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The Children and Psychology

Paul Goodman

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ity — we have let up on toilet-training, we have been liberating sexuality, we have honestly relinquished an old-fashioned authority because we do not know right principles. Then in the new generation there is more and more health and available energy, and less and less to do with it; more and more unprejudiced, not-class-ridden and goodhumored kids who are, yet more and more stupid. This is the psychology of abundance that goes with the economy of abundance.

With the alleviation of the anxieties of poverty, there naturally loom vaster and at first vaguer anxieties of destiny. Our present task, it seems to me, is just to get rid of a few more ideas, to get rid of Life so we can have a little life, and finally to get rid of Psychology so we can have a little contact and invention. As Lao tse said, “Good government is to empty the people’s minds and fill their bellies.”

Paul Goodman

What is most significant, it seems to me, is the earnest attention paid to the Children and Family as a subject, the desire of parents to be Informed and thereby do their best, rather than following their wit and impulse; or to say this another way, what is significant is the importance assigned in our society to Psychology itself? for Psychology is still by and large the family-psychology that Freud made it discussing the problems of jealousy, infantile dependency authority, submissiveness and rebelliousness, and sibling competition: and problems of spite, moral prejudice and other reaction-formations springing from instinctual deprivation. This interest in the Children is of course hopeful, for the increase of wisdom cannot fail to remedy abuses, and has already done so quite spectacularly.

But this interest is also itself a symptom of an unfortunate social situation. Earnest folk pay such special attention to the children, and in general to their Inter-personal Relations, because there is not enough objective man’s work or woman’s work to put themselves to. I do not mean that there is not enough absolutely (it’s a large universe); but that in our present social and technical arrangements there are not enough exciting and available and unquestionably self-justifying enterprises, where a lively human being can exercise initiative and use his enormous psychic and physical powers to anything like capacity. This problem goes, I think, deeper than any of the current differences in political or economic arrangements, and I cannot think of any immediate change that could alleviate it. We are in a phase of collective enterprise that does not, and probably cannot as yet much use and stimulate such remarkably gifted animals as individual people, especially if we consider them (as children) before they are discouraged and become rusty, and in addition to our powers all the knowledge and equipment of our culture. So more and more are likely to blow off steam in religious exploration; and the brunt of the burden falls on preoccupation with the Children and Interper-

sonal Relations, for these at least are things that one can individually try to do something about.

Good parents work to preserve-and-give more available energy to their children; the children in turn grow up and find they have not much field of action for this energy, but they can expend some of it on their children.

The helping of children has the prime advantage that it can be disinterested, compassionate, and *noblesse oblige*; it is our nearest equivalent to the old chivalry. The bother is that, except for those who have a calling, who are born teachers, it is stultifying as a steady occupation. We also need some dragons to kill and planets to visit, for goods to produce that people unquestionably need. A psychiatrist friend of mine says that the right care of children is: let them alone and be around; where “be around” means I suppose, to provide safety, audience for the exploit, consolation for the hurt, suggestion and material equipment for the next step, and answers when asked. This simple formula will not fill up a twenty-lecture seminar on Children.

The family as battleground

As our families are, the children in both their present satisfaction and the free growth of their powers, are certainly crushed, thwarted, pushed, hurt, and misled by their hostile and doting grown-ups. Frankly, I doubt that you can find one child in a dozen who is not being seriously injured, in quite definite and tangible ways, by his family. I would say this indignantly, as an indictment of the Family and *ecrasez l'infame* let's fight to get rid of it! If I thought that the available substitutes were not even more disastrous. But consider also the other side, that the parents are tied to and tyrannized over by the little Neros. You cannot put them in their places for several reasons:

1. You can't, try it;

show a lot of sense and life when they strike out directly for the rewards of activity, money, glamour, and notoriety, which will “prove” in one fell swoop that they are not Impotent. And it is curious and profoundly instructive how they regress, politically, to a feudal and band-and-chieftain law that is more comprehensible to them. The code of a street-gang has made an article in common with the Code of Alfred the Great.

It is disheartening indeed to be with a group of young fellows who are in a sober mood and who simply do not know what they want to do with themselves in life. Doctor, lawyer, beggar-man? thief? Rich man, poor man, Indian chief? They simply do not know an ambition and cannot fantasize one. But it is not true that they don't care; their “so what?” is vulnerable, their eyes are terribly balked and imploring. (I say “it is disheartening”, and I mean that the tears roll down my cheeks; and I who am an anarchist and a pacifist feel that they will be happier when they are all in the army.)

The psychology of abundance

This a sad picture, naturally; for it is always sad when you write about something, rather than do something. (Poetry is not sad, it is an action.) I do not think there is cause for indignation, nor for despair. Not for indignation because so many people are doing their best and many of these difficulties that have arisen are surprising and must simply be addressed patiently. Not for despair, for my feeling is that we are in a strange transition: to finding some kind of collective arrangements that will be rich with animal vitality and creative spontaneity and will be without Interpersonal Relations. Of course I cannot imagine such an apparently contradictory thing or I would be writing that instead of this. Meantime we psychologically-informed parents are doggedly (and out of our own hides) contributing to the explosion of it. By the millions — soon by the vast major-

increasingly early times, to nursery-schools and schools. Perhaps the schools will provide “exploration and inspiration toward a career”. But the situation of the teachers in the schools is fundamentally no different. For always the question is, What to teach? What is realistically worth teaching? The curriculum becomes poorer and poorer, Because an honest educator cannot seriously believe that the solid sciences and humanities are life-relevant to the average of this mass of pupils. Nor is so-called “vocational” training the answer. (The same tends to be applied precisely in the absence of vocation.) Neither the jobs trained? for nor the kill-time training add up to what would enliven a human soul. The answer of the school is again psychology; what the teacher has is not a subject-matter but a method? and what he teaches is Interpersonal Relations. The only art that is essential is to read simple words, for production and distribution depend on reading. (So there has been universal free primary education for a hundred years, and the earmark of the delinquent who won’t fit into the economy is that he won’t or can’t learn to read.) But the savage and intolerable irony is the current craving for more mathematics and physics, lest our bombs, radar, and rockets fall behind Russia’s — these beautiful studies that have been transcendent goals for many of our best! now advocated so basely and the professors greedy for the subsidies and students on any conditions.

Success without achievement

Brought up in a world where they cannot see the relation between creativity and achievement, adolescents believe that everything is done with mirrors, tests are passed by tricks, achievement is due to pull, goods are known by their packages, and a man is esteemed according to his front. The delinquents who cannot read and quit school, and thereby become still less able to take part in such regular activity as is available,

2. It’s bad for them to slap them down, and if they are injured it bounces back on you in the end; and
3. Most fundamentally, in the good cases you can’t deny the imperious demands of the children because most, and perhaps all? of the hard things they really want are justified: they want space, excitement, sexual freedom noble models to grow up to, wise saws of experience, real arts and crafts to learn animals to hunt, an unknown to explore, and comprehensible answers to direct questions.

But it is not the case that our housing our economy, our style, our frontiers, and our sciences are amenable to these justified childish demands. Our arrangements have become so objective that few grown-ups and no children any longer have an available objective world. So a sensitive parent feels justly guilty; he tries anxiously, in impossible conditions, not to rob the children of their natural rights as the free heirs of nature and man. Do not many of us suffer from what we could call a Lear-complex? We are abashed by the free unspoiled power of the very young, we have no right to withstand it. we resign and give up our own rights.

As a striking example of parental guilty good intentions, notice in community planning how every adult requirement of quality style, and efficiency, is sacrificed to suburban utilities of safety and playground.

Being master with authority

Contrast it to make the point clear- with a master and his disciples whether an artist or an artisan or a scholar: he uses the kids for his purposes, he says do and don’t with a clear conscience because his soul is fixed on the work; he teaches them out of his compassion to prevent error and advance the future.

They, in turn, are neither humiliated nor browbeaten nor exploited. They are growing into the work and growing through him because he is a master of the work; and the compelling proof of all this does not come from authority but from the work. Now regarding the Family as a school of growth in the art of personal life and of exploration and inspiration towards a career, what experienced mother or father feels like a master of the subject and can command and forbid with conviction, except in some elementary issues of health and safety and perhaps grammar and manners? (As Yeats said, "The best lack all conviction — the worst are full of passionate intensity.") We do not know the method to reach the goal we do not know. This is often expressed by the sentence, 'I don't care what my children do or become, so long as they will be happy.' An honest, humble, and sensible sentence, but it puts parents in the impossibly anxious position of trying to fulfill an indefinite responsibility. So instead of improvising with wit and love on a foundation of experience and unquestioned personal achievement they necessarily rely on Psychology and Mental Hygiene.

Another cause of preoccupation with the children is that children have become the only colorable excuse for existence of the monogamous family. Economically women make money and own most of it. As a way of life, with the general breakdown of the old sexual conventions and the weakening of the old inhibitions, monogamous marriage is felt as a trap and a frustration; people are exposed to and allow themselves to feel, temptation but are not able to take satisfaction so there is plenty of resentment and guilt, projected resentment. Frankly, again, it is my observation that if many marriages (maybe most) could be simply dissolved after a few years, the partners would suddenly become brighter, rosier, and younger. And again I would therefore urge, change the whole institution, except that the situation is not simple: we are still in the toils of jealousy of our own Oedipus-complexes, and in the present social fragmentation the companionship

of marriage, such as it is, a safeguard against isolation and loneliness. (The Family was a bulwark of the private economy, and now it is a refuge against the collective economy.) But these grounds for the continued existence of the institution cannot stand much ethical scrutiny, considering the cost. It is the children that make the effort unquestionably worthwhile; and of course with the two or three children now standard, the burden of justification that must be borne by each little darling is great indeed.

Salvation through sex-technique

As a defense against it, it has become the highest aim in life of an entire young generation to "achieve" a normal happy marriage and raise healthy (psychologically healthy) children. This is, what was always taken as a usual and advantageous background for work in the world and the service of God, is now regarded as a heroic goal to be striven for. This is preposterous. Yet, I should like to repeat it, the sentiment is deeply justified by the fact that at least this goal can be personally striven for; it is connected with real, not merely symbolic satisfactions and responsibilities; and the same cannot be said for other goals for most people, which are either fictions of prestige and power, or are managed collectively. Consider, as a test, when the goal cannot be achieved or when the marriage cracks up: it is the exceptional case where the person's work or social role is important enough and real enough to occupy his thoughts and keep him going with manly fortitude. Viewed in this light, the thousand manuals of sex-technique and happy marriage have the touching dignity of evangelical tracts, as is indeed their tone; they teach how to be saved, and there is no other way to be saved.

The well-intentioned loving and resentful parents make a vocation of the children until finally they can send them off, at