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Understanding Children

AS CHILDREN GROW, they experiment with various facets of their inborn psychology which is expressing itself, establishing its own authority, and creating its own ego manifestation. Each child has a certain approach which is part of his or her innate behaviour pattern. As children progress, they try out new behaviour patterns, which are not an intrinsic part of them, but which they adopt because of their love or respect for someone else, or as a way of coping with fear and uncertainty about those around them. These new habits stay. It might be only for two minutes in a day that a child manifests the behaviour and yet the subconscious is ready to absorb it and turn it into a lifestyle pattern.

A child is prompted by a physical, emotional or mental stimulus from outside or within, which is translated into a behaviour pattern. This may be either approved or disapproved. When there is disapproval,

children may establish that habit as a permanent part of their behaviour because it annoys people and they are happy to see people annoyed; or they may try to achieve the joy of seeing people happy with them by disciplining themselves and not repeating the habit.

Habits are hard to lose and hard to replace. Therefore we need to observe our children and their habits to see what they are consistently manifesting.

Prenatal influences

It is important to realize that even when the child is not yet born, the intake that is taking place in the consciousness is far greater than we believe. As the embryo matures, the intake becomes much greater, through nervous impulses, sound vibrations, emotional vibrations or through transference of thought processes. The mother needs to be very careful in her own attitudes to the various pressures she is under to prevent transferring them to the infant at such a very early stage.

The unconscious development in the child is largely unseen and unknown to modern day psychologists and psychiatrists, although more and more is becoming understood as time progresses. By contrast, the philosophical and psychological thinking in India over the past 2,000 years accepted this as an important part of the development of a child. In traditional families, long ago, when it became known that a woman was pregnant, everything was done to keep her happy and in a state of well-being, emotionally and otherwise, knowing full well the significance of this time for both mother and child.

Early childhood influences

At an early age, a child's tendencies verge on being purely instinctive. The main basis for their behaviour is self-interest. Overlaid on this, a child displays tendencies inherited and absorbed from parents and grandparents, which in turn are overlapped by other factors as the child grows.

Initially, the child just wants love, attention, care and comfort. He or she wants to be recognized as an individual, to be the centre of attention, to be entertained and given importance. This is the result of the trauma around conception and birth, various domestic dramas and pressures, and reactions to the newborn child from family and others. The fuss and drama filters through to the unconscious in the child and creates demands that flow from there.

A young child is very impressionable and has both passive and active natures but, due to environmental and parental influences, one or the other nature dominates. Children mature to youth displaying the ego-base from which they unconsciously operate. When this ego-base and children's demands conflict with the lifestyle of the family, children may become disappointed, disillusioned and feel rejected. On the other hand, when these demands are entertained, children may assume more than is appropriate, become an nuisance and increasingly unlovable to those around them.

And yet children are inherently lovable. The child's need for love, care and attention is quite unconscious. If a child seems to be unlovable, it is usually due to adult

influence. A child requires a consistently positive input to release an inherent capacity to give and to love. Only with this opportunity and input does the child come to be seen as lovable by others. If not distorted by poor upbringing, the child releases the rare gift not only of joy, but of compassion itself.

The Child's Innateness

The child who is brought up to express his or her inherent potential is one who gives others joy. Such a child naturally expresses a deep feeling of gratitude to the parents and others who have influenced his or her growth. In addition to the expression of the child's inner goodness, innateness relates to the gifts and potential children have to excel in some area of knowledge or creativity

Some children have the gift of music, others art, yet others a scientific understanding or a capacity for literature. If a child is allowed to develop his or her innateness and, for example, the child innately has a talent for singing, then the expression of the child's emotional development is tied up with singing. Therefore security comes from singing, self-esteem comes from singing, values, morality and principles of living come from singing. So the child expresses his or her own beauty and inherentness in singing. It could be arts, crafts, or any subject of study, whether geography, mathematics or history it does not matter, except that the child excels and in excelling finds self-respect.

The more positive a child becomes, the happier the child feels within him- or her-self. Progress occurs. This progress stops when an expectancy not of his or her own making is imposed on the child. Reluctantly, the child submits. But the parent pays the price through the child's misbehaviour and, at the same time, the child is robbed of future peace and happiness and society has lost yet another good citizen. Consequently, parents must study children thoroughly to understand their inherent direction. Then the children will do well, and the parents and their children will always share a warm and lasting relationship.

Fitting into society

Unfortunately, our present day system of living determines that thousands of children never find their potential or inherentness. The fear of society is this: supposing every child wants to be an artist or a musician, who is going to operate the computers? The whole system supporting the commercial world could break down. So those in power, those who are at the head of these commercial enterprises, cannot afford the luxury of allowing educational reforms in this direction.

By the time children are twenty-five or thirty they forget what their innateness is all about. So they take up hobbies to fill the gap (the loss of innateness) and participate in the commercial world. They grow up to be parents themselves with a lot of resentment and anger because they were not allowed to find the joy they thought was available and could have found.

Letting children express their interests

It is best to let children find their own way, by providing alternatives for expression. A girl who likes music may start with the violin, but end up playing the guitar. A parent should be happy so long as she is able to express her own self in a peaceful way. Painters may try crayons, oils and so on, until they find the medium which suits them and which frees their expression. Why say, "This is the way it must be done"?

Let your children grow within a framework of discipline, but also let them pursue their own interests. In the later teenage years, wise parents support their children's strongest wishes, whether it be to pursue subjects at school, to go out and work or to try to excel at sports - whatever they really have their hearts set on, so long as it is a positive activity and outlet. If parents cling rigidly to their idea of what the child must do, the child will not only not succeed but he or she will never lose the resentment for having been squashed. Then the parents will no longer have a son or daughter - the relationship will be gone forever.

A common mistake in parenting, which is usually a facet of parents wanting their children to grow up too quickly, is a distorted approach to competition. Parents may be anxious to see their child develop the 'killer instinct' and learn how to win at any cost. In fact, children do need to be competitive - but with themselves. By taking up the challenge of improving themselves, they will do better. But when parents try to push them to

compete against others and put a high premium on their results, the children may develop a fear complex. The irony is that the child who comes first and the child who comes last both develop fear and anxiety if their parents are driving them to win. The losers fear they will always be a failure, while the winners worry how long they can stay at the top.

From time to time in sports and other areas, we see cases where parents have pushed children to an extreme to achieve gold medals and various other types of recognition, and the children have only finished up with vanity and superficiality due to their achievements, having lost touch with the joy of simply expressing what was inherent in them. I have seen cases where children have expressed their own innateness in a particular field and the parents have wanted to capitalize on this in order to obtain personal kudos by associating with their child's achievements. In such cases, they tend to exert tremendous pressure to make their children achieve success and obtain the highest accolades. Instead of the children's lives and achievements being an expression of joy, they become clouded with resentment, even if they do get to the top. The children did not really want to go so fast and miss out on so many other things. These children have lost the joy of their own expression and innateness.

Parents may be oblivious to the fact that the pressure they have put on their children to achieve will eventually go against them. In revenge, a child may ignore the parent in public, even display outright

rejection. At times, the child will even deliberately fail in exams or at whatever he or she is trying to achieve so that the parent cannot take the kudos or receive any respect through the child's achievement.

How to nurture your child's innateness

What then, are the conditions that will bring out innateness rather than stifle it? - love, accommodation, allowing freedom of expression, guiding, offering alternatives and encouragement, giving children alternatives to work with and having patience to allow them to grow. By backing up our children so that they feel our support and love, we allow them to experience and learn through each stage of growth. Every new activity will be experienced to the full and one of these activities may become a lifelong interest. In any case, the bond between parents and children will always be there and improving all the time, despite the emotional ups and downs of the teenage years.

Happiness is the key, not achievements. For example, some children do not understand Maths in Year 8 at school, and yet we may feel they must do well. To please the teachers, parents and the system, children do try to solve problems, more out of fear, so that they succeed to some degree. Such success unfortunately never lasts. If there is a real problem in relating to Maths, the child will have a much worse problem the following year and in each successive year until he or she finally does an about-face and says, "I don't want to study Maths. I want to do something different." So, why did we bother the child

with Maths? The child should be left alone and given what he or she wants, rather than being forced to do Maths well beyond his or her level of competence and then forced to change subjects. We would do better for our children if we allowed them to do what really suits them for all of the secondary years - and to have the experience of excelling at it. Wherever the children's interests are, it is our duty to ensure that they achieve their goals happily.

What is required in our community are people who can assess and understand the areas in which children excel and give them appropriate education. This should happen from the age of five or earlier, rather than leaving it until tertiary or upper secondary level, when ten or twelve years may have already been wasted. Society would then be much happier because everybody would be doing what they wanted to do, excelling at what they were doing, and everybody would be more content, more tolerant, less angry, less resentful and, as a result, more genuinely motivated to help each other.

Value Each Child's Uniqueness

Some parents, who are influenced by peer group pressures and by expectations from their own parents, are motivated to avoid looking like a failure in the social circle in which they move. They try to bring up their child in such a way that others will accept him or her, expecting the child to fit a stereotype, rather than independently deciding what is inherent to the child and how the child should develop and grow. However,

growing up in a unique environment with a unique set of parents with their own psychological patterns, the child cannot attain this uniform expectancy. Instead, the child achieves according to his or her competence and capacity.

Each parent therefore must decide what is right for each particular child according to his or her own nature and abilities, rather than feeling that they have to produce an accountant, lawyer, doctor, computer programmer, secretary or whatever else. All parents must decide how they are going to function as families, which principles they are going to base their standards on and how they want to educate their children to find fulfillment and joy in life.

Sometimes it can be hard to know how to give guidance and support without at the same time applying expectation and pressure, so we can be worried about talking to children for fear of creating expectancy. Where do we draw the line? The secret is to allow children to express their positive approaches and not to interfere while this is happening, but when negativity is expressed, it is reasonable to caution them that you do expect them to be positive.

Parents need to be in touch with their own innateness and intuition to be able to assess the capacity of their child. If parents are calm, quiet and relaxed within themselves, they are able to reach the point of knowing. But if they are frustrated and distracted, they are so busy trying to keep themselves afloat that their innateness is not available, much less intuition.

Letting Children Be Children

Parents do not own their children and we should not seek to make them what we would like them to be. A child needs time to be a child; he or she should not be made into a small adult. A child must have time to lose the immaturities of childhood.

Children between the ages of one and four are cute and innocent and may come out with funny tendencies, which are both amusing and entertaining. We respond, and the children feel encouraged to give some small pleasure through the various things they do. When they are five or six they start establishing their individuality and manifesting their little egos - challenging us and matching their wit with ours, arguing and questioning. We do not like it. We feel ourselves challenged, compromised. We then start becoming slightly more dominant and demanding.

Unwittingly, we may feel that we have to make the child obedient and take notice of our authority as a parent and it is here perhaps that the child slowly stops being a child. Then, as the years progress, we place an expectation on the child to behave and perform, loading the child up with various approaches and gadgetry for him or her to show off as a young adult. All this takes away from the time that was meant for them to be children. So, when they grow up and really are young adults, they still behave like children! Many people who are supposedly mature adults, really behave in a childish fashion.

Unfortunately, there is no definition of the word

childhood. A lot of mischief is childhood – spilling milk, throwing food, bringing dirt into the house, being untidy, and so on. We must allow children to enjoy their childhood and not prematurely make them adults. We may not realize it, but every fruit in our garden has gone through its childhood. Every flower has gone through a childhood, and it has bloomed.

Childhood to me represents a state of total joy and happiness at living. A child does not have to make demands or throw tantrums. Children can participate in and experiment with many things without getting into trouble, while we guide them through each stage. The child is enjoying childhood. There is discipline, but it is very subtle. For example, one grandmother nurtured that kind of childhood through her approach to her grandson's misdemeanors. When he was young, he wanted to do many things that were not constructive. For instance, he liked to drag a pot down from her marble table. Watching this, she would softly speak to him, cajole him, distract him and take him away from the pot without allowing him to know he was doing anything wrong. Many times she would quietly move him away from an area where she felt concerned about what he was going to do. Quite often we feel we do not have time for such kindness; she would spend half an hour persuading him away from the pot, yet she did it so beautifully that he never sensed a problem. He was able to enjoy his childhood and today he is very close to his grandmother. If Granny says something he accepts that as the law. She has made herself lovable.