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Getting the Right Start in Life

By

Dr. Telma de Acosta

What happens between two and six years of age, between six and twelve years? What are children like and how do they live at two, six and twelve years old?

At two, the child talks, walks, begins to feed himself and to acquire habits of personal cleanliness; parents and home are his world. From two to six he becomes more and more able to do things for himself and to look after his own immediate and elementary needs; his

social circle widens; he is no longer so tender and he gets used to prohibitions, reprimands and punishments.

At six, he starts school. He can and must assume responsibilities. He is capable of the mental effort of learning; he enjoys vigorous games with other children and begins to adapt himself to life with a social group much larger than his family. Nevertheless, his home and parents continue to be the most important factor in his life and in the formation of his character.

Helping the child grow up

At 12 he leaves the elementary school. He is moving towards adolescence and is confronted with the first problems of that age and with the question of what he is to do when grown up.

Dr. Telma Reca de Acosta is the leading child psychiatrist of Argentina and the founder of the first child guidance clinic in that country. After some years spent in the United States of America, she returned to Argentina where she now teaches child psychology and child psychopathology at the University of Buenos Aires.

All this means that gradually, but surely, the child is leaving behind him his early dependence and helplessness and is developing his separate personality, his own life. This is the central factor in individual development. As he matures he begins new interests and activities which must be given scope, new modes of conduct which must be rightly interpreted.

During all this, there is a constant interplay of personalities—parents, brothers and sisters, grandparents, school-teachers, friends and companions—providing on the one hand love, security and experience, and, on the other, conflict and opposition. There can be no development without problems.

To help the child to grow up, all that a parent can hope to do is to face the problems with equanimity, and to remember that the child's destiny is very different from the parent's own, and from the ideal which the parent has set for himself.

Fathers and mothers find it difficult to accept the fact that in the natural course of things children move gradually away from them and become independent. Whenever this groping after independence is thwarted—whether it be physical, emotional or intellectual—the child's character suffers some deformation.

Parents sometimes find a deep satisfaction in the knowledge that their children cannot do without them, cannot dispense with their help and seek protection even in insignificant things. Certainly, the child knows—and must feel sure—that he can at all times count upon his parents for advice and help. This gives him confidence and poise in his new ventures. Nevertheless, he must acquire his own experience and try out his own strength and ability.

The father should never substitute for the son and do everything for him on the pretext of smoothing his way because he, the father, knows best what is good for him. If this happens, the son may develop intellectually but, as a person, he will remain dependent and incapable. During development, as soon as a new aptitude appears, the child should

be given an opportunity to engage in activities which will enable it to grow.

All children, in the pre-school period, should normally acquire ability to feed, dress and look after themselves in everyday routine matters, become used to playing with other children and engage in physical activities suited to their strength and temperament. If they can join a kindergarten, so much the better. When they meet a difficulty they should not be left to their own devices but be shown how to meet and overcome it by their own efforts.

Standing on his own feet

During the school years, if the rhythm and mode of development are understood and respected, the child will gradually learn to stand on his own feet, to fulfil his duties without being told to do so, to help in small tasks, to associate with other children on a wider basis and to engage in more complicated activities with them.

Luis is a boy who provides an example of the effect of too much restriction of his activities. He is eight years old and his mother brought him to the clinic "because he is very nervous". He is violent at times, and tears and breaks things when he is reprimanded. He will not obey. He is an only child of parents of modest means. His parents do not wish him to play in the street but he runs away whenever they are busy.

When he does escape he engages in violent activities and is over-tired when his mother finally succeeds in bringing him back home. She, fearing for his health, exerts more and more pressure to prevent him from running away and playing with the children of the neighbourhood.

When in the consulting room he is told to undress for examination, his mother fusses around him to unfasten his shoes and help him to undress, pointing out that he is too nervous, disorderly and lazy ever to find anything. Every morning, she dresses him to make sure he is up in time—and the process is accompanied by a long sermon. Sometimes she even feeds him. At school,

he is a good pupil, quiet and obedient. He plays in recreation time, studies well and his teachers have a good opinion of him.

Luis speaks resentfully of his parents: they will not let him do anything for himself and they disapprove of everything he does. It never occurs to the mother that his "laziness" is the result of her habit of doing everything for him since the time when he was very small, or that his violence is related to the constant hampering of his activities, to the scolding and disapprobation to which he is subjected.

Embarrassing questions

As a child's body grows, his intelligence develops and he feels an increasing urge to explore and investigate everything around him: how does this and that work, why does this cause that, etc? He asks questions incessantly in the first years of this period and before he goes to school. This is the moment when parents can contribute to the development of his intelligence and help to give him a sane view of the world.

"What are we to do", ask parents, "when he asks embarrassing questions?" There is only one thing to do; answer the questions truthfully and in accordance with the child's capacity to understand. Between three and four years, questions about the origin of children and sexual differences will begin to come. Where do babies come from? Where do they come out? A direct answer is best: they live within the womb of the mother until they are big enough and strong enough to live outside; the same happens with all animals; birds and chickens come out of eggs—which come out of the mother.

Later, other questions will be asked and none of them will be embarrassing *if a correct answer has been given to the earlier ones.* Study of natural science at school enables children, later, to understand the part played by the father in procreation and to regard the whole sexual biological process calmly and clear-sightedly. The farm child has, of course, less difficulty because to him the phenomena presents itself naturally.

All the answers given must be simple without any distortion of the facts. Girls whose mothers, in an effort to inspire love and respect for motherhood, have told them that birth is the result of an operation which involves indescribable pain, have confessed that they have been terrified of their womanhood and that nothing would induce them to marry and undergo such tortures.

Fits of temper

During the pre-school years, a boy's behaviour will sometimes exasperate the father: he will have fits of temper, be disrespectful and rude, develop a habit of touching his genital organs, have periods of over-anxiety and unfounded fears. If such behaviour is a passing phase only, and not very marked, it may be considered as normal to development. If the child is treated kindly on all occasions, if the father stands by him and comforts his fears, makes certain that he had sufficient opportunities for play and normal activities, takes no notice of his fits of temper and does not allow them to be used as a weapon for the fulfilment of his whims, this is all the father can do—and he must do it—to help the boy. If the symptoms persist and become aggravated, an expert should be consulted so that the child may be treated if necessary.

As a rule, brothers and sisters will be born during this period. A child does not usually seem as pleased at the event as his parents expect him to be. He is hostile and even aggressive towards the newly-born infant and sometimes towards the mother. Or else he becomes sad and retires within himself, losing interest in his usual activities, and behaving again as he did when he was smaller.

On these occasions, the child should be treated gently: he should be played with and every care should be taken to avoid doing anything to stimulate his jealousy—which is natural and not a sign of a vicious character. If he is assured of his parents' love, he will gradually recover—particularly if he has been told beforehand about the birth of the brother or sister, and if the new arrival is not

allowed to oust him from his previous position.

This is not, for example, a good moment for removing the child from his parents' bedroom if he has previously been sleeping there. It is always preferable for a child, at least from the age of one year, to sleep in a separate room—but the charge-over should not be related to the arrival of another child.

Physical punishment

It is often asked, how can a child be made to obey? Most modern parents are reluctant to resort to physical punishment or to threats and "the-bogey-man-will-get-you" tactics. Nevertheless, worried by the necessity of finding some effective way of proceeding with a child's education, parents sometimes use more subtle coercive measures: "If you do not behave well while I am away, and treat your little sister kindly, I will not come back", says a mother to her four-year-old daughter when leaving home for two or three days.

The girl, who in the beginning was jealous of her eight months old sister and whose behaviour towards her was very variable, conducted herself in an

exemplary manner while the mother was away and took great care of the baby. This solicitude continued, in fact, in quite a remarkable manner even afterwards. However, the child began to be afraid for no apparent reason, to cry out in the night, and she gradually turned into a pusillanimous and anxious child.

This was due to the fact that, knowing in her heart that she had hostile feelings towards her sister, she lived in constant fear that her mother would fulfil her threat and leave her. The idea that the mother might cease to love her, might leave her and not come back home meant the possibility of a punishment much more serious and harmful than an occasional—merited and light—physical chastisement.

To give a child the right start in life, a deep bond of love must be maintained with him, his growing needs and his need to express his personality must be respected, his education must be directed along clear-cut and consistent lines, and the restrictions which must be placed on him in the interests of those who have to live with him must be enforced firmly but without severity.

A Statement

By

Dr. M.G. Candau

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If the amount of bodily disease in the world reached the proportions of many of the existing social ills with mental and emotional causes (delinquency, alcoholism, drug addiction, suicide, etc.), not to mention classical mental disease, an epidemic state would be declared and strong measures taken to combat it.

This striking statement was made at a WHO Seminar held a few years ago, and it is equally true today. In countries with well-developed health services, about half the total number of hospital beds are occupied by psychiatric cases. Careful studies of the outpatients at large general hospitals have shown that