

## **The Problem of the withdrawn child**

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To illustrate the way in which the mode of approach which I have attempted to describe works out in individual cases, I want to take the problem of the withdrawn child.

All psychiatrists working with children are agreed that one type of case presents difficulties of a very special kind: that is the child, of whatever age, from whom it is impossible to obtain a response. These children and young people neither like nor dislike their therapists; they give either a polite and superficial answer to all questions or attempts to elicit from them any kind of material, or they make no response whatever. I was very interested in Dr. Ansell's paper on the use of narcotics for the treatment of these children, and I think I can offer some suggestions to account for the low proportion of children in her series who responded to this method.

Now it is generally believed by therapists that the operative mechanism in these cases is that of 'jamming!' - i.e. the impingement upon one another of two instinctual drives acting with equal force in opposite directions. The problem in such a situation is to separate the components of this 'jam' so that at least part of one of these forces becomes detached and available for the child to use.

It is undeniable that in a number of such cases this is the mechanism at work. It is also clear that a number of cases exist like those described by Dr. Ansell where a traumatic experience which is too painful to be touched upon, forms the core of the inhibition. My study however, and that of my co workers, of children of this type by the methods and in the circumstances I have attempted to describe, suggests that in many such types there is also another factor at work.

Ernest Schachtel of New York in his paper "On memory and childhood amnesia", examining the concept that the amnesia for the events of childhood from which we all suffers arises from the factor of repression, points out that the main tool which has been used for the exploration of memory is language and that in any language only a few aspects of the totality of experience have found expression. Professor Wood Jones in a delightful series of random talks, entitled Unscientific Essays, describes for example how the people of the Keeling islands have special words for familiar experiences, such as the disappearance of a flame that is blown out, or of the water in a puddle which is dried by the sun: events which intrigue children, but for which adult language has no word. Korzybski and his workers have also stressed heavily the inadequacy of ordinary language to express many of the most important aspects of human experience.

In any thoughtful consideration of the world of today, particularly in its international aspect, it is impossible to avoid a disturbing consciousness of this inability of language to bridge gaps in understanding or the failure of understanding between peoples of differing social experiences. Many languages show examples of identical words or phrases, as for example 'sanctions' in French and the original English meaning which convey in facts

opposite significances, and in single languages phrases occur which according to the context may have opposite significances.

In no sphere is this difficulty more acute than in the intercourse between adults and children. We are indebted to Piaget for exhaustive study of some of these differences of meaning according as words are used by adults or by children. But the areas of exploration of Piaget and his co-workers are limited and devoted to such definite themes as the child's conception of causality, the language and thought of the child, and the moral judgment of the child.

Action, not language, is the natural mode of expression of children and the use of objects for expression of idea and feeling is much more natural to them than the use of words. If opportunity for varied and subtle forms of action are provided for children, their use of them suggests that their difficulties in response arise from factors essentially different from those which have been suggested. Study of these children by the means I have been describing suggests that failure to achieve expression of inner experience arises not so much from the operation of repression, as from sheer inability to find material in which some of the essential interior experiences of children can be expressed. We are all familiar to some extent with this experience; for example, when we fall in love, or are moved by some profound religious or political experience and find ourselves (unless we are poets) either speechless or reduced to making use of phrases which constant use has reduced to a kind of sign language of the emotions experienced. None of these tools are available for children, Each child's inner experience is for him separate and unique, and he is alone with himself in the struggle to find expression for it.

Thus many of the children who we find confronting us in silence, unable to give any response to our most tactful questioning, incapable of drawing or modelling or discovering within themselves any sentiments or ideas that they can put into story or other imaginary form, are children held fast in a situation from which it is for them impossible to escape.

The dilemma that faces them may perhaps be called the dilemma of simultaneity: this is that a number of things within them are happening at one and the same time on different planes and in differing modes. If this state is therefore to be communicated, some tool must be found which is capable of expressing complexity and simultaneity of this sort. Language cannot do it, since in language words must be string out into grammatical form, and, even when accompanied by gestures, can only deal with one aspect of a situation at a time. Now it is just this analysis into aspects and their serial presentation in grammatical form which is outside the capacity of the withdrawn child,

His consciousness is drowned in the situation in which he finds himself, and his misery consists precisely in the fact that he is unable to extricate his consciousness from this confusion or to stand aside and see it objectively.

The withdrawn child therefore faces us much as might a drowning man, who sees us from afar, but has given up hope of our being able to rescue him and is too exhausted himself through his battle with the elements to be able even to make us a signalling gesture.

Most children who come to us as patients have been a long time in this condition, and secondary effects have begun to develop. According to the nature of his condition and the origin of his troubles, by the time a child comes to us he is either immersed in a

phantasy world of his own so different from our world, that no bridge exists between him and us or is caught up in a whirl of strange feelings and thoughts which he is miserably conscious of being unable to put into words or gestures.

Caught in this situation, the child experiences a growing isolation and an increasingly blurred perception of the nature of his surroundings. He is like a person trapped in a luminous fog which surrounds him like a prison, on to the walls of which his small fears and perplexities become projected in the form of immense and terrifying shadows. From within this prison he stares at us with hopeless eyes.

It is this hopelessness which is the kernel of the situation as we meet it first. A withdrawn child is a child who has already given up expectation of help. He is used to being tormented by his fellows and to his hopes of help being betrayed by the adults that he knows. The appearance of a fresh adult who expresses a wish to help him wakes no responsive hope, and indeed in many cases intensifies his inner shrinking.

If his trouble arises from an initial traumatic situation, an approach through narcosis may cut his trouble short. But apart from the means I wish to describe, I know of no way in which a diagnosis can be made; and, as Dr. Annell has reported, if the isolation arises from causes other than trauma, this type of therapy is unlikely to bring relief.

What is needed, therefore, in order to make the process of analysis possible, is to reawaken the feeling of hope. These children are so shut up in the blackness of their own isolation that unless hope of communication can be aroused there is no dynamic available with which we can work.

It is here that the type of approach which I have been attempting to describe begins to show its value, Children learn from each other; and a child introduced into an assembly of children for whom the help which they need is patently becoming available, can catch from observation of other children that reassurance about the possibility of help that we, as adults, are incapable of giving to him.

The procedure, therefore, that we have found most suitable is to explain to each child, in words, the nature and contents of the children's floor to which he is coming, and to couple this with a particular reassurance that on this floor children are safe from adult comment and interference, and that what they do or say there is not reported to their 'grown-ups', Arrangements are then made in the usual way for the child to come to the building at times which make as little disturbance as possible in the usual rhythm of his week.

Once arrived at the Institute, in accordance with his age and degree of shrinking isolation he is invited or coaxed to come downstairs to the playrooms. In the case of very young children it is sometimes necessary at first to invite a parent to come downstairs with the child, The parent is then accommodated with a chair in the corridor or the small interview room, and urged to become absorbed in an occupation of her own.

The child, in the meantime, is welcomed by the therapist assigned to him and told he may behave exactly as he likes, that no one expects anything of him, and he can wander where he will. As far as the child is then concerned, no further notice is ostensibly taken of him.

This, however, is only apparently true as, in order to be successful with a child of this kind, the therapist in charge must maintain a constant and unobtrusive observation, even when she seems to be busy helping the other children or tidying up and putting in order some of the apparatus of the playroom.

Left to himself the child will probably retreat to some chair or some corner of the room, and with tense muscles wait for the assault that previous experience has told him is certain, sooner or later; to be made upon either his feeling or his attention. At the close of the hour it should be made quite clear to him by the therapist who has fetched him, that his presence in the playroom has been appreciated and enjoyed; that no one minds or feels embarrassed by his total lack of response; that he is liked as a person, and that the therapist is looking forward to seeing him again. Other therapists working in the playrooms whom he may have met or passed in the corridor will also have given him a welcoming smile, and on his return to his waiting parent (if one has accompanied him) care is taken to avoid giving any impression at all except that of a general welcome.

When through constant repetition of this experience it has soaked into the consciousness of the child that the freedom from demand which the welcoming adult has given him is a reality and can be depended upon, the child will begin of himself to make tentative steps forward. He will gradually move out of his phase of frozen isolation towards observation of other children; he may return a ball that has arrived in his neighbourhood, poke a toy nearer to a child who clearly needs it, smile at an absurdity in the play of another child, or even take a hesitant part in some occupation that is going on. At this point the therapist may unobtrusively join him, always taking care to arrange that the child's head is on a higher level than her own so that the child, not the adult, "Talks down". A willingness to experiment with the material offered will then gradually appear.

It is here, that the value of the World technique becomes apparent. As has been explained in the first paper, this consists of a deep metal tray which can contain water or sand or a mixture of both, and a cabinet of shallow trays containing a number of objects whose classifications have been listed in "The Nature and Use of the Lowenfeld World Technique with Children and Adults" (1).

The advantage of this tool is that it makes no demands upon the children (it can, by the way, be used equally well with adults) and presents no challenge. Children can take any objects they like from the cabinet and in any order; the objects can be stood upright in sand, buried, or placed in or on water. A withdrawn child will probably start by watching other children using this apparatus, and when he has seen one or two of them place the objects in what will appear to him quite irrelevant positions, will venture himself to put one or two objects in the tray nearest to him. His therapist will then drift across to him and make a gentle comment expressing approval, and then sit down quietly to watch. The child may continue to add objects to his tray or may move away to watch other children - which of these he does is immaterial: he is gaining confidence.

After a period, short or long according to the child and the severity of the conditions from which he suffers, the child will settle down to making a 'world' of his own. At this point the method of handling the child diverges. A 'world' made by a child is a presentation of an aspect of his inner state. The mode in which it is dealt with by the therapist depends upon the fundamental psychotherapeutic theory in which the therapist believes.

It is possible to treat a world as if it were a drawing or a dream by imposing upon the construction - as is done for example by Dr. Turner in his paper - a formula concerning the nature of mental contents previously determined. If this is done, and the judgment and intuition of the therapist has led him to recognise some truth about the nature of the material presented and the child's relation to it, the Interpretation given by the therapist will produce some relief of tension in the child, and the barrier of isolation will be to that extent diminished. The material produced by the child in this or any of the other forms of apparatus available for him in our playrooms will then fall in with the pattern familiar to the therapist from other and more accessible patients, and from this point the treatment will proceed according to the school of thought and practice to which the therapist belongs. The relief felt by the child at the understanding by the adult of one aspect of his suffering will act like a motor-driven rudder working below the surface of his consciousness directing him to produce more and more material relevant to that aspect of his problems of which the therapist has shown understanding.

This mode of treatment of the material, though valid in itself, is not that for which the apparatus was designed and is directed towards a rather different goal.

The essential quality of the 'world' apparatus as designed, is that it is a tool for the exploration of the total content of a child's inner experience, and studying the structure of this content within the personality of the child. In order to make such study possible, no more than is absolutely necessary is said to the child at each stage about the underlying significance of the world he is making; instead each world is carefully discussed with him, as it stands, and the exact meaning to him of each object is elicited. The world is then drawn by the therapist, mostly with the help and according to the comments of the child, and filed in his case sheet for future reference. In this way a complete series of his worlds and records of his use of other materials is accumulated which is at a suitable moment taken from the case sheet and gone through in detail with the child. What is aimed at then, as always, with the child, is to understand exactly what the child has intended to express in the constructions he has made in the tray, and to trace from world to world the inter-relations, inversions, enlargements, suppressions and developments which have taken place in the themes and statements made in his earlier worlds.

When a range of material is treated in this way, what becomes clear is that these productions represent a very complex structure, composed of sensorial experience, observation, deduction, ideas of all kinds, simple and complex affect, individual and group phantasy, all mixed with statements about every-day happenings. The characteristic of this intricate network is that each part or aspect is, for the child who makes it, inseparately bound up with every other part, affecting it and being affected by it. Thus what this apparatus does is to make available for the child a way out of what I described earlier as the most crucial factor in the isolation of the child: the simultaneity of the elements of his experience. For him these elements are like the individual members of a frightened flock of sheep which, when startled by a dog, crowd together in an attempt to get out at a field by a single narrow gate and end by blocking the pathway of escape altogether, perhaps trampling one another to death in the exit.

Once an apparatus is put within the child's reach which allows the simultaneous presentation of many fundamentally different and even opposite elements of his situation and his dilemmas, the width of the gate has become equal to the size of the field, and all aspects can be presented simultaneously.

And it is my experience that when the complexities are disentangled the 'withdrawnness' disappears, and the personality which then emerges is generally one of unusual versatility and richness.

In thus making possible for a child a simultaneous presentation of many different qualities of experience and of stress, we are not doing for him anything that is peculiar to the process of therapy, but are, in our endeavour to meet the urgent needs of children, cooperating in that struggle which is at the core of the problem of our generation. It is in an endeavour thus to present together the whole experience of the human being that James Joyce wrote "Ulysses", that Gertrude Stein has written all her work, that Picasso and the surrealists have been experimenting in painting, and that Chagall was moved to the strange composition of his pictures.

It may be asked what is the advantage of this mode of approach over the older method of direct interpretation of selected elements within the framework of an accepted school of psychopathology. A great deal of the answer to this may be found in the recent book of Erik Erikson "Childhood and society". We are confronted in our children by Individuals who, in their adult life, will have to face, and to find their identity within, circumstances and forces totally different from those which confronted us in our childhood. It is not enough to solve for and with a child the conflicts that lie within him in his relation to the members of his family; the child needs also to find his own identity, to become familiar with his own sensuous equipment, his abilities, his constitution, his type of emotional endowment, and the possibilities of Interior self-respect and satisfaction that lie within the exercise of his own individual functions.

To do this it is necessary that he should find a way in which as it were the 'flavours and the main content of his experience should become available to him, and some understanding be reached of the mode by which experience Interlocks with experience.

Children, in our culture, spend the first part of their lives 'in the air', so to speak. They are carried or supported freely in 'mid-space' not (as in some cultures) firmly attached either to their mother or to a board; and it is only when they are able to get about freely, by themselves, that space terms come to have meaning for them. Their earliest impressions are perforce without any relation to time or space. There is nothing to help them to know whether a particular sensation is within or without themselves; for example, pain inside the abdomen or the pricking of a napkin pin from outside are perceived by an infant simply as existing. There is no means by which 'within' can be distinguished from 'without'. In the same way, there is no top or bottom to the body, but a great confusion of areas of sensation. Sensations of all kinds intermingle and are not located. Since all these sensations and experiences are also involved in the children's emotional contacts with their parents and other members of their environment, and since these people impinge upon the child's awareness in very definite ways, all direct experience in any child becomes charged with overtones of every sort and strength. All these need sorting out. To do this it is essential that the child be provided with the means of making representations which are independent of time and space and are capable of representing all types of spacial and associative relations at one and the same time.

Although the course of events which has been described is what usually happens in the handling of the withdrawn child, it is not the only way in which such a case may develop. Some children, wholly inhibited in the use of the usual methods of communication, find the

opportunities provided by the world apparatus of such immediate relevance to their situation that they fall upon it with the eagerness of hungry human beings upon a well-laden dinner table and with an intensity of interest which has to be seen to be believed; and they then construct a 'world' which, in symbolical form, states their whole problem. Illustrations of some of these responses will be found in the paper published in the journal 'Sauvegard', and some in my earlier book on play. (At the conference this paper was illustrated by coloured slides of a number of 'worlds' which have had to be omitted from this text owing to difficulties of reproduction.)

## REFERENCES

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(Sauvegarde Reference)

TURNER