

How a Child Operates

A speculation by George M. Prince @ 80

Organisms organize, and what a human organism organizes is meaning. He or she does this by making connections to form ideas. (Kegan, p.13) An idea or thought is a mental picture of something not actually present, and thinking is a succession of such pictures. (Dewey, p.5)

A child learns to make connections and create ideas through experiment. These are physical experiments in the beginning—making connections between those wiggling fingers and the tensing of muscles in the arm and hand. Learning to crawl and walk are accomplished through an almost endless series of experiments, each leading to an approximation and a modification so that the child gets successively closer to the move he intends. .

As we watch a child stagger upright and collapse, we do not say, “No, No, that is wrong, do not fall down. Correct standing up is staying on your feet.”

We do not say that because we know the child is trial and erroring—connecting to what helps stay up and what does not.

When a child is trial connecting to make meaning out of something new, we seem to lose our understanding. A child sees her first horse. “Daddy, there is a big cat!” “No, Sally, that is a horse.” We are so committed to correct answers that we punish the *process*—the trial connection—the thinking process that is essential in making meaning.

Connection Making

This is the heart of making meaning. To learn—to understand— is to grasp meaning (Dewey, p. 132) and it depends upon the capacity and *willingness* of the learner to risk trial connecting that may be “mistaken”.

Everything the parent or teacher does and the way s/he does it creates a field that either encourages the child to make connections or discourages connection making. (Dewey, p. 59)

The other action that is most damaging to training the mind is parents’ and teachers’ dominating belief that “getting it right” is the most important concern. (Dewey, p 65)—that goals are everything.

To help a child develop his or her thinking power we need to understand what is going on with a child. We need to know about anxiety and it’s central role in learning.

Anxiety

"...the role of anxiety in interpersonal relations is so profoundly important that its differentiation from all other tensions is vital." (Sullivan, p. 49)

"...anxiety arouses *uncanny emotion*" (Sullivan, p.9) It is akin to *awe...dread...horror...loathing*. Unlike the pain of hunger or a blow, there seems to be no source, it is manageable only with careful attention and knowledge of its underlying meaning.

Neurophysiology

Anxiety originates in an organ of the brain. The amygdala acts as the storehouse of emotional memory and thus of significance itself. The signals from all the senses are received by the thalamus, which routes them to the amygdala, which scans for crisis. The neocortex—the reasoning/thinking part of the brain— receives the information split seconds later. If the amygdala detects danger, it flashes an emergency signal to all parts of the brain to mobilize. This signal is sent before the neocortex has had a chance to analyze the situation to determine the reality of the danger. (Goleman, p.15–17)

History

An infant first experiences anxiety at about six months when s/he senses that he has been abandoned by Mother, or that Mother is gripped by anxiety, or when the infant is confronted with a stranger. (Kagan, p 43.) The emotion remembered by the amygdala is an unspecific fear of ceasing to exist—failing to survive—the feeling we call anxiety. Because the amygdala is *approximate rather* than precise, this dread feeling will later be triggered whenever any event resonates with that emotional memory of abandonment—any event that even remotely conveys, "you are unimportant", or that demeans him, discounts him; suggests that he does not matter, that he is meaningless.

It appears that *all* punishment, criticism, even disapproval, triggers this anxiety to some degree and arouses the impulse to react defensively. Some people with a solid sense of self are able to handle this with less damage than others less fortunate, but it impacts *all*.

Further, concern with anxiety is a continuing preoccupation for most people throughout life. (Sullivan, p.11, 26) In marriage, it has been scientifically established that there must be five times as many positive moments as negative if the marriage is to remain stable. (Ottoman, p. 29) Certainly the same proportions apply to children. Unfortunately, bringing up a child is far too often "correcting".

Anxiety and Learning

Anxiety interferes with any activity that is going on. A child quickly learns to stop whatever she is doing that triggers anxiety. When a child is discounted—demeaned—

she is emotionally “hijacked” and will have the impulse to stop making connections and fight, freeze, or flee. In most situations she must transform this impulse into compliance with the adult’s order, but it leaves a residue of anger and rebellion that interferes with connecting.

The relaxation of the tension of anxiety brings the experience of interpersonal *security*. In this state the child is free to make the connections of learning.

Relationship, Field and Learning

A relationship is formed of all the messages that pass between two people. These messages create a field that, like a magnetic field, exerts a force on the parties. Relationships persist over time and affect interpersonal security. When some of the messages sent by a parent or teacher are disrespectful and demeaning, they trigger anxiety in the child *and it has a continuing effect on the relationship*. A single discount has more force than five validating, appreciative actions.

When there are discounts in the field, everyone tends to become defensive, antagonism increases, and trial connecting slows. When the field is unfailingly respectful, the child feels safe and can self-soothe her “normal” anxiety about making trial connections.

(Expectations—*Pygmalion in the Classroom*, how expectations influence the field and become self-fulfilling)

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence is the ability to manage one’s transmissions to another without demeaning or diminishing the other while maintaining one’s integrity. An emotionally intelligent person knows how to create relationship fields that advance interpersonal security, reduce defensive perversity and invite collaboration and synergy. S/he also knows how to handle destructive inputs to damage-control.

To a large extent, how one manages relationships determines the quality of his or her life.

To determine whether a transmission is emotionally intelligent, answer the following two questions: does this help me to be and feel meaningful? Will this transmission help xxxxx be and feel meaningful? If the answer to either question is no, the transmission is EQ negative and it will damage the relationship.

Emotional Intelligence and Self

To operate at our best, each of us needs *inner* personal security—an internal field that unfailingly supports us. This requires that we learn *to deal with ourselves* with emotional intelligence to nurture learning and growth. Our internal field tends to break

down when we do not live up to expectations or make a mistake. A mistake is an event and when we convert it into information—tell its story—if we begin by discounting and demeaning ourselves, it triggers the inevitable anxiety and we greatly reduce the possibility of connection making and learning.

It is emotionally intelligent and a far better learning experience if we are mindful of the learning curve and tell the story of our mistake without punishment and with a beginning, middle, and conclusion—creating well-organized information to guide us to a new level on the curve. Only in a positive field does our full potential come into being.

Learning from Events

There is a widespread belief in the saying, “We learn from experience” as though the experience is the teacher. When we analyze how we learn from what happens to us, it is clear that the teacher is “us”! What happens is an *event*. It is neutral and meaningless until we process it into a story. We connect it to other experiences; determine the significance of it and flesh it out with feelings and reflection so that it *becomes* an experience organized into information we can use in the future. Its information is most useful if our story has a beginning, middle and ends with a conclusion—a therefore.

It always begins with telling the story to myself. This is a monologue. It can be enriched by then telling it to another person.

Skill with language is important, for language is the way we transform events, and to capture meaning one needs words. “Language is the transformation of experience, and at the same time it transforms what we can experience.” (Goolishian) “We could not experience love as we do if we had not learned to talk of love..” (La Rochefoucauld, quoted by Goolishian).

Vocabulary and storytelling are critical assets in growth.

Dialoguing—Getting the Most Out of Our Stories

The purpose of most exchanges, when there is no hostility, is to make connections to create new meaning, and to forge a mutually beneficial relationship. Such a relationship has definite characteristics: “A” truly listens to “B” and makes connections to his own information. When “A” responds, he opens with an acknowledgment of “B”’s message. His reply will have some connections to what “B” has spoken of, and it will contain no refutation or disagreement. When his view is different from “B”’s, he does not hesitate to voice it—not as a refutation, rather as a different view.

“B” responds in the same way. The result is a non–defensive field. One exchange builds upon the preceding without opposition, which invites the development of new connections and new meaning.

When the urge to persuade, teach or control takes over, the mutuality tends to disappear and the field is transformed to invite distancing and defense; the exchanges are likely to become sequential monologues.

Autonomy and Responsibility

The ultimate expression of respect is to help the child be in charge of him or her self. It is critical for each to learn *all* the strategies that lead to defensiveness, opposition and antagonism (emotionally stupid transmissions such as contempt and blaming) and to learn the processes that allow the same sort of information to be put in a way that invites collaboration and synergy (Emotionally intelligent Itemized Response and Self–Focus).

Whenever a problem arises, whether it is behavior or learning, it is an opportunity for the problem owners to go into a creative idea–getting mode and develop options to solve it.

In addition it is important for the children to operate in small groups where they can experiment with the various ways of managing the field. Most of their lives will be lived in such groups.

The goal is to have each child experience that the field of the group is the sum of their transmissions and learn to discriminate emotionally intelligent from emotionally stupid; to realize that it is within her or his capacity to *manage* her own transmissions to impact the field. They are not powerless.

Creative Field

Everyone needs to know the language of harmony—the emotionally intelligent way of managing transmissions. Each child learns to use the Think Tank flow chart and gets to know the roles of Facilitator, client, and participant. This is a structure that gives practice in managing for a positive field.

Regular Practice—EQ Groups

In the everyday give and take between people there tends to be a level of unwitting demeaning that causes a negative field. It requires considerable energy to maintain our EQ gold standard. We need regular reinforcement and to provide this it is useful to have “EQ groups”. These are small (eight people) groups that meet regularly to self–

reflect. Through experience exchange, problem solving, and attention to EQ skills, we learn to manage our mental processes and refresh our commitment to positive fields.

At the same time, because interpersonal security is high and defensiveness low, innovation is fostered by the new connections made possible in these exchanges. There is a great deal of building and discovery. Members are helped to be in touch with their own meaningfulness. Positive attitudes are generated.

Change Agents

Ideally everyone is a member of an EQ group. Through membership everyone is exposed to the gold standard and becomes "field conscious", aware of the destructiveness of actions that demean. Organizational change, even in large systems, can be created by these small groups. (Wheatley. p 96)

Imagining the Future—Visioning

A vision is an imagined narrative of what I want the future to be. A vision has a powerful impact on outcome, if I *own* the vision. In situations where there is a problem and an action is required, imagining (visioning) how I want to *feel* afterwards can have a strong influence on getting there. It can be a useful tool in managing my part of a field. We need to be explicit about it.

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