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Infants tell the stories of their lives - and it is our obligation as adults to listen

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Abstract

Children have a strong driving force to learn and to be developed. Will to examine and thirst for knowledge flourish as most when children experience a fundamental confidence. Children need to feel safe or assured about receiving help to regain their safety, if this has been threatened. Vignettes from three infants lives show how different outcomes in explorative situations tend to form the expectances of what is to come next. The internal working models of attachment in infancy contribute to form the development of self confidence as well as future citizenship. Preschool settings can be important arenas to offer children good circumstances for development without fear. Infants tell the story of their lives and it is our obligation as adults to listen.

Introduction

What is possible to do during the first years of life in order to prepare the child for future positive participation in the society? A highly simplified way to describe something about functioning in a society could be; living up to one's own responsibilities; having ability to contribute to what is common; and, to be able to experience and take care of the personal capabilities and one's own rights. But rights and responsibilities are scarcely something we usually associate with infants and small children. Rather with development and everlasting learning, with curiosity and play. And this is where the lines cross; to play and develop or to work and protect life's different possibilities - all this we seem to handle better when released from insecurity and fear. If security is sufficient we have possibilities to use our power and energy for work, learning and creation. If this is not the case, a part of our power is required when trying to create or re-create a feeling of life as not being dangerous but exciting. In this respect age does not make a distinction between people.

Children have a strong driving force to learn and to develop. They have will to examine and a thirst for knowledge which flourishes with confidence. Children need to feel safe or assured about receiving help to regain safety if this has been threatened. An infant could need one safe attachment person within reach in order to explore its environment.

All experiences of infants must be related to "here and now". A symbolic tool, like language, is needed in order to relocate the thought and the imaginations into another reality than the one oneself experiences or has experienced. An infant has not yet developed a systematic, symbolic communication and relates all its experiences to its own reality. The fantasies of small children have, for example, expectations based on earlier experiences, rather than of escapism or empathy in others lives.

Vignette II

Eva crawls quickly across the floor. She has her eyes fixed upon a big, motley ball lying half way beneath a chair. Now, the ball is close to Eva and she raises one hand towards it. It is too far away and she puts her hand once again on the floor and crawls a bit further. Now!

However, the ball does not lie still when Eva tries to reach it, but rolls further. Eva loses her balance and hits her chin on the floor. She stiffens and, her under lip shivers and she bursts into tears. She turns her head a bit, gets a nod and a kind word from the preschool teacher who turns towards Eva. Eva gets up and crawls in beneath the chair and succeeds at last in touching the big ball.

This became at last a both happy and beautiful statement from Eva's development diary. Here a row of good circumstances, worth mentioning, emerges; Eva has the ability to direct concentration and attention towards stimulating possibilities as the ball (she is not occupied by being sorry or concerned), she shows endurance, has good hope of getting help from other people when it comes to difficulties, and moreover this help is given her when she needs it. We have observed a good sequence which has given Eva new experiences and besides has confirmed her in a positive expectation of both herself and others.

Vignette II

Miranda is sitting on the floor looking at a teddy placed on a low table some metres away. She gets into crawl position, and waits a moment. Then she starts to crawl towards the teddy. At the table Miranda waits again a couple of seconds before she raises, grabs the edge of the table and tries to get up supporting herself on the table. She almost manages but not quite. Her legs do not bear and Miranda loses her balance a bit and thuds down on her but again. She takes a deep breath, stiffens and looks in one direction and then in the other. No one is there. She looks again, now for a good while. Her eyes get filled with tears and she sits totally calm and quiet. A minute later Miranda sighs and crawls back to her starting-point on the floor. The teddy must wait.

The story began with a feeling of excitement and appetite for discovering. But the end of it, and the experience it can reflect, is a little different. Nevertheless Miranda tells us that she has good experiences of detecting and of learning new things. She knows that it is possible and worth the inconvenience to dare to try. Her expectation is that it will be possible to approach the new without being prevented by fear or uncertainty. She shows competence of regulating her experiences so that they will not become overwhelming, through breathing and body control. When this is not enough to restore the safety, Miranda tells us that the experiences so far tell her there is help to get. The experience Miranda gets at the end of this story is probably not typical for her life. She copes with it by returning to the starting point, a kind of spatial safe basis. Her statement is not that sad as it could appear. Miranda withstands something difficult, but this is temporary and has contributed to her experiences of that one can cope with such worries without something dangerous occurring. And she has just made the experience that she was able to cope with it herself.

Vignette III

Anna sits on the floor with bowed head with her eyes fixed on the floor. She raises her head, looks up and fastens her gaze upon a yellow ball with big, red dots. It lies quite near her, but not until now Anna discovers the ball. She quickly draws her breath, turns her head away from the ball and begins to grumble/whimper. She rubs her face with the back of her hand and in particular over her eyes. Then she does the same but now with both hands. Anna cast a quick look over her shoulder to see the ball again and closes her eyes just as she starts to scream. She screams with closed eyes, roughly screwed up, and the body crouching/huddled up. The head is once again bowed. A preschool teacher comes and asks with a kind voice why Anna became so sad. Anna does not look up but continues to sob. When the preschool teacher put her arm around her Anna winces and increases her crying. The preschool teacher discontinues the bodily contact but stays close by. After a couple of minutes Anna lies down on the floor and quickly falls asleep.

Anna relates to those who listen to her story that life is a dangerous place and that one has to try to protect oneself as good as possible. Lonely as one is the best way is to avoid unknown and new situations. One who must manage everything alone shall not take any risks. It is better to minimize life and try to find coping strategies to deal with it. This is a child with an internal working model which differs from these of Eva and Miranda. Anna does not believe in external help, her experience does not include any secure base. We do not know why this is so, but in the present situation it is hard for Anna to develop through related detecting. Many positive experiences can be needed to change her expectations and to come within her attempts to protect herself against intrusion. Anna is a child who with her statement shows that both caution and objective awareness are needed to get through and to help out.

Conclusion

We can learn a lot of important things from “narratives” like in these vignettes. No child is too young to tell us about his or her needs, experiences and expectations. But we need to ask for this information, to interpret it and to use it! If so, we can take an active part in preparing each infant for a good and secure participation in society in the future.

1 The three vignettes which occur in the text are all based on observations of children, made by the author. They are authentic but their identities have been removed. The environment is an open preschool for parents with small children where also preschool teachers are employed.