

The Collected Works of D. W. Winnicott

Volume 6, 1960–1963

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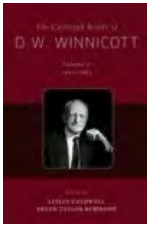
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CHAPTER

6 The Five-Year-Old

Donald W. Winnicott

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Abstract

In this BBC radio broadcast, Winnicott charts the development of the infant in the safety of home and family, initially unaware of conscious dependence on all around him, until the start of school. Winnicott gives examples of the child's entry into a shared, more objective reality, one requiring him and his parents to adapt. Children negotiate this in different ways. The child may use his attachment to a loved object to make this transition to school. Parents feel sadness, hope and excitement about this transition. A child's reversal into the pre-school world and then shifting into the more mature stage of school is normal for the child and the parents.

Keywords: Winnicott, home, nursery, school, child, parent, dependence, subjective reality, objective reality, adaptation, attachment, transition

Subject: Clinical Psychology, Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology

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Originally published in *The family and individual development* (pp. 34–39). London: Tavistock, 1965. Broadcast 25 June 1962, as 'The first five years (13th talk in series): Now they are five', part of the series *Parents and children*. S. Waterhouse (Producer), Network Three. London: British Broadcasting Corporation. The transcript of the original broadcast is published, as 'Now they are five', in C. Winnicott, C. Bollas, M. Davis, & R. Shepherd (Eds.), *Talking to parents* (pp. 111–120). Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1993; and *Winnicott on the child* (pp. 171–177). Cambridge, MA: Perseus, 2002. The original broadcast recording is available at [CW 12:3:3].

In a court of law a learned judge is reported to have said, with reference to the case of a child of nearly five whose parents had split up: 'Children of that age are notoriously resilient'. I have no wish to criticize the judgement given in this case, but it is open to us to discuss the question: Are children of five years

notoriously resilient? Resilience, it would seem to me, comes only with growth and maturity, and we may hold the view that there is no time in the development of a child at which it could be said that the child is resilient. Resilience would imply that we could expect compliance on the part of the child without danger to the growth of the child's personality and to the establishment of the child's character.

It might indeed be argued that there are some special features of this five-year-old stage which would make us particularly careful *not* to relax our watch on environmental reliability. It is these special features that I wish to consider here.

Parents watch their children grow, and they are astonished. It is all so slow, and yet at the same time it all happens in a flash. That is the funny thing about it. A few weeks ago they had a baby; and then he was a toddler; and today he is five, and tomorrow he will be at school—or she—whichever applies. And in a few weeks he will practically have started going to work.

p. 310 There is a contradiction here which is interesting. The time passed both slowly and quickly. Or, to put it another way, when the parents were feeling things from the point of view of the child, time practically stood still. Or it started off still, and only gradually began to move. The idea of eternity comes from the memory traces in each one of us of our infancy before time started. But when we jump across to having our own grown-up experiences, we realize that five years are almost nothing.

This has a curious effect on the relationship between what the parents remember and what the child remembers. They themselves remember clearly what happened a month ago, and now suddenly they find that their five-year-old is not remembering his aunt's visit or the arrival of the new puppy. He remembers some things, even early things, especially if these have been talked about, and he uses the family saga which he learns almost as if it were about someone else, or as if it referred to characters in a book. He has become more aware of himself and of the present time, and along with this he has come to forget. He now has a past, and in his mind a hint of half-forgotten things. His teddy bear is at the back of the bottom drawer, and he has forgotten how important it once was, except when he suddenly feels a need for it again.

We could say that he is emerging from an enclosure: the walls of the enclosure began to have gaps, and the fences became uneven in thickness; and lo and behold, the child is outside. It is not easy for him to get back inside again or to feel that he is back inside, unless he is tired or ill, when the enclosure is re-assembled for his benefit.

The enclosure was provided by his mother and his father, by his family, by the house and the courtyard, and by the familiar sights and noises and smells. It also belongs to his own stage of immaturity, to his reliance on his parents' reliability, and to the subjective nature of the infant world. This enclosure was a natural development from the mother's arms that were put round him when he was an infant. She adapted in an intimate way to her infant's needs, and then she gradually de-adapted, according to the rate at which he became able to enjoy meeting the unexpected and the new. And so, since children are not really very like each other, the mother finds that she has made an enclosure in which each child lives, one for each child; and it is out of this enclosure that her son or daughter now emerges—ready for a different kind of group, a new kind of enclosure, at least for a few hours a day. In other words, the child will go to school.

Wordsworth referred to this change in his 'Ode on the Intimations of Immortality':

*Heaven lies about us in our infancy,
Shades of the prison-house begin to close
Upon the growing boy....*

Here surely, the poet felt the child's consciousness of the new enclosure, in contrast with the baby's unawareness of dependence.

p. 311 Of course, the parents will already have started up the process by using a nursery school if a good one happens to be near where they live. In a good nursery school a small group of toddlers can be given opportunity for play, and can be provided with suitable toys, and perhaps a better floor than the one available at home; and someone is always present to supervise the child's first experiments in social life, such as bashing the next child on the head with a spade.

The Primary School at Five

But the nursery school is not much unlike home; it is still a specialized provision. The school we are now considering is different. The primary school may be good or not so good, but it will not be adaptive like the nursery school, not specialized except perhaps at the very beginning. In other words the child will have to do the adapting, will have to fit in with what is expected of the pupils at the school. If he is ready for this, there is a great deal to be got out of the new experience.

The parents will have given a lot of thought to the management of this big change in their child's life. They will have talked about school, and the child has played at schools and has looked forward to the idea of experiencing an extension of the bit of teaching that his mother and father and others have already put in.

Difficulties do arise at this stage since environmental changes have to be fitted on to changes that are happening in the child because of growth. I have had quite a lot to do with difficulties of children at this age, and I would say this, that in the vast majority of cases of difficulty there is no deep-seated trouble at all, no real illness. The strain has to do with the need for one child to be quick, for another to be slow. A few months make a lot of difference. A child whose birthday is in November may be champing the bit waiting to be admitted, whereas a child whose birthday is in August may be packed off to school a month or two early. In any case, one child eagerly goes on to the deeper waters, whereas another tends to lie shivering on the brink and fears to launch away. And, by the way, some of the brave pushers-on suddenly shrink back after putting a toe in and go back inside their mother and refuse to re-emerge from the familiar enclosure for days or weeks or longer. The parents get to know what sort of a child they have, and they talk to the schoolteachers, who are quite used to all this, and just wait, and play the fish on a long line. The thing is to understand that coming out of the enclosure is very exciting and very frightening; that, once out, it is awful for the child not being able to get back; and that life is a long series of coming out of enclosures and taking new risks and meeting new and exciting challenges.

Some children have personal difficulties that make them unable to take new steps, and the parents may need help if the passing of time does not bring cure, or if there are other indications of illness.

p. 312 But it may be that there is something wrong with the mother, the perfectly good mother, when her child shrinks back. Some mothers operate in two layers. At one layer (shall I call it the top layer?) they want only one thing: they want their child to grow up, to get out of the enclosure, to go to school, to meet the world. At another layer, deeper, I suppose, and not really conscious, they cannot conceive of letting their child go. In this deeper layer where logic is not very important the mother cannot give up this most precious thing, her maternal function; she feels she is maternal more easily when her baby is dependent on her than when, by growth, he comes to enjoy being separate and independent and defiant.

The child senses this only too easily. Although happy at school, he comes panting home; he screams rather than go into the school door each morning. He is sorry for his mother because he knows that *she cannot stand losing him*, and that she has not got it in her to turn him out because of her nature. It is easier for the child if the mother can be glad to be rid of him, and glad to have him back.

A lot of people, including the best, are a bit depressed part of the time or almost all the time. They have a vague sense of guilt about something and they worry about their responsibilities. The liveliness of the child in the home has been a perpetual tonic. Always the child's noises, even his cries have been a sign of life, and have just given the right reassurance. For depressed people all the time feel that they may have let something die, something precious and essential. The time comes when their child is due to go to school and then the mother fears the emptiness of her home and of herself, the threat of a sense of internal personal failure which may drive her to find an alternative preoccupation. When the child comes back from school, if a new preoccupation has come about, there will be no place for him, or he will have to fight his way back into the mother's centre. This fighting his way back becomes more important to him than school. The common result is that the child becomes a case of school refusal. All the time he is longing to be at school, and his mother longs for him to be just like other children.

Or it may be the father who complicates the issue in some such way, so that the child wants school but cannot get there or cannot stay there. And there are other reasons for school refusal, but these are not being enumerated here.

I knew a boy who at this stage developed a passion for joining things together with string. He was always tying the cushions to the mantelpiece and the chairs to the tables, so that it was precarious moving about in the house at all. He was very fond of his mother, but always uncertain of getting back to her centre because she quickly became depressed when he left her, and in no time she had replaced him with something else she was worried or doubtful about.ⁱ

p. 313 Mothers who are a bit like this may perhaps be helped by understanding that these things often happen. Such a mother may be glad that her child is sensitive to his mother's and other people's feelings, but sorry that her unexpressed and even unconscious anxiety should make the child sorry for her. He is unable to get out of the enclosure.

The mother may have had an experience of this difficulty that the child is in at an earlier date. She may, for instance, have found it difficult to wean him. She may have come to recognize a pattern in his reluctance to take any new step or to explore the unknown. At each of these stages she was under threat of losing her child's dependence on her. She was in the process of acquiring a child with independence and a personal slant on life, and although she could see the advantages to be gained by this she could not get the necessary release of feeling. There is a very close relationship between this vaguely depressive state of mind—this preoccupation with undefined anxieties—and the capacity of a woman to give a child her full attention. It is not possible to consider the one without referring to the other. Most women live, I suppose, just on the borderline between concern and worry.

Mothers have all sorts of agonies to go through, and it is good when the babies and the children do not have to get caught up in them. They have plenty of agonies of their own. Actually they rather like having their own agonies, just as they like new skills, and a widening vision, and happiness.

What is this that Wordsworth calls 'The Shades of the Prison House'? In my language it is the changeover from the small child's living in a subjective world to the older child's living in a world of shared reality. The infant starts off in magical control of the environment—if he receives good-enough care—and creates the world anew, even his mother and the door-knob. By the age of five the child has become able to perceive his mother much as she is, to acknowledge a world of door-knobs and other objects that existed before his conception, and to recognize the fact of dependence just at the time when he is becoming truly independent. It is all a matter of timing, and most mothers manage it beautifully. Somehow or other people usually do.

Further Complications

There are plenty of other ways in which life can affect children at this age. I mentioned the child's teddy bear. The child may well be addicted to some special object. This special object that was once a blanket or a napkin or the mother's scarf or a rag doll first became important for him or her before or after the first birthday, and especially at times of transition, as from waking to sleeping life. It is immensely important; it gets treated abominably; it even smells. It is lucky that the child uses this object and not the mother herself, or the lobe of her ear or her hair.

p. 314 This object joins the child to external or shared reality. It is a part both of the child and of the mother. One child who has such an object may have no use for it during the day, but another will take it everywhere. At five the need for this thing may not have ceased, but many things can take its place—the child looks at comics, has a great variety of toys, both hard and soft, and there is the whole cultural life waiting to enrich the child's experience of living. But there may be trouble when the child goes to school, and the teacher will need to go slowly, and not ban this object absolutely from the classroom just at first. This problem nearly always resolves itself in a few weeks. I would say that the child is taking to school a bit of the relationship to his mother that dates right back to infantile dependence, and to early infancy, to the time when he was only beginning to recognize his mother and the world as separate from the self.

If the anxieties about going to school resolve themselves, then the boy will be able to give up taking this object along with him, and instead will have a truck or an engine in his pockets, as well as the string and the liquorice; and the girl will somehow manage by screwing up her handkerchief, or perhaps she will have a secret baby in a matchbox. In any case children can always suck their thumbs or bite their nails if hard put to it. As they gain confidence they usually give up these things. We learn to expect children to show anxiety about all moves away from being part and parcel of the mother and of home, moves towards citizenship of the wide, wide world. And anxiety may show as a return to infantile patterns which mercifully remain to provide reassurance. These patterns become a sort of built in psychotherapy which retains its effectiveness because the mother is alive and available, and because she is all the time providing a link between the present and the child's infancy experiences of which the infantile patterns are relics.

Postscript

One other thing. Children tend to feel disloyal if they enjoy school and if they enjoy forgetting their mother for a few hours. So they vaguely feel anxious as they get near home, or they delay their return without knowing why. The mother who has reason to be angry with her child should not choose the moment of his or her return from school to express it. She, too, may be annoyed that she was forgotten, and must watch for her own reactions to the new developments. It would be better not to be cross about the ink on the tablecloth until she and her child have re-established contact. These things present no great difficulty if we know what is happening. Growing up is not all honey for the child, and for the mother it is often bitter aloes.

Notes

Editorial This case is also discussed in 'The Effect of Psychotic Parents on the Emotional Development of the Child' [CW 5:5:21],
Note i 'String' [CW 6:1:20], and the 1971 version of 'Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena' [CW 9:3:5].