

An Institute for Child Psychology

It was in 1938, that I managed to get on to a course of play therapy for children, run by Dr Margaret Lowenfeld and her willing helpers in Pembroke Villas W6. Dr. Lowenfeld's medical work, mostly with young students from the public schools and Oxbridge, that came to her found some of her methods helped the under-developed child in their psyches; and set about dealing with young children suffering from behaviour difficulties. At that time any special individual set up, would not be recognised by educational and medical authorities, but like all pioneers with new ideas, what Dr Lowenfeld had to offer disturbed children was very rewarding. To make it pay, she took in interested people who could pay fees for a three-year course in Play Therapy, and when they passed, would be able to work in the very young, and new child guidance clinics, or in their own premises.

Dr. Lowenfeld was a person with enormous energy; an able speaker, with "know how", who would help her by having a distinguished list of Trustees. Money was needed, money must come and she set about finding it. Enough was found for her to have No 6, Pembridge Villas made into a workable place, room for students, an office for files and case histories, for staff, pupils and patients. It was a Georgian Terrace house, with a large sunny basement where play rooms were fitted out for the observation and play of children where they came for their therapeutic sessions. This was a play room with small tables and chairs, world material and lots of toys. Next to it was a room with tiled walls and drain along the bottom, with water taps - pouring tap and pipes, where children could express themselves by the use of water to release some of their inner problems. There was a quiet, small room, where patient and student could talk or sew - and a workroom with tools for making wooden toys etc.

Dr Lowenfeld had invented some special toy materials, which helped to show her the problems of each new child, when they first came to the clinic.

One was a mosaic of coloured shapes, with one shape not fitting like the rest, and it was this shape that gave some clues to the child's mind.

The mosaic consisted of five shapes and six different colours.

1. Is a half inch square.
2. Is a triangle fitting the half inch square.
3. Is a diamond square, sides all the same.
4. Is a big triangle sides all the same.
5. Is the smallest triangle, half the size of the big triangle.

The colours were black, white, red, blue, green and yellow. The method was to introduce the five shapes and six colours to the children, then put them all back in the box, and invite them to make a large or small pattern or use them however they like within a special sized tray designed by Dr. Lowenfeld. The box containing the coloured shapes consisted of;

- 6 big triangles
- 12 small triangles
- 4 squares
- 8 half squares
- 12 equilateral triangles
- 24 scalenes
- 8 squares
- 8 diamonds
- 10 isosceles triangles

After the child made what he wanted to do, each colour and shape had to be drawn round and named for further study.

The second important trial for each child introduced to them in the playroom, was a large wooden tray with a galvanised lining made to Dr. Lowenfeld's measurements - in this tray contained sand, and water could be used as well.

Surrounding it were trays full of small painted figures of people, every kind of animal, little wooden houses, pig sties, small dinkie toys of cars, railways bridges etc. roads, aeroplanes and railway lines and tunnels.

The child when introduced to this and asked if he would like to use the toys to try and give his or her picture of the world. the student sat near on a small chair and watched to see if the child was eager, or slow, and listened to what he said as he played.

This again all had to be remembered and written down by the student. Sometimes, the child would get angry or tearful or excited about what he was doing, acting out some of the scenes he witnessed at home. Using the different toys to show his aggression, or tears.

This equipment was part of the furniture in the playroom, and some children could work their feelings off in this way many times over.

Twice a week, children came to this clinic and each child had the same student to follow him or her around the playroom for two whole hours. Every change of play, movement from one room to another, what they played with and said, had to be remembered and later written down and given in to the tutor for the older staff to discuss before the next session. At one time the 10 students whose ages were from 19 years upwards all began to look like the children they studied!

Miss Jordan was in charge of the sessions, and if something unusual was happening, we would get a message to her to say the weather was changing. Perhaps a boy was working out his agro and was brandishing a heavy weapon from the tool room, or a child got over excited with water play.

The most absorbing part was when a child who continued session after session with the same play material and a day would come when a change came and they would move on to a more constructive, or destructive material. Part of the student's job was to just say to the child, "Now you putting a cow into the sand" picture, or "you are running around on the scooter". It was a very good way of making them aware of

what they were doing. All students wore green overalls, so we did not impinge their own personalities on the child or show any emotion; accepting them just as they were.

Other than our sessions in the playroom, time was given up to attending lectures at Pembroke Villas, and others outside. There were second- and third-year students, most of whom had some degree. It was the time when many psychologists were coming over from Germany and came to lectures and to improve their English. This was good for us to meet a variety of psychologists, some of whom would help us too.

The first year of this course really laid the foundations well and I am most grateful for all I learned, it gave me a wonderful basic understanding of child health, children's growth. The psycho-pathology and mental diseases, and the varieties of behaviour due to mental defects physical defects, and the knowledge that there were children who were already psychotic. Something barely noticed until this time, and certainly nowhere for them to be placed if so ill, so they could not be allowed to remain in the family

The subjects that we studied were:

Our relationship between worker and child and how to handle them with a delicate balance. How careful to be over observance of facts in the playroom.

J B Watson in the USA developed his Behaviourist philosophy studying young children and their reactions to a stimulus, and reconditioned reflexes. He made observations of children's fantasy life, and observation of the environment in which the child lives, and this became the basis for Child Guidance Clinics. The bridge between mind and body and how the glands affected the body. All this was taught to us by our tutors Miss Stewart and Miss Trail. We were given a list of books to read on "Animal psychology and Man" by Katz.

Kohlers "Mentality of Apes"

Introduction to Animal Psychology (Flats) by Mann Physique and character.

Kaetochwer Childs Conception of the World by Piaget
Language and Thought of the Child by Piaget
Nursery Years by Susan Isaac
Bodily changes in fear, rage and pain by Cameron
Edward and Marigold by M Thorburn Little Red Houses by G B Steve
Psychology (academic) by Woodworth

Other subjects, some short some longer, were all extremely helpful. This included office administration, the work of committees, admissions case histories, accounts etc.

Then we were tutored through the social workers department. Followed by an interesting series of lectures by Dr Ethel Dukes, on Mendels Law and the importance of heredity and the effect of environment. The relationship between a mother and the nurse and her new-born child. The need to build up confidence in children from the beginning.

This was followed by a course on children's health and illnesses from the first day of birth, by a German paediatrician Dr Nathan, whose ideas seemed far in advance of many of our children's doctors at that time over here. His knowledge of how different diets suit different children. From my matrons experiences of nursing sick children and all the whims of parents over their children's allergies or fads was extremely helpful and an eye-opener in many ways.

The "cream" of lectures were those given us by Dr Lowenfeld. She was a gifted exponent on her own subjects, and her knowledge and approach to children's troubles in Childhood was extremely large range. Her very big contribution to the study of young children, was what she called "primary system thought", which is how babies learn to distinguish things both visionary and feelingly by touch and smell and hearing. In this subject another well-known child psychologist Dr Winnicott found the same system at work until the baby can distinguish between the "not me" to the "me".

One of our favourite lectures were given on a Friday evening at Kings College in the Strand by Dr J.A Hadfield - they were specially put on for a Friday evening, to

keep students from dashing off for long weekends, as they were so popular, he always got a full house. His lecture series was on psycho-pathology and mental hygiene. We were introduced to the works of Freud, Jung and Adler, Stekel Janet, Charcot, Pavlov, Firenzi and their understanding of the unconscious mind and how to accept it as a natural hypothesis.

Dr Hadfield lead us through many different ways for studying people's problems, by analysis, by hypnosis; his own aetiology of psycho-neuroses being the deprivation of love in early childhood, not only sexual and sensuous but protective love from the mother from birth. If this isn't given spontaneously, children react by anxiety, anger, jealousy, self-pity, self-display and depression. These early hurts come out in analysis when buried in the unconscious mind, these hurts manifest into adult life with unhappy results, making illnesses and nervous disorders paramount. It would have caused us fun to go deeply into some of these causes, which made us joke together about some of the answers given, which we called "Hadfields crab".

His interesting talks on the different periods in the changes children go through to adolescence and adulthood, complimentary but, different to those age changes, which the anthroposophist observe in their educational systems when they divide the child's personalities into choleric, depressive, and sanguine and aggressive - and their need for expression in the varying environments and in the community.

Another very worthwhile course we went to weekly was by a Miss Kirschner, who taught a system of eurhythmy, and gentle exercises, similar to some forms of yoga. We learned to stretch and yawn like a cat movements and stretch a long ack leg. I believe her methods have a name, but I don't remember it, but it was rewarding, and not done to music.

We also visited the Rachel Macmillan nursery training school, the Norland Institute, a Juvenile court, and even sat in on the third reading at the House of Commons on a bill to "Spare the Rod".

During a visit to the medical museum in Lincoln Inn Fields, Johnnie our only male student whether by shock at seeing so many grim pieces of the human body

immersed in spirit in glass jars, or it was pure coincidence, suddenly fell on the floor in what at first looked like a faint, but it was a pure episode for us all to witness an active epileptic fit.

The last of the visits was to an institute or hospital at Tooting Bec - where several hundred small children lived, completely without wits. These small children, sitting in low chairs, or lying down if unable to sit up without ample support, just sat out their days - some would grow up and remain in an institution for life; and others maybe would die for their little limbs and bodies and heads were all so twisted and misshapen. The routine was to keep them fed and clean, and dressed for daytime and a repeat performance at night. I asked one of the Sisters "How could she bear to do this work?" She replied, "Oh I think looking after them, is like one does for animals". I knew I would never have such patience.

As a group of students, we were a mixed lot, five out of the ten being British, and to stir us up like a Christmas pudding were a Dutch girl, a New Zealander, one from South Africa and another from South America, and a Swede.

Most of us were living in attics in the Notting Hill area, and it was my first time of living on my own. Several of us had no University training but had educational experiences in modern schools, like A S Neills, Summerhill, in Suffolk and Bedales in Hampshire. Any of us without an academic qualification would not be allowed to go on for the next two years - but what we gained in this year would be of great benefit for future understanding of children. I still have a large book of all the lecture notes I took, which would be good material for anyone wanting to do a research on children before and during the war years, as that was before Spock and Jolly brought out more to bear on how to bring up children. I feel certain my mother's interest in Pestalozzi and Madame Montessori was an advance on the Victorian methods at the beginning of the Twentieth century.

At the end of this wonderful year of training there could be no further opportunity. In September 1939 the Second World War began, and all children in large cities were evacuated from the worst of the over-populated areas into the country. It was like a domestic revolution, and what we all learned about children out of their

native environment, brought about big changes in child care. Many children proving to be unbillable evacuees - of which I will give a picture in "Bourton Grange".

To add to our knowledge, if we could borrow a box of the mosaic shapes and take patterns from our friends and relations it would add to exam results and we could gain useful knowledge from our diagnostic report.

One outstanding example happened when at an old scholars weekend at Saffron Walden, one of the masters obliged me with his idea. He worked quickly as was his temperament and produced a design which shocked me, and I guess he twigged I was surprised. It was a most delicate well-formed pattern, starting with the white diamond shapes as a centre. It reminded me of the lovely needle work doylies, people used to put under their cakes at a tea party. It was at a Whitsuntide weekend. In August of the same year, this master was tramping with a group of older children on Dartmoor, when he fell down dead on a Tor. He had come home, for he was a Devon man.

Since then in the 70's and 80's two wonderful books have been published, one called "Dibs" by N Axline and the other "Bobby" by Rachel Pinney. Both tell of the treatment they practised with a boy each, who lived in New York; carrying out the Lowenfeld method which came exciting and dangerous to themselves but had wonderful results for the child.

Many people today will never have heard of Dr Margaret F Lowenfeld and it is good to know her insight and skills have left behind a living and vital way to help very distressed children. Her teaching and handling of children proved invaluable to me throughout my life and I like to honour her for sharing her gifts with others.