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## From Pleasure to Reality, Through Fantasy: What do Children Need?

*Eugene Goldwater, Ph.D.* ⓘ

The so-called “reality principle,”—acting in accordance with predictable consequences rather than just immediate pleasure or discharge—requires the ability to fantasize. There are several environmental (“nurture”) factors which contribute to the successful development of this ability. These are: an abundance of pleasurable experiences which can be anticipated; a moderate number of adverse events, which have been “detoxified” by their association with emotional support; and, in addition, exposure to vicarious experiences, but only according to the same rules—that is, such experiences should be primarily positive, and if negative, then associated with a positive emotional context.

I'm going to talk about making the transition from the pleasure principle to the reality principle.

That's the bad news. The good news is, first of all, no one has to do it! A lot of people don't, to a greater or lesser degree. And, it is my belief that parents have a lot of influence over their children in this regard. And there are many easy and fun things that they can do to keep their children from making this transition.

The other good news is that of course the reality principle is just an extension of the pleasure principle. It refers to the ability to postpone pleasure, or discharge, in favor of getting more pleasure, or discharge, later on.

In fact, the name “reality principle” is a complete misnomer. It has nothing to do with reality! If we deliberately delay gratification, it is because of a prediction about the *future consequences* of our actions.

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How do we make a such a prediction? By extrapolating from our *past experiences*. So what we are actually doing is giving up what is real—pleasure or action in the immediate present—in favor of a hypothesis about the future, which is in turn based on a memory (conscious or unconscious) of the past. For **Freud (1911)** to call this the “reality principle” was pure propaganda. Freud was very concerned about power, prominence, and influence—precisely those values which are best served by having the ability to delay gratification. And there is no doubt that if you help your child to learn to delay gratification, he or she will have the greatest chance of *success*, in the so-called “real world.”

If the future and the past are not real, how are we persuaded to give them a greater value than the present? By making them real in our minds. We imagine the future, and we imagine the past. What is real, in the present, is our imagination. Our fantasy. In order to develop the ability to delay gratification and discharge, we must develop the ability to fantasize.

For two reasons. First, we use fantasy to plan the future, and to plan for the future. This is the *preparatory* function of fantasy. Second, fantasy can be used to drain off some energy that might otherwise go into immediate action. If we get an impulse to act, even a brief fantasy of carrying out the impulse may be enough to forestall it, while we think about whether we really want to do it, or not. Or, we can just enjoy thinking about it. This is called the *substitutive*, or *compensatory*, function of fantasy (**Fenichel, 1945**).

How does the infant, which functions according to the pleasure principle, oriented entirely towards the immediate present—it wants what it wants, when it wants it—begin to develop these amazing abilities? We can assume that in the absence of an immediate perception, internal or external, its mind may call up some perceptual memory. But if it doesn't like what comes to its mind, it has the power to act, and thereby create new perceptions or sensations, blocking out thoughts (which of course is exactly what we see in our impulsive patients). In order to progress to the use of complex patterns involving the recollection, recombination, and projection of memories and memory fragments into useful fantasies that help the child to control impulses and plan the future, its nascent imagination will need a lot of encouragement. The only way that fantasy can come to replace immediate perception and action is if *the process of fantasy itself is pleasurable*.

In order for this to happen, there needs to be a lot of gratification in the child's life. Of course, there has to be some frustration too.

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If the child's needs and desires are anticipated or gratified too easily, it has no need to think about what it wants and (later) how to get it. But insufficient gratification also interferes with fantasy development. If the child doesn't have something to look forward to, then it will not develop fantasy, because fantasy will not be pleasurable. And this is what we hear from impulsive patients in therapy: "Why should I think about what I want? It doesn't help." Those of us who had sufficient gratification as children don't have that attitude at all. We have the feeling that if we think about something, either we have a good chance of getting it, or we have a good chance of figuring out how to get it.

People who have been overly frustrated don't have this positive feeling about fantasy. They don't like to fantasize. They don't like to think. What children need is plenty of pleasure in their lives, with a moderate amount of frustration, so that they can expect and anticipate pleasure, learn to "look forward" to getting what they want, while also learning to tolerate delays and occasional disappointments.

Unfortunately, it isn't enough for children to have positive fantasies—to learn that things usually turn out all right. We also want them to have negative fantasies. They need to be able to learn not only from good experiences, but from bad ones as well: mistakes; mishaps; melevolence on the part of nature, or of other people. How can they learn to have a good feeling about bringing unpleasant memories and fantasies to mind?

The answer is that negative images become acceptable if they become associated with a *positive context*.

Let me explain with a somewhat simplistic example. Suppose your daughter is out playing, and she slips and falls, and scrapes her knee. She comes to you, crying and bleeding. And, if you're a good parent, you'll say, "Oh, you had a boo-boo. I'll kiss it and make it better." Or, "Do you know what? You're going to get a Band-Aid!" Or some other positive intervention, depending on what you think might be most soothing, or reassuring.

The next time she scrapes her knee, she'll still feel the shock, and the physical pain, but she won't be quite as upset psychologically, because she will anticipate being soothed, or reassured.

And, the next time she finds herself in a slippery place, she'll think, "The last time I played here, I ended up with a kiss, but the way I got it wasn't really worth it. I'll go play where it isn't so muddy."

You may be thinking: kids remember bad things that happen to them perfectly well, whether they're soothed or not! But the fact is, what we see clinically is that there are people who seem never to

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learn from their bad experiences. They get hurt, or get in trouble, again and again. And when you analyze these people, you discover that the reason they don't learn from their bad experiences is that they don't think about them; and the reason they don't think about them is that they don't *like* to think about them; and the reason they don't like to think about them is that they have not learned to associate such experiences with soothing or reassurance. ("Shame on you for crying!")

We see this phenomenon even more in the case of traumas—overwhelming unpleasant experiences. Traumatized people suffer from intrusive memories and fantasies. They put a great deal of energy into trying to contain these images—energy that otherwise would go into constructive fantasizing—and often try to escape from them altogether by drinking or drug use, or by impulsive behaviors.

Children, then, should be protected as much as possible from traumatic experiences, not just because we don't want them to suffer pain and fright, but also because such experiences may make it harder for them to learn, think, and plan in the future.

If a child does have a trauma, we should, of course, try to alleviate its effects as much as possible. Just like we did with the scraped knee.

One woman told me that when she was a child, she was sexually molested by her grandfather. She immediately told her parents. Her parents, first of all, believed her; second, they told her that it was a bad thing, and that she was right to be upset about it; third, they told her that they would make sure that it didn't happen again; and finally, they did make sure that it didn't happen again, by not allowing her grandfather to be with her alone, ever again.

Looking back on this experience many years later, she said that she thought her parents had handled the situation right, and that it was never a big deal for her.

What we often see clinically, of course, are cases where the original trauma was intrinsically more severe; or where the initial reaction of the parents, because of their own past history, or whatever reason, was so negative that it caused a secondary trauma. For example, a rejecting response: "You're making it up"; "You brought it on yourself." Or an hysterical response: "You're ruined for life"; "Your grandfather is a monster."

By contrast, a positive environmental response may "detoxify" the trauma. This is exactly what we try to do in therapy: get people to talk about what happened to them, in the context of a loving relationship, so that it will be possible for them to think about their

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trauma, which in turn will make it easier for them to think, in general.

To summarize thus far: children need some frustration and delay; a lot of positive experiences that teach them hope (positive anticipation); and some negative experiences which they can associate in their minds with enough support that the memories are tolerable.

But, all that is still not enough.

We want our children to grow up being able to fantasize about things that *have never happened to them*. Positive things that they can strive for—what would they like to do when they grow up? And dangers that they need to be able to anticipate, without ever having been exposed to them.

We don't mind if our daughter learns not to play in slippery places, by scraping her knee a few times. But we don't want her to learn not to be friendly with strangers, by getting kidnapped and raped a few times. We don't want her to be kidnapped and raped even once! How can we get her to have a fantasy which will teach her not to be friendly with strangers?

What she will need is to have the benefit of *vicarious* experience. For the full development of constructive fantasy, children need to learn from the accumulated experience of their entire society. They need information that comes from the memories, and fantasies, of everyone who has gone before them. They need *education*.

This is a big subject. What should children be taught? And how should they be taught it? I suggest that exactly the same rules apply to learning through vicarious experience as apply to learning by direct experience. For maximum learning, there should be a preponderance of interesting and hopeful information. Information of negative importance (that is, of a cautionary, or potentially frightening or depressing nature) should be kept to a necessary minimum and given in an emotionally supportive context.

In preliterate societies, oral traditions take care of these needs. The telling of stories and sharing of experiences are themselves emotionally rewarding events.

In modern society, there are of course many other things that children can learn from. But I believe that talking with children, and telling stories to them, are still the best ways of educating them. Because of the positive emotional context of these activities.

All good children's stories, for example, have both positive and negative events, including some that are potentially frightening or depressing. Children learn to handle these feelings because of their

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association with the pleasure of being close to Mommy or Daddy. (Or some other benign story-teller.)

**Bettelheim (1977)** says that the function of fairy tales is to help children learn to cope with their internal states—their drives and their conflicts. That is certainly true. But in addition, they have the very important function of educating children about external reality.

One of the classic tales about meeting strangers is "Little Red Riding Hood." "Little Red Riding Hood" is not directly about being kidnapped and raped. But it creates a feeling tone: bad things can happen if you go someplace alone; people are not necessarily what they seem. And this creates the basis for giving the child a more specific message, when she or he is old enough to understand it. And I think it's appropriate to be specific, and honest, about the message. To tell the truth! If *you* tell it. "Don't go with someone you don't know, because they might kill you, or they might force you to have sex. And being forced to have sex is very unpleasant."

I believe in telling the truth about positive things too. I recall once when my son was about six, we all sat

down at the dinner table one night, and we had forgotten the milk. And I said to him, "Daniel, please get the milk." And he said, "Why should I?"

And I had a radical idea. Why not tell him the truth? He did ask a question—maybe he can understand the real answer!

So I told him the truth. I said, "Because, if you learn how to be nice and help other people now, then, when you grow up, other people will love you, and want to help you." And he looked at me, and he got up, and got the milk.

Obviously, there may be situations when a better answer would be simply, "Because I asked you to," or "If you won't do things for me, then why should I do things for you?" Just as the child who asks why she shouldn't go with strangers may at first simply need to hear that Mommy won't like it. But ultimately, if we want our children to develop the capacity to figure out for themselves what is best for them, and how to protect themselves, we will have to tell them the truth. (That is, our honest hypotheses about the future, based on our reasonable extrapolations from the past!)

The final thing I want to touch on is the fact that in today's world, there are of course many, many other sources for information besides story-telling and verbal instruction. And all of these—books, movies, television, and now the Internet—have the inherent *hazard* that they provide information, and vicarious experience, in a context which is not necessarily emotionally nourishing.

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This is a subject that I have strong feelings about. Because of a traumatic experience that I had when I was a child. When I was about nine years old, I saw, lying around, a copy of the book *Nineteen Eighty-four*, by George Orwell. And I picked it up, and I read it.

Those of you who are familiar with that book know that it is a presentation of absolute helplessness and hopelessness. And it had a profound depressing effect on me.

I was already depressed, of course. Otherwise I probably wouldn't have been interested in the book. I would have put it right down. But it reinforced my depression. Not just for a week, or a month, but for years. In fact, I had a visceral dread of the year 1984, right up until that year came, and passed. Which was thirty years after I read the book.

That book should not have been so easily available to me. Some parents may have the idea that their children will naturally tend to read the books, and watch the movies, which will be right for them. This is false. If parents want their children to grow up with pleasure, then they need to exercise their responsibility to decide not only what life experiences they should have, but also what vicarious experiences they should be exposed to. In this day and age, that is reality.

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