

Observations in a Play Group of Young Children

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In the following article an attempt will be made to describe in aphoristic form a group of young children at play under conditions of everyday living. There are many important factors that influence the life of a little play group: the personality pattern of the individual child, the parents, their background, the neighborhood and everyday events. They all may create or prevent group psychological developments.

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Observations were made in a group of children six to seven years old who spent their after-school time in a play school. For the most part they were children of broken homes, whose mothers were working. Most of these children had early experiences of an inharmonious home life. Many of the parents, recent immigrants from South America, had difficulties of adjustment in the new country. Some of them did not speak English.

The children were aggressive, independent, and temperamental. There were very few shy, withdrawn children among the group. The city streets had added to their abundance of exciting experiences. The play school tried to aid the home in its problems of adjustment, and in the period of recreation which the child spent in the play school, many of his problems and difficulties were reflected. There was no way to isolate the child's play hours from his entire life. The following case may illustrate the way in which times of stress and uncertainty in the home intruded into the child's play:

A handsome, active boy, who usually demanded more attention than the others, was heard to remark, "My father works at a bank now," and some days later, "My father is at a shipyard now. He is not at the bank anymore. He has locked something away and could not find the key. It was money. The boss does not want him around any more." Again, a few days later: "He is looking for a thousand jobs now. He went to the employment agency. They are faking jobs there. There is no job." And still later, "My father wants to open his

own shop now. He wants to be a window cleaner." During this time the boy's demands for attention increased. Previously his active playful attitude had been an asset to the group; now he was causing disturbances, and was not so well liked by the children. At this time he was seen to bring in a great many new toys, apparently trying to win back the children's attention and interest. Finally he appeared in the play school at times when he should have been in his class at the public school. He said, "Do you think I am playing hookey? I do not know how to play that game." This remark shows the mixture of aggression and teasing, characteristic of his behavior. At last the mother came in to give us some explanation. She had started working outside of the home only a short time before; simultaneously the father had been looking for work. Deprived of attention and care at home, the boy had tried to gain it in school in every possible way.

In another case, disappointment in the school situation affected the child's adjustment in the play group. He was an only child and for a long time refused to play with the others. He was often heard complaining that his classroom teacher did not like him. Soon he became a master of truancy. His walk to school seemed to consist of so many moves to avoid getting there. He always managed to slip away from the person who accompanied him. His failure to adjust himself in school was not caused by a lack of abilities. When the school was informed about some of the elements in his case, he was transferred to a smaller group of alert children under a new teacher. After being accepted here, he improved not only in school but in his adjustment in the play group, and he started to play with the others.

The organization of group life usually is hampered by various difficulties. This is due to the complex nature of the children's background, experiences at home, and individual difficulties. A well functioning children's group is established only when the majority of the children accept each other and accept the teacher. But before this phase has been achieved, there is a period in which a lack of group feeling among the children is the main characteristic. They jump aimlessly from one activity to the other; they scramble all over the place in all directions, and they enjoy doing things which they well know are undesirable. This is in answer to the amount of pressure they feel when asked to remain in the group. They follow any kind of leadership among themselves, they abandon it again; they have difficulty in listening to the teacher.

One explanation of this initial wild phase may be that these young children are fearful of what to expect in the new situation. They continue to behave as they did when playing on the street, alone, or in their little gangs. However tough they may seem to be in their determination to keep up their wildness, to a great extent their behavior reflects fear. After a while, through many efforts, friendly explanations, and organized games, a phase of beginning group life finally may become established. The children, still resentful and dubious, may listen to the teacher for a while. Often they react with boredom to any suggested activity. "Can't we have any fun?" is the characteristic protest during this time of superficial group adjustment. It is not just the quest for fun that is the disorganizing influence. The children have not found their place within the group; they have not learned to function in it, to be part of it. Teacher and children do not know and understand each other. The fear of giving in to the group and to the teacher is still paramount in many minds. The group is in an experimental stage of organization and planning by both children and the adult. During this period the group will be unable to hold the highly aggressive child who is the problem of any group. He will stray away and refuse to stay with the others.

A phase of partial adjustment follows. Here the active playful child may begin to establish his role and to play it in some coordination with the others. There will be traces of leader and follower relationships. In this phase the children may become critical of a child who disturbs the group. In spite of all problems of discipline, however, there will not be complete disorder any more. Some rules may have been accepted and others may be answered with counter-suggestions by the group. There will be a better chance to know and to guide the children.

Then the group may begin to invent, and to organize their own expressive group games. They may reach this stage slowly, with many failures on both sides. The role of the understanding teacher will now be to watch and not to interfere with what the children may try to organize. There may be many setbacks, with an occasional return into previous unorganized phases of group development. This phase is, on the whole, a phase of beginning group relationships, and enjoyment of group life. The children forming the core of the group will be inclined to play and to express themselves in coordination with the others.

In this phase it may happen that the problem child who has strayed away from the group may return, this especially if in the meantime the teacher has taken the time to establish a relationship with the runaway or showoff. He may now be attracted by some of the roles in the group. The reason for this is that now, tendencies, needs, enjoyments, are expressed by the children in group play. Playful actions of personal value to the individual child are now lifted to group level.

The following is an example of group play invented by the group under observation. Once on the playground they found big waste-baskets which they used as cages. One child took the part of the animal in the cage; it had to be fed, to be taken care of. Soon the cage was not important any more. It was the play that fascinated the children. This animal play turned out to be the favorite group game. The animal at first was a little dog; later any number of roles was performed in the game. Significant were the roles of the big, courageous dog, the sick dog, the cute little baby dog, and the "keeper." The children performed all the life situations they could think of. The "keeper" was a mysterious being, who seemed to represent the father of the group and kept the peace among them. He accepted suggestions as to how the play might be continued. One boy, ever unable to adjust to the others, too difficult to accept given rules, now approached the group slowly. In this game he at length took part happily and regularly, working out his own little role undisturbed. This group consisted mostly of little boys, many of them only children. Perhaps they chose the role of puppies because they were shrinking away from playing the role of babies and yet were interested in getting the attention that infants receive. This remained a boy's game and went very well with this group. It was played in continuations almost every day for a long time.

This same group played a cowboy game. The children sat on their wooden horses looking into far away distances, in a motionless pantomime. The whole group joined spontaneously in complete silence in an entirely imaginative situation: racing at high speed towards a distant goal. It seems that in a good play the coordination of roles comes naturally to the children. In fights, the roles of the wounded and the defeated are not necessarily inferior roles. The victor does not always appear to be the leader of the game. A child plays his own personal role, and simultaneously the planned role of the game. So we observe the wounded fighter raising his head to give directions as to how the game must be continued. No group game can consist of domineering

parts entirely. The child does not merely enjoy his own part, he also watches the others in their roles, with amusement.

It was observed that within this group there was some loyalty according to sex groups. Long before the entire group had advanced to the development of a group feeling—a feeling of belonging together—boys and girls were found to gather in their own respective groups. This became evident in some play situations. Boys and girls were observed to act out their plays separately, in a way which was quite different, in the experience of the observer, from groups of young children of different parentage. Even if the girls may have wanted to join in the cowboy game, or if the boys may have wished to participate in playing house, they stayed with their own sex group, and expressed their attitudes in so many words: “Boys and girls do not play together.” The child typical of this group conformed to the rule. It seems that this attitude expressed the thinking and the ideas of their parents. These young children, many of them only children, naturally grew up very close to their parents, who were still used to habits and customs of their own country, and were in an initial period of adjustment to the new environment. They accepted, at first, it seems, new habits in food and dress and other conveniences. In opinions and matters of emotional value the process was more difficult and took longer. Somehow the little group of young children was an imitation of this world of their parents. The boys were the leading group; they were also in the majority. However, there was a feminine influence of importance. The group might have been characterized as a patriarchal group with strong matriarchal features. This character in the group appeared, for instance, in teasing games. One scene occurred on the playground regularly. The group of girls would rush high up on the square ladder and take a stand against the boys. Then they would start out in a kind of chant, as, for instance, “I know your girl friend.” This was answered by the boys in a similar demonstration of group chanting, but rather weakly. The girls were more spirited in this kind of verbal fighting. These enunciations were strongly inspired by sex group feelings. The awareness of the differences of their roles was constantly present. The actual interest in sex was much more in the background in this group than might be expected. It would be hard to determine how far these boys and girls were following a pattern of behavior observed by them at home; it would be difficult to discern if a more modern spirit had started to influence them.

Patterns of power can often be distinguished in the attitudes of children in their games. Sometimes traditional and personal patterns seem to be closely connected, as in the girls' attempts to dominate the boys by means of verbal aggression. In fights among the children the traditional habits were interwoven with patterns of power. There existed a traditional role of cursing in this group, as a preparation for the fight, preceding the actual fighting, and sometimes replacing it. The attacker not ready to fight, or perhaps more ready to withdraw, would start to curse his adversary. In this cursing he embraced the entire family of the enemy, often mentioning the mother specifically, very seldom the father. This was apparently a display of strength used by the attacker. It was traditionally received with some expression of horror by the attacked enemy and by the group. The children were like the chorus in a classical play. Hardly ever was the group found on the side of the one who was using bad words. Often they turned to the teacher with complaints about him, and they appeared to be more horrified when a girl assumed this role. The roles, however, changed frequently. The child who had just seemed to be horrified by the use of the forbidden words would use them himself in an impersonation of a powerful role.

Almost as in classical versions of times past, the pattern of child and hero seemed to be interwoven: so Athena in Homer's *Iliad* stepped unseen behind Achilles and admonished him "not to draw his sword now, but to use bad words to his heart's content."

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These informal observations on group experience were intended to bring out once more some facts well known to the psychologist and educator. In working with a group of children it is important to recognize and to know as well as possible the problem child in the group. In crucial situations it may be vital to establish a purposeful cooperation of all agencies interested in the individual child. Finally some of the difficulties which may be encountered in the organization of group life are touched upon. To anticipate difficulties may prevent discouragement and failure. In understanding group problems and developing group techniques observation must guide the teacher.