

## THE THEORY AND USE OF PLAY IN THE PSYCHOTHERAPY OF CHILDHOOD.

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THEORIES have been put forward concerning children's play which relate it to phylogeny and to an impulse towards preparation for life.

Psycho-analysis tends to regard play mainly as an expression of impulses and ideas repressed from consciousness, owing to incompatibility with other parts of the psyche.

While in substantial agreement at points with other theories, I believe play, if regarded from the angle of treatment, to be somewhat different in nature and purpose from what has yet been suggested, on the following grounds :

(1) In early childhood the child has no power of distinction between the "me" and "not me", between the outside (skin sensations) and the inside (interior bodily sensations), between feelings (hunger, cold, etc.) and affect (rage, pleasure, etc.). There is a central consciousness which experiences and endeavours to organize experience. This mass of experience I believe to form a total whole unanalysable into component parts.

(2) Experience suggests that Spearman's postulate concerning adults, that any lived experience tends to produce in the experience a knowing of the character of the experience, applies to early childhood also. A child must then use the material of the experiences he has already had to make to himself pictures of new experiences. Since an infant has only bodily experience, his picture will be in bodily terms.

(3) The child, like the adult, endeavours to master his experience by grouping it. Whereas, however, the adult—

(a) Groups his experience by perception of external impersonal qualities of the object, the child groups his by subjective reaction to the object, i.e., the feelings aroused by the object in him.

(b) Is able to detach the perceived characters from the fundamentals (black hat, black shoes, blackness) and preserve the separateness of the fundamentals, the child, when perceiving a common character, fuses the fundamentals into a total whole.

*The Impulse to Play.*

This globular mass of experience and concept is dynamic. It presses always towards expression in action:

(a) To relieve the tension of excitation.

(b) In order that by externalization it may be realized and absorbed into the total psyche.

Emotion and experience can only be expressed in terms consonant with it. One cannot, for example, express shapes in music. The nature of early experience is such that sensation, affect, concept, memory and feeling all coalesce into an indivisible whole. For expression of it there is therefore needed a medium which is itself plastic, multi-dimensional and indivisible. Play, in suitable circumstances, can provide this medium.

*Nature of Play.*

The material expressed in play cannot be represented in words, not on account of repression, but because language is incapable of expressing it. I suggest that this part of the psyche be called the primary system. As the child grows, so cognition develops. Cognition (conscious) could then be termed the secondary system. The primary system persists through life, but diminishes in volume as development proceeds. To cognition the primary system is "unconscious" because its content is not susceptible of expression in secondary system terms.

*Neurosis.*

If a child fails to express the material of his primary system in such a way as to make contact with it, there is a tendency for ideas of the primary system to dominate him. Adaptation to life then becomes unsatisfactory, and any one of the neuroses may ensue.

*Use of Play in Therapy.*

Simple provision of suitable opportunity for play can relieve many slight neuroses. The severer neuroses can only be resolved by enabling the child to build a bridge between the contents of the primary and secondary system. As aids in this procedure certain pieces of apparatus and a technique have been devised, which are illustrated in the Congress exhibition.