

violence in child-rearing. London: Virago.

Is There a Harmless Pedagogy?

Gentle Violence

OVERT abuse is not the only way to stifle a child's vitality. I shall illustrate this by the example of a family whose history I was able to trace over several generations.

A young, nineteenth-century missionary and his wife went to Africa to convert people to Christianity. Through his work, this man was able to free himself of the tormenting religious doubts of his youth. At last he became a true Christian, who—like his father before him—gave his all to transmitting his faith to others. The couple had ten children, eight of whom were sent to Europe as soon as they were old enough to go to school. One of the children was the future father of A., and he always told his only son how lucky he, the son, was to grow up at home with his family. He himself, after being sent away to school as a little boy, had not seen his parents again until he was thirty years old. With trepidation he had waited at the train station for the parents he could not remember, and, sure enough, when they arrived, he had not recognized them. He often told this anecdote, not with any sign of sadness, but with amusement. A. described his father as kind, good-natured, understanding, appreciative, contented, and genuinely devout. All his family and friends also admired these qualities in him, and there was no ready explanation for why his son, having such a kindhearted father, should develop a severe obsessional neurosis.

Since childhood, A. had been burdened with disturbing obsessive thoughts of an aggressive nature, but he was unable

to experience feelings of annoyance or dissatisfaction, to say nothing of anger or rage, in response to actual frustrations. He also had suffered since childhood because he had not "inherited" his father's "serene, natural, trusting" piety; he attempted to attain it by reading devotional literature, but "bad" (because critical) thoughts, which filled him with panic, always stood in the way. It took a long time in analysis before A. was able to express criticism without clothing it in alarming fantasies he then had to struggle to keep at bay. When his son joined a Marxist group at school, this came to his aid. It was easy for A. to locate contradictions, limitations, and intolerance in his son's ideology, and this subsequently enabled him to subject psychoanalysis to critical scrutiny as well and define it as the "religion" of his analyst. During the stages of transference he became increasingly aware of the tragedy of his relationship with his father. Examples of his disappointment with various ideologies multiplied, and he realized more and more how these ideologies served as defense mechanisms for their adherents. Intense feelings of indignation at all possible forms of mystification came to the surface. The newly awakened anger of the deceived child finally led him to be suspicious of all religious and political ideologies. His obsessions diminished, but they did not disappear entirely until these feelings could be experienced in connection with the long dead and internalized father of his childhood.

In his analysis A. was now able to acknowledge the helplessness rage he felt at the terrible constrictions that had been imposed on him by his father's attitude. He was expected to be, like his father, good-natured, kind, appreciative, understanding, not to cry, always to see everything "from the positive side," never to be critical, never to be dissatisfied, always to think of those who were "much worse off." A's previously unrecognized feelings of rebelliousness revealed to him the narrow confines of his childhood, from which everything had to be banished that was not suitable for his devout and "sunny" nursery. And only after he had been allowed to articulate his own revolt (which he had had to split off and project onto his son so that he could oppose it there) was his father's other

side revealed to him. He had found it in his own rage and mourning; no one else could ever have convinced him of it, because his father's unstable side had found a home only in the psyche of the son, in his obsessional neurosis, where it had taken root in a remorseless way, crippling this son for forty-two years. By means of his illness, the son had helped preserve his father's piety.

Now that A. had found the way back to his childhood emotions, he was also able to empathize with the child that his father had once been. He asked himself how his father had dealt with the fact that his parents sent eight children so far away without ever visiting them, for the sake of promulgating the Christian idea of brotherly love in Africa. Wouldn't he necessarily have deep doubts about such a love and about the meaningfulness of work that required such cruelty toward one's own children? But he dared not have doubts, for fear his devout and strict aunt would not keep him. And how is a little six-year-old, whose parents are thousands of miles away, to fare all by himself? He has no choice but to believe in this God who demands such inconceivable sacrifices (for this makes his parents obedient servants of a good cause); he has no choice but to become devout and cheerful if he wants to be loved. In order to survive, he has to be content, appreciative, etc., and develop a sunny, happy disposition so that he will not be a burden to anyone.

If someone who has turned into this kind of a person becomes a father himself, he will be confronted with a situation that threatens the whole structure he has taken such pains to erect: he sees before him a child full of life, sees how a human being is meant to be, how he could have been if obstacles hadn't been placed in his way. But his fears are soon activated: this cannot be allowed to happen. If the child were allowed to stay as he is, wouldn't that mean that the father's sacrifices and self-denial weren't really necessary? Is it possible to have a child turn out well without forcing him to be obedient, without breaking his will, without combating his egotism and willfulness, as we have been told to do for centuries? Parents

cannot permit themselves to ask these questions. To do so would cause no end of trouble, and they would be deprived of the sure ground provided by an inherited ideology that places the highest value on suppressing and manipulating vital spontaneity. A's father found himself in this same position.*

He tried to make his son control his bodily functions while still an infant, and he succeeded in having him internalize this control at a very early age. He helped the mother to toilet train him as an infant, and by distracting him "in a loving way" taught him to wait patiently to be fed, so that feedings were kept to an exact schedule. When A. was still very little and didn't like something he was given to eat or ate "too greedily" or "misbehaved," he was put in a corner, where he had to watch his parents calmly finish eating their meal. It may be that the child in the corner was serving as a surrogate for his father, who had been sent away to Europe as a child and who had wondered what sins he had committed to cause him to be taken so far away from his beloved parents.

A. did not remember ever being struck by his father. Nevertheless, without meaning to and without realizing it, the father treated his child just as cruelly as he treated the child within himself—in order to make a "contented child" out of him. He systematically tried to destroy everything that was vital in his firstborn. If the remnants of vitality had not taken refuge in an obsessional neurosis and from there sent out a call for help, then the son would indeed have been psychically dead, for he was only a pale shadow of his father, had no needs of his own, and no longer had any spontaneous feelings. All he knew were a depressing emptiness and fear of his obsessions. In analysis he learned for the first time, at the age of forty-two, what a vital, curious, intelligent, lively, and humorous child he had actually been. This child was now able to come alive in him and develop his creative powers. A. gradually

* The mother had also grown up with this ideology. I do not discuss her here because the faith A. was compelled to hold in spite of the doubts he felt was an important factor in his case and this was connected primarily with his father.

came to realize that his severe symptoms were, on the one hand, the result of the repression of important vital aspects of his self and, on the other, a reflection of his father's un-lived, unconscious conflicts. The father's fragile piety and his split-off, unacknowledged doubts were revealed in the son's tormenting obsessions. If the father had been able to face his doubts consciously, come to terms with them, and integrate them, his son would have been freed of having to grow up with them and could have had a full life of his own at a much earlier age and without the help of analysis.

Pedagogy Fills the Needs of Parents, Not of Children

THE reader will have noticed long before now that all pedagogy is pervaded by the precepts of "poisonous pedagogy," no matter how well they may be concealed today. Since the books of Ekkehard von Braunnühl unmistakably expose the absurdity and cruelty of the pedagogical approach in today's world, I need only call attention to them here (see Bibliography). Perhaps the reason it is difficult for me to share his optimism is that I regard the idealization of one's own childhood as a major, unconscious obstacle to learning for parents.

My antipedagogic position is not directed against a specific type of pedagogical ideology but against all pedagogical ideology per se, even if it is of an anti-authoritarian nature. This attitude is based on insights that I shall describe shortly. For now, I should simply like to point out that my position has nothing in common with a Rousseauistic optimism about human "nature."

First of all, I do not see a child as growing up in some abstract "state of nature" but in the concrete surroundings of

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care givers whose unconscious exerts a substantial influence on the child's development.

Second, Rousseau's pedagogy is profoundly manipulative. This does not always seem to be recognized by educators, but it has been convincingly demonstrated and documented by Braunnühl. One of his numerous examples is the following passage from *Emile* (Book II):

Take an opposite route with your pupil; always let him think he is the master, but always be it yourself. There is no more perfect form of subjection than the one that preserves the appearance of freedom; this does the will itself become captive. The poor child, who knows nothing, can do nothing, and has no expertise—is he not at your mercy? Are you not in control of everything in his environment that relates to him? Can you not control his impressions as you please? His tasks, his games, his pleasures, his troubles—is all this not in your hands without his knowing it? Doubtlessly, he may do as he wishes, but he may wish only what you want him to; he may not take a single step that you have not anticipated, he may not open his mouth without your knowing what he is going to say.

I am convinced of the harmful effects of training for the following reason: all advice that pertains to raising children betrays more or less clearly the numerous, variously clothed needs of the adult. Fulfillment of these needs not only discourages the child's development but actually prevents it. This also holds true when the adult is honestly convinced of acting in the child's best interests.

Among the adult's true motives we find:

1. The unconscious need to pass on to others the humiliation one has undergone oneself
2. The need to find an outlet for repressed affect
3. The need to possess and have at one's disposal a vital object to manipulate
4. Self-defense: i.e., the need to idealize one's childhood and one's parents by dogmatically applying the parents' pedagogical principles to one's own children
5. Fear of freedom

6. Fear of the reappearance of what one has repressed, which one reencounters in one's child and must try to stamp out, having killed it in oneself earlier

7. Revenge for the pain one has suffered

Since at least one of the points enumerated here is present in everyone's upbringing, the child-rearing process is at best suitable for making "good" pedagogues out of its objects. However, it will never be able to help its charges to remain vital. When children are trained, they learn how to train others in turn. Children who are lectured to, learn how to lecture; if they are admonished, they learn how to admonish; if scolded, they learn how to scold; if ridiculed, they learn how to ridicule; if humiliated, they learn how to humiliate; if their psyche is killed, they will learn how to kill—the only question is who will be killed: oneself, others, or both.

All this does not mean that children should be raised without any restraints. Crucial for healthy development is the respect of their care givers, tolerance for their feelings, awareness of their needs and grievances, and authenticity on the part of their parents, whose own freedom—and not pedagogical considerations—sets natural limits for children.

It is this last point that causes great difficulty for parents and pedagogues, for the following reasons:

1. If parents have had to learn very early in life to ignore their feelings, not to take them seriously, to scorn or ridicule them, then they will lack the sensitivity required to deal successfully with their children. As a result, they will try to substitute pedagogical principles as prosthesis. Thus, under certain circumstances they may be reluctant to show tenderness for fear of spoiling the child, or, in other cases, they will hide their hurt feelings behind the Fourth Commandment.

2. Parents who never learned as children to be aware of their own needs or to defend their own interests because this right was never granted them will be uncertain in this regard for the rest of their life and consequently will become dependent on firm pedagogical rules. This uncertainty, regardless of whether it appears in sadistic or masochistic guise,

leads to great insecurity in the child in spite of these rules. An example of this: a father who was trained to be obedient at a very early age may on occasion take cruel and violent measures to force his child to be obedient in order to satisfy his own need to be respected for the first time in his life. But this behavior does not exclude intervening periods of masochistic behavior when the same father will put up with anything the child does, because he never learned to define the limits of his tolerance. Thus, his guilt feelings over the preceding unjust punishment will suddenly lead him to be unusually permissive, thereby awakening anxiety in the child, who cannot tolerate uncertainty about the father's true face. The child's increasingly aggressive behavior will finally provoke the father into losing his temper. In the end, the child then takes on the role of the sadistic opponent in place of the grandparents, but with the difference that the father can now gain the upper hand. Such situations, in which the child "goes too far," prove to the pedagogue that disciplining and punishment are necessary.

3. Since a child is often used as a substitute for one's own parents, he or she can become the object of an endless number of contradictory wishes and expectations that cannot possibly be fulfilled. In extreme cases, psychosis, drug addiction, or suicide may be the only solution. But often the child's feeling of helplessness leads to increasingly aggressive behavior, which in turn convinces parents and educators of the need for strict countermeasures.

4. A similar situation arises when it is drilled into children, as it was in the anti-authoritarian upbringing of the sixties,* to adopt certain ways of behavior that their parents wished had once been allowed them and that they therefore consider to be universally desirable. In the process, the child's real needs can be totally overlooked. In one case I know, for example, a child who was feeling sad was encouraged to shatter a glass when what she most wanted to do was to climb up

* This was a recent direction taken in German child-rearing methods, loosely based on permissive child-rearing in the United States.

onto her mother's lap. If children go on feeling misunderstood and manipulated like this, they will become genuinely confused and justifiably aggressive.

In contrast to generally accepted beliefs and to the horror of pedagogues, I cannot attribute any positive significance to the word *pedagogy*. I see it as self-defense on the part of adults, as manipulation deriving from their own lack of freedom and their insecurity, which I can certainly understand, although I cannot overlook the inherent dangers. I can also understand why criminals are sent to prison, but I cannot see that deprivation of freedom and prison life, which is geared wholly to conformity, subordination, and submissiveness, can really contribute to the betterment, i.e., the development, of the prisoner. There is in the word *pedagogy* the suggestion of certain goals that the charge is meant to achieve—and this limits his or her possibilities for development from the start. But an honest rejection of all forms of manipulation and of the idea of setting goals does not mean that one simply leaves children to their own devices. For children need a large measure of emotional and physical support from the adult. This support must include the following elements if they are to develop their full potential:

1. Respect for the child
2. Respect for his rights
3. Tolerance for his feelings
4. Willingness to learn from his behavior:
 - a. About the nature of the individual child
 - b. About the child in the parents themselves
 - c. About the nature of emotional life, which can be observed much more clearly in the child than in the adult because the child can experience his feelings much more intensely and, optimally, more undisguisedly than an adult

There is evidence among the younger generation that this kind of willingness is possible even for people who were themselves victims of child-rearing.

But liberation from centuries of constraint can scarcely be expected to take place in a single generation. The idea that we as parents can learn more about the laws of life from a newborn child than we can from our parents will strike many older people as absurd and ridiculous. Younger people may also be suspicious of this idea, because many of them have been made insecure by a mixture of psychological literature and internalized "poisonous pedagogy." A very intelligent and sensitive father, for example, asked me if I didn't think it was taking advantage of children to try to learn from them. This question, coming from someone born in 1942 who had been able to rise above the taboos of his generation to an extraordinary degree, showed me that we must be mindful of the misunderstanding and new insecurity that can result from reading books on psychology.

Can an honest attempt to learn be considered an abuse? If we are not open to what the other person is telling us, genuine rapport is hardly possible. We need to hear what the child has to say in order to give our understanding, support, and love. The child, on the other hand, needs free space if he or she is to find adequate self-expression. There is no discrepancy here between means and ends, but rather a dialectical process involving dialogue. Learning is a result of listening, which in turn leads to even better listening and attentiveness to the other person. In other words, to learn from the child, we must have empathy, and empathy grows as we learn. It is a different matter for parents or educators who would like the child to be a certain way or think they must expect him to be that way. To reach their sacred ends, they try to mold the child in their image, suppressing self-expression in the child and at the same time missing out on an opportunity to learn something. Certainly, abuse of this sort is often unintentional; it is not only directed against children but—if we look more closely—pervades most human relationships, because the partners frequently were abused children and are now showing unconsciously what happened to them in childhood.

Antipedagogical writings (by Braunnühl and others) can be of great help to young parents as long as they do not interpret them as instructions on "how to be a parent" but use them to expand their knowledge; they can then find encouragement to abandon their prejudices and look at things in a new way.

*The Last Act of the Silent
Drama: The World
Reacts with Horror*