

## Cleanliness and Tidiness

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Report of the first of four lectures in a course of eight on “Common Difficulties in Normal Children” arranged by The Institute of Child Psychology and delivered at Friends’ House, Euston Road, N.W.1, on Wednesday, November 7<sup>th</sup> 1934.)

**Lord Northbourne** (President of the Institute of Child Psychology) presided and, in introducing the lecturer, said: It is a great pleasure to me to be here to-night and to see such a splendid audience at the first of this particular series of lectures. It is also a pleasure to be able to do what I can, even in such a small way as this, to help the work of the Institute of Child Psychology. It is for that reason I am here, not that I am particular an advocate of those virtues, cleanliness and tidiness, which are the subject of the lecture. At the moment I am not a good example of those virtues because I have just come from a train journey. I, however, distinctly remember an earlier period when I was not only not an example but a conscious opponent of those virtues. I suppose we have all passed that stage, more or less.

To-night Dr. Lowenfeld will give us the first of a series of eight lectures on “Common Difficulties in Normal Children”. You are going to hear, I think, something with regard to the application of real scientific method to problems which have hardly previously been dealt with from that point of view. They have been left to chance and to individual judgement. Recently, however, statistical and analytical methods have been applied to the study of common psychological problems. Some people are rather afraid of that fact. They do not like the idea that the human mind can be treated scientifically. It is thought to be shocking that some dehumanizing influence should be exerted on the human mind by statistical work; that science is soulless and that, perhaps, the tendency of such work may be definitely anti-religious. I think religion has hitherto been left free very largely to deal with psychological problems. On the other hand, there are a good many reasons for which I disagree with that view. Very few of us realize how far we are automatic, how small is the degree of freedom we have. That is particularly true with children. There is no reason why we should not, with advantage, find out a great deal more about that part of our consciousness which is largely reflex and not conditioned by active or conscious thought on our part. I also think that the highest flights of the human mind must necessarily always remain outside the range of exact science. If any other condition arose, if we could docket and ticket everything, we should arrive at a point from which we could not proceed any further. But it is also true that the more we can remove from the field of speculation, the more we can make strictly scientific, the more room there is for free development of thought in new directions. A very vague figure illustrating that point was recently put before me by a Viennese psychologist, who said: If you take the whole sum of scientific knowledge which is filed and ticketed and represent it by a circle, the circumference of that circle represents the contact of the human mind with the Unknown. The more purely scientific knowledge, in the strict sense, the bigger your circle becomes, and the greater the contact of the human mind with the Unknown and the greater the field of progress. So it seems to me that we need not be at all afraid of the work of psychology. It is rather aiming at a release from unseen bonds of one kind and another which restrain us and keep us from further movement in an outward direction.

The Institute of Child Psychology exists for the purpose of making investigations of this kind. It exists for three main purposes: Firstly remedial, by taking children in and treating them on particular lines and so freeing them, while there is yet time, from the restraints to which they may be subject. That is much easier done when children are young. Secondly, its object is to collect and have a fully documented and fully indexed dictionary of knowledge which is to be available not only, of course, for the Institute itself but for everybody who is interested in similar work. Thirdly, the Institute takes students and trains them in the particular technique which the Institute has evolved to undertake research work either on their own, with the Institute or for bodies doing work of the same type. Briefly, then, the three objects are remedial, research and educational.

The applicability of the work is very wide indeed. There is now a great demand for real information on such subjects as are to be dealt with in these lectures. It seems that something of that outlook has penetrated the official mind, judging by the Act which has recently been passed. Many people are now interested in education and parents themselves also want information.

The Institute of Child Psychology is by no means alone in this work but its claim is that of a distinctive outlook on the problem and distinctive methods of approach. What those methods are I hope you will see in these lectures. I think the Institute has proved its worth; it has vitality and it has originality. It now desires its work to be better known to the general public. It wants greater public interest and more membership Hence these lectures. It also needs, in common with all other bodies, practical support to enable it to carry on its work. The two Directors, Dr. Margaret Lowenfeld and Dr. Ethel Dukes, are working very hard in order to achieve these objects and I have a tremendous admiration for the way in which they manage to do all their work.

**Dr. Margaret Lowenfeld** then said: As Lord Northbourne has said, one of the aims of the Institute is to try to make use of the parents with whom we come in contact when studying children from the point of view of the general difficulties that everybody meets, because here we come up against the difference between the point of view of the child and the grown-up. We have chosen for this series of lectures those difficulties which, in looking through the list of topics I have discussed with parents when they have asked perplexed questions about their children, have come up most frequently.

One is the question of cleanliness and tidiness, the usual difficulty in that connection being something like this: "I am so distressed about Mary" – or it may be Tom. "The children must look nice and she is a pretty girl (or boy) and I do the very best I can. I am not at all harsh or sever, but I cannot make the children keep clean. The other day something like this happened: I had some friends to lunch and wished my children to be particularly nice. Just as everybody arrived, the door into the garden burst open and in came a completely filthy small person carrying something that looked like a lump or dirt but was really a dead bird, saying 'Mummie, what sort of bird is it?' Now, what could I do? I did not want to show that I had no sympathy, but there we were with just exactly the situation I had tried to avoid." That difficulty is repeated over and over again, and we are constantly asked: "How can I get the children to be reasonably tidy and clean?"

One mother said to me awhile ago: "I have not a very large house and it is important that my husband should have a study where he can be quiet so we use the other room for the children as much as we do for ourselves. I try to impress upon them the necessity of having the room tidy so that we can walk round in it and be comfortable but it is no use. Every time I go out and come back there are toys all over the place, everything dropped just where they have used it, and when I try to get them to put things together tidily there is an upset and row. So in the evening I go back and think sadly, wondering what mistake I have made and why I cannot get my children to behave with reasonable tidiness." That is a very average and proper point of view, and because I am going to spend the rest of my time trying to see what the child's point of view is, I want to agree with you that the parent's attitude is a right and suitable civilised point of view. Having started from that angle we will look at the matter from the child's angle.

### **Cleanliness**

When one talks about cleanliness in children there are usually two quite separate things in mind. In taking from parents histories of their children I have to be extremely careful to put my questions in such a way that the parents will know what I am referring to. Otherwise we get these two things mixed. Firstly, at what age does a child obtain control of its bodily activities; that is, at what age can it feed itself properly and control its excretory functions – control its body? Secondly, how far is it possible to keep a child with its hands and face and clothes in a reasonable state of cleanliness? These two functions are absolutely different and have nothing to do with each other; or that which they have to do with each other is so technical that it does not really come into our talk this evening.

Let us take the first point of view. One meets endless difficulties with children who do not seem to be able to gain control of themselves or, having gained control, seem to lose it or seem to behave in a way they ought not, simply to despite the people around them, and they do it with a certain amount of twinkle in the eye and obvious pleasure at having thwarted the grown-up. The grown-up feels depressed, humiliated or angry and asks: How is it that I have failed with my child when others seem to succeed so very well with their children? Looking at the matter from the child's point of view, I would say that everything to do with a child's body – eating, sleeping and baths – constitute the whole of the child's life. A small baby knows nothing except its own body. That is what it begins with. Anyone who has watched a quite small baby in a cot playing with its fingers, finding out how many it has and what happens with them, learning about its toes wagging at the end of the cot, not quite sure whether they really are its toes or not, knows how charming, eager and active a child is. Up to that point we approve. We say "How delightful and nice". When children begin to crawl we are delighted if they are pleased with things they find about or are pleased when investigating the corners of a room. But as soon as it comes to the excretory functions, the grown-up mind draws an immediate thick black line. It is thought that a child should avoid interest in these. That is a very grown-up point of view. How is the child to know that its interest may only go so far? When the most exciting of all things happens, when a boy discovers he can make a gorgeous fountain almost as good as the one coming out of the bath and he feels proud of, how is he to know it should not be mentioned or thought of? In the case of most children the whole question of training in the early stages of life is fraught with the gravest difficulty with regard to their ideas of right and wrong, their ideas of what is permissible in themselves and what is not. Supposing you want something very badly, you are interested in something very much and somebody else comes along,

either a grown-up or an older friend, and tells you you ought not to be interested in that. You know, if you try very hard, you can quite well prevent yourself from appearing interested but it is practically impossible to stop yourself being interested: you go on just the same. The same is true of an infant. You can make an infant behave in almost any way you like because you are in possession of all the things the child wants. It wants comfort, it wants love, it wants approval, it wants joy and smiles, and if you are only going to give those wonderfully precious things to certain kinds of action and not to others, naturally the child will attempt to sit on those actions you do not like. You achieve a certain amount of conformity to your standards but soon you are talking about difficulties. If you have been successful and the child has had other things to be interested in and is the sort of child that can give up things easily, all goes well. But if it is not, and you wish the child to do this, that and the other it does not want to, out of that battle of wills come some of the difficulties between children and grown-ups.

Turning to the next stage of cleanliness I want to remind you that the type of civilization we have is very recent. We are now all clean, particularly the men, we look so nice and everything is stressed on the line of being exceptionally dainty. A mediaeval scholar assured me that in the Middle Ages the mark of sanctity was dirt and filth; the mark of sanctity was to be dirtier than one's neighbours. Those clean and dainty were deemed to belong to the fleshpots of the world and were regarded as worldly. Those not worldly were exceedingly dirty and never combed their hair. If you read that very amusing American book Are We Civilized? connected with the study of big cities as they were years ago, you will find that our present-day idea of cleanliness is really very modern. Queen Elizabeth had the first bed-gown, and then it was of black satin. Later she had a woven embroidered wool bed-gown, but even then she probably had not more than two. The modern idea that it is natural, normal and right to be very clean and to like having one's clothes clean is so recent an acquisition of grown-ups that they are rather nervous of it in their unconscious lives. We are never nervous of the things we have had for a great many years and that nobody has thought could be otherwise. It is only the new things we are nervous about.

But children start from an entirely different standpoint. The first thing really active, intelligent children begin with is curiosity: what they want to do. They want to understand everything: what word is wrong: what is the effect of one thing on another; and they must try it. In my work with children I have saucers of paints, large brushes and a huge stretch of paper on the wall. It is one of my amusements to watch whether it is possible for the children to keep the paints separate, take only one saucer and one large brush. I tell them they will enjoy it more that way, but they ask how do they know a colour is brown if they do not try it: "You tell me that is going to make a mark but how do I know if I do not see it?"

Every child has an intense interest in things and wants to know what they smell like and feel like. The idea that a child should be able to control and weigh its actions, should be able to know beforehand what is going to happen as a result of action, is wrong. To expect a child to know that if, in a nice white frock, it goes into the garden and puts its hand into the earth and then puts its hand on its frock it will make it dirty, is like expecting a child of 3 or 4 years of age to do a geometrical problem.

A child's mind differs in construction from an adult's. A grown-up has always present at every moment of his or her life a vast amount of memory. It is practically impossible for any

grown-up to look at or listen to anything without at the same time comparing it with other things seen or heard. "That is ugly" usually means "I do not like that as much as other things". "How pretty" may be spontaneous but more likely it is an involuntary comparison with something else. With an adult everything is saturated and permeated with memory. A child has no memory. It lives entirely in the moment's experience. There is an actual scientific basis for that, and it is a point I have followed for many years past. Recent work on the structure of the brain has shown that certain parts of the brain-structure, which are responsible for assisting the growth of things like memory, are not present at birth but grow slowly during the first five years of life. So that your child, when it runs out in the garden is completely obsessed with the thing it wishes to touch. Having touched it, it is interested in the feel of its hands. The idea that the child has a white frock on and that Mummie said she was not to go out in the garden and that dirty hands would dirty the frock, is as far away as our last summer's holiday. We could remember if we tried. If we are angry with a child for not stopping and trying to remember, we are angry because we expect the child to do something that it is impossible for it to do. It is as though we were expected to be wise in cases in which we know nothing and have not had the requisite opportunity to know. When mothers have gone on being cross for reasons children do not understand and for doing what they know could not be prevented, children sometimes become cowed and give in, but they very often become defiant.

It is astonishingly difficult to know what to do. I had difficulties in getting here this evening and travelled on four cars with different notices. To the child it is the same. All the way down its road are strange new signs with very profound meanings that grown-ups understand though the child is completely bewildered. If a child goes out and does things it is told not to, it is not defying you but is merely obeying its nature. To be angry with the child for that is like being angry with a cat for eating a mouse. You may not like a cat eating a mouse. If so, the only thing you can do is to keep the cat away from it. The child so scolded feels the world is cold, hard, unmanageable and impossible to make contact with and gives up trying. That child gives rise to one of the various difficulties parents complain about.

The feeling of interest, of delight in the things that one can touch and influence and make messes with is one of the talismans of life. The very clean child, - and there are such - the child who comes to mummie with its hands to be washed every minute because it is afraid of getting dirty, the child who at 5 years of age is a perfect lady is very rarely a child who is going to develop strongly in later life. So much of the child's power is expended in coping with the primitive parts of itself and keeping them in restraint as they were never intended to be at that age that this power is withdrawn from the rest of its life, and the energy which should lie behind the desire to experiment and experience, instead of developing on into painting, cooking, housewifery and even writing, is exhausted. One child brought to me would not write because so severe a standard had been kept in the home that writing was dirtying in the sense of dirtying paper.

All sorts of inhibitions arise from a child's desire to be what a grown-up wishes it be. If it realizes that there is a desire that it should be excessively clean, if it is a nice child and likes the person who expresses the desire, it will try terribly hard to do what is wanted. I saw a pathetic youngster to-day. That child tried frightfully hard for six years and succeeded but the struggle became too hard for it, a cord snapped and the child could not try any longer but went straight over into being turbulent, noisy and objectionable. The parents, not

understanding the strain to achieve the first step, ask: How is it possible that a child's character can change so much in so short a time? The child's character has not changed – it is the same – but the child has used up its cultural force in trying to put its natural desires underground.

### **Tidiness:**

To return to tidiness. Tidiness is a wide subject and a most important one. There must be a certain amount of tidiness in every home. Things have to be kept, to a certain extent, in their proper places or there is nothing but chaos. Tidiness is one of the most valuable qualities that any human being can possess if it can be exercised without undue struggle. It is essential to the proper functioning of life that we should all possess the quality of tidiness, but no child wants it. Tidiness has two aspects: the first aspect is more properly applied to the preservation of property. Every mother likes to see her little girl take off her clothes and fold them up; wash her paint brushes when she has finished painting; the boy to unscrew his Meccano and put it away tidily so that the next time he comes to use it he is not crying out for missing parts. It is right and reasonable that clothes should be put tidy, brushes washed and the Meccano put away, but that has nothing to do with the next kind of tidiness. That is a question of the preservation of the materials used, keeping them in a nice and proper state, so that they are not destroyed before their time. Tidiness has two kinds of realization. There is the kind of tidiness in which the individual does not think at all but is unable to stand, and is constantly irritated by, the sight of things about in places where they have no particular reason to be. The moment such an individual sees anything lying about he or she would be more comfortable if it were put somewhere else. We know the devices some go to. We are perfectly happy as long as the outsides of things are tidy, and do not worry about drawers. There are others who feel extremely troubled if the contents of drawers are out of order but who are not distressed by a book out of place. Another kind of tidiness is that there is a sense of order in the mind, and that is a very profound part of human thinking. The first thing that anyone has to do when faced with any collection of objects that have to be understood is to invent a classification of those objects. Imagine yourself packing for your friends, making an inventory of your house, putting your things together when you leave one house to go to another, or so that they can go into various kinds of store.

You make in your mind one or two abstract categories: these are small things, these are outdoor clothes, these indoor clothes. You decide to put these together and arrange your packing in this and that way. On your inventory you have the kitchen, the bathroom, and this or that bed-room and if something has strayed out of its category you put it back. The same with the things that are going to be stored – those are going to mother's, those to the store, and so on. You are only able to memorize those things because you have first of all put them in classes. Classification – the capacity to see what is the fundamental quality of any group of objects and, having seen that, to put all the objects that belong to that classification in their group – is what we who are doing research work and trying to train others to do research work realize is the hardest mental task on earth. Once you can properly classify any group of phenomena you are already three-fifths on the road to understanding them, because it only by understanding each object that you are able to make a class for it.

Some time ago I had an interesting time helping a Chinese friend of my sister's to pack. There were unfamiliar garments. I could not classify them and did not know where they should go. The child is in that position all the time. It is faced with a vast number of phenomena, a vast number of different ways of putting those phenomena together, and has a very small equipment for doing so. The adult so often thinks that the child will spontaneously know how to be tidy. One mother said to me: "Look at the state Marion has left her nursery in." I said: "Have you asked her how her clothing ought to go away and why?" She answered, "Of course not." I then asked: "Why don't you?" and she replied "But what a silly idea! Of course they've got to go away." I said "Yes, but why in that particular way? Have you ever tried to get hold of her ideas and explain why it is that it doesn't do just to pick the things up in her arms in a bundle and throw them into the cupboard?" But I could see from the mother's face that she thought there was something in the child's mind which made her know why things ought to go away and how. The mother thought the child was just deliberately being naughty.

There are a few ways in which a grown-up can help a child more than in trying to help it to understand that things belong to classes. To children every quadruped is a gee-gee or a bow-wow. The child starts where we end. A bow-wow has a fat body on four legs and a head and tail. The child, as it were, starts knowing what a quadruped is and only later goes on to recognising particular kinds of quadrupeds. Some of us need a man with a lot of letters after his name to tell us that they are quadrupeds. Many things a child is quite sure of begin in that way. You may ask: "What is a cow?" and the child will reply, "It is a fat thing with a tail and four legs." You may say, "No, that is a horse." Then the child says: "But some are cows and some are horses." We destroy that sense of classification. We hardly ever put any work in to give new concepts and get the child to understand what it is doing: why things go in boxes and what is the idea of having things in tidy order. The result is that very many children learn the habit of tidiness outwardly, but that does not in the least educate their minds.

Now we come to a curious paradox. Some children, just as some people, are terribly distressed about dirt on their hands. Some children are very neat from an early age. They seem to have a natural instinct for tidiness and to enjoy having everything absolutely exact. The same is true of grown-ups. Taking average people, you will find two main polar ends. There is the grown-up at the one end who is exceedingly tidy and very distressed and unable to work sometimes if anything is out of place and likes having the whole house in exact order, who must have – cannot possibly manage otherwise – things not only classified but labelled, docketed, ticketed and put away. On the other hand, there are quite a lot of people who are competent, for instance (in research life) at the office, but are exceedingly uncomfortable if his or her papers are not in disorder all around.

You may have a most competent administrator in whose room there will be bundles of papers all over the table apparently in extreme disorder but any one of which can be found by that individual at any moment and in his or her mind they are in order. There is the untidy person who is untidy all over, and the tidy person who is not competent. But if you consider very carefully the characters of competent people I think you will often find there is a parallel phenomenon with these two types of people. The person who is competent in research – I am thinking particularly of a lady who is the only calm centre of a whirl of activities and organization of all sorts – people who do not trouble if their papers are

apparently in disorder, are usually people with a fairly steady centre in their minds, a capacity for adjusting themselves to the difficulties that arise in life, a capacity for growth and adjustment to different types of theory and interest and without particularly explosive emotions. On the other hand, the people who find that it is absolutely necessary to keep their outside lives in complete order are very often people who, at the same time, find themselves under the stress of extraordinarily strong emotion. We often put it the other way and say they are cantankerous and irritable. It is because their emotions are so strong and they are afraid of them, because their emotions are in a state which does not make them particularly adaptable that they must have their outside world exact, orderly and in shape.

I instance that because of its extreme importance with children. It is something we have had considerable experience of in our work. The child who is extremely orderly, needs to have things round it straight and wants to have the whole of its circumstances tidy and in order, is a child who is struggling with immense difficulty, to keep in control extremely violent emotions, is a child who has under the emotional stress that which has the greatest power for its development and which it has not had the good fortune to find outlets for and of which it is terrified. Notice how many of those children suffer from night terrors or bad dreams, dreams of animals coming up on their bed frightening them. Those frightening things are their own emotions and they feel so terrified of them that they have to make this complete neat-fitting shell round them in order to help balance their inside disharmony.

Now turn to the other side of the picture. How is it possible to achieve what we want and not upset our children? The first cardinal, crucial, inevitable absolutely fundamental rule is to let your children see that you understand their difficulties. Children, on the whole, are pathetically eager to perform. If you can get a child to realize you understand that it enjoys being dirty, that it is interested in its bodily functions and takes an interest in the marks it can make; if you can get the child to realize that you understand it feels like that, and that you have felt the same, that you and the child are quite at one and that you know those sort of things are nice to do, you can, as a result of that understanding, move in two directions:

In the direction of finding ways in which a child can do the things it wants to do without breaking the laws you are trying to enforce. Perhaps you can find periods in the day when the child may be as dirty as it likes; when it can go into the garden, play with plasticine, do cooking, or the child can paint an outside shed and legitimately get paint all over itself. The other direction is that, at the same time, you can tell the child that there are all sorts of things that have to be done, even if the child does not like doing them and you can impress upon the child that it will hate itself later if it cannot do those things. Instance a hurdle race. A child always enjoys a race, and you should let the child realize that you see how difficult it is and praise all the little steps it makes towards it and does not look at it as if the child were an uncommonly foolish individual when it does forget. If you never punish at this stage and support the child by exacting from it an absolutely practicable and minimum standard, you will succeed. Neither license nor severity is helpful. Life is constructed on rhythm. Every child seems to go from the rhythm of freedom in which it is itself quite outside the outer world into the rhythm of construction where it is part of the adult world and behaves like an adult. Personally, I think a week is as long as a child can endure without adult rules and authority to guide it. After that the child gets excited. The rules should, however, be the minimum, should apply to one period in the day and be enforced in a good temper and as



part of the give-and-take of life: You had your fun this morning and you must give me my fun now. Attacked from that point of view the difficulties people complain of would not develop. Sometimes during the holidays I have been with children whose parents have found this or that difficulty, and providing I can instil the feeling of the children and I both being on a level, that we each have our work and our fun and must not interfere with one another, those difficulties just melt away.

A final point in regard to tidiness. If you have helped a child to really understand its own mind, really to know which things go together and thereby be really interested in order, and if you have achieved at the same time a certain amount of practice in finding and making order and in making things tidy, then you have achieved that which will give any boy or girl one of the best foundations for life.

Asked how it was possible to secure tidiness on the part of a child at any particular moment, for instance, when somebody came to lunch, Dr. Lowenfeld replied: You cannot do anything at any one moment. It is necessary to look ahead and lay your plans in advance. The difficulty is that people will wait till emergencies arise. If you know guests are coming, take the trouble to think beforehand and say to the child: "You have an awful hurdle to get over to-night. Someone is coming and when I come in to tell you you must put your things away." You should gradually build up such a relationship that the moment you use a certain tone of voice or manner the child jumps to attention. That is the thing that is so extraordinary about children. At the Institute yesterday afternoon we had a boy who was extremely noisy. At last it became more than we could stand, so I went up to him and said: "Do you mind not being so noisy, because there are a lot of us about?" He quieted down immediately. It is the difference between an appeal to the child by a friendly human being, part of the community who wishes to help the child, and the smack of annoyance given by a grown-up. If you can get children to be part of you and part of the community, you can get them to do almost anything, providing you give them the outlet they need. You are out for trouble the moment you use the force of authority or affection to enforce upon a child the thing you want. You will get it, but you will pay for it in the future.