

# How the Group Helped a Discouraged Boy\*

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In the following article the author will attempt to describe and analyze the case of a young boy, following the same procedure which Adlerians follow when they counsel parents and children in private practice or in a Child Guidance Center. Every bit of information, if relevant to the case, becomes significant. In this way, we come to conclusions about the whole personality from the small details we gather. We proceed step by step, setting up tentative hypotheses as the bases and causes of the individual's basic mistakes. In the process, we may make errors in our interpretations, but as the case unfolds, we are bound to find the wrong suppositions and their correction.

Unless a teacher understands the child's behavior and personality from a psychological point of view, with insight into the factors which influenced his development; unless she has an objective method for recognizing the child's present goals and motivations, she is in no position to correct the false assumptions and erroneous goal which he has set for himself.

But even if the teacher possesses this understanding, it may be a difficult task to influence the child and redirect his behavior. The teacher, however, has one advantage over all other people who deal with this child; she can work with the whole class and solicit the help of the group in the adjustment and improvement of each child.

This article will attempt to demonstrate how the teacher with the help of the entire class succeeded in winning the confidence of a discouraged boy, showing him alternatives for his behavior, and helping him have the courage to be imperfect.

One day, a boy entered my classroom and asked if I would allow him to "show and tell" something to my class. I granted my permission, thinking that he had to make an announcement. To my surprise, he pulled out a rock from his pocket and proceeded with a very interesting and competent lecture on gold mining. He said that he had visited several gold mines and that he had made a thorough study of the subject.

*Comments:* Our first impression of this boy, would, no doubt be, that here is a kid with a lot of guts and self-assurance, interrupting a teacher in what she was doing. In spite of the interruption, we may be inclined to admire him for his competency and for sharing his knowledge with the entire class. However, the teacher who is trained to examine motivation of behavior and to analyze the goal and purpose which the child has set for himself, would immediately recognize that this child is taking over the stage in order to be the center of attention.

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There are two forms of attention which children may seek. Some children who do not yet believe in their ability to gain a place among their peers without the support of an adult, will, in first place, seek the attention of the adult. Others, are primarily concerned with getting attention from their peers. In this case, we see that this boy wanted the attention from the group and that he had the ability to get it.

He thanked me for giving him permission to talk, adding that, although he took much of my time, it was not lost time, since the students learned something about gold mining.

*Comments:* This last remark makes us wonder if attention is all that this boy wants. In a very subtle way, he tries to place the teacher in a position where she has to be thankful to him. There is an element of superiority in this remark, and it may indicate a need for power, although at this point it is limited to the intellectual level. His approach was well planned and well executed. There is no question in our minds about the intelligence of this boy.

He gave his name as Jimmy, a seventh grade student. The boy aroused my curiosity, and I asked the seventh grade teachers about him. None had him in class, nor did they know who he was.

The following year, Jimmy's name appeared on my class list. I was surprised because I taught a class of children with learning difficulties, covering the subjects from first to fourth grade. At first I thought that perhaps Jimmy's name was put on my list by mistake, since he was supposedly in the seventh grade the previous year. When I checked with his teacher I discovered that he was only in the fourth grade the previous year; that he had repeated second and third grade, and that he was classified as a "non-reader."

*Comments:* This is our first important clue to Jimmy's problem. Why has this intelligent boy not learned how to read? We know that children who are not actually mentally defective can learn how to read. They may not, and usually do not, understand what they are reading, but they can learn to decipher the printed symbols, and may actually read fluently. Children who do not learn how to read have excellent private reasons for not being willing to learn. We must investigate why this boy does not want to learn how to read. So far, we do not yet have enough information about Jimmy, but we may speculate, and set up tentative hypothesis. Is this boy an over-indulged and dependent child? We know that there is a high correlation between dependency of children and their subconscious resistance to reading, unwilling to function independently.

We may also suspect a younger brother or sister who is doing very well in school as a discouraging factor. But, so far we do not know.

I also learned that he had accumulated a great deal of knowledge of various subjects with which he likes to show off whenever he has a chance.

*Comments:* We can see that this is an ambitious boy. He seeks recognition and status. It would also appear that he is overcompensating with an accumulation of knowledge beyond what the other children have. But where and how does he get it since he can't read?

On the first day of school, when the students introduced themselves, Jimmy made approximately the following statement: "You are probably wondering how come a boy of my age happens to be in this class. All I can say is that I have had bad luck. I was sick most of my life, and I was in and out of hospitals most of the time. As you know, there are no schools in hospitals where one can learn how to read and how to spell. But there were many doctors in the hospital. They used to come and talk to me for hours, and from them I learned more about sickness and medicine and even operations than the nurses did." When the children asked him what was wrong with him, he said that he had a rare disease, unknown to medicine before, and that his case will go down in history. When they asked what symptoms he had, he replied that this was still a secret; that he was not allowed to reveal anything about his illness, but that his case would soon be published, and then everybody will be able to read about it.

*Comments:* There is now no doubt in our minds that this is an over-ambitious child with a strong drive for superiority. He must be something "special"; being equal, and certainly being inferior to those around him, is unbearable for him. With such a belief he can never accept himself for what he is or gather enough power to move forward on his own. We may assume that he has been exposed to suffer social humiliation over a long period of time. He may have been teased by his classmates and criticised by his family for his lack of progress in school. Perhaps he was also shamed by teachers. Jimmy is trying to overcompensate for these humiliations by carrying the kind of prestige that none others do. He must safeguard himself against further disgrace, even if he has to resort to cunning and lying.

There is something very pathetic in his defensive explanations for his school retardation. We sense his discouragement in spite of his exaggerated report of his importance.

If such a child is to regain his self-confidence we must remove any pressure in regard to learning.

It was obvious that Jimmy was trying to get the admiration of the whole class. It was also obvious, to the other children, that he was telling tall tales.

*Comments:* It is possible that Jimmy is aware of this also, but at this moment he has the center of the stage, which is so important to him.

I asked the class if we could put Jimmy in charge of washing and bandaging minor bruises and cuts, since he knew so much about medicine. They thought that it was a good idea because it would save the school nurse a lot of time.

*Comments:* The teacher is trying to induce the entire class to give Jimmy the experience of being needed and appreciated. This is her first opportunity to encourage him.

The following day, Jimmy came to class with a white band and a red cross over his arm. I found him surrounded by children, explaining the meaning of the Red Cross, and where and how it started. Again, he was well informed. When I asked him where he gathered so much information, he replied that he had read about it, but he immediately corrected himself, saying that his uncle had told him about it. Evidently he suddenly remembered that only the previous day he had told the class that he could not read. I complimented him, saying that some day he might become a great scientist.

*Comments:* We can see that on the one hand, Jimmy lacks self-confidence, but on the other hand he is constantly seeking and finding ways to be in the center of attention. We also notice a quality for leadership. This is no small success, having the entire class listen and pay attention to him.

It seems that the teacher succeeded in giving Jimmy a feeling of being welcome. She ignored his deficiencies and in this way opened the door to his feelings of belonging to the class. It was her determination to use every opportunity to show respect for and a belief in him, something he may have never experienced before.

### **Background**

Jimmy was the oldest of three children, and the only boy. His grandparents had immigrated from Greece when his father was a young man.

*Comments:* This is further important information which will hopefully lead to a better understanding of Jimmy's problem. We know that the position a child holds in the family constellation is a great factor in his personality development. Jimmy is a first born child and a male. This is an important consideration, especially the fact that father and the grandparents came from a patriarchal society, where the man is the boss of the house, and where a male child automatically inherits certain birth rights not granted to girls. Much is expected of this boy.

Our next piece of information is that he is dethroned by a girl. Unfortunately we do not know for how long Jimmy was an only child. However, we may assume that as the first born, he may have been pampered and indulged. Before the first girl was born, he may have been treated like a prince by the entire family.

The father became a very successful businessman. He married an American girl—a school teacher. In addition to the immediate family, there lived in the house his mother's brother, a chemist, and his paternal grandparent.

*Comments:* Jimmy may have been the center of attention of many adults. IN A SENSE, HE HAD MORE THAN ONE SET OF PARENTS. There is a strong possibility that he was exposed to different influences and values; his grandparents and his father coming from a different cultural background than his mother and his uncle.

The mother was a very sick woman who had spent a great deal of time in the hospital. His two sisters were very close, leaving Jimmy out of their relationship and activities. Both of them were good students. The sister next to him was a grade higher in school than he was.

*Comments:* Our first assumption seems to be confirmed. Jimmy was defeated by a younger sister who not only dethroned him but also surpassed him in school. This is very threatening to any first born, especially to a boy of Jimmy's cultural background.

The grandparents favored the girls, who were affectionate, helpful in the house, and "smart." They considered Jimmy as stupid, a liar, and lazy.

*Comments:* Most children find support in their grandparents. Usually, they are indulgent and gentle with their grandchildren, no matter what the children may do. In this case, even the grandparents fail Jimmy.

The father was very much disappointed in his son. He made no secrets of his feelings. He told Jimmy that he would never amount to anything, and he threatened that he would not leave the business to a "good-for-nothing son."

*Comments:* Here is an abundance of significant data from a psychological point of view. We notice a very definite struggle with father. Both of them are discouraged. The father seems to have given up all hopes of making a MAN out of Jimmy; a man with self-confidence and with a sense of responsibility toward the family and toward the future.

Jimmy may be as overambitious as his father is, and therefore afraid that he will not be able to live up to his standards. He doesn't feel that he is a man. He is a male, but he doesn't compare with his father. This increases his feelings of inadequacy. But he is a first child, and he must maintain his position by all costs. We see that Jimmy cannot compete with his sisters, so he gives up. But he had to find something which will bring attention from his father, and he became a problem child, thus keeping his father continuously busy with him. We now see that he is acting intelligently but for the wrong purpose.

We see that Jimmy is creative and resourceful. He operated with a wide range of purposes. At times he is seeking attention, at times he is involved in a subtle power contest. Surely, he could change his behavior at home and at school if, subconsciously, he would not resist pressure. We may also suspect an element of revenge, especially against his father. From his point of view, opposing his father has brought him success.

During a conference with the father, I learned that he blamed Jimmy's difficulties partly on inheritance from his wife's family, and partly on his wife who "pampered and spoiled the boy." I also found out that Jimmy had a close relationship with his mother; that he spent much time with her, amusing her with funny stories, and that he always cried when she left for the hospital.

*Comments:* This warrants further speculations. We notice an unusual alliance, namely between mother and son. Probably an alliance against father. We may assume that the father is also disappointed in his wife who is sick so often; that he neglects her. Although we have no details about the home situation, we may assume that Jimmy is siding with her against his father. We don't know to what extent mother may plead with her husband not to be so strict with the boy, thus protecting him. Since she is a sick woman, he may yield to her, but not without resentment against both of them.

It is interesting to note to what extent Jimmy has been a focal point of opposing forces within the family—grandparents, father and sisters against Jimmy and mother. We still don't know the role the uncle plays in this family, but we may assume that he too is on the side of Jimmy.

Jimmy cries when mother goes to the hospital. This is our first indication that he tries to get attention by inducing pity toward himself. But knowing father's values and attitudes toward the male sex, he may only feel more contemptuous over such display of weakness.

I learned that Jimmy was always a healthy boy. He had never been in a hospital.

*Comments:* It is possible that Jimmy obtained his information about hospitals from his mother.

His school records showed that he was a show-off since kindergarten, and that he was frequently absent from school.

*Comments:* Jimmy probably felt that he had no status in class.

#### **Jimmy's Position in my Class:**

Jimmy was the oldest student in my class. At first, he was very conscious of this fact. He used every opportunity to remind us that he was in this class only because of the years he had spent in the hospital.

*Comments:* Being that much older than the other children is an unfortunate strike against him. His discouragement is two fold; he doubts that he can do the work as well as the other much younger children, at the same time he must show that he is superior to them.

Once, after he had again brought up the subject of the years he spent in hospitals, I asked the class why Jimmy gave this matter so much thought, and why he used every opportunity to remind us of it. This developed into an animated discussion. Some children said that Jimmy must feel very much ashamed to be so far behind in school, and this is how he justified it. Some said that Jimmy thinks that by telling us about the hospital, we will feel sorry for him and we will not be so critical. Others said that he wants to be noticed and admired. Jimmy denied that he wanted any of these things. I asked the class if, in their opinion, Jimmy got anything out of this kind of behavior. Some felt that it served as an excuse for not doing any work, but the majority of the children felt that Jimmy was so afraid that nobody would notice him that he forced their attention by telling stories in which he is something special.

*Comments:* The teacher takes the first step to solicit the help of the group, discussing Jimmy's behavior not from a critical point of view but to help Jimmy and all children in class to look for purposes in behavior. It is interesting to notice how well the children understood that Jimmy was safeguarding himself by telling that he could not read because he was in the hospital, and thereby hoping that his failure will be excused without having to assume the fault of it.

I asked the group if Jimmy could get attention in any other way, and if so, could they tell him in what way. The children said that they admired him very much for his knowledge in science and for his ability in sports.

*Comments:* Frankly, Jimmy's ability in sports surprises us. We would have expected that such realistic achievement which puts him ahead of his class would suffice to flatter his ego, and that it would be this area that he would exploit in order to have status with his peers. For this very ambitious child, being good in just one area is, evidently, not sufficient. He does not think that he is good enough unless he is exceptional. There were other children in class who were also good in sports. Jimmy can stand no competition.

Jimmy, who was sulking until then, looked up and smiled for just an instant. He quickly resumed his angry expression.

*Comments:* At this point, Jimmy is determined to show us that we are wrong. Perhaps, he is continuing in the classroom the power contest he has with his father. He tries to defeat both by his display of obstinacy. Smiling openly would to him be an admission that we were correct in our evaluation.

I asked him if he knew that the children admired him, and he shook his head. When I asked for a show of hands of those who admired and liked him, most of the children raised their hands. I asked Jimmy to look up and count his friends, but he refused. He was angry for the rest of the day.

*Comments:* This supports the above supposition. He does not give in easily. However, the possibilities are that this experience had encouraging effects. Probably Jimmy never before experienced open display of acceptance by his peer group.

I decided to build Jimmy up through sports since this required no reading.

*Comments:* The teacher was careful not to choose a subject or activity in which Jimmy might possibly fail or do poorly. She is trying to build on his strength.

I discussed this with the students one day when Jimmy was not in school. All thought that this was a good idea.

*Comments:* Some may argue that this was not a spontaneous and natural reaction of the class, but that the teacher plotted, using the class in her endeavor. This is absolutely true. However, it does not diminish its effectiveness. If any, it demonstrates that basically, children are good and eager to be of help to others provided that we lead and motivate them in this direction.

The next time the group met for the regular class discussion meeting, one of the students suggested that the class should form a baseball league with Jimmy as its leader. They also suggested that they invite another class to join them. Jimmy liked this idea very much, and he went to work immediately. He went into the other classroom to talk to the teacher about our suggestion. When he returned, he looked radiant. He had managed to organize the first match. The children showed open amazement and admiration.

Jimmy soon became the leader of both groups. He practiced with them after school, and he reported daily to the children in class.

*Comments:* The significance of this example lies in the fact that the teacher spotted Jimmy's one advantage—his ability in sports, and acted upon it. She moved him from a minus to a plus position. He is moving into active participation.

From that day on, Jimmy participated in all activities which did not require reading. No one made any point of this fact. When the children read, Jimmy either listened or he occupied himself with something without disturbing the class.

When I suggested to him that he could be helped by any student he might like to work with, he refused such help. He did, however, agree to let me work with him for fifteen minutes each day.

*Comments:* This is the first breakthrough leading in the right direction. Discouragement was counteracted by his first experience of success. But this is only a start which may, or may not develop further. We hope that this is a turning point for this child. The teacher has succeeded by now in winning Jimmy's cooperation, but this does not indicate that she has also succeeded in changing his general outlook nor his goal.

Every now and then, the children began asking him to join any reading group he would like; they assured him that this would make them happy, that they would like to help him, also that they could help him if he would let them. But he still refused.

*Comments:* It confirms our feeling of Jimmy's obstinacy. A child who feels that life is worth living only if one is ahead of others will stay away from activities that do not provide them with the opportunity to prove their superiority. They lack the courage to be imperfect.

One day I told the children the story of the boy who wanted very much to know how to swim, but he refused to go into the water until such time when he knew how to swim. At this, Jimmy burst out in uncontrollable laughter. He said that this boy must be very stupid to think that he could learn how to swim without going into the water. I agreed with him that this boy would never learn how to swim in this manner but I did not think that this boy was necessarily "stupid." I then asked the class to think of a reason this boy might have for not going into the water. Most children felt that he was afraid that he will probably never learn how to swim but did not want other people to know this. By saying that he must first learn how to swim before he goes into the water, this boy thought that he could protect himself from showing his real reason. The children emphasized that what this boy felt and what he did was not exactly smart, but that was no indication that he was dumb otherwise.

I asked Jimmy if he knew anyone who behaved in a similar way to this boy. He did not reply to my question.

*Comments:* It is interesting to see how a child, not understanding the behavior of another person, assumed that the other is "stupid," whereas he never associates his own behavior with such an interpretation. Whereas children are quick to understand the purpose of other people's behavior—when they personally are not involved, this does not hold true when it concerns their own. Such children must be helped to understand the fictitious goal they have set for themselves.

At the end of the day, after the class was dismissed, Jimmy stopped at my desk and he told me that he realized that I had meant him when I asked him that question. I agreed with him and I asked if he intends "to go into the water." Jimmy cried for the first time. He said that he was ashamed that the children would laugh if they heard his halting reading.

*Comments:* Did Jimmy cry in order to get the teacher's sympathy or was this a first admission that he might be wrong? We are inclined to believe the latter. If so, this would indicate his first courageous step.

In a mirror technique, the teacher succeeded in showing him how silly his actions were, without shaming him in the process.

I told him that I did not think so, but that he would have to find out for himself. He said that he wanted to wait a little longer.

*Comments:* So far, Jimmy always declined all friendly invitations to try. Although he wants to wait a little longer, he is not actually refusing. This gives us further hope.

It is important to notice that the teacher made no promises to Jimmy, not only because she is in no position to make such a promise, but more so because it is important for Jimmy to learn to take chances. It is his fear of failure that paralyzes him, therefore we must concentrate on removing such fears, even at the risk of failure.

As the students progressed in their reading, and as they started to give book-reports, Jimmy's mood showed changes. He appeared gloomy and absentminded. He also started to cut classes.

*Comments:* What might be the reason for this change? There is definitely a sign of new discouragement. Possibly the fact that the other children are being successful and receive attention, especially when they give book-reports. Too little attention is now being paid to him. This kind of reversal or regression is not rare in overambitious children when they think that they are losing ground.

One day he announced that the club to which he belonged (which he had never mentioned before) was sending him to New York City to play in a baseball tournament, and that he would be absent for three days. Everyone was very curious about this trip, asking many questions. Jimmy was once more in his element. He did not show up for three days. When he returned, he gave a full report of the events and of the places he visited in New York - Times Square, Radio City, and other known places. Again he was well informed and could answer most of the questions posed by the curious students.

*Comments:* We see how ingenious this boy is; how well he lays plans and executes them.

Suddenly it occurred to me that I had not asked Jimmy to bring a statement from the parents regarding his taking off from school, and that this may have been another of his tall tales. I called his home and learned that he had never been away from home; that every morning he left as usual when he goes to school, not returning until at the time when he normally would return.

*Comments:* This should not surprise us. He was driven by his need for being "special."

During our next discussion meeting, I asked the class if they could figure out why children tell "tall tales." I did not mention what I had learned about Jimmy. Most children felt that tall tales are used by people who don't believe that they could find admiration from others in any other way. They also brought out that these people never give themselves a chance to find out if they are right; that they often operate on false assumptions. Jimmy did not participate in the discussion. I asked him if he would like to comment but he shook his head and remained silent.

*Comments:* It may sound that the teacher is demanding too much of small children. Many teachers may question the advisability to involve the class in the problems of an individual child. This would indicate a lack of confidence in the children's ability and eagerness to understand behavior, and especially to be helpful to others. Children want to solve their problems, and school is the best, if not the only place, where such training is possible. We must be careful not to extend our adult anxieties and inadequacies to children and thereby teach them to avoid FACING PROBLEMS AND FINDING SOLUTIONS to them. At all times, we must refrain from fault-finding and from becoming punitive.

We notice that the teacher did not make any fuss, nor did she confront him directly with his lie. She did not even mention Jimmy's name during the discussion. In a way, the teacher was put on the spot, having transgressed a school regulation which requires that children bring notes from home whenever they want to take off from school. The average teacher probably would have reported the incident to the principal, etc. How different this situation might have turned out had she done so. All that was gained would have been destroyed and she would have lost the friendly relationship which she had established with the child. The children understood that the goal of one who is bragging is to hide feelings of inadequacy.

The following morning, Jimmy came to school somewhat earlier than usual. He came straight to my desk and told me that he had heard that I had called his father. He demanded to know why I had done it. He appeared very angry.

*Comments:* It is not uncommon that children who operate on power, consider anything that may indicate disapproval by others as unfair. Perhaps he was trying to get the teacher involved in an argument.

I told him that, I violated a school regulation by not asking for a note; that for my own and for his protection I needed confirmation from his parents that they gave their approval for his absence. I also added that I liked him and that I

wanted to do all I can to help him. However, in order for me to know what to do, I had to know the facts. I also pointed out that the children in class felt the same as I do, and that he must surely have noticed it. I reminded him of the discussion the group had the previous day, regarding discouraged people. I told him that I felt that he was such a person, afraid of failure to such a degree that he would not risk the chance of trying and finding out if he is right or wrong. I asked him, "Could it be that you feel worthless unless you occupy a 'spécial' position, being different and superior to others?" Jimmy's mouth began to twitch and tears filled his eyes. I told him, further, that he was waiting for a miracle from heaven in regard to his reading as well as in regard to feeling accepted for what he was. I said, "Jimmy, haven't you noticed that all of us like and respect you for what you are? For us you needn't be anything else."

*Comments:* This may sound like a lecture. In a way it is. However, there are times when private counseling is necessary. The teacher actually indicates understanding and even sympathy for the fact that he avoids reading. She appeals to his ambition but at the same time points out how unimportant it is to be exceptional, that he is liked for what he is. She put no cloak of moral indignation over his lying to her, in fact, the lie isn't even discussed.

Jimmy answered that he realized that he was only fooling himself not others. He said that a number of times, only the fear of being laughed at kept him from joining a reading group. Again he asked me to promise him that nobody would laugh if he read. I told him that I could not give him such a promise; that it takes courage to find out for himself and to face such a possibility. I added, "I am sure of one thing though. The children will have more respect and admire you more for having the courage to try, no matter how poorly you perform, than they will if you continue being 'different.' This is a decision that must come from you alone." He said that he would think about it and tell me in the morning.

The next day, Jimmy pulled up his chair and joined a reading group. All the children smiled; some waved at him. The boy next to him put his arm around him. When Jimmy's turn came to read, he blushed, hesitated for a moment and then started pronouncing the words he could read. The teacher jumped in quickly whenever she anticipated a word which he might not know. When he had finished, he blew his chest and in a boisterous way said, "Well, I did better than I thought. In fact, I think that I did rather well."

*Comments:* The teacher did not get into a power contest with Jimmy. She did not argue nor did she make promises. But she proved to be his friend. As a consequence, he cooperated with her; mustered up his courage. She had succeeded in restoring Jimmy's confidence in himself and in others.

We notice that in Jimmy's remark there is more of a humorous bravado than sincere belief in what he is saying. His old pattern is still visible, but not so deeply entrenched as before.

## **Conclusion**

Frustrated overambition is often the main reason for giving up. Jimmy had to learn to believe in himself and to respect himself as he was before anyone could help him. The teacher and the group gave Jimmy the incentive to overcome his disbelief in his own ability and to have the courage to accept the fact that in some areas others were superior to him, without feeling humiliated or rejected because of this. The teacher went to a great length to provide him with proof of the fallacy of his original thinking. However, without the help of the group, she might have not succeeded. We see in this example that the group was being used to influence the child not only toward wanting to learn and to exercise self-discipline but to exercise a corrective influence of the child's attitudes and behavior. At all times, we must remember that when the teacher or the group can convince the child of the futility of his goal, and can show him alternatives, he is likely to consider and change it. He then turns to constructive direction.

## **Appendix: Years Later**

It may be of interest to the reader that Jimmy is a television actor, and is frequently performing. His basic life style has not changed. He is still the center, and the spotlights are on him. However, he is using constructive, socially acceptable means to achieve his goal.

Interestingly, he chose a profession which requires constant reading.