

Wisdom consists of understanding that this interaction for the child, is a transitory period aimed at the acquisition of a greater degree of autonomy. As soon as they start to walk - that is, two or three months later - they can begin to work side by side with us. A new form of attachment to the environment is achieved by means of such collaboration.

Another frequently made error is that of wanting to keep the infant attached to you longer than necessary, either at the breast (which is no longer needed) or by making yourself indispensable as a support person to whom the child clings because he was not given the time to experience the pleasure of moving his body freely. Since there is an ideal time for every change we should be careful not to keep the child in a state of dependence that no longer corresponds to his real abilities. If we do, personal progress will be obstructed and months will pass without the child developing psychological structures appropriate to his age.

We have to be ready to maintain contact with the child, but the form in which this is manifested should change. Only when this happens are we really helping in his development.

The Crisis of Opposition

The third developmental crisis occurs at 30 to 36 months of age and concludes the first basic period in the construction of the personality. It is called the crisis of opposition, but this term is incorrect because it gives a negative connotation to a period that is actually positive. The crisis demonstrates that the child has taken another big step forward in the path towards independence and humanization.

Around three years of age, children are able to speak very well and to refer to themselves with the pronoun "I". They are able to move about perfectly, and even run, and have reached an accurate awareness of their world. They now have the distinguishing characteristics of human beings and are perfectly aware of their level of maturity. Now they are waiting and asking to be recognized as adult.

The crisis starts when children begin to say "no" to almost everything we propose to them, demonstrating that they can react

in a very different way than adults expect. The change generally happens suddenly and can surprise many parents who almost cease to recognize their own child. In reality, what the child is no longer accepting is our style of addressing him by continually stressing that he is small and has to do what he has been ordered to do. At this stage, his ego wants to be taken into account and consulted when there is a decision to be made that concerns him. These decisions are simple. They are always related to daily life - to eating, getting dressed and so on - but behind each of these actions lies his relationship with the environment.

If, from the very start, we were able to see the capability of the child, tried to perform the right activities for life together with him and increased our collaboration with him, then the crisis of opposition may very well never arise. The child constantly receives the reassurance required by his ego without having to fight for this recognition. If, for example, we have to go out with the child and put on an overcoat, we should turn to the child with love and respect and invite him to come out with us, to take his overcoat, (which should be hanging in a wardrobe accessible to him), and put it on. This is clearly better than just taking the garment, and without even explaining what we are intending to do, going up, grabbing him, and trying to dress him while announcing that he has to go out. Around the age of three this form of behavior begins to arouse opposition. A power struggle starts, which the adult can appear to win by using verbal or physical violence to end the protest; however, the child loses a precious opportunity to feel he has grown and has been recognized as a person who is able to make decisions and who lives in an environment that takes his opinion into account. The real message for the child's ego is, "You are important here and the things that we do require your approval. You count and you can participate in this environment". If adults succeeded in understanding that behind the child's "No" is the desire to be recognized as a person who is already able to resolve many problems related to him, they might be able to ask for his opinion much more often than is generally done. At this point, I should stress that we are not suggesting that it should be left to children to decide what to do. The idea is simply to avoid giving only orders and to leave a choice between just two alternatives when it is possible. We can say "Do you want to put on an overcoat or a raincoat?" - and be ready to accept that the child will go out wearing whatever garment he chooses, even though we would have preferred the other one.

In this period, what really counts is helping the child to verify the importance of his presence in the family. As soon as he feels reassured about this he will stop saying "No" and will continue to work peacefully along with us. Real collaboration only comes from those who do not feel overpowered and can contribute freely. Only when we are free is it possible to make choices.

We have to learn a completely different manner of addressing children even before the period of opposition arises. This can develop only if we overcome prejudice toward children because they are small. In reality, and it is useful to repeat, it is only their bodies that are small, not their minds or ability to do things. Their abilities are not in fact utilized by the environment. We leave these extraordinary human beings in a situation of absolute dependence that does not correspond with either the motor or verbal abilities of this age. There are countless opportunities in every day life to take children into serious consideration, giving them a chance to understand what is happening, reflect on it and make a choice. That is exercising a decision-making power which all human beings want and feel as indispensable to their status as free persons.

"Would you like some biscuits or would you prefer bread and honey?"

"Should we cook some potatoes or carrots?"

"Which tablecloth should we use: the green one or the white one?"

"Shall we go to the zoo or to the puppet show?"

It should be clear that we are not risking anything by offering, whenever it is possible, two alternatives, while the child gains very much, because we demonstrate that we consider him able to choose, and respect his judgement. This is the best food for his ego and for making it even stronger, in the right sense of the word. The aim is to produce a person who is respected and who, therefore, respects others and the environment and shares in responsibilities. There is no difference in the psychological mechanism that decides between "biscuits" and "bread and honey" and, much later, between solar or nuclear energy. These are decisions that can only be taken well if the person called upon to take them has learned to consider the consequences of the decision.

In our Infant Community, we make particular efforts to ask for the children's opinions and decisions on everything possible, so

that they get used to the democratic exercise of power. This does not imply doing what they want but, starting from the real situation (we only have biscuits or bread and honey so it is impossible to ask for anything else) we offer a choice. If the child wants something that we do not have, but could buy, we can simply say that we don't have it right now, "But when we go to the market together, remind me and I will buy it." This approach, combining respect, consideration and collaboration, is the only valid response to the crisis of opposition which would be better termed the "crisis of the recognition of the ego". It is a moment of passage to a higher level of development, and this should make parents happy, considering that the child is continuing to grow both in age, wisdom and personal maturity.

At three years of age, a child is an extraordinary human being with whom it is possible to establish a relationship of increasing equality. The road to other important mental conquests such as learning to read and the acquisition of other cultural abilities, can be started. While participating and sharing in practical life helps in perfecting the child's motor skills and in reassuring his ego that he is recognized, his immense mental energies can be used to continue to learn, instead of being burnt up in an endless struggle against an environment that has not understood the real meaning of his opposition. There is a battle going on for a type of relationship within the family in which we can select a democratic system, trusting the children capable of making choices.

It is also very dangerous for the future of the human beings to let children perceive that life is always a conflict and that, if you want to assert yourself, you always have to oppose other people. It is our responsibility to children, and, therefore, the future of humanity, to provide them with a model for relationships with other people that involves respect for the individual and that allows everyone who lives together to express an opinion and take decisions. All this begins very early, at birth itself. By the age of three, the model for the human being that is developing within the child is complete. The child wants freedom and respect, and we should create family and social groupings in which these values are real and operational.

The period of opposition is also one in which children begin to better understand time and to establish some relationship with the past and the future. It is, therefore, essential to be very careful

in making promises, and when we make them, to keep them. This is yet another aspect of the respect and consideration we owe children. Thinking that they are young and forget things easily is a serious underestimation of their abilities. When it is really impossible to live up to our promises, we have to apologize and propose an alternative. Children are generous and do not expect perfection from us, but rather an honest relationship in which we have to demonstrate our willingness to collaborate.

Education is difficult, because in a teaching situation we are faced with our true egos, and are obliged to ask ourselves if we really believe everything we say and if we have faith in the large potential of every human being. We have to decide to change in order to offer the children who live with us the possibility of growing up in an atmosphere that offers aid to life.

Every family and community provides education for all its members, but adults have the power to change the environment and should use it to favor everyone's development. Contrary to what happens to the body, which reaches a certain level of development and then stops, the mind can continue its growth up to the last moment of life. With appropriate human mediation everything is possible. Crisis periods are favorable for change, not only in children but in all who participate in them. The results are assessed in terms of the new physical and psychological abilities needed for continuing to grow and are measured as an increase not only in years, but in the quality of life.