

"Rita"

An Experiment in the Psychological Approach to Group Work

SADIE GARLAND DREIKURS

This is the experience of Rita, age six, who, with 240 others, attended a Day Camp for children under my direction for a nine weeks' period during the summer of 1944. The background of the director, the training of the staff and the participation of a psychiatrist and medical students provided an opportunity to experiment with the application of Individual Psychology to the group situation. Because of the war it was impossible to obtain the services of trained group leaders; thus, the services of untrained students and of children of teen age were enlisted. This freedom from rigidity of theoretical background proved an asset in presenting a new psychological approach.

The first day at camp, Rita appeared—a pathetic little girl whose face was dirty from wiping her tears away with her hands. The group was called together for assembly, and her first act was to push another girl off a chair and take possession of it. She bit the boy next to her and, then, had a fight with him, because he pulled her hair. For the rest of the time she disturbed by standing up and turning around or by crying, because somebody was hurting her. She looked miserable and succeeded in antagonizing all the children around her. This was during the first half-hour of the first session.

At the end of the day the staff had its first meeting. Before the problems of the day were discussed, one young girl counsellor immediately brought up the problem of Rita. She would not continue if Rita were kept in her group. Before she could describe the nature of the difficulty, three other members of the staff who were campers the year before exclaimed, "She is a holy terror." "She did nothing but fight all last year." "She is impossible."

The second day of camp I was called to come to the assistance of a counsellor who had difficulty with her group. When I arrived the children were in line taking a drink—all except Rita, who was surrounded by a group with which she was fighting. The counsellor greeted me by saying, "I can't stand it any longer! Rita is impossible, you must get her out of here."

I approached Rita and put my hand on her head with the intention of stroking her. She pulled herself away and said, "I won't get out of here." She cried and waved her arms around and struck anyone near her. I told her it was quite all right, she would not have to leave, and I had enough time to wait for her; then I asked the counsellor to take the group out of the hallway and leave us. I continued to stroke Rita's head after the children left, and I told her that I thought she was a very nice little

girl and that I liked her very much. She responded with, "I hate you," and she pulled herself away.

I continued to stroke her head and I told her that if she felt badly, I could sympathize with her, and perhaps it was a good idea to have a good cry, and when she felt better she could tell me what she would like to do. She responded, "I don't want to do anything"—and to: "Where do you want to go?" "I don't want to go anywhere."

When her excitement subsided, I told her it was time for me to visit some of the other groups and I asked her if she would like to visit also. She did not reply, but when I took her hand she followed me. I took her into the room where a group of seven-year-old children were sewing. Nobody in the group knew her. There were two little girls with a chair between them. I told the little girls that Rita might like to join them for a little while, if they would help her by showing her what they were doing. They consented and she sat down. When I returned a half hour later, she was sewing, she was talking to the two girls and she had a smile on her face. As I approached her she hung her head. At the end of the day, when the children were dismissed, she came back to find me and said, "I came to say good-bye."

Rita was one of the first children to be presented for observation and examination by Dr. Rudolf Dreikurs, who attended these weekly conferences with ten medical students who were under his instruction. As a rule, the observations made by staff members about each child were given to two students, who observed the child in the group and talked with him. The reports of the students were presented and discussed at the weekly staff meetings led by Dr. Dreikurs. This is the summary of the report on Rita:

"She seems to be a child who is easily provoked to opposition. Then nobody can deal with her. She shows an expression of suspicion that somebody will always turn against her. She has an older brother and feels that her mother prefers the boy and that she herself has no place in the family. Although her mother babies and spoils her, at the same time she scolds, nags, spansks and punishes her. Therefore, Rita probably feels that nobody likes her—and she probably does not like anybody either. Her problem is her disbelief or doubt whether she has any place in the group. If a child believes that nobody likes her, then she behaves in such a way that nobody can like her. She provokes antagonism which she expects.

"Recommendation: Rita must be convinced that she is liked, or can be liked if she wishes it. It will probably take some time, because she might distrust the first experiences of affection. But as soon as you can convince her that she is liked her behavior will change. She might very well at the end of nine weeks be a different, a quieter and better behaved child. A camp experience like this might very well be a turning point in Rita's life. However, we must keep in mind that if Rita improves and

stops being a problem child, her brother might easily become a problem himself. It is necessary for the mother to understand the problem and help both children. The main difficulty for the staff will be not to get provoked by Rita and to maintain a friendly, encouraging attitude without undue attention if she disturbs."

One of the methods of approaching the children with their own problems was through group discussion. At one of these discussions with Rita's group, I asked what the children liked best in camp. Many children gave activities, etc. Rita said, "I like you." One of the children said he liked lunch best, and then I asked, "Who likes to go home best?" Rita immediately stood up on her chair, flung her hands in the air and said, "I don't." The discussion that followed was an effort to find out why some children do not like to go home.

At the end of the second week, Rita rarely disturbed in assembly. She sang, she often raised her hand when children were asked as a small group to sing for the rest, she smiled and enjoyed herself. She participated in activity and only occasionally got into difficulty. On one of these occasions I had a talk with her in an attempt to explain her reason for fighting. I asked her how many of the children she thought she could get to like her, and she did not know. She was willing to try and to tell me later.

A few days later, when I was visiting her group during the rest period, the leader asked the children if any would like to tell a story or sing. Rita was not one of the volunteers, and after an interval the leader asked her if she did not want to sing a song. She hesitated, and her neighbor took her hand and said, "I am your friend, I will sing with you." Whereupon Rita turned to the girl on the other side of her, took her hand and said, "Come on, you are our friend, too; sing with us!"

At the end of the fourth week of camp, Rita developed a rash and was sent home. Her mother came to call to explain her physical condition and brought a doctor's certificate. She was asked how Rita got along at home. At first the mother said she had no difficulty; then she said she had to spank her often, because she fought with the children, and the neighbors expected her to be punished to satisfy the other children. She described her son as being a "perfect child in every way, in school, at home, in achievement and in behavior," and she could not understand why Rita was so different.

She confided that the year previously Rita was so difficult that she falsified her age to get her in Day Camp, because she did not know what to do with her at home. (It is against policy to accept children under six.) She added, however, that Rita was a "changed child the last three weeks." She did not fight so much and she could not wait for morning to go to Camp. But she had become impudent to her mother.

The impudence was described as follows: The mother told her to get ready for bed. In her usual fashion Rita got undressed and danced

around and annoyed her mother, who shouted at her and said, "You bad girl, go and take your bath and go to bed, or I will spank you!"

Rita then said, "Mother, if you will say, 'please,' I will take my bath." The mother said, "Please take your bath, Rita dear." Whereupon Rita said, "Yes, mother dear," went into the bathroom without further discussion and took her bath. When she came out, she ran into the kitchen where her brother was drinking milk and knocked the glass out of his hand. Her mother again threatened to spank her and yelled at her to go to bed at once; whereupon Rita once again said, "If you will ask me nicely, I will go to bed." The mother did, and Rita went to bed.

Rita's mother was shocked when she first listened to the interpretation of her child's behavior. She could not believe that Rita failed to realize she was loved.

During the last week in Camp, when there was difficulty with an older boy, I asked the children how they thought we could help him. Rita's response was, "Show him that you like him, and he will be good." Also, during the last week, Rita's brother presented a problem for the first time, by having a fight with the boys. This continued through the week.

The gradual change in the behavior of Rita, the different facial expression, with its increasing relaxation and happiness, her participation in group activities and her friendly relationship with other children demonstrated clearly her social adjustment during this period. It is worth while noticing how the child tried to influence her home situation, teaching her mother the ways of talking to children, which she learned at Day Camp, and her psychological understanding of other children who had similar problems.

FROM OUR FRIENDS

The following reports were recently received:

New York Group: Six active members of the group made a successful attempt to introduce psychological work to the Grand Street Settlement. An enlarged program is planned for the next season.

Chicago Group: An Individual Psychology Summer Seminar was held July 23 to July 30 at the Co-op Camp at Cloverdale, Michigan. Thirty people attended. A new relationship between Individual Psychology and the Consumer Co-operative has been established and gives great promise for future cooperation.

A Seminar on Individual Psychology is planned for the coming season to train people to teach Individual Psychology. Dr. Dreikurs will be in charge of the seminar and a number of professional persons in various fields, who have already been acquainted with Individual Psychology, will be invited to attend the seminar.