphere in the nursery will be more favourable to the games he is planning—which are to him the really important things of life. But the same child may be unbearably tiresome at meals downstairs because he has found that he can score off his young sister and concentrate attention on himself without directly affecting the important things in the nursery. In any case, adult conceptions of good and bad are very perplexing for the child. It is impossible for him to discover any system in the way these terms are used. Certain things, which have no significance for the child, are pronounced good by the adult. But other things which seem supremely good to him—such as building a crane from very unsatisfactory material—are dismissed by the adults as mere play.

## **Energy and Naughtiness**

The important thing about all problems of child- behaviour is that this behaviour is a manifestation of energy, and energy is in itself amoral. Although the child is so much smaller than the adult, he has about as much energy and emotion as the average grown-up. But whereas the grown-up has innumerable and varied outlets for his energy, the child has very few. The baby works it off by kicking and screaming, the six-year-old is never still for a moment, and as he grows older the child must somehow find activities which will work off his energy without earning the disapproval of surrounding grown-ups. There may come a time when all the activities sanctioned by parents are inadequate, and the imprisoned energy becomes so explosive that it is forcibly repressed by parents as hooliganism and naughtiness. But the force which is making the child so turbulent is a driving power which will be invaluable when he is grown up. It is the force which may put him at the top of any profession he chooses and to repress it instead of guiding it may have disastrous consequences. Nelson, for instance, was a noted robber of orchards, and Clive was sent to India because of his organised rowdyism at home. If we want our children to grow up to

be men and women of vigour and enterprise, there must be a stage when the raw material of these qualities is all we can see—and the raw material is this explosive and often destructive energy. Obviously, we cannot expect the child who possesses the energy which may make him conspicuously successful as an adult to be also a child who is never in mischief. Naughtiness, according to grown-ups, is a departure from their standards of good behaviour. The child may of course be doing something which grown-ups consider wrong and the child also accepts as wrong—dying or cheating perhaps. More often, he is merely disregarding adult regulations as to cleanliness or tidiness which he considers entirely unimportant. Or he may be making himself a nuisance climbing over furniture or finding outlets for his' energy in some way which causes discomfort to grown-ups. All these ways of behaving are described as naughtiness.

But modern parents are undertaking a very difficult task: they are trying to make the child, who has an immense store of energy, whose mind, scale of values and outlook on life are quite different from their own, conform to their own standards of behaviour. And these standards involve the achievement of cleanliness in the first year of life, the suppression of the instinct for cruelty, in earlier centuries permitted to adult man, by the age of ten, and the acquisition, even earlier, of the ability to fit into a life which sets up barriers against all the primitive instincts and provides very few supplementary outlets for energy.

In medieval times, such difficulties did not am'. As far as we know there were many fewer neurotic children, largely because the accepted standards of culture and behaviour allowed many of the primitive instincts to have direct expression. Since machinery was unknown, ordinary life provided plenty of useful outlets for energy, for everyone was expected to take an active part in providing food and protection for the community. The problem of an super-abundant energy therefore solved itself, much as it does to-day for the happy child in the country who can go where he likes and make as much noise as he wishes. But though modern conditions, especially for those who live in towns, offer very little help in solving these problems, modern psychology can give on understanding of the child and his actions. Once we understand the child, we can find a way of handling him that will help to overcome the difficulties which the general circumstances of life solved automatically in the past.

