

The Psychology of Early Childhood

A STUDY OF MENTAL DEVELOPMENT IN
THE FIRST YEARS OF LIFE

by

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THIRD EDITION

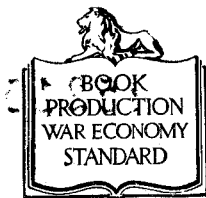


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TO
THE FIVE LITTLE PEOPLE
WHO SO GENEROUSLY SUPPLIED
MOST OF THE FACTS

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IN COMPLETE CONFORMITY WITH
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PREFACE

In this book an attempt is made to trace, from their very earliest appearances after birth, all aspects of mental development in childhood up to the age of about 4 or 5. It is based largely on the author's almost daily observations of his own five children, over a period of some twenty years, supplemented by numerous tests and experiments. In addition, observations have been made for me by a number of former students and other psychological friends on their own children in reference to special problems. All this evidence is discussed in relation to other published diary records made on the first three or four years of life by reliable observers (usually parents of the children)—from Preyer to Wilhelm Stern, and from Darwin to the Dionne Quins. There are now some dozen or more of such records of great value; but material from them has never been systematically collated into a single review of normal growth. They need co-ordinating and supplementing by precise reports on the very beginnings of mental functions and impulses.

In addition, the whole is constantly considered in relation to many published records of observations and experiments made on groups of children in reference to particular functions. Thus the book seeks to deal with the very *foundations of child psychology*. Indeed, this is a phrase that would have well expressed my main aims and I might have chosen it for the title (so avoiding the repetition of the title of Stern's well-known book), but in the present state of our knowledge it seemed too pretentious to claim to have covered the entire foundations.

The first purpose of the book is naturally to advance our knowledge of the psychology of childhood. The importance of such knowledge is now increasingly recognized. Even if all is not completely determined by the first four or five years of life, as some psycho-analysts would have us believe, there is little doubt that these first years are of profound significance for future development: and the better understanding and training of the little child may be at the root of many of our educational and social problems.

It is also hoped that the student of general psychology will find material of value, especially in the evidence given in nearly every

chapter as to what are genuine inborn tendencies in man. All the capacities and impulses of adulthood take on a new aspect when studied from their beginnings, for then they can be seen in their crudity. The student of psychology who has neglected the genetic approach often reveals serious gaps in his knowledge. The genetic approach not only gives us the best clue to innate propensities, but it helps us to understand more clearly many fundamental points of general psychology. To mention only a few treated in this book : the detailed study of reflexes in infancy compels us to define more exactly the distinction between reflex and instinct, the study of play in the first three years illuminates the general theory of play ; observations on imitations reveal the inadequacy of the Gestalt and other theories of imitation ; the appearance of early fears reveals innate tendencies in addition to those allowed by the Behaviourists ; the detailed reports on sex development and the attitude to parents in the first few years, undermine the Freudian foundations of human nature on sex attitudes in infancy. The chapter on the origin of laughter includes evidence revealing the inadequacy of well-known theories of laughter.

Further, as most chapters of this book can be read independently, specialists in various topics may find individual chapters of service in their own particular lines. Thus the linguist interested in the origins of language may turn to the chapter on Language ; the physiologist may find some interest in the chapter on Reflexes ; the medical man and others concerned with child psycho-therapy will find relevant material in the chapters on Fear, Aggression, Parents and the Oedipus Complex, and Sex Development. Indeed, most of the volume has a bearing on the question of what is normal and what abnormal in the development of children. Those concerned with the testing of infant development will find many facts showing that mental functions may appear considerably earlier in the environment of home than in the formal and more disconcerting surroundings of the Clinic or Laboratory, even allowing for higher intelligence quotients of most of their own children studied by psychologists.

It is hoped that the book will also be of service to some parents, who, having made some acquaintance with psychology, wish to study the development of their own children ; and also that it will be a stimulus and guide to much needed research on the very

beginnings of mental life; here the various new types of experimental tests should be of value, for it is often important that occasional observations should be supplemented by repeated tests or experiments, if chance coincidences are not to be misinterpreted.

Parts of a few chapters have already appeared in psychological journals, and my thanks are due to the Editors of the following for permission to make use of the material published by them: *The British Journal of Psychology* (article on The Psychology of Imitation, 1930), *The Journal of Genetic Psychology* (article on The Innate Basis of Fear, 1930), *Le Journal de Psychologie* (article on La Psychologie Génétique du Rire, 1936), *The British Journal of Medical Psychology* (article on Reflexes in Infancy, 1927). In all cases, however, these earlier papers have been carefully revised and in most cases very considerably extended. My thanks are also due to the Trustees of the Leverhulme Fund for Research Fellowships, for a grant which set me free from University duties for some months during 1935 and enabled me to put together a considerable part of this book.

My indebtedness to former workers in the field of child psychology will be clear from many references in this book. My debt to the group of friends and former pupils who have made careful records of the development of their own children is also acknowledged by references throughout the book. I should also like to express thanks to my wife for help in recording observations on our own children and with the proofs.

I am very grateful for helpful comments on the chapter on Reflexes by Dr. C. S. Myers and Dr. H. P. Gilding (Professor of Physiology in the University of Birmingham), and to my colleague Mrs. F. M. Austin for dealing similarly with the chapter on Suggestion. To my secretary, Miss J. M. R. Christie, my thanks are due for help with the typescript and proofs at all stages. My greatest debt is to Professor Cyril Burt, who generously read the whole book in typescript: his wide range of knowledge and his penetrating analysis resulted in many extremely valuable comments and suggestions which have improved every chapter.

C. W. VALENTINE

February 1942

I regret that war-damage and the inaccessibility of some libraries has prevented the checking of a few of the references.

PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION

The book has been re-set and a few slight emendations made. I have added a number of useful observations made by Mr. W. D. Wall on his two children, and my thanks are due to him for help with the proof-reading for this edition, and to my wife and eldest son, Lieut.-Col. W. H. Valentine, O.B.E., for further help with the proofs.

C. W. V.

July 1945

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THE PSYCHOLOGY OF EARLY CHILDHOOD

CHAPTER I

Introductory

Value of the study of early childhood. The study of the early years of childhood is of value for several reasons. For the man of genuine psychological curiosity, the fascinating interest of a developing mind is motive enough for studying it, while the importance of child psychology as a foundation for a science of education is obvious. Further, just as the study of childhood checks the tendency to over-rationalize our interpretation of adult behaviour, so the study of infancy lessens the danger of interpreting later childhood too much on the lines of adult experience. The significance of infant psychology for education, and for dealing with both normal and problem children will be dealt with more fully later.

Value for 'pure' science of psychology. The value of the study of earliest infancy for the 'pure' science of psychology will, I hope, often appear in this book.

Thus our discussion of reflexes will bring us to close grips with the controversy on the distinction between reflexes and instincts. The chapter on Fear gives evidence on the innate bases of fears, which the Behaviourists interpret as conditioned responses due to experience. Our study of imitation bears directly on, and I think refutes, the assertion of Gestalt psychologists that imitation (or what is almost universally recognized as such) always involves 'insight' and purpose. The chapter on Laughter supplies evidence that some well-known theories of laughter are quite inadequate. The chapters on Sex and the Oedipus Complex show the doubtfulness of the grounds on which some psycho-analytic interpretations of adult conduct are based.

Still more important, perhaps, is the fact that the most reliable evidence as to *what is genuinely innate in human nature* must be found in the study of human infancy. Even McDougall's massive contributions to the study of human instincts do not, I think, supply altogether satisfactory criteria as to what are the innate impulses,¹ valuable as they are as main guides. For the fact that a similar impulse is displayed in (apparently) instinctive activities of higher animals does not prove that in man that impulse is instinctive or innate. Indeed, McDougall himself only claimed that it

¹ *Social Psychology*, 9th edition, p. 49.

affords a strong presumption. Nor does the possibility of morbid exaggeration of an impulse give us a satisfactory clue, for many actions exaggerated to an abnormal degree owe at least their specific nature to experience.

The spontaneous occurrence of a new type of activity in the child, with first-hand evidence that it was not learned through experience, affords, it seems to me, the only certain proof of the genuine innateness of an impulse unless some activity developing later can also satisfy that criterion. Thus the foundations of child psychology are also some of the main foundations of human psychology as a whole.

The question of innate propensities has become more prominent in view of the bold challenges of the Behaviourist school, of Adler and of some psycho-analysts. Consider especially Dr. J. B. Watson's general view that there are few genuine innate tendencies in man, and the suggestion that any infant, if taken in hand early enough, can be 'conditioned' into almost any type of character. This assertion as to the absence of innate tendencies of an instinctive type can, as I hope to show later, be combated by evidence from early childhood, more particularly that gathered by continuous observation of the same child from birth over a period of years.

Most of those psychologists who, unlike Watson, believe that man possesses many innate tendencies, are still uncertain as to what precisely they are. For example, E. L. Thorndike emphasized our ignorance as to what situations originally provoke smiling, laughing, crying, frowning, imitation, fear, &c., and concludes that we can only solve the problem by direct observation of infants from birth.

The sociologist, as well as the educator, seeks from psychology more definite pronouncements as to inborn impulses and finds this lack of knowledge a hindrance. For example, Professor M. Ginsberg writes: 'Whether there is an original craving to hurt or destroy remains a question which urgently requires further investigation.'

Closely associated with the problem of what is really innate is the question of what innate mental differences there are between the sexes. This cannot be settled without a careful study of infancy before the influence of suggestion and tradition can have any effect though the *absence* of differences during the first few years would not prove that innate differences do not exist: for they may exist between innate tendencies or capacities which only mature late say at adolescence. We shall, however, find evidence that sex differences reveal themselves soon after 12 months and probably before.

The solution of problems as to the hereditary transmission

¹ See his *Educational Psychology*, Vol. 1 (New York, 1920).

² *Sociology*, p. 111 (London, 1934).

mental traits is also clearly dependent on our knowledge as to what is really innate.

Another value of the study of infancy lies in the fact that the *elementary functions may be observed in greater isolation* than they can be later. The instinctive impulses are now seen in their crudest form, less obscured than they are later by accretions from experience. Elementary cognitive processes, too, appear in their simpler forms and may be studied in their origins. The significance of time for maturing is only brought home to one by following and testing the development of the same child just at the stage when intellectual capacities are first appearing. Thus some 8 or 9 months elapsed (from about 2 years of age to about $2\frac{3}{4}$ years) from the time when one of my infants correctly used the number 'two' to the time when he could apprehend 'three' as a group; in another of my children the interval was even longer—so far is the truth from the supposed idea of a sudden development of a 'faculty of number'.

Practical values of the study of early infancy. There are further ways in which a more exact knowledge of development in infancy seems likely to prove of great practical value. They may be mentioned here briefly before the fuller discussion which will follow.

(a) The *early diagnosis of mental deficiency* may in a few cases at least enable suitable treatment to be given. For example, cretinism, due to defective functioning of the thyroid gland, if discovered in the first year or two, may be treated successfully.¹ Physical signs sometimes betray cretinism as early as 3 or 4 months: appropriate psychological observations may help diagnosis even earlier. They may also lead to detection of other types of mental deficiency early enough to permit treatment. In types of mental deficiency where treatment is not possible, we might by early diagnosis at least prevent fruitless expectations and serious errors in the bringing up of the child. It might also prevent the adoption of such children by parents who will subsequently rue their choice. The fact that some mental defectives are socially responsive and physically attractive makes this danger the greater.² Professor Hollingworth, indeed, reports that one mental defective of 9 years of age was so attractive that he was adopted successively by four

¹ See Leo Kanner, *Child Psychiatry*, p. 192 (London, 1935). Dr. Arnold Gesell describes a remarkable case of an infant who at 6 months was only at the level of maturity of a normal one-month-old baby. Thyroid treatment had an immediate effect and by the age of 1; 6 she had reached the normal level for about 1; 2 (*Biographies of Child Development*, p. 86). Here and throughout this book I adopt the usual method of giving years and months separated by a semi-colon.

² See A. Gesell, *The Guidance of Mental Growth in Infant and Child*, Chap. 13, (New York, 1930).

different families, each time being returned to the charity organization with the report that he could learn nothing. Tests revealed that his I.Q. was about 65.¹

A very early and very certain diagnosis of serious deficiency will be needed for any decisive general policy of a revolutionary type in reference to defectives, such as is now being discussed. Drs. Berry and Gordon, for example, report without approval or disapproval a proposal that the lowest grade mental defective should be given an overdose of morphia; that is for the perfectly hopeless, speechless, degraded imbeciles.² I have put the question to three young mothers, and they all said that if they knew that it was absolutely certain that a child of theirs would be a hopeless imbecile, they would think it kinder and better to have it 'put to sleep'.

(b) *Early diagnosis and treatment of 'problem' or 'nervous' children.* A fuller knowledge of the first two or three years would probably prove of great value in the training of those who, at a later stage, become the 'difficult' children in the home or school or the 'problem' children of the Child Guidance Clinics. The general trend of medicine and of the treatment of crime is toward prevention: and there is, it seems to me, little doubt that we shall eventually do more and more in the pre-school period to prevent children becoming problem children. But for this we need a much more exact knowledge of what is abnormal in respect to many individual impulses and emotions, and what are only individual variations within normal and healthy limits.

Recent developments which have emphasized the need and importance of the study of early childhood. Three recent developments have especially emphasized the need of the study of the earliest years of life, and have greatly stimulated that study: first, the assertion by various psycho-analytic writers, including not only Freud but Adler and others, that the first few years of life are decisive for the character of the individual; second, the devising of intelligence tests for infants of 1 and 2 years of age, and even for 3 and 6 months; third, the Child Guidance Movement with its attempts to cure temperamental and character abnormalities in very young children. Let us consider these seriatim.

The psycho-analytic view that character is determined by the age of 4 or 5. Leading psycho-analysts have asserted that the first four or five years of life are the most important in the fixing of character. Freud holds that 'the little human being is frequently a finished product in his fourth or fifth year'.³ Adler goes

¹ *The Psychology of Sub-normal Children*, p. 143 (New York, 1920)

² *The Mental Defective*, p. 189 (London, 1931).

³ *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-analysis*, p. 298, 1922.

far as to say that 'one can determine how a child stands in relation to life a few months after his birth'.¹

It is not my wish to underestimate the importance of the first few years of life, but rather to stress it. It seems, however, impossible to state, on the evidence we have before us, that the first four to five years of life are more important than, say, the years of adolescence, or that they are decisive for later development.²

The Freudians have certainly shown that in many cases some experiences of the earliest years may continue to exert a profound influence on the life and character of the child when he grows up, even though he may have forgotten those experiences. It may also be admitted that, if bad relations are set up between child and parents in the first few years, those relations may be fixed so that the parents' unaided efforts to change them later may be futile.

But this is not to say that the child is a 'finished product' and impervious to all influences. And the record of many Children's Homes, Reformatory Schools, and Child Guidance Clinics show that the character of a child may be decidedly changed when he is moved out of the family environment as late as 10 or 12 years of age, or even later.

Decided changes are often noted in children who enter an infant school at 5 ; 0 or 6 ; 0 when the home environment has been unsatisfactory.³

It is certainly not proved that if a child suffers from an injurious social environment, or erratic and foolish discipline till, say, 5 or 6, but enjoys a favourable environment thereafter, it is necessarily more handicapped than a child who has a satisfactory environment till that age, and then comes under wrong discipline or vicious influences continuing through the unstable and suggestible period of adolescence.

In any case it seems unnecessary to make extreme statements about the absolute fixation of character by the age of 5 or 6. It is enough for our purposes if we admit that this early period is probably far more important for future development than was at one time thought.

The attempts to test intelligence at 6 or 12 months. A second influence that has proved a powerful stimulant to infant psychology is the attempt to press back the testing of intelligence earlier than

¹ *Understanding Human Nature* (translated by W. B. Wolfe), p. 42.

² The next four paragraphs are partly quoted or paraphrased from my book, *The Difficult Child and the Problem of Discipline*, Chap. III (Methuen, 1940).

³ Dr. Susan Isaacs, herself a good Freudian, testifies to this: see her section of *The Educational Guidance of the School Child*, p. 68.