

DEVELOPING SOCIAL FEELING IN THE YOUNG CHILD THROUGH HIS PLAY LIFE

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Those of us who had the privilege of knowing Dr. Alfred Adler and learning from him directly the theories of Individual Psychology have a great responsibility in passing his theories on to others. In reality, if Individual Psychology is presented in the right way, it can be understood and applied by the general public. We all remember how Adler impressed on us that there are no set rules to use, as each human being has different needs. However, he did tell us there are three problems in every human being's life that must be met independently: social, occupational, and love problems must be met, and the way they are met shows the degree of adjustment the personality has developed.

The child needs to develop courage, an attitude of cooperating, and social feeling, to meet the three problems of life independently. Recognizing this, what better place is there to start a lesson in cooperating than in training the young child for nursing and sleeping? Adler said many times, "If you wish to understand a person, watch his movements and do not listen to his words." How wonderful this is, because we can start from birth as long as we do not have to wait for the development of speech.

An observant parent can tell when a baby is hungry, and should try to cooperate with the baby's needs by giving him his food and only as much as he seems to need. By so doing the baby gets one of the first lessons in cooperating and begins to feel he is in a world of friends, not enemies.

The same observance can be made with sleep. If the baby is comfortable and the environment is right, he will take all the sleep he needs, when he needs it. In other words we are trying to cooperate with the baby's own inner needs, not forcing our routine on him. If his needs are almost impossible for the household to carry out, one can make an effort to work out a routine more suitable to both the baby and adults. A baby who must cry it out is not apt to feel he is in a friendly cooperative world where his comforts are considered. If his comforts are taken care of he can soon feel secure and does not need to develop a fighting attitude.

Up to six years the young child's life is largely spent in eating, sleeping, and playing. Adler's theory that a child's goal is more or less set by the age of six is certainly not new; for centuries we have heard, "Give me the child for the first seven years, then you can have him for the rest of his life."

Naturally there are as many goals as personalities. We now know, thanks to Adler, that it is the goal containing social feeling which we wish to help develop in the child. Acknowledging this and recognizing that most of the young child's waking hours are spent in playing, it seems that it certainly is the duty of every one dealing with the young child to create the right environment for playing, where a child can develop courage, cooperation, and social feeling.

Therefore it is important to fit the material with which a child plays to his inner needs. This again can be done by observation as we have proven in a project which was started more or less as a psychological workshop at the time we started carrying out Dr. Adler's theories. In other words, we created a place where a child from babyhood up to eight years could be introduced to all types of playthings selected for safety, progressive usage, artistic and creative value.

There is a baby table where the small child is placed after he has been walked around by the adult who watches his reactions. The adult selects a few articles to which the baby seems to be attracted. The articles are placed on the table, of course with all due consideration for the safety of the baby. In a short time we can see the baby make his own choice, discarding some toys and returning to others time and time again. One baby will like to fit toys into each other; one will love to hug an animal; one will like toys that make noise, etc. Toys with too many pieces overpower a baby who often just throws them away from him. If this method of fitting the toy to the child's interest is carried on, we are much more apt to have a happy, creative, socialized type of child. We have seen it work so many times in the selection of dolls. The adult will think a certain type doll is just the one his child would like, but when the child is brought in to select one it often is not the one chosen by the well-meaning adult. When the music boxes are turned on, some children will pay no attention, others will drop everything and listen. The harmonica is a good first instrument, as the tone is better than that of a toy piano or other toy musical instrument.

Suppose we wish to develop independence in a child. We most certainly will not provide him with a train that must be hooked together by an adult, or a doll carriage that is too heavy for the child to manage up and down the curbs, or a toy with too many pieces for him to pick up alone. Some children have more abilities than others in the handling of toys; here again is proof that we cannot go by rule or age. A little boy under six can have just as much fun with so-called girls' toys as a girl can have with so-called boys' toys, and both should be allowed to exercise their choice without adults saying "that's only for boys" or "that's for girls, you don't want to be a sissy." By developing physical control of one's muscles one has a better chance of establishing an attitude of confidence. For this purpose the slide is suggested, with its stairs in the back for the upward climb as important for the development of self-confidence as the downward ride.

If we are working on social feeling and consideration for others I know of no better toy than a see-saw to quickly make one conscious of

another's situation. As you well know, if one gets off without notifying the other, one gets a bump.

A tea set is an excellent means for developing social feeling, for tea parties are more fun if someone else is with you and can share your cookies. Here again is a good place to study eating habits. Once a mother said to me, "My child just does not eat, even candy." I could only try to convince her that her child was not eating, not because the child did not enjoy food, but simply to get her attention. We had a tea party, and I suggested that the child feed the stuffed elephant, which I had placed at the table, with a piece of chocolate. The child ate all the chocolate herself to the utter surprise of the mother.

Many faulty attitudes can be handled indirectly, as Dr. Adler suggests, through the play life of the child. A child who has been frightened by a dog can become so interested in the magnetic dog and bone that the fear soon disappears. The child who has had an unhappy relationship with the doctor can sometimes have a change of attitude through the little play sets of doctors and nurses.

Going on to older children: a child who has resisted learning has oftentimes become so interested in the printing press that his resistance has disappeared. His confidence was reestablished because he found his way of learning.

Children who have had concrete experience in their play life are in a far better position to grasp the abstract when they enter school. The child who has played with a big farm set and all the animals is more apt to be really interested in farm life. Thus he may become secure in his abilities to understand his lessons. The toy milk bottle sets form a background for counting, such as two bottles here, three bottles there, and so forth.

Colors are learned by the handling of a tin can toy, consisting of a nested set of tin cans with a cover, in the six primary colors. This is an excellent example of a toy that can be used from six months to six years, both in a play-pen and as a beach toy. Finally it can be used as a receptacle to hold the child's crayons for his school desk.

The child who has developed the feeling of security in his first six years of life because of his environment is in an excellent position to attack the big problem of leaving the security of home and entering the school. He does not have to spend his time in "How can I get attention?" He can see how he can cooperate and find his individual way of contributing to the group because of his feeling of security. These attitudes, as we have said, are best formed through the application of Individual Psychology on the part of those dealing with the child. An attitude of cooperating is best developed if the adults in the environment are secure in themselves.

Many years ago Dr. Adler said, "We already know the toys that develop geometric and mathematical talents. Now I feel we know the toys that really help develop social feeling, and maybe in the not too distant future we will know the toys to develop the new Goethes and the new Edisons."