

The Development of a Power Contest

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The counselor whose efforts are centered on child guidance is acutely aware of the increasing number of children who have become involved in a power contest with parents, teachers, and the world in general. It is all the more disturbing today to find that these aggressive children come not only from the slums but also from an environment which outwardly at least seems to be sound, where the child's physical needs are well supplied, where opportunities for education and recreation are adequate.

In a broad sense, the power drive in children seems to be another symptom of the world-wide revolt against authoritarian control which is seen in fights between labor and management, between husband and wife, parents and children, not to mention governments and peoples (3). This is not to say that destructive attitudes are formed "out of the air"; the development of a power contest resulting in aggression is a process of action and reaction continually mounting between individuals (4). At the same time, in this period of transition toward a wider democracy (3), controls which once held are now loosened, and to a great extent methods which formerly were "effective" are now proving inadequate. There is confusion, and even the young child does not escape the impact of this change.

With this in mind, it has been observed that many young children today are responding to their environment by behavior that is marked by pronounced aggressiveness, backed by a complete disregard for order. One has only to witness the despair and to hear the complaints of parents with aggressive children of tender years to realize that physical welfare, educational and recreational opportunities are not the only safeguards against a distorted view of life and that if the life style

which these children are in the process of developing is not redirected, it may lead them to further difficulties in later years.

It was Alfred Adler who pointed out that children who form mistaken ideas of life and become hostile and aggressive, in many instances have been neglected or pampered in early childhood (1). The counselor meets many such children, both from the underprivileged groups and from those which are more fortunate financially; that is, there are neglected and pampered children to found in each.

Not all neglected children, however, and not all overprotected and pampered children become problems. Many underprivileged, neglected children through overcompensation have found ways to turn a minus into a plus situation; and there are overprotected children who find opportunities for growth and change of attitude. There are some, as well, who are able in adult life to maintain their demand for special privilege, through continued wealth, perhaps, or other "good fortune" such as, for instance, the choice of a mate who is willing, through needs of his own, to continue the pampering.

Nor do all neglected or overprotected and pampered children who do have difficulties and who are actually problems to themselves, their parents, and the community, become aggressive and destructive. There are many who take the path of least resistance, who in discouragement or hostility retreat into various inadequacies, into psychosomatic illnesses, or who become passive, docile, intimidated by their experience in early childhood, and so do not present the problem in discussion: a hostile attitude toward life and their fellow man which is expressed by active destructive and aggressive behavior.

The unfortunate child who has developed such an attitude, who is involved in a power contest with parents, teachers, and the world, is nevertheless a part of the whole: of the family, of the community, of the times in which he lives, and as such he cannot be considered outside of his social setting.

Such an unhappy power-driven child was Harry T., an only child of parents in fair circumstances. His mother came to the child guidance center when Harry was ten years old and listened during the sessions, but she did not bring Harry with her. She did not dare, Harry was so aggressive and destructive. He had been "kicked out" of nursery schools from the time he was three years old. He would come into a group and disrupt it, throwing blocks or other toys around; when the children were drawing he would snatch their drawings and tear them up. At home he did all manner of destructive

acts daily; he would climb up in the pantry and throw jars of preserves to the floor, or stir rice and salt, coffee, tea and soap together in a heap. His behavior was not merely mischievous; it was deliberately destructive. He would kick his mother, if she tried to restrain him. All this the distracted mother poured out to the counselor when she finally sought help, and the counselor, sensing the mother's need for release, continued to listen.

As Harry grew older he did not "outgrow" his aggressiveness as his parents were hoping he would. In the first grade, after a few days the teacher called the mother in; she, too, was helpless in the face of Harry's destructiveness. He would throw the children's crayons all around the room; whenever he could get hold of their books and papers he would destroy them or scribble all over them. After the first school year, the mother put the boy in a private school, taking a job outside of the home in order to be able to afford this expense. The mother was able to get her breath now; she was still concerned, but she hoped that putting him in a private school would help. On weekends at home he caused trouble, throwing his food and milk around in all parts of the house and refusing to clean up the litter, but the mother felt she could put up with this behavior for the short time he was home. Secretly she was convinced that the school was keeping him only because he was being well paid for.

Finally, when Harry was eight, the mother stopped working and Harry was sent to a public school. Then life became a nightmare. Harry was more destructive than ever. On one occasion he took a knife to school and frightened the other children. The adjustment teacher at school took an interest in him and they had frequent talks. Harry became somewhat attached to her and his behavior improved a little, although he was still a very poor student, not interested in his work at all. Most of his energy was spent toward disturbing others and destroying their efforts and peace. At the age of nine he went so far as to smash the headlights of an automobile on the street, a new Cadillac. The owner went around asking people in the neighborhood who might have done this, and soon learned that "only one child around here could have done it—that must be Harry T." The neighbors feared and disliked him; when they saw him coming, they closed their doors and forbade their children to associate with him. He looked for companions who were as destructive as he, or spent his time "lording it" over younger children.

Such was the history of Harry T., and the counselor, questioning deeply into the life of this family, dredged up a great deal, and this is what was uncovered.

First, the father was overseas during the war when the child was born. The mother lived with her parents-in-law with the new baby, and she resented this condition very much. She shut herself off from them to a large degree, and out of her own frustrations and unhappiness she concentrated all her thoughts and energies on her child. To any little reaction the baby showed, she over-reacted in return. If he was hungry and cried a little, she would rush to meet his demand; if he whimpered the least bit, she would take him in her arms immediately and "comfort" him. She responded completely and instantly to his every "demand." She at once poured her whole life interest into the child, but at the same time she resented it. For unconsciously she rebelled against the slavery into which she had given herself. In her own childhood she had been brought up by an extremely dominating mother and she had been involved in a life-long battle with this mother. As Harry grew older and became more exacting and at the same time unwilling to learn to do anything for himself, she began to fight the domination of the child as she had fought the domination of her mother: with anger and resentment; and very early the child started to increase his pressure. Thus they became involved in a contest for power, in which the mother became helpless and the child "flourished"; he had tasted power, he had to show his power. Since he had never been trained to do things for himself, since he had never learned the joy of creativeness, he felt inferior. When he wanted to throw off this feeling of inferiority and feel important, there was but one thing he could do: because he was unable to create, he had to destroy. Then, when the mother challenged this need, the struggle for power was on in earnest and grew more intense from day to day.

By this time the father was at home again. This father was a rather ineffectual person and usually let the mother handle the problems with Harry, although at times he became so exasperated that he beat the boy severely. Harry was constantly punished, too, by being deprived of privileges, and there was always scolding and belittling by both parents. They felt that the boy was old enough to do things for himself, and this they demanded of him, not realizing that he had been taught only to make demands himself and hence had no conception of the needs of others or willingness to act upon the requests of others.

The mother's antagonism toward him grew so that she would not take him with her anywhere. He was so untidy and dirty and would refuse to clean up, she said. His behavior was a threat to her need for prestige and supremacy, and she was ashamed of him and resented him. But the more her antagonism toward him grew, the more he fought back with his destructive and negative behavior. The mother's attitude was one of helpless exasperation which she made no effort to conceal. "Why do I have to have a boy like that? I never see any other boy behave like that!" (Even in her discussions with the counselor she had a difficult time to find anything good about him.)

When the counselor saw the child for the first time she was moved by the expression on his face; it was a sad, hopeless, and at the same time, defiant look. As Adler said of such children, "He lived in a land of enemies" (2). His pathetic expression said plainly, "I can't trust anybody, nobody loves me, so I *have* to fight!"

Children like Harry constantly provoke the treatment they receive. It is only a step from the use of power over parents to the use of power over others outside of the family. Such children are impelled to try out their power whenever they feel inadequate, which, actually being inadequate in many ways, they do when they see others busy, productive, and well regarded. Their compulsive behavior provokes the slaps which again prove to them how unloved they are. Everyone treats them as if they were "bad" and they live up to their reputation because they can't believe they can be different. They see the world and themselves in a distorted light and are completely convinced that they are "bad" and figuratively keep "boxing gloves" on at all times.

Much can be done with Harry and his parents to help them find a better way of living, but it will not be easy. The mother at present is a member of a mother's therapy group, and while she is still very discouraged, she is beginning to think things through a little. She realizes that Harry was overprotected and pampered when he might have been learning to grow up and to feel the joy of independence, of being a "little man." She has not yet been quite able to see the relation of the pampered child's feeling of inferiority to his need for destructiveness. She has not fully realized her share in the power contest that has developed between them. When she begins to give up her antagonism and resentment toward him, when instead of complaining she moves toward him and becomes his friend, she may be able to make him feel more worth while. Then as a constructive approach

to his re-training is established, Harry may reach toward the useful side of life, and little by little give up his aggressions.

In summarizing, it might be said that there seems to be an increasing number of young children who exhibit aggressive behavior, and this is found in the homes of the poor and more fortunate alike; that in subtle ways the revolt of our children against adults has apparently seeped into the kindergarten (3); that over-protection and pampering will create feelings of inadequacy in a child for which he may compensate by a demonstration of power, often expressed by aggressive behavior; that if his parents in their own feeling of helplessness and inadequacy attempt to overpower the child by force, a contest for power may develop between them, a process of action and interaction which mounts in intensity as the struggle continues (4); that later the child may extend his need to express power to others in the community which in turn will respond by rejecting him; that his isolation from constructive friendships will deepen his feeling of inferiority and unhappiness so that he will believe he has to be "bad"; that such a child is not "incurable" but can be helped to give up his need for aggression if his parents will give up their battle with him, and, substituting more constructive methods, encourage the child, in a friendly way, to feel worth while.

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