

Chapter 5

PERSONALITY

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The years from 5 to 12 were described by Freud as the “latency period”, the part of a child’s life when strong infantile sexual impulses are to some extent mastered, and so remain latent till re-awakened in the bodily and emotional flowering of adolescence. But the repression of infantile sexuality and the control of primitive aggression is a gradual process, even a painful and reluctant one. And here the child is helped by the mother who wishes him to grow up, who is able to free him; by parents who expect, as his powers develop, increasingly responsible cooperation from him in governing his unruly impulses. He is stimulated by the very frustrations of his situation in the family to explore wider fields. [EDITORS’ NOTE: *A more extensive discussion of this age, also from a psychoanalytic standpoint and with many case vignettes, will be found in Lidz (Chapters 6–8). Supplementary descriptions of personality development, extending beyond the customary realm of the psychoanalytic approach, will be found in Ferguson and in Mussen, Conger & Kagan. These books*

add emphasis to such characteristics as the child's shift from dependence on parents to peers, the development of moral reasoning, achievement and competence motivation, self-esteem, cooperation, and competition.]

In the first years at school teachers act as parent substitutes, not only to shelter and guide the child's inexperience of the world, but also to protect him from the disruption of his own passions. They make it easier for him, too, to identify with parents when they prohibit sexuality, and so to accept the demands of the environment. He makes common cause with others in the same predicament, finds brothers and sisters outside the home, participates in little groups where the children make and enforce their own laws derived from their interpretation of the laws of the adults who have governed them hitherto. The child is sadly deprived if he is isolated from his fellows, over-protected, confined to the prison of his infancy, to a love which grows more unrealizable and stifling.

For during these middle years he is learning, through participation in a social framework, knowledge, skills, values and confidence in his power to create and to repair. He learns that satisfactions may be enhanced by sharing them with members of his group, that jealousies and defeats may be sweetened likewise.

The goal of sexual satisfaction, marriage and children, that in the very young child's fantasy is realizable tomorrow if not today, seems, if admitted at all by the latency child, very far away. During the middle school years interest in children of the opposite sex is often deprecated. But the basic need to come together in love with others and to create together can be satisfied in work and in games. During this period those games are popular which have a definite structure, rules that take over parental sanctions, keep unruly egos in check and serve as a protection for the weak. Through them the child learns to try out various aspects of himself in different roles, to express aggression constructively, to accept failure with a good grace, to find allies to strengthen his position, to share success and the responsibility of authority.

During these years friendships with other children assume increasing importance. A child may choose companions because of mutual interests and prowess. His interests may be greatly influenced by the friends he makes. Apparently unlikely friendships

occur where each child expresses for the other attributes that he is unable to develop or to experience within his own personality: the athlete may join with the scholar, the successful pretty girl unaccustomed to, yet secretly fearing, defeat with the insignificant little mouse who vicariously enjoys success through her friend. Groups may form in which certain children fit into roles which express the needs of the others: the class dunce who conveniently carries the dullness of his companions, the naughty boy whose brushes with authority are regarded with gleeful disapproval by his more cowardly or conscientious friends. Children, as individuals and as groups, have their heroes and heroines who personify their aspirations. The sophistication and health of any little group can be judged fairly accurately by the personality of the leader.

It would be naive indeed to expect to be able to judge, or adequately to influence, the course of a child's development in the latency period by superficial external behavioristic criteria and recommendations. Should children paint more, or play more team games? Are "baddies and goodies" films and plays to be encouraged? Should groups of children make models of Everest, or should they compete in running races; should they hoard stamps or collect train numbers? Are the docile children better adjusted, or are the rebels in better shape? The demand for neatly typed categories and for a syllabus of life activities forgets that each child is one child, unique; and that all activities are necessary to all children. The answer is yes to everything. The advantages to society and to the individual are reciprocal. The social experience which the repression of sexual impulses makes possible, indeed enforces if the child is to grow at all, strengthens his power to cooperate and to discipline himself, in that it gives it a motive and reward; and this strengthening confidence relieves the inner tensions of the child. Yet it is tempting to overvalue the external evidence of adjustment and to underestimate the importance to society as well as to the individual child of the richness and harmony of the inner life.

With this in mind I propose to consider further the modes by which the latency child acquires his values, strives to achieve strength and integrity and to resolve the guilt which is part of being human.

The two great needs of the growing child, as of the adult, are to feel confident that he is alive, able to create, and that he is strong enough to take care of the people and things that he loves, both as they are in the outer world and as they exist in his mind. He needs to prove that his impulses to love and make are strong enough to repair some of the damage caused, in fact or fantasy, by his impulses to destroy and negate; for from the beginning of life, pain and frustration from within and without call forth such impulses. Frightened of his own aggression, the infant attributes it to whatever thwarts his will, thereby increasing its formidableness, from which he may retreat by annihilating his perception of it. Thus he creates fancied enemies, unreal projections: but in children, as in adult life, real dangers may creep up while we wrestle with ghosts.

An infant, if he is normally fortunate in his parents and in his own endowment, learns by repeated experiences of love and care how to love and care for others, and begins to distinguish between his own angry emotions and the hostile impingements of the outer world. With some recognition of dawning responsibility for his own destructiveness, he begins to realize that this is sometimes directed against the very person whom he loves and who both cherishes and frustrates him.

A little boy who at the age of 2 will often say spontaneously and affectionately "Sorry mummy", following outbursts of temper, may already, at the age of 7 months, be observed to check his impulse to bite the breast, after he has already done so, and felt his mother flinch. Thus guilt is born early in the infant, derived from the conflict between his love and hate directed toward the first person who has cared for him. It may spur the child on to reclaim the wastes of his hatred by love and reparation, or, when this is not possible, unconsciously to seek situations where he will be punished to appease a vengeful guilty conscience.

If his infantile fantasied omnipotent attacks on the mother have not been too violent and sustained, if they have been contained and humanized by maternal empathy and understanding, the very primitive retaliatory conscience created by them can be largely modified by experience. The bad figures of the fairy tales—typical personifica-

tions of this conscience—ferocious monsters, wicked step-mothers, dogs with saucer eyes, recede into the background of daily life and dreams. Unwarrantable retribution still plays its part in the sanctions of the playground:

Tell tale tit,
Your tongue shall be slit,
And every dog about the place
Shall have a little bit.

The 10 year old girl in tears because she has quarrelled with her best friend may actually feel abandoned by all her world and left naked to her enemies. But if she is able to find in herself a primary good experience of a secure and understanding person, she is better able to stand alone when need be and hold to her principles even if they happen to be unpopular with her friend or group. On the other hand, if she has wronged her friend, this secure internal core helps her to admit it and make amends.

Successes that are achieved too much on the basis of competition and at the expense of others build up a precarious self-confidence that is always liable to be assailed by the ghosts of the bodies over whom the triumph has been won, or to be destroyed by defeat. Such persecutory guilt is often at the base of sudden inexplicable failure. Thus James, an 11 year old boy, was referred for psychotherapy some months after the death of an elder brother, because of dramatic deterioration in hitherto excellent school work. When he related a nightmare about Hamlet's father's ghost it gradually emerged how his previous application and success had been strongly motivated by envious wishes to supplant his father (whom he consciously loved and admired) and his elder brother. The death of the latter had accentuated his unconscious guilt about the omnipotence of his destructive wishes, and inhibited the expression of his ambitions lest his father too should be swept out of the way in fact as well as fantasy. Failure in learning and in social adaptation may of course in some cases be invited by the overestimation of a child's capacity, by the school, or by unrealistically ambitious parents. In James' case,

for instance, the hopes that the parents had entertained for the elder boy were then all invested in the younger and proved an additional and too heavy responsibility for him to carry.

On the other hand, parents who expect too little, who "baby" the child and do not encourage him to stretch toward his capacity, do not strengthen his faith in his ability to grow. Similarly abdication of parental authority, with idealization of the value of free expression of aggression, does not help children to evaluate realistically, and to take charge of their disruptive tendencies.

Solid achievement in skills and learning, in cooperative living with family, class and friends, prepares the child to face the stress of re-emerging sexuality at puberty, and to enjoy the unparalleled promise of adventure and fulfilment as an adult which then comes within his grasp. The building of this achievement in latency years depends upon the child's success in mastering within himself the omnipotent infant whose unrealistic ambitions would disrupt society. Yet, in the unconscious, nothing is finally relinquished: the infant is in us all, who sees the earth clad in the splendor of his desires and distorted by his terrors of the dark. Too severe a repudiation of the infantile part of himself leads in the latency child to division within the self. Such division may be typically exemplified in the impoverishment of imagination by an over-intensification of all the normal defenses against primitive anxieties, defenses which over-emphasize perception and control of external objects and stifle the spontaneous expression of emotion. The ostracized infantile part of the personality remains then undeveloped by the success of the growing child, and when reactivated at puberty may burst forth uncontrollably, or be perceived by the more efficient, rational part of the personality as such a threat that its suppression is redoubled and the adolescent is deprived of that reacquaintance with infantile emotion, the sources of anxiety and delight that are essential for the development of a rich maturity. If on the other hand infantile sexuality and aggression remain so much to the fore throughout the childhood years that they prevent any organized latency period, thereby interfering with organized work and play, the child is prevented from developing that experience in managing his environment and his impulses that is essential if he is to be able to weather adolescent storms.