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The Children We Teach

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I would like to discuss what modern psychoanalysis has contributed to the understanding of childhood and adolescent development. There is a modern analytic body of theory which has grown out of analytic investigation, but when we train analysts, we train them to enter the analytic room with an open mind to a particular patient. Psychoanalysis developed first as a method of investigation, then as a technique for treatment, and finally as a science of the human mind. Most of our study of child development is done through observation and participation in the regression of particular patients on the couch. If a patient allows himself to enter this process, he regresses to his earliest childhood and he offers us the experience of going back with him to get in touch with our own infantile feelings. So, it is on a very personal level that we learn how children develop. One of the most important things for the analyst to know is his own early development through the experiences he has with his patients.

To begin this discussion I'm going to take you back to the first few months of life, after the dawn of awareness, but prior to the development of cognition. When the patient has regressed to this period of his life, pleasure and pain are all he knows. That is, the infant is aware of sensory experiences only. He may be in a state of warm harmonious comfort with sensations of pleasure filling his being, a state in which he feels at harmony with everything around him, although not aware of everything around him since he has not really begun to think or

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feel. This evaluates experience according to the amount of discomfort felt.

The first moment of learning comes at a time when unpleasant sensations impinge on the baby in a quantity that backs up in the system. The infant may experience a change in temperature. The change is repeated, and he feels unpleasure. He may feel aches as he lies too long in the same position. Or he may feel pangs that tell him it has been too long since food entered his stomach. Something is experienced internally, something with which the infant must cope in order to escape unpleasure. Reflexive living is behind him. Freud described an earlier mechanism, the compulsion to repeat as a mental mechanism pre-dating the pleasure principle. He traced this tendency to the first experiences in which some overpowering stimulation is admitted to the psyche unexpectedly. The state of unpreparedness sets up a repetition in which what is changed is the addition of anxiety as a preparation for experience. By experiencing anxiety the person avoids being swamped by unexpected feelings. Some children have test anxiety, some are terrified of saying the wrong thing to the teacher, others fear being embarrassed by something the teacher will say before classmates.

The cerebral cortex developed in man as a further step to protect him against intrusive experience. It stores no memories and admits a limited amount and type of stimulation from the world to the deeper mind. It functions as a protective barrier to sort out sensory impressions in order to eliminate intrusive knowledge of the world around it. We've seen the fear of evolutionary theory (Darwinism) lead to the movement in the schools to teach alternative theories of creation. So we might say that consciousness is born out of discomfort. When we teach, we deal first with the mental structures that have developed to block new experiences. Now this preamble leads us to what kind of children we see in the classroom.

You are probably aware of others, but I've thought about children in four or five categories.

There are those children in the classroom who seem to be off in a world of their own. That is, they are unaware of the existence of anyone else in the room. They do not seem to be aware of our presence or the presence of other students in the room. The detachment of these children tells us that they cannot process much contact. To reach them

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educationally, we must wait for their contact with us, for they are using their energy to ward off intrusive experience.

There is another kind of child in the world alone. That child is restless or cranky, you might even say colicky, and when we think of the child who seems to be experiencing some inner tension, we feel that she is not looking outward, but is caught up in some inner experience. Both of these types of children seem to me to be the most difficult ones to reach in the classroom, simply because they are not aware of our existence. Our first problem is bringing them into the world. That is, they are going to have to learn that they are not alone in the universe. These are usually children who have experienced a great deal more frustration and discomfort than gratification. What is repeated instinctively is the attempts to ward off stimulating interactions with others.

There are some children who turn sufficient quantities of tension into outer directed rage. They take a giant step in learning at the point when they are suffering from tension caused by internal states or stimulated by experiences with the world around them. The giant step that they take is to convert sensation into rage. Now that may sound like an ordinary step. But when we realize that rage comes before object relations and creates relations as a response to physical states of tension, this tells us that this little machine is learning a new way to process internal states. He is creating a mental structure which changes him from a passive receptor to an active partner in his experience. It creates an object field in his mind and a new method of experiencing. If we can trust this re-creation of infancy presented to us by adult patients working in analysis, then we can observe that rage is the first learned activity. When the infant is capable of rage, it can begin to look for the cause of its troubles. It begins to be interested in learning and knowing about causes. This seems to be a very important step towards becoming a successful student. Without that rage, we have a child who must attempt to ward off stimulation and block out experience in order not to be aroused. At best, he becomes the passive recipient of facts.

Now we're not out of the woods in the classroom with the child who has reached this level. This kind of child may be repetitively angry, and looking for the source of his discomfort in his surroundings. He's learned another very important lesson on how to survive.

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He's become aware of the presence of others, although not yet as separate people. He sees teachers and students as unidimensional. His interest may be solely in who is to blame.

The enraged student appears in the classroom in at least two different forms. He is the child who has not learned to distinguish himself from the others. He knows he is uncomfortable and he knows there is something out there, but he may experience the environment as hostile and give the teacher a lot of trouble.

There is a second kind of angry child in the classroom who, because he can't distinguish between himself and others, begins to turn aggression inward. And you'll see him in the sickly child (the somatizer), the accident prone child, the impulsive child, the child who confuses his mind (the schizophrenic), or the child who feels depressed, worthless, or inadequate. Does all this sound familiar or am I talking about unknown children? These are the children who respond to the pressures of the curriculum, and what is experienced as the demands of the teacher, by being unable to learn. And those who engage in self-attacking patterns when they cannot concentrate on the lesson are a common classroom occurrence.

These children are aware that the teacher exists and they experience her much as they may have experienced parents or siblings. She does not gratify them or help them. She is a dangerous object whose displeasure is to be avoided. When they experience a teacher as a dangerous object, and themselves as incompetent and incapable, they feel rage because the situation is not gratifying to them. At this point, in a repetition of their early past, they may begin to think in terms of protecting the teacher from their own rage.

Those students who want to protect their teachers from their rage behave in a number of ways. I'm sure you have all seen the child who wants to please: does the dance, seeks approval, and cares about nothing more than that the teacher will like him and think he is wonderful. From talking to teachers, it has been my experience, that most teachers prefer this third kind of child to any other—the child who wants to please. Certainly we may feel bad that the child doesn't have a deeper interest in learning the subject matter. But it certainly is nice to be in the room with children who want to please us. It's much easier than being the room with a withdrawn child, or an impulsive child, or a cranky child, or an enraged child.

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When a child does not have gratifying experiences to call upon from his early childhood, he cannot trust parents or parent substitutes, and those feelings are brought into the classroom. It does create a difficult situation for the teacher. That is, this will arouse feelings in the teacher which are uncomfortable.

Welber (1977) discussed the question of whether the teacher and parent can handle the feelings induced in them by these types of children.

Maybe it seems too analytic to emphasize infancy this much, but these infants become children, and enter the elementary school. They become adolescents, and they enter the junior high and high school, and then they become college students and graduate students, and still later they enter the psychoanalytic institute and become analytic candidates. The patterns developed early remain the same when they enter an educational experience.

From my experience in the analytic institute, I find that they have not changed their approach to learning from the style developed in the first few months of life. They are still using the techniques of learning, and the techniques for blocking learning which they established in early infancy.

I see the job of the analyst and of the teacher who enters the classroom as one of re-education. The teacher who enters the classroom with the intention of teaching the curriculum is certainly fulfilling the requirements of her department and of her administration. She is living up to the goals of all good education—that children should be educated. But as you probably have learned, she soon finds that she has a task of undoing learning patterns that have occurred earlier. And these are patterns which interfere with intellectual curiosity, with the motivation to learn, and to work cooperatively or, in fact, to be in the classroom at all.

If the teacher is aware that she has feelings, and if she recognizes that children have feelings, positive and negative, which they may not want to feel and if she recognizes that it is important that these feelings be understood and put to use, then she may decide to engage in emotional education or re-education in the classroom. Re-education begins with recognition of the patterns interfering with learning. The creative teacher then experiments with what frees the motivation to learn. Re-education is a two-step process: undoing the blocks then

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directing the liberated energy to activities that will make learning pleasurable.

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