

“DAISY, YOU DO KNOW HOW TO READ!”... IT’S THE CHERRY ON THE CAKE

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Abstract: Daisy, a three year old girl was non stop screaming and crying when she started nursery school. The hospital referred to “psychosis” to the mother. The article explains how did the teachers in charge who used to meet at a monthly basis in a group of “help to helpers”, inspired by Balint groups, help the child to give up her withdrawal attitude and her mother who was extremely anxious. Consequently, Daisy could enter the primary school at the required age. The discussion relies on different theories to explain what has taken place to help the child recover.

Keywords: Nursery school, Withdraw, Disturbed schooling, supporting schoolteachers, “help to helpers”.

Résumé: Quand Daisy est arrivée à l’école maternelle, à l’âge de trois ans, c’était une enfant en complète opposition à toute proposition de l’école, elle hurlait et criait sans cesse. L’hôpital spécialisé avait évoqué une « psychose » à la mère. L’article montre comment des enseignantes qui se réunissaient une fois par mois dans un groupe d’inspiration Balint, appelé « Soutien au Soutien », ont pu permettre à l’enfant de sortir de son enfermement, tout en aidant la mère face à son anxiété. En conséquence de quoi, Daisy a pu entrer à l’école primaire à l’âge requis. La discussion s’était sur différents théories pour préciser ce qui a pu se débloquent chez l’enfant.

Mots-clés: Ecole maternelle, retrait psychique, scolarité paradoxale, soutien enseignant, « Soutien au Soutien »

Daisy, as we have decided to name her, is a three year old girl when she starts nursery school. The second child in a family of too, in which the eldest is growing fairly. She is accompanied by a mother giving her much attention but who is nevertheless very anxious about her adaptation to school. The school offers three classes with a high quality of interactions and shared experiences between the members of the staff.

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Du secret de famille au secret de société... la violence en héritage, in actes du colloque de Thionville « du pulsionnel au culturel », ss la dir. H. Bendahman, Paris, L’Harmattan, 2008.

Ma mère ne voulait pas que je sois mère, in actes du colloque de Troyes, colloque « Malaise dans la transmission ; Crise de l’idéaliété et fondation du sujet, ss la dir de H. Bendahman, Paris, L’Harmattan, 2011

The school teacher is worried about the girl's behaviour because she refuses everything during the first year at school. Right from the beginning of the school year, the girl throws herself on the carpet and screams, and she cries during all the morning. She never speaks except for occasional meaningless words; she never plays and clearly shows her opposition. She systematically refuses any activity offered to her and her refusal behaviour is materialized in her body. This refusal attitude of the educational situation lasts several months... the child also has a conflicting and oppositional behaviour with her mother. A dry eczema spreads on the child's face and arms. The mother is very anxious about this withdrawal. She shows the child to a speech therapist who suggests an appointment with a specialist of a Paris hospital. Back from the visit, the mother is overwhelmed by anxiety. According to the mother, at the hospital, the staff mentioned "autism" and "autistic withdrawal".

The teacher describes this situation in front of a group of educators called "*Help to Helpers*", by Jacques LEVINE (1994)", who meet regularly to analyse and try to understand difficult behaviours, inspired by BALINT groups where doctors used to meet in order to cope with their patients' problems. She liberates herself from her anxiety about Daisy's future and her feeling of powerlessness in succeeding to get the girl interested in the school activities.

As the supervisor of the group, I gave my understanding about Daisy's refusal as her way to express her powerful resistance. The girl puts all her strength to resist every proposal offered to her. I'm hopeful in her ability to grow once she will be rid of the inner conflict which prevents her from stepping forward. The eczema periods are to be understood as the embodiment of a painful skin, a burnt open to the outside, as if the "*protective shield*" built by the mother, as defined by BION (1979), had been inefficient (PIERRAKOS, 1990).

If we succeed in strengthening the barrier of the protective shield, then probably the refusal behaviour and resistance to the activities offered in the class, will give place to a growing process first at school and the child being then able to mobilise her potential to grow up.

At this stage, I suggest to the teacher to get in touch with the mother, who is willing to help, to give her confidence in her abilities in order to help her daughter to grow up and try to understand with her, the roots of the heavy refusal of the little girl.

The traumatic family romance appears little by little. When Daisy was just eight months, the father went on a bankruptcy and of course the family economical situation was disturbed. To enable the mother to find a job, the girl, who was cared at home, had to be looked after by a nanny: The mother resented this situation. Probably Daisy's mother expressed in a conflict projected outside on the girl's nanny, her inner conflicting feelings. Her inner conflict has no other way to express itself but by her suffering and by the feeling that she was the only reliable person to understand the girl.

At the same time, a letter arrived from the hospital structure, to tell the family that, some day or later, the girl would have to be welcomed in a specialized medical and educational structure.

The combined efforts, willingly accepted by the mother, of the teacher and the mother get stronger. The family agrees to leave the girl a second year in the same class, with the same teacher who will adjust the tasks according to the girl's ability to cooperate.

The second year at the same nursery school, Daisy's behaviour improves: Daisy is less oppositional and when it occurs, the teacher handles the situation with humour and is able to understand what Daisy means with her corporal behaviour and also indicates that she is ready to accept this behaviour.

During the third year in the middle section, Daisy seems to be able to do more things than what she admits to.

At the end of the middle school year, Daisy is then six. Her case is examined by a commission which is supposed to give recommendations for the future of children who have difficulties at school whose name is C.C.P.E. in France (BOURGOIN, 2001). The teacher confirms the girl's intelligence in spite of her speech difficulties.

During the following school year, Daisy arrives at school where she produces two drawings on which she writes the initials of the Christian names of all the pupils of the class.

- *"But, you do know how to read! "*
- *"Yes, no!"*
- *"Then, if you know how to read, you will go to primary school"*
- *"Yes, no!"*

The staff resumes the task which consists in giving the mother the confidence she needs, and to convince her that the girl has acquired during the holidays, quite unexpectedly, the necessary bases for reading. Contacts are established with the primary school selected to welcome Daisy.

The latest image of the "film" shows Daisy saying good-bye to the teachers of the nursery school. Her teacher gives her a book from the class library and tells her: "Well, as you can read, I lend you this book and you will bring it back to me when you have read it".

DISCUSSION

Daisy's strong bodily refusal behaviour was puzzling to the people in charge, and made communication impossible. Daisy was rigidly fixated in refusal behaviour towards outer requests reinforcing an inner protective shield and developing a dry eczema visible to everyone (PIERRAKOS, 1990).

The teacher's first task was to observe the child patiently in order to be able to understand her and find meaning to her behaviour. If we are going on the assumption that Daisy has played out at school the attitude she had adopted when she was eight months old with the nanny, we can find the roots of this disturbing behaviour, back at that time. Nowadays, everybody agrees that the baby builds its psychic life thanks to the mother-child interaction, or thanks to the new-born and mother substitute.

According to the paediatrician BRAZELTON, the stimulus works in a permanent cycle of interaction between the mother and the child. The mother's stimulus spurring the baby's new appeals which experiments in its turn new ways of communications with his mother.

For authors with a psychoanalytic view, like ANZIEU (1983), the emotional exchange between the mother and the child builds a psychic interface, a shared skin, between the mother and the child making possible a genuine identification between the two partners, echoing their respective feelings, emotions and images. This evokes sculptor Rodin's cathedral in which one is the creator of the other. It's a loving fantasy in which each one is the wrap of the other and the reverse. If this process fails, *"the baby, because of a pathological and premature reaction of negative auto-organisation... adopts a backward attitude, a closed process, as in an egg not hatched out yet"*.

According to BION, the mother has the capacity to predigest the toxic elements from the child's environment to make them digestible for the child. It's the transformations of the " β " elements to " α " elements (WINNICOTT, 1971). If it is not the case, the child is poisoned by the " β " elements. The mother-child separation of this psychic wrap which opens gradually, cannot build itself.

That's what happened to Daisy.

In course of time, the patient and the holding behaviour, as defined by WINNICOTT (6), towards the girl's reaction-formation and the ability to make a bond with the mother has made it possible to rebuild a psychic wrap for the child and the outside world.

Thanks to this patient and trustful behaviour from the environment and the benevolent attitude of the teacher, Daisy has been able, first, to observe then to start trying new and more genuine patterns of relationship and at the same time, she has been able to step backward and avoid contacts, but harmlessly, this time.

As generally admitted bouts of sulkiness can be interpreted as a backward step towards internal objects surrounded by external objects, felt as persecutors. For Daisy, it was the physical mother, the nanny, and later the school.

The teacher's merit has been not to confront the girl directly in order to make her compliant to her own expectations, but to give the girl the necessary time to build a "Moi-Peau" (or me-skin) (ANZIEU, 1983). That's what LEVINE (1994) means when he mentions "transitional pedagogy".

Little by little, defensive aspects have given away, the child being able to build a psychic self holding boundary which enables her to achieve autonomy and to feel unified. Thus, during the second year at school, the girl did ask her mother to leave her at the gate and she used to walk across the schoolyard as “a big girl” and used to come and say “Hello” to the adults who cared for her.

At that time, the eczema had disappeared, as well.

According to ANZIEU (1983), the following stage of the emotional growth of the child requiring the erasure of this common skin and the knowledge that each one has got one’s own skin and one’s own self, which does not occur without resistance and suffering.

Then, the fantasies of the scratched skin with defence mechanism, such as skin disorders, as eczema of the child, which take place. The dry eczema giving away confirms the fact that Daisy has been able to overcome this stage to achieve autonomy (PIERRAKOS, 1990). The child is able to think of herself as a being of her own independent from her mother, and think about her mother as an inner caretaker, that is what WINNICOTT means by “the capacity to be alone”, or “inner caring of the child”, by LEVINE (1994).

Meanwhile, memory builds itself. Thus, Daisy is able to name her school teachers. Later, the child will continue to internalize pre-reading elements which will become meaningful when she achieves the necessary maturity to allow her to show them.

Now, we must examine the last stage of the story, when the teacher of the upper class gave the book as a gift to the child with those words: “*Well, Daisy, as you know how to read, you will read this book and you will bring it back, when you have read it*”. She had the intuition, thanks to her chosen words, to enable the child to forward her development, to make a bridge with the primary school and to make it easier the symbolic step back towards nursery school, in order to regain her narcissistic support. It deals with the building of the necessary bond which enables the child to be in a permanent psychic process with the outside world, in terms of space and people. It has helped her to build her separate and unified self.

What is interesting in that study, is the opportunity it shows us how teachers with a sensitive and available presence towards a suffering child, have succeeded in helping her to reconcile herself with school requirements.

The staff’s main qualities have been to be able to find, in many aspects of school life, suitable answers to the child’s psychological inner conflict and this, without a special psychological training.

Two of the school teachers, in charge of the child were regular and active members of the “help to helpers group”. It has helped them to feel more confident towards the

child's puzzling behaviour, which they felt potentially alarming. Thus, they have been able to develop their abilities to establish a closer relationship with the girl and the mother and in their turn, to give the mother confidence in her capacity to help her daughter recovering and help her to pursue her emotional growth.

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