

# Peller, Lili, E., Incentives to Development and Means of Early Education

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## INCENTIVES TO DEVELOPMENT AND MEANS OF EARLY EDUCATION

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"Hitherto education has only set itself the task of controlling, or, it would be more proper to say, of suppressing the instincts. The results have been by no means gratifying, . . . Nor has any one inquired by what means and at what cost the suppression of the inconvenient instincts has been achieved. Supposing now that we substitute another task for this one, and aim instead at making the individual capable of becoming a civilized and useful member of society with the least possible sacrifice of his own activity." (5)

### I.

What are the effective means of early education? Wide disagreement as to the answer will be found among different schools of thought. Education is emerging from an empirical to a scientific discipline. When we find it hard to define basic concepts in education, we may turn to parallel areas in medicine in order to gain a frame of reference.

The function of therapy is to initiate, support and/or accelerate the healing process. As medical science progresses, the means of therapy necessarily change. In his diaries, kept during the epidemic of yellow fever towards the close of the eighteenth century in Philadelphia, Benjamin Rush accuses himself because he is unable to make the rounds of all afflicted who need blood-letting. Today we know that his qualms of conscience were unnecessary, because the blood-letting actually undermined the resistance of patients. If Dr. Rush had smoked his pipe with greater leisure, or slept an hour longer, more people might have had a chance to survive the fever.

The function of early education is to initiate, support and/or accelerate developmental processes leading from child- to adult-hood. Means of education considered of central importance yesterday, may be considered unnecessary or harmful today.

A specific educational measure or experience is frequently considered all-important in causing adjustment or maladjustment. As our case material broadens, emphasis may shift from a specific incident to a general condition. The father who remembers the spanking he incurred after stealing apples as a young lad attributes his development into a law-abiding citizen to this well-remembered incident. It may not be easy to persuade him of the possibility that he grew up to be honest mainly because he lived with, and was loved and cared for by honest parents. The corporal punishment which was comparatively harmless in his case may have under changed social conditions a humiliating effect that makes it dangerous.

In the early days of psychoanalysis the psychic trauma occurring once and suddenly was considered the cause of neurotic development. The search for the spectacular trauma has today been replaced by a patient and undramatic unravelling of early tensions and unbearable deprivations. Other changes in causal thinking are just appearing on the horizon. In many case histories of neurotic or delinquent maladjustment the emphasis is still placed on what the neurotic parents *did*. Yet we know that even if parents have insight on an intellectual level and do not *do* anything harmful to the child, but are highly neurotic, the child has but a small chance of normal development.

A historical perspective of changes in educational theory enables us to see in what direction we are moving today.

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#### IV.

##### *The School of Psychoanalysis*

The child's physical growth is determined by inner factors. He himself indicates his need for food, exercise, rest, etc., and modern child care considers it its main task to answer these requests. Looking back only twenty or thirty years we realize that child care then tried much more to *shape* the child; this trend becomes even clearer if we go back a hundred years. The occasional cutting of the sublingual ligament to facilitate speech, tight swaddling clothes to force the child to stretch his knees, a contraption on wheels in which he was suspended by his arms and forced to "walk" when crawling was his desire, daily painful "cleaning" of the tender and easily injured inner tissue of his mouth,—all these preceded the rigid habit training. These are examples picked at random. Their common denominator is to change the child, to accelerate his development.

In modern child care our foremost goal is to interfere as little as possible with developmental trends. A recent attempt to do so concerns the skin of the neonate: since the days of antiquity midwives have carefully removed the vernix caseosa. Aldrich suggests that it be left untouched. The whitish smear is absorbed within forty-eight hours. Nature's handiwork sometimes appears sloppy and in need of improvement, yet when we step back and observe instead of rushing into action, the rather unpleasant-looking paste disappears without our help, leaving the skin excellently soft and clean.

While the main current in modern child care is to study the child's natural development and to follow along with ancillary measures, there are aspects of child care which certainly cannot be brought under this heading. Take the numerous inoculations against children's diseases: they have no counterpart in nature, they cause discomfort and real suffering to the baby—yet they are considered essential to good child care.

A good deal of the child's early intellectual and emotional progress as well as his physical development is maturational. Yet the greater part of his swift intellectual growth and of his ethical development does not follow the same model as his physical growth.

According to the psychoanalytic view powerful stimuli from the social world come into alliance with his innate tendency to develop.

There is nothing automatic about the child's emotional, intellectual and ethical progress. The main factors in his early development are his early attachment to his mother, his oedipal attachment to his parents, and the sequelae of this bond.

The child relinquishes childish satisfactions in order to please his mother. ". . . all (the children's) play is influenced by the dominant wish of their time of life: viz., to be grown-up and to be able to do what grown-ups do." (6) This wish is present in every child, but its power rises and falls with the depth of the child's attachment to an adult. In our culture the incentive to give up certain forms of behavior comes from the adult,—and from him comes the image which the child wants to resemble, but the metamorphosis itself is carried through by the child; no one else can do it for him. It is not true that the child is inert, while the adult is active, pulling out the weeds and implanting sundry virtues instead.

The simile of the gardener who "bends the twig" is not just a romantic phrase, old-fashioned and innocuous. It stands for a philosophy of education that is still widespread. It should be replaced by attitudes more in agreement with newer insight into the child's development. The gardener cares for an organism inferior to himself. Parent and child need deeply to realize that though separated by age, maturity and experience, *they are peers*. The parent who lacks this conviction will either be despotic or will treat the child as a toy or puppy. The latter is more likely to happen in our enlightened era, yet it is almost equally harmful. The child who fails to anticipate his future role has no motivation to identify with the adult.

The child's early attachment to his mother or mother-figure provides a powerful leverage for his education. In comparison with the child's later oedipal attachment its effect is limited. The baby's attachment to his mother changes but little. He might be compared to a person who likes to go about in an old, torn, and dirty garment, but has learned to throw a clean garment over it when visitors come, and moreover has acquired increasing skill in looking out for the approach of the visitors.

The conflicting emotions of the later oedipal attachment stir the child far more deeply. He goes through many storms, yet we should not be sorry for him, for without this apprenticeship in human relations he could never join the adult group. From these conflicts results the

ardent wish to grow up and the first vague outline of his moral self. Their outcome determines his ability to form lasting and sincere attachments and spurs his intellectual development. In short, the oedipal passions, the structural changes which they initiate in the child's mind and their personal variables set the compass for his development in the next years, and, to a certain extent, for all his life. All the other known incentives of development seem small when compared with the oedipal attachment.

According to psychoanalytic thinking the individual undergoes several deep-reaching reorganizations before maturity is reached. The Sturm and Drang of puberty has been well known since Stanley Hall's studies. It took psychoanalysis to discover that the turmoil of early childhood surpasses it. The child experiences love, hate, jealousy, hope, despair, triumph and guilt in great intensity and rapid succession. Intellectually he wrestles with the riddles of sex, birth and death, although he is in no way equipped to understand them, even if the correct information is supplied. In the myth Oedipus solves the riddle of the sphinx, but the child can neither solve nor bypass it.

At the climax of the oedipal phase he strives for physical love satisfaction, for insight far beyond his years and for the exclusive possession of his love object. He attempts the downright impossible with the uniqueness of purpose characteristic of his age—and he fails.

The attachment to his parents survives this collapse and his desire to be like them is tremendously strengthened. So also is his interest in intellectual pursuits. He has tried a short-cut and failed. He is now eager to travel the long road and thus he is now ready for education in the academic sense of the word. He wants to learn and to acquire skills and is highly sensitive to prestige and status. A large share of his energy goes to pursuits unrelated to instinctual satisfactions. Emotional problems continue to hold a priority on his energy over intellectual concerns, but under favorable circumstances the most stirring emotional problems are temporarily solved as he enters latency.

To put it very simply: part of his early aspirations must fail, while the other part must be preserved. For his favorable development one is as indispensable as the other. His oedipal aspirations must collapse, but he must salvage his tender attachment to his parents, his admiration for them. He must be certain that they are fond of him and that he is a needed member of the family. It is highly desirable

that he continue to live with them, day in day out, and that there is a wide range of shared interests. All these are incentives and aids to his development. The directly sexual part of his ambitions crashes—to this blow (in reality, it is a long series of blows) the child can adjust. But because this frustration and because confused feelings of guilt are inescapable, we, his educators, should keep other tensions and deprivations at a minimum. He cannot adjust to repeated changes in his parental figures.

In regard to the control of instincts the difference between his person three years ago and his present self is greater than the difference between a member of a primitive tribe and highly civilized man. This change was effected not by punishments and rewards. Cruelty has partly been transformed into concern for others, love of dirt into appreciation of cleanliness, the desire to exhibit his naked body into a sense of modesty. If one may use a simile, one may say that the fervor and passion of the oedipal conflicts has melted his early ego and forged a new structure. In these deeply revolutionary processes the child needs all the help which his attachment to stable and loving elders can provide.

Judging from the current literature of child welfare, the policy of preserving the child's emotional tie to his parents or parent-substitutes even under most trying circumstances, is being widely accepted. But how do we account for the fact that this need is more imperative than all the other needs of childhood? Outside the psychoanalytic school it can be explained only with the view that family ties are sacred. But as the child grows older a rupture of family ties becomes less harmful to him. Does this mean that family bonds become less sacred as the child approaches adolescence? If we take the oedipal situation for more than a figure of speech, then we have the explanation for his inability to advance in his education if his early attachment is broken several times: under normal conditions he already loses so much that he cannot bear losing more.

Leniency in early education is in various degrees practised by all pre-industrial societies and was postulated in our society long before psychoanalytic teaching was widespread, by educators such as Pestalozzi, Froebel, and Dewey. Permissiveness should be the keynote of early education, not because the young child cannot stand strain and frustrations, but because *inevitable* blows and sacrifices make heavy inroads

on his resistance<sup>1</sup>. It may be said that this argumentation is idle and that only the permissive attitude is valid. However it seems to this writer that sometimes teachers waste their efforts trying to spare the child trials that should not and cannot be put out of his way; and that present day nursery education is honeycombed with sentimentalism. A child may be struggling with a piece of clothing, and the teacher's hands may be itching to help him; yet as long as he asks for no help there is no need to run to his rescue. A physician treats a man whom he knows to be frail in one way and prescribes a different regime to another who is strong and sturdy but recovering from a recent grave illness.

## V.

Fenichel identifies as ". . . the basic means of all education . . . direct threat, a mobilization of the fear of losing love and the promise of special rewards." He defines "what education fundamentally desires . . . good behavior not only through fear of opposition from the grown-ups (who can after all, be deceived) but good behavior for its own sake . . ." (3, p. 285). As indicated above, the present author disagrees here, although she is in agreement with the main thesis of Fenichel's paper. Good behavior is too insignificant a goal of education. Good behavior is possible without initiative, without courage, without intellectual acumen, yet every society must expect these qualities in at least some of its subgroups or individuals. It seems doubtful whether good behavior includes the ability to form deep and lasting attachments, or the ability to enjoy mature sexual relations. To be kind and courteous, even towards those who cannot report on us, to be clean and industrious, to resist temptations even if there is no one to watch us—this is the essence of good behavior.

Freud defines as the task of education: "to make the individual capable of becoming a civilized and useful member of society with the least possible sacrifice of his own activity" (5). This purports "what education fundamentally desires" with more vision than Fenichel's statement, and it points to the two basic mistakes education can commit: failure to socialize the child, or the sacrifice of too much of the

<sup>1</sup>. A similar thought has been expressed by Whitehead (12): "It is not true that the easier subjects should precede the harder. . . . Some of the hardest must come first because nature so dictates, and because they are essential to life. The first intellectual task that confronts an infant is the acquirement of spoken language. What an appalling task, the correlation of meanings with sounds!"

child's spontaneous drive. Yet "good behavior" seems compatible with such a sacrifice.

For educators of the "old school" good behavior might be acceptable as the goal. Education for them is primarily restraint, achieved by external regulatory means. According to them intelligence is not connected with the fate of the child's emotions. Intellectual abilities are inborn and their development depends upon intellectual stimuli. In the sexual field the main concern is to bring the individual to the point where he will be unlikely to infringe upon moral laws and conventions. Punishments and rewards are regulatory measures and as such are able to bring about an increasing degree of restraint. But restraint, *even internalized restraint, can never be the main goal of education based on a dynamic theory of personality.*

There are limited areas where the child comes to modify his behavior on account of recurrent punishment. To take a time-honored example: he learns not to touch the hot stove because of the pain he has experienced. He learns to substitute caution for unreined curiosity. While such substitution and the prompt, rather mild, consistent displeasure that follows actions which he must learn to avoid, works in issues remote from his instinctual needs, it can never make the child travel the enormous distance he has to cover in order to become an adult. The displeasure which the child experiences may be a "natural" consequence of his action, or the educator may introduce it in order to make him change his behavior, sometimes to protect the child from serious harm (11). But in matters which lie in the path of direct instinctual satisfaction the punishment would have to be so painful that the child would be more bewildered than warned.

Threats and rewards are regulatory mechanisms effective in bringing about minor adjustments. The view that they can build the character structure which makes an adult out of a child, seems a replica of Lamarckian thinking. Lamarck explained the evolution of species by external, environmental regulation. If an organ is useful in a given environment it is retained and developed, if it is useless or harmful, it atrophies. The environment thus rewards or penalizes actions and their carriers, and thus creates new species. According to modern biology external regulatory influences could never lead to a new species. *Creative processes, mutations, are postulated,* although so far mutations producing new species have not been observed. Biology has

thrown old concepts overboard, although for the time being there are no observational data supporting the new concept.

In the genesis of the adult from the child external pressure initiates many changes and regroupings within the child, but it cannot enforce them. In this case the *creative* factor is the child's attachment to his parents. It is this attachment, and not external pressure that generates the wish to relinquish childish satisfactions.<sup>2</sup>

Fenichel also states that "children (need) very deeply . . . love and affection from the persons of their environment."<sup>3</sup> This is correct but too general. The child's greatest need is for love from the persons to whom he is attached, and not merely from persons who chance to be near him. "Persons of his environment", his teacher or nurse or a kind-hearted aunt may offer this love amply to the child—yet he profits but little. We can assume that many foster-mothers appearing in the history of disturbed children have offered love and affection to no avail.

For the older child emphasis shifts from attachment to identification with the person in authority. The youngster will keep rules if he likes the person who gave them, understands why they are necessary, and is given a chance to support them actively. His intelligence must be stirred, his love and loyalty activated, and whatever helps in this is an important tool of education. This is true according to psychoanalytic thinking. According to traditional education the child who misbehaves should be punished harder and harder until he reforms.

<sup>2</sup> It is tragic that Otto Fenichel cannot counter the above views. I want at least to add one remark, which is in line with his way of thinking. It concerns reaction-formations. The child who is especially fond of exhibiting his naked body may become especially modest; the child who is exceedingly cruel may develop deep and broad sympathies with those who suffer. This reaction-formation is initiated by the disapproval of a beloved adult, but its strength is derived from and will be proportional to the strength of the original drive. This is the classical view. On second thought we may conceive another possibility: it may be that the strength of the reaction-formation is determined by the differential which the child senses between his desire and the wishes of his beloved adults. In this case a child living in a highly prudish group or in a society abhorring uncleanness would develop stronger reaction-formations than if he were living with the identical instinctual equipment in a less "civilized" group. External factors may have a greater weight than the classical psychoanalytic view assumed.

<sup>3</sup> In a joking vein we may make the corollary statement: "Adults need love and affection from the young children of their environment." From personal experience I should say that for every child who asks to be kissed or taken on the lap, there are at least three adults who want to invade the reserve of a three-year-old and bestow unsolicited affection upon him. Children are highly selective in their quest for affection.

"What shall I do when I have tried every device that I can think of, and will fail?" (asks the young teacher). There is no explicit formula that will cover each specific case, but one general suggestion may be given: *get order*. Drop everything else, if necessary, until order is secured. . . . Pile penalty upon penalty for misdemeanors and let the 'sting' of each penalty be double that of its predecessor. Tire out the recalcitrants if you can gain your end in no other way." (1, p. 96.)

The attitude reflected in this old quotation is hardly found today in our schools, yet it still works great harm in some reform schools. The child without a bond to anyone cannot be reformed by punishment. Its only effect may be that he learns to use more cunning in reaching his goals and that he stores up resentment which may precipitate him into a criminal career. Has the education of the youngsters who fill the reform schools failed because they did not receive enough threats and rewards, or was some other means of education missing in their early history? It is far less harmful for a mature person to have promiscuous and shifting relations than for a young child. The personal bond leads a child towards a socialized existence; there is no "Ersatz" for it.

Anna Freud's work in the residential nurseries provides us with a fitting example. In the beginning all the children (about twenty-four) were cared for by all the nurses (about six). Later it was tried to group children and adults into "families". A very stormy period followed. Fights among the children multiplied, crying became more frequent, far more jealousy was observed; yet soon ". . . the state of frenzy subsided and gave way to a quieter, more stable and comforting attachment. At the same time the children began to *develop in leaps and bounds*.<sup>6</sup> The most gratifying effect was that several children who had seemed hopeless as far as the training for cleanliness was concerned, suddenly started to use the pot regularly and effectively . . . All the children in the group have greatly enlarged their vocabulary . . ." (4, p. 160.)

This may well be called an *experimentum crucis*. The same children, the same physical set-up, the same adults. No doubt they had love and affection for the children before and after the grouping in families. They showed approval and disapproval before and after. Yet after the establishment of the personal tie, the children's education made remarkable progress.

6. Italics of this author.

Those who attach greatest relevance to threat and reward make the implicit assumption that the instinct of self-preservation is stronger than any other desire. The child will comply with our demands in order to avert harm to himself. According to psychoanalytic thinking the need for self-preservation, though powerful, does not always rate priority. Under certain constellations a wayward adolescent will not be motivated towards "mending his ways" by increasingly severe and painful punishments. He rather develops an increasing ability to "take it" (plus a number of distorted attitudes like bitterness, masochism, hatred, etc.).

We are all familiar with the young child who is offered good food, yet in spite of his hunger does not eat well because the conflicts with his mother have been shifted to the food she is giving him. He is undernourished although offered tasty food at every meal. Here too emotional conflicts push self-preservation into the background.

Threats and rewards are the main means of education where education is conceived as external restraint. In some areas, such as in habit training, they can be important incentives. However, mechanical training, regardless of the child's understanding of what is being demanded of him, does not lead toward emotional maturity. The child's insight is as much a means of education as his mother's rewarding smile. On each age level a humanized education makes fullest use of the child's critical abilities.

In conclusion we return to the simile of the twig: the elastic young twig is bent into a certain position and held there by a cord and stick; after a year or two this support may be removed; the twig will not snap back, but continue of "its own" to grow as it was bent. External pressure has been "internalized". This well-known process in *horticulture* does not tell us anything about the child. To understand his way of internalizing we must consider his deep and contradicting emotions, his intellectual power, his fears, his ability for keen observation as well as for denying unpleasant facts, his reactions to frustrations, his anticipation of his adult role. Without this complex basis of reaction the child's development would not differ essentially from the results of animal training, and the child would not undergo a transmutation into an ethical and social being.

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