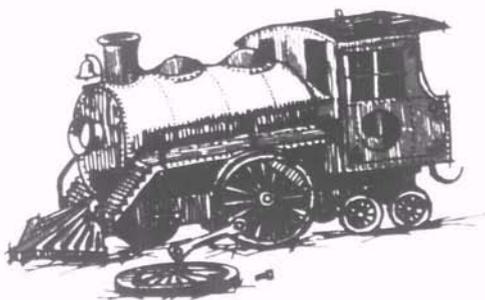


PRESSURES ON THE YOUNG CHILD



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EVERY young child living in any period of time has had to meet and deal with the pressures in his environment. Growth in any human being relies on the ability of the person to find solutions to his problems and to move forward in becoming an increasingly mature person.

Growth requires conflict. Without conflict life would be dull and static. The young child of every environment has the drive and the inner strength to grow. Our recent experiences with the young child of poverty provide an excellent illustration of the ability of children to want to learn even though the child may come from a family in adverse circumstances. One of the great joys of working with the three, four or five year old is that he is an aggressive learner and thus grows. He constantly seeks and strives for growth and thus meets conflict.

Everyone engaged in child rearing needs to recognize the fact that conflict carries constructive possibilities. To deny this proposition is probably to deny that children can be educated.¹

The Young Child's World

If growth requires conflicts, why then are we so concerned with the pressures upon today's young child? What is there about his world that makes pressures a topic discussed in most journals? How much stress and conflict can he undertake and still maintain his equilibrium? Which pressures are realistic and positive and which are limiting and negative? How can we help our young children further develop their inner strengths so they are able to cope² with their world?

There is general disagreement and also lack of agreed upon knowledge on how much pressure should be applied to children. It is undisputed, however, that the

¹ Willard W. Hartup. "Early Pressures in Child Development." *Young Children* May 1965. p. 282.

² Coping: "... the process of developing ways of dealing with new and difficult situations." Lois Barclay Murphy. *The Widening World of Childhood*. New York: Basic Books, 1962. p. 6.

young child is living in a fast paced, rapidly changing, increasingly complex and uncertain world. This world is reflected in our children. It is not uncommon to find the four year old taking tranquilizers, attending sessions with a psychiatrist and talking about "when I go to college."

The rapidly increasing number of emotionally disturbed young children suggests that the child's world is becoming more and more anxiety-laden; yet this may also suggest that we are becoming better able to diagnose disturbances. However, the adult world must be made aware of the undue pressures being pushed on children.³ Overprotection brings on its own conflicts and is not the answer to helping children face their world. The security found in a home with loving parents and realistic demands provides some of the foundation needed for coping.

The changing family itself brings new conflicts in living. David, who is just five years old and has been to nursery school for two years, lives with his working mother and two younger siblings in a high-rise apartment. He has moved twice. He goes to school with 35 other five-year-old children in kindergarten. He has to take the elevator 10 floors to get down to the cement playground.

David has flown in a jet, watched the astronauts blast-off into space, seen many beautiful books, and above all has the love and respect of his parent. Already David has learned he is a worthy person. He can meet the many stresses in his life because he knows the limits and recognizes his strengths. David is not an atypical five year old in 1965. His life is like many others but he has the extra important ingredient of having an unusually knowing and thoughtful parent. Many other children living under these circumstances may not be as fortunate as David.

Judy is an overprivileged suburban child who is loved by her parents but who is caught up in the pressures of status and rush toward early learning. She too goes to kindergarten but with 25 other five year olds. She knows that she is in the slow reading group and this upsets her parents. She has learned that the challenges of school mean defeat in the eyes of the adults she wants to please. Judy is learning fast that failure is an uncomfortable and insurmountable conflict.

Judy, too, is not atypical. Were the demands of reading too much for her at this time? Was the preoccupation of her parents with her success in this area too overwhelming? What had happened in her previous learning to justify her inability to cope with this problem? Was love only given to her on a "pay as you go" basis? How will the many Judy's meet future conflicts in learning and living?

Relieving Pressures

Each child in his own way, from his own background of experience will meet pressures with either assurance or defeat. The very experience of attending nursery school or kindergarten can be an expansion of or a limitation upon the child's ability to cope with his environment. Educators in the field of early childhood education believe firmly that the experience of early schooling can be most beneficial to the young child.

³ Association for Childhood Education International. *Don't Push Me*. Washington, D.C.: the Association, 1960. 40 p.

There is no doubt that each entrance of each child into nursery school or kindergarten is fraught with pressure. This pressure should be one of significant growth to the child. At the same time, such a pressure can be one of extreme pain and stress. Much has been written on preparing the child for school, yet have we thought deeply of the many pressures that encompass the child as he enters the new environment of school?

There are the new adults who will make different demands on me. There are more children together in one place than I have experienced before and they are all my age though different. Some are bigger, some a different color, some noisy, some afraid. How do I feel? There are all those toys. Which one should I try out first? There is a book like one I have at home. Mother is leaving and I feel lonely and afraid in this strange place. Everyone lies on the floor for rest. I don't want to rest and where is my bed and my stuffed dog?

Pressures, the new classroom is full of them. Can the child cope and learn and flourish in this environment? The trauma of first experience is always difficult. Life is continually presenting new, first adventures. Each successful previous experience provides the basis for coping with the new. A good school for young children is planned to assist each child in confirming his world and in extending his horizons. It is organized so that each child may move toward progressive, positive self-fulfillment and self-realization. The sensitive, knowledgeable teacher can help each child to meet constructively the pressures in his environment and thus to reach his own maximum growth.

When and What To Teach to Whom

One of the major questions asked by today's adults is "Can the young child learn more?" There is no doubt that the young child is learning rapidly. A brief glance at a kindergarten child brings complete awe at what has been learned in five short years. Yet can this five year old learn more? More of what? Do we want him to know more about himself, more about how to learn, more about working with others, or more academics? The latter is emphasized in some schools of thinking. No knowing adult is going to prohibit the child from learning all he can about the subjects of our common schools. At the same time no knowing adult is going to thrust or heap on work for work's sake nor is he going to "water down" the second grade curriculum.

The rapid changes in the world about us make us reexamine what a child can and should learn. This is a different world than we knew as children or young adults. No one wishes to return to the world of yesterday, but rather to catch up with the world of today so that as leaders of children we may be knowing in how to use the best of all worlds. Perhaps this is part of our confusion. The selection of what is to be taught, to whom and when is a continuing, unsolved pressure on the adults.⁴

The constant dilemma faced by parents and teachers is when to teach what to

⁴ Agnes Snyder. "Who? What? When? Where? How? Why?" *Childhood Education* September 1963. p. 5-10.

specific children. It is in this area that we find the greatest disagreements. Reputable persons are writing in periodicals that babies can and want to learn to read, that the typewriter provides an incentive and method of early learning, that the young years are wasted, that America has become a nation of child worshipers, and that early training prevents future failure.

In contrast we read and hear that the early years must provide time for exploration and discovery, that the development of the first five years of life provides the psychological foundation for later learning, that childhood is a time of play which has unchallenged learning potential, that any normal child of two can learn to read but should he, or what else is more important and basic in the learning process in the early years?

The recent explosion of knowledge and the overwhelming amount of knowledge to be learned has put all adults in a panic. The panic is transferred to the child and the pressures mount for all. If we stop and examine the claims at either extreme of the pendulum it becomes apparent that everyone is attempting to help the child meet his world more successfully. Each is attempting to resolve the question of what to learn when. One's basic belief about learning and child growth and development becomes evident. It is my belief that young children *can* learn more but in the milieu of their environment and under the positive pressure of growth, rather than under the limiting pressure of satisfying the adults' needs in a restricted situation.

The young child is interested in a myriad of topics and thus is eager to learn about the world in which he lives. Jets, wheels, animals, age-mates, home, the far away, himself, his family, economy and politics, water, snow and rain, make-believe and now, and on and on. The selection of areas of knowing are unending. It may become necessary to learn to read to satisfy insatiable curiosity and then he will begin to read with adult help. This he will do, not because the adult wanted him to read or because it will build the adult image or ego, but because the child wants to know and is willing to undergo the tasks necessary to read. The adult will not prevent, nor will he demand but rather he will encourage each child to build on his inner strengths and needs to move toward new steps in learning. This learning will not be accidental but the true outgrowth of the developing mind and experiences of the child nurtured by the knowing adult.

The significant growth that will have its permanent effect on the child must come as the child develops a clear and realistic image of himself as a learner. The role of each adult who lives with children must first and foremost provide the opportunity for children to experience success and support and to meet failure honestly. Each new experience should help the child increase his strength to come to grips with each new situation with openness and security.

Pressures become less threatening as one understands and respects the drive and strengths that each child brings to the conflicts in his challenging world. As each young child moves forth with love and direction his ability to cope with his world in 1965 becomes less overwhelming to him as a person. The healthy child is in the process of becoming and is developing a positive approach to life and learning.

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