

The Latency Child—More Than Meets The Eye*

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At all times, our program and our centers must remain a place where children can be children. This will mean many things to an individual child over the course of six years—a place to grow, a place to learn new skills and meet new people, establishing new relationships, a place to let loose running and screaming in the halls, sometimes that controlled chaos which is essential and often difficult for many adults to allow, a place to become involved in one's own fantasy play.

Part I—The Model

What appears to be a simple premise, that throughout the life of each human growth and development are a continuing process, is only recently becoming generally accepted. The more traditional view contrasts short and intense periods of growth with longer and placid times in which we "coast" utilizing those skills we have developed during the developmental phases. In the human services, our interest has tended to be drawn to those intense developmental episodes and away from the longer and less dramatic "interims;" we have been given a legacy helpful to working with the very young child and the adolescent and a vacuum for the rest of life.

Upon closer examination, "Latency" and Adulthood do not appear to be so uniform and un-eventful. Gail Sheehy in *Passages* graphically hypothesized a number of developmental tasks commonly faced during the adult years. A similar look at "Latency" will yield insights into a similarly complex time. The child between five years of age and the onset of adolescence faces a number of difficult tasks in the ongoing process of development. What follows is an attempt to "tease out" some developmental threads in this process.

One word of caution—the data available to

* Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference of Jewish Communal Service, Grosinger, New York, May 28, 1978.

us about "Latency" are elemental. Beginning attempts to define are highly impressionistic and observational. Future research will tend to refine, clarify and modify. As development occurs at varying speeds at various times for various individuals, what follows is not intended as an absolute guide ("at 8 years-6 months . . .") but as a guide to the tasks facing all of us at one point or another.

Who Am I?

A primary task faced by all children is the development of a sense of "I." For the infant, this initially is reflected in the struggle to differentiate "I" from the world surrounding "I;" figuratively the question being posed is "where does my fingertip end and the blade of grass begin?" As the child ages, the task is not completed, rather the way the question is posed becomes increasingly complex.

"*I am Jewish*"—Our concern as workers within Jewish settings is often focused upon the acting out of this re-phrasing of "who am I?" The developing child is faced with constructing a personalized Jewish "I." In our pluralistic society and with our minority status, this task is often quite complex. "How am I Jewish and my classmates not?" And within the Jewish community, our internal differences pose a similar challenge.

"*I am male/female*"—Throughout the grade school years elements of gender identity are added, often subtly suggested by

cues within our environment. In a world which increasingly questions traditional views, the gender "I" seems more difficult to assimilate.

Reality/Fantasy—The young child's world is a world of fantasy, fantasy intertwined with reality. The sorting out of the "I" requires an integrating of our imagery and our sense of reality.

The sub-species of "I" are almost innumerable. As the shadings of "I" become finer and finer, each individual must begin to grapple with the joys and pains of individuality and aloneness.

Inclusion/Exclusion—Intimacy

Flowing out of our definition of "I," is the child's need to develop an understanding of "we." All of us need to be both a part of a larger group as well as to be separate from it. As the child grows, the need to become accepted by peers, to be a part of the club, team, gang, etc., becomes more and more primary. And yet fulfilling this desire is often difficult to actualize. It requires the lowering of defenses in order to allow others to share with us, risking rejection to achieve inclusion. The desire to be a part of a collectivity often runs at counter purpose to the need to understand and define "I."

At a later point, group intimacy begins to lead to the development of close ties with specific individuals. Risks and rejections are major here, but also important rewards.

At the other end of the spectrum of the drive for inclusion is the ability to exclude. We cannot share and develop positive relationships with every person we encounter. How, then, to limit our relationships, to differentiate levels of intimacy; how do we dis-associate from and reject another in protection of our "I?"

We must learn to balance the "I" and the many "we"-s we are a part of.

Power and Impotence

As we increasingly understand ourselves, we also attempt to understand and control our environment. Early tasks find us building,

separating and labeling. We strive to develop control over our surroundings; we want to feel that within our own power is the ability to satisfy our own needs. And as we test this assumption of power, we are constantly confronted with our impotence. The child's world is complex; parents and other adults are innately "right" and yet control is important.

Gratification and Abstinence

What Freud identified as the growth from "pleasure principle" to "reality principle" in governance of behavior, does not end as the pre-school years end. As more and more independence is acquired, the conflict between satisfaction that is "irresponsible" and "responsible" delay recurs. Do I eat the sandwich first or the dessert? As children age, they are expected to delay gratification over longer and longer periods of time.

Becoming Civilized/Adult

Put together, the tasks facing the child might be described as "becoming civilized." Children are continually asked to assume the values, attitudes and behaviors of parents, and in more general way of community and of society. Demands may be muffled and unclear; at times in opposition to each other. The childhood years are those in which we are expected to become the actualization of others' desires. With every additional year, the level of expectation increases. The child should be less childlike.

Our attempts to develop a model which describes some of the richness of the "Latency" years are directed at improving our ability to provide effective service. Should our services provide only intellectual stimulation and interest, they will be of limited utility. In attempting to increase psychosocial underpinnings, our goal must be to provide a more accurate and useful tool to bring to our efforts in serving the children of our communities.

Our next task, then, is to translate our descriptive knowledge into service modalities.

Part II—The Application

A model is designed as a guide, a standard, a

comparison. Our model raises value questions, issues to be examined, and ideas to be translated into our work. Center programs for children of school age have existed since the beginning of the Center movement. In fact, the need for such services has often been the catalyst for the development of new Centers and new facilities. Services for school-age children are often the focal point of a new and growing Center and the entry point into the Center for many families. But whether we work in one of these facilities or in a well established Center, it is important for us, as professionals working with children, to begin to develop models, approaches, and techniques. This paper does not attempt to spell out a specific set of classes or groups, but rather to grapple with another set of issues: How does one use the developmental model in our programs?

In extracting the major developmental issues, we begin to look at a dynamic and continuously growing young person. A person who struggles with issues of identity, peer relationships, power and impotence, the need for gratification, and the insistence and pressure from adults to become more "civilized." In our work with people, any conceptual model to which we hold and even our routine daily tasks are laden with value questions if we choose to examine them—so too this model.

Included in the discussion of identity is the question-statement "Who am I?—I am male/female." We know that gender identification begins by the age of two years. However, we do not know how today's changing society will impact on the developmental process of children. If we hold value in the need to break down gender stereotypes and work in this manner, are we sure we are not confusing children and making their identity search a more difficult process? Is it possible that we are providing too many options for a child?

Another value which has been ingrained in us is, "Children must learn to share and be friends with everyone." However, the model points out the need of children to move from group intimacy to attempting closer ties with

specific individuals. They should not be forced to share with everyone or to be friends with everyone. Within the group context, the issues of allowing individual friendships to grow while cooperating with the group must be separated from the issues of group friendship and group sharing. The individual needs of the child must always be considered along with the needs of the group.

Examine the question of power versus impotence. What are the implications for a child whom we have instilled with the values of taking control of one's life, standing up for what one believes in, and speaking out? When confronted with other adults, teachers or even parents who do not appreciate assertive children, the child may end up in the middle. The opposite may also hold true. For example, we give permission to a child to back down from a physical fight, to realize that he is not always the most powerful, when the child's parent may think differently. When we set expectations regarding a child's ability to delay gratification, we may be again "interfering" in a family process. How many times has each of us heard from a parent that his/her child should be allowed to do something whenever the child pleases.

The value of children growing to become more responsible and more adultlike with the implied message of being less childlike is another issue to be examined more critically. Are there certain childlike behaviors which should not be given up totally such as some of the free creative spirit we all see in young children? Rather, in learning to cope with the realities and restrictions of our society, should we not help children as well as adults choose appropriate times, outlets, and channels in which the sometimes wonderful childlike spirit can emerge?

In tying together all of these developmental concerns for the child, the over-riding issue becomes, "I am competent/I am not competent." This, in essence, becomes the major task of school age children—to develop a self-image, the perception of self which we as professionals can help shape as we work with any individual child in our program. In

influencing the shaping of that self-image, it is essential to recognize the value continuum which exists and we must be prepared to consciously understand these values which we are instilling so as to help each child cope with the value conflicts with which he/she may be faced.

We have referred to values throughout this section. It is clear that understanding the tasks faced by the growing child does not provide us with guidance as to the "correct" resolution. As representatives of community agencies and as professionals, we have the responsibility to clearly understand what our agency stands for, our own biases and the expectation of each child's parents. It is tremendously important that parents clearly understand the goals of the programs they involve their children in; it is sheer tragedy for children to find themselves tugged between parents and agency-adults. It is also important for us to confront, albeit lovingly, parents with the differences between their children's needs and their own.

In developing a school-age program, a number of programmatic areas are important. The over-all program must offer variety. Children need the opportunity to discover and develop new skills, social, creative, and physical, to develop their unique self. They need opportunities through which they can test out new thoughts, skills and behaviors and from which they can withdraw if they choose to pull back. Classes, groups, lounges, etc., can each provide opportunities to feel the satisfaction of a new accomplishment, to risk new relationships, to learn new skills. As children grow, contact with a variety of adults provides them with numerous role models to examine and allows them to identify various traits which they may wish to incorporate into their "self."

As we plan programs for children ages 5 to 11 years, we must understand the vast differences occurring within this six-year span. Expectations of a child's ability to take on responsibility, length of attention span, ability to form close friendships or to delay gratification should be based both upon "typical" behaviors at that age and an assessment of a

particular child's developmental level. This dual assessment is necessary also in regard to physical development: gross motor and fine motor skills and intellectual capability—a realistic progression of developmental variations and needs in skill.

Within the period of 6-11 years of age, several transition points should be taken into consideration:

1) Entering grade school: From a "pre-schooler" to "grown up child."

2) The beginning of Hebrew school (usually around eight years of age): academic demands increase and free time decreases.

3) Moving toward adolescence: ages 10 and 11 show increased interest in heterosexual behavior and a desire to separate from "baby stuff." Also faced here is the "graduation" to being a "teen."

Center programming should recognize and respond to these particular flash points.

In all of our programs, it should be very clear that the utility of our conceptual brilliance is limited only by the quality of our staff. It is the direct leadership staff member who through his/her abilities, sensitivity, and caring helps the children in the group risk and struggle with these life tasks. The process of staff selection and supervision thus becomes one of the most important, if not *the* most important component of our professional work.

A number of critical components of supervision should be identified. The supervisor becomes the role model for the leader as the leader models for group/class members. We, as supervisors, must have a conscious knowledge of self which includes the same issues of identity, power and intimacy with which children are faced. A good supervisor has the ability to focus on the individual needs of the supervisee and the children in relation to those same issues. Also important is an understanding of group process, the ability to perceive group issues, a knowledge base which can be translated into a realistic set of expectations regarding children's behavior, and the ability to use available resources. Listening, giving support, confronting, and

giving praise, all are skills essential for a supervisor. The supervisor then takes all of this and helps the supervisee grapple with these same issues and skills for him/herself and with the group. The life issues discussed in the model are dynamic, constantly re-presenting themselves to us throughout our lives. Therefore as adults working with groups, these issues may arise in areas such as that of identity—leader role vs. member role, power and control in the group, intimacy and acceptance by the group, and gratification and a feeling of accomplishment. Examining these areas should be part of an on-going supervisory process.

No attempt has been made in this article to specify program content. This must be done within each Center. The needs, desires and values of each community must be assessed. It is also our role as professionals to interpret our goals and programs to parents, especially if we see a conflict between a child's need and that parent's need. We must work with parents and families to raise some of the value questions and conflicts. As with our staff, parents may

still be struggling personally with these developmental issues and we must provide some mechanism to assist them and not just their children.

At all times, our program and our Centers must remain a place where children can be children. This will mean many things to an individual child over the course of six years—a place to grow, a place to learn new skills and meet new people, establishing new relationships, a place to allow loose running and screaming in the halls, sometimes that controlled chaos which is essential and often difficult for many adults to allow, a place to become involved in one's own fantasy play. Or it may mean having a place to find an adult who will give the child his/her undivided attention. As adults, we and our staff must remind ourselves that children need a safe place to learn to be themselves, to discover themselves, to be happy and angry, responsible and irresponsible, good and bad. We can be that place.