

Play in Childhood; the Froebelian View and Modern Thought

By Margaret Lowenfeld

It is startling to find that Froebel in his work on the education of man, where he concerns himself directly with play, foreshadows much that has come explicitly to formulation in modern dynamic psychology. "Play," says Froebel "is self-active representation of the inner— representation of the inner from inner necessity and impulse."

Play, as seen from the angle of modern psychology, is a very complex function— a function which in childhood differs fundamentally, both in its nature and in the part, it plays in the general economy of the personality, from the part played by play in adult life. "A child," says Froebel, "shows at play the highest phase of child development, that is at development at this period," and modern psychology empathetically endorses his vision. The child who is inhibited in play is the child in whom the forces which make for vigorous normal development of intellect, emotion, and instinct, are so tangled and interwoven with meh other that they prevent free and spontaneous growth. Froebel was fully aware of this.

He saw also that there is an organic relationship between the type of play which carries the energies of a child in childhood, and his relationships in later life. He says:

"His future relations to father and mother, to the members of the family. to society and mankind, to nature and God—in accordance with the natural and individual disposition and tendencies of the child—depend chiefly upon his mode of life at this period." In this point of View as in everything concerning the nature and importance of play in children, Froebel was a pioneer. Karl Groos, in his work on the Play of Man, written eleven years after the Education of Man, is far behind him in sight, confuses the play of children with the play of adults and fails altogether to see the relation between the play of children and their development in after life, a fact whose importance is coming more and more heavily to be emphasised by modern schools of child psychology.

Having reached this point in understanding Froebel's use of the word, we find that his conception differs at certain points materially from the findings of modern psychology. To Froebel, education, the harmonious development of the whole human being in the framework of the family relationship and the Christian religion, was the supreme interest in Me and the focus of his energies. To him, therefore, play was interesting and important as a means by which the child gained knowledge of himself and increased his capacity to obtain' control of his innate powers.

But this is only one aspect of play, an a5pect which in our studies of child Me and child nature at the Institute of Child Psychology we have come to classify under the heading of "Play and the conquest of the environment," using the term

environment in the widest possible sense. Play, it is coming slowly to be realised, serves many other functions in the personal economy of the child.

It is primarily creative: the child comes from a world of which he has no knowledge and of which his part is for a considerable period that of an omnipotent being; his wants are attended to as soon as they are felt, his needs are anticipated, and his attention is sought; he finds himself the centre of his universe. As the months progress, conditions radically alter he ceases to be the centre of the universe and finds that many strange things are expected of him; all around him are unknown features, new sights, sounds, smells, noises; a complicated relationship that he has to work out; new faculties of body and of mind, new tasks and new opportunities. The world of the small child changes daily round about him; to-day he can do things that a month ago were beyond his comprehension; yesterday he was expected aware of prohibitions and of punishments that a month ago were entirely beyond his ken. A medium must be found for the absorption and orientation of all these experiences, they need to be recapitulated, to be rehearsed to be "played out" (we use even in adult terminology the idiom and the activity of the child) in relation to each other.

Contrary emotions perpetually sweep over the child, love and hate in turn terms evoked by surges of momentary emotion: "I will go into the garden." and "You mustn't say I'm not to," says a small girl of three and a half and when the aunt persists in the refusal, "I hate you, I hate you. I am going in the garden to get a big stick and I will cut you up into little, little bits and I will eat you." For the moment rage absorbs her field of consciousness, and the rage will remain for perhaps ten minutes, until it is drowned by another emotion. Adults, on the other hand, have stable emotions—they do not wish to kill and drown to love and possess interchangeably—and they are therefore very bewildering to the small child. Were it not for play—play at home on the hearthrug, and robbers in the wood, full of wonderful recoveries and equally wonderful recoveries—he would fare badly in the attempt to make harmony in his soul. Play is the safety valve for the «notions of childhood, their stage and then purge, and without play—conceived as a stage for the drama of his emotions—no child will reach emotional maturity.

Words form a counterpoise to the egocentric phantasy world of childhood. His fantasies are his own and cannot be shared, but in gaining knowledge of words he is admitted into the phantasy life of other people and the knowledge of reality other than his own. "What is a theatre?" I ask a little girl who has been talking about theatres. "It's a home where people go to and they die." Then seeing my look of dismay, she added: "No, it isn't. Let's play theatres. You make one and I will play it, and you will tell me what it means."

The child is right it is by playing out a thing that she achieves understanding of it—an understanding which cannot be given in any other way so completely. Failures to understand words can be discovered best through a child's play. Much of his play is an effort to orientate himself and to understand the significance of the words he uses.

There is much more that might be said on this subject, but in a short article of this kind, it is only possible to deal with the most essential points regarding play.