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**Some Thoughts about the Role of Verbalization in Early
Childhood**

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Piaget (1923) and Karl Bühler (1934) have explored the development of language, a theme very much neglected by analysts so far; Heinz Hartmann touched upon the subject of verbalization in his article "Technical Implications of Ego Psychology" (1951); and Loewenstein, in his paper "Some Remarks on the Role of Speech in Psycho-analytic Technique" (1956), has explored the importance of verbal communication in the psychoanalytic situation.

These, however, are not the themes of my paper. This paper is limited to the role that verbalization plays in early child development, emphasizing specifically the importance of the verbalization of feelings by the very young child.

It has been my experience with children between three and five years of age that a number of them needed treatment badly but were so lacking in speech, and sometimes in other ways of communication as well, that they could not express themselves in treatment. We decided that these children needed preparation in this area before treatment could be started. Although of course this task could have been accomplished by the therapist, we thought it could also be accomplished by the combined efforts of teachers and parents. Whereas a therapist would have had to spend one hour daily over a long period of time in such preparation, this work could be done just as well or better when it was extended over the whole day and was done by teachers, parents, etc.

Verbalization is considered by us a part of general education, and therefore it need not be confined to the analytic hour. In concentrating on trying to help the child verbalize his feelings and thoughts, I arrived at the following conclusions:

¹ Dr. M. Katan has greatly helped me in the verbalization of my thoughts.

1. Verbalization of perceptions of the outer world precedes verbalization of feelings.
2. Verbalization leads to an increase of the controlling function of the ego over affects and drives.
3. Verbalization increases for the ego the possibility of distinguishing between wishes and fantasies on the one hand, and reality on the other. In short, verbalization leads to the integrating process, which in turn results in reality testing and thus helps to establish the secondary process.

I

The very young child can perceive the outer world with his perceptive organs—the eyes, the ears, the nose, the skin. The child himself wants to name these outer perceptions early; he needs to verbalize perceptions of the outer world in order to obtain fulfillment of his wishes and needs. In the course of expressing his desires for certain objects in the outer world, he discovers early the advantage of being able to name these objects so that his desires may be understood and fulfilled. This process is helped along considerably by the parents as, with pride, they watch and usually encourage the naming of objects, sounds, smells, etc., by the young child. The parents help to libidinize this process, and their show of visible pleasure encourages the child to become more and more ambitious.²

Usually the child is not so quick at learning words to express the inner perceptions of his feelings. The child perceives his feelings, of course, and expresses some of them without words—by crying or laughing, by facial expressions, or body motility. In the very early stages of development, however, these feelings are not usually given names. Often they are not understood by the parents; so the means of communication, like pointing, etc., that exists with regard to wishes directed toward the outer world is nonexistent for the expression of the child's feelings. In this respect, the task of the parents is much more difficult. They have to guess at the child's feelings.

Verbalization of the child's emotions by the parents comes very much later than verbalization of his perceptions of the outer world. In

² I will discuss later the eventual disadvantages of this libidization (**Anna Freud, 1960**).

my experience, feelings of pain or getting hurt are verbalized earlier than are other feelings; then follows the verbalization of feelings of fear, of being scared. Yet such feelings as sadness, excitement, happiness, and anger are often not verbalized for the child until a much later date. In some cases these feelings are not verbalized at all, and the child picks up the words for them as he develops further—is read to, etc.

If the child does not learn to name his feelings, a situation may arise in which there develops a discrepancy between the strength and complexity of his feelings on the one hand, and his modes of expression on the other. If the child could verbalize his feelings, he would learn to delay action, but the delaying function is lacking. Accordingly, the situation may have pathological consequences.

When the child has later acquired the art of verbalizing, he will still cling to the earlier method of acting upon his feelings instead of mastering them through verbalization. This uninhibited discharge may bring him into conflict with his environment, so that he will form either too great fears about the environment or too early feelings of guilt. If this process of acting upon feelings continues for a considerable time, the results will be fully evident. The child's ego will become fixated upon acting upon his feelings rather than attempting an adequate means of mastery. In such children the ego becomes weak, for it is repeatedly overwhelmed by affects.³

II

It now becomes clear that verbalization of feelings leads to an increase of mastery by the ego. The young ego shows its strength by not acting upon its feelings immediately, but by delaying such action and expressing its feelings in words instead. To the observers in our nursery school, it was very gratifying to see the changes which certain educational efforts produced in young children who had not yet learned to verbalize their feelings but expressed their feelings through actions. When we succeeded in helping these children to

³ Children whose acting upon their feelings predominates over verbalizing their feelings can in this way establish a pattern which predisposes them to become "actors out" in later life. I am in full agreement with Phyllis Greenacre's findings on this point as described in her article "General Problems of Acting Out" (1950).

verbalize what they felt instead of acting upon it, we found that they demonstrated a mastery over their feelings and that this mastery led secondarily to a feeling of greater security. It was then striking to observe how they seemed to rise rapidly toward their age level.

We should be very much aware of those situations in which the increase of the child's verbalization does not lead to the ego's ability to express the child's feelings in an advantageous way. I have in mind the type of parents who not only are unable to show their own emotions but also do not permit emotions to show in the child. If such parents speak about their feelings which they are unable to show, or speak about the child's feelings, it is clear that their words are used not to further the expression of emotions but to ward these emotions off. If this is the case, the words are not a bridge, as they ought to be, but are a defense against the emotions. The child may now take over the example set by the parents and also use words defensively.

Anna Freud, in her recent lectures (1960), has made possible the understanding of another disadvantageous type of verbalization. She pointed out that some parents show an inordinate amount of pleasure in certain functions of the child. Accordingly, the child, in order to please the parents, may overcathect these functions. This means that he libidinizes them. They become, so to say, hypertrophic, and this leads to an unwanted distortion of normal development. The energy that should have been invested in other functions is now stored up in these selected functions, with a resulting disharmony of development. It is obvious that this libidinization can also occur in the process of verbalization; the development of other functions may lag behind in favor of verbalization.

In order to prevent confusion, it is necessary to elaborate on the subject of mastery by the ego through verbalization. Verbalization creates, for the child, a means of communicating his wishes and feelings. We have already had an opportunity to speak about the profitable delay of immediate acting upon feelings. This delayed action, as a result of the verbalization, enables the ego to judge the situation. The verbalization as such is a part of the intellectual process, which, according to Freud's formulations (1911), is a trial acting, using small quantities of energy.

Verbalization prevents the fixation of a part of the ego at a certain

level and keeps open the transition to further development. Thus, through verbalization, the ego is able to master its affects and does not have to resort to defenses like denial, avoidance, etc., to shut these affects out.

III

Verbalization increases for the ego the possibility of distinguishing between wishes and fantasies on the one hand, and reality on the other. Such children are able at an early age to differentiate between pretend and real. We know that the object relationships of the small child are influenced for a time by the fantasy object relationships. Early reality testing will contradict existing fantasies of grandeur and the child's belief in the power of his magic wishes. More and more he will be able to recognize himself as a child, with the limitations of his age, and accordingly his magical thinking will be prevented from extending over too long a period. It seems to me that such a child will enter the oedipal phase better prepared to weather the storm through his ability to express his feelings verbally, and therefore will feel less overwhelmed and his guilt feelings will not become too strong. The ability to distinguish between a wish and reality will be helpful in the resolution of his oedipal complex. The resolution of the oedipal conflict varies, as we know, according to timing and completeness. The complete resolution is an ideal never achieved. Yet the more complete the resolution is, the better it is of course for the child's continued development—for his early and strong superego formation.

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