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CiCe
Institute for Policy Studies in Education
London Metropolitan University
166 – 220 Holloway Road
London N7 8DB
UK

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Welcoming a two year old to the nursery: the viewpoint of the nursery worker/teacher

Yveline Fumat

Professeur Emeritus, Montpellier (France)

Introduction

Welcoming a two to three year old into a nursery involves radically challenging the expectations and mental pictures of the nursery worker. The worker's view of a two year old infant cannot be positive if expectations in relation to this child are based on the representations of the skills of a three to four year old, and even more so if the institution has not taken into account individual needs, only allowing the child to express him/herself in terms of deviancy or passivity; for example

In a group, s/he is agitated... when involved in physical activities, she remains on the side lines or is pushed about by the older ones and wants her security blanket. When expected to behave like others, s/he does not quite follow what is going on and when s/he is not invited to join in, s/he wants to emulate the bigger ones and hampers the serious activity... S/he doesn't even know how to draw a circle and remains impervious to the slightest collective instruction.
(Nursery worker's report on a very young child)

With this perspective, the child can only assume the status of 'bad boy/girl' or trouble-maker, unless her apparent passivity helps her to become invisible and s/he does not disturb the group. To view an infant in the same way that one would an older child is particularly elitist, a source of frustration for the adult and particularly demeaning for the child.

How, in such conditions, can the child's self-esteem and self-confidence be reinforced?

In the best scenario, the child who is not showing any sign of maturity is labelled as not ready for school. However, it is evident that even with plenty of good will, the child is being asked to adapt to the school rather than the other way round. What can be more unsettling for a child than to arrive in an unknown place and be surrounded by people whom s/he has never seen before in his/her life? A well-organised initial welcome to the nursery for the child will help the child to familiarise herself gradually with the school and to anticipate what s/he is about to experience.

However, no matter how well the first day is organised, the child may demonstrate physically and/or through attitude his difficulty in separating from his carer, and in accepting the rules of the new environment. From birth, the child has undergone a process of separation-individuation, but his sense of self is still very fragile. S/he can act out insecurities in many ways: hiding in s/her shell, going through regression, being defensively aggressive or hyperactive. Sometimes extreme distress will manifest itself through either violent or silent tears. Some psychopathological symptoms may develop, such as regression in potty training (only recently mastered), biting, inhibitions, extreme shyness.

It is therefore important not to identify the child with his symptom(s) by calling him 'naughty' or 'dirty', and equally important not to return aggression with aggression, as this would have the effect of increasing feeling of insecurity.

The difficulty for the teacher/nursery worker lies in trying to distinguish between insecurities which will pass and the more durable ones which may require later attention.

Settling the child in with the help of a caring adult will allow the child to feel valued, but sometimes requires a review of the schooling methods (allowing the presence of the carer in the classroom for a while, reducing time-tabled hours). The two year old requires a vigilance all the greater as s/he is immature and still lives an intensely close relationship with his/her mother and other relatives. Her dependence in relation to the adults in her life is still very important not only in meeting her physiological needs or stemming uneasiness but also on affective and cognitive levels.

The child needs a special relationship with an adult in order to find her boundaries and to be reassured. Interactions with the teacher can help with the mental elaboration of separation from the mother. This entails being close to the child, not in an intensely uniting way but rather in an emphatic one. The teacher is not a substitute for the mother (which would make her/him a rival to the mother) but has more of a 'hand-over' role. The young child needs his/her mother to look at him/her, to talk to him/her and to help him/her make sense of what s/he is going through, what s/he is doing, to reaffirm his/her narcissism and self-esteem. Finally, all this is only made possible if the child is positively and unconditionally recognised as her/his parents' child.

Taking young children through these steps of integration at school is difficult for adults: it requires them to think about and successfully organise the child's first day in nursery, but also demands the emotional availability to welcome each child and its parents. All the adults involved may be subject to old emotions and feelings of their own, and such an internal and uncontrolled echo can make the adults react in a way that is detrimental to the educational purpose. The risks are in adopting an attitude either too impulsive or too rigid, or in disengaging oneself emotionally to protect oneself, which makes it difficult to see the child's suffering. The teacher is called upon to react with what s/he is, without allowing herself to be discouraged, impatient or indeed resentful.

Managing internal conflicts and reactions of opposition, or a child's distress due to separation, is quite destabilising. For the teacher, there is no such thing as a 'proper' attitude per se. It is a recognised fact that working with children requires a lot of patience. This is true in the sense that one needs to trust the child in his/her capacity to grow, and s/he needs to be given the time to find boundaries and overcome transitional difficulties.

For the adult, to be aware and, at the same time, spontaneous requires a conscious effort to distance oneself, which warrants the support of a working team and of continuing professional development.

How to adopt a professional stance in one's relationship with parents

The younger the child, the stronger the reactions of rivalry. Being aware of the complexity of certain situations enables us to recognise the difficulties of both the parent and the child, and to separate oneself smoothly, thus avoiding projecting value judgements, which are latent sources of conflicts, on the family. One mother seems in a hurry to leave her child, another appears to wait until s/he cries to go away or prolongs good-byes: both

mothers experience a difficulty in separating which needs to be taken into account with tact and firmness. As for aggressive reactions, if they are perceived as an attempt to express a feeling of uneasiness, and not seen as directed personally at the teacher, they often open channels for a more trusting communication.

To the extent that in France the nursery is both a free child-minding service and a school, the teacher is confronted with paradoxical situations. S/he may wish to set up an individual programme for each child, thus enabling each to settle in to the rhythm of the school without difficulty. However, the reality of working parents or their unavailability does not allow for such transitions. The unpleasant sight of a child not settling down well can help to set up 'the good professional' against 'the bad parent'.

Teachers are often inclined to declare that parents 'give up'. This rather abusive value judgement is more the expression of a defensive position than the attitude of a professional who respectfully listens to the parents. Relationships within a family are characterised both by emotional and irrational factors: the teacher and nursery workers' relationships with the children and their parents should move beyond such factors and to be available to all of them, thus allowing each child to adapt.

How can we find a way to suspend value judgement and to engage in listening to and acknowledging one another? As noted above, our own representations can get impede us, but some indicators may be helpful:

- reassuring parents, notably by restoring to them a positive observation of their child, allows the parents in turn to reassure their child;
- respecting transitional objects such as the security blanket, the dummy, personal photographs;
- organising mediations between the family and what is learnt in school, for example photograph albums and 'my life' notebooks. The aim is to further coherence between the different areas of the child's life so that the passage from family to school is seen as promotion and not abandonment (or abduction).

If communication between the teachers and the families becomes a key point in the schooling system, the activities undertaken in school acquire even more meaning for the child because they have meaning for the parents. However, to welcome the parents and their ambivalent feelings about school, and to support their parental position, require a step back, listening and self-confidence which involve 'human skills' at the heart of this change of view.

Finally, to develop the notion of a contract with the families through a project personal to each child, and the establishment of some deadlines for taking stock to pave the way to the near future guarantees better integration: this will allow these exceptional modes to be accepted by nursery workers and will give parents the chance to play a part in their efforts. Parents can then truly be considered as partners

A tool for partnership: a 'life notebook'

The idea behind the life notebook is to bring home to the school, and school to the home. A 'life notebook' is unique to each child and is a way to forge material links between

family life and school activities. As such, it contains a transitional dimension between the family micro-culture and the school culture.

This notebook, which records events experienced by the child either in school or at home, becomes part of a significant network. As a witness to the child's life, it gives the child memories and holds a strong emotive value. The objectives of the 'life notebook' as a communication development project with the child at its centre are:

- to facilitate the welcoming of each child into the nursery school and to maintain links with his/her family;
- to suggest socialising activities which make sense, so that everyone feels recognised and is encouraged to progress within the group;
- to give greater importance to situations of authentic communication, which will enable all parties to learn to talk and to want to become a reader.

The child takes home his/her 'life notebook' regularly, and so it becomes a means of making the parents – through their child - more sensitive and of engaging them in the pedagogical project. The notebook involves the parents in the learning process, especially in using narrative skills which are similar to written ones. The child sees adults reading his/her life notebook, and thus has the opportunity to construct a model of a reader, to observe the postures, attitudes and strategies of the reader. So from a very young age s/he will understand when and why to use one's writing skills.