

The Importance of People

Column Editor: Peggy Brogan

Separateness—and Communication

"I CAN TELL you something good," confides four-year-old Wendy to her cousin Madeline. "But you have to promise to keep it under the pillow."

"I promise," agrees Madeline, and a small blonde and a brunette head bend sympathetically toward each other to facilitate the sending and receiving of such an important message.

Wendy and Madeline are engaged in a most basic human learning. Born as are all human beings with ways for reaching out to others and for responding to such reaching out, these girls are actively exploring the freedom-authority relationships involved in the powers of human communication.

Already at four they are engaged in a task difficult even for their grownups—the task of cooperatively communicating about communication. Already they are recognizing that sending a message from one's own inner specificity is not as simple as it sounds. There must be a person to receive such a message—a person who wants to and who is able to receive such a message—a person who will herself move toward the sender to actively take part in creating the conditions necessary for the message safely to cross the separateness between the two girls.

With eight-year-old Gus the problem is more difficult. "You're just lucky I'm not allowed to go in the street," he roars at the conspicuously older and larger attacker with whom

he has been fighting just a moment earlier. And Gus looks hopefully at the space between sidewalk and street which is now separating him and an obviously furious opponent. There is no sympathetic bending of head to meet head in this communication about communication. An interval of silence reinforces the interval of space as Gus anxiously waits to see if the boy in the street will accept his message. He doesn't know what he can count on by way of understanding from this hostile stranger.

And he's not too sure what he can count on in himself by way of communication power. Sometimes his messages reach their destination in ways in which he intends them to. His Mom *does* give him the extra money he needs. His teacher *does* understand that he knows how to figure out arithmetic problems even if he doesn't want to explain how when asked in class. His friend *does* ask him to play after school. But there are other kinds of times too—times when his father thinks he is lazy because he doesn't get better grades in school, when the kids think he is a sissy because he doesn't like to break through the line playing Red Rover.

Even when his rival contemptuously spits toward Gus and walks on down the street, Gus is not too sure what has happened. Intense worried feelings give way to intense feelings of relief,

and as he unfreezes Gus knows only that the threat is over—that this time he is saved.

Timmy and Alan seem almost to share the same inner specificness. Although each boy is new to his primary group and each lives in noticeably different situations, it is interesting how often they are the two boys who manage to climb to the roof of the house where playground toys are stored, who manage to eat their lunch in three gulps and can hardly wait to get to the play yard, who enter wholeheartedly into active exploration of any kind but find time hanging heavy on their hands during the daily quiet work period. And it is interesting how often in togetherness they find themselves in real or self-imposed trouble with the grownups.

"You're just as stinky as all the other

teachers," they announce now to their teacher who is watching them clean up tables and floor which are a mess as the result of a half hour's experimenting with mixing and pouring various substances. "Yeah. What are teachers for? They're supposed to help the kids," they continue to one another without pausing in their wringing out of sponges and mopping.

"No one has asked me for any help," is the remark of their teacher which stops them in their tracks. First looking at her as if to confirm the fact that the words were spoken, the two boys then silently effect a meeting of minds across the space of the classroom as only two friends can. "Okay. You finish the floor and we'll do the tables," they announce in glee, expecting to call her bluff. At first there is uncomfortable giggling and then silence as three

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potential friends set about the job of cleaning up the room together.

Obviously this is a somewhat new communication situation for the boys. They need time to let it sink in, to sort out its significance. Later in the day they seem still to be moving at a wondering, thoughtful pace—perched in their favorite spot on the toy shed roof.

"I think it's time we fixed this old roof up," Timmy suddenly says to Alan. "It's sure a mess," agrees Alan as the two boys climb down and go into the shop to each get a container of nails and a hammer. And for the rest of the afternoon the steady pound of hammers can be heard as each small shingle on the roof receives eight or ten nails calculated by Timmy and Alan as necessary to make it strong.

Helping Children Communicate

How can the grownups help children to learn the meaning of human separateness? How can they free children to learn from one another the problems involved in communicating across it? How can a child be invited to reach from his own inner specificness toward an especially selected other? How can he be helped to know and respond when another is seeking him? How can children be helped consciously to create barriers to further communication when this is necessary to give their life-space form? How can they be helped just as consciously to seek to remove barriers which would confine them within an inadequate world?

Or perhaps we should change the question to ask how can the grownups learn from the children. How can a

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teacher know when a child is reaching toward others—when a particular child in terms of his specificness is reaching toward a particular other? How can a teacher know when a child needs a special other to reach toward? How can the view of teaching which a teacher holds in her mind help her to want to become sensitive to the interpersonal communication patterns of her children? How can she consciously provide for and enjoy freed individual uniqueness as it takes shape in and helps to shape two-way communication in the classroom? How can she know

when being the sender or receiver of messages herself will facilitate and when hamper a new learning?

Children are what they are and become what they become in relating with others who matter to them. What a challenge to teachers who shape the classrooms where sensitive human responding is nurtured—where children (and teachers too!) come to know how important people are to people!

—PEGGY BROGAN, *professional staff, Child Education Foundation, 535 E. 84th Street, New York 28, New York.*

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