



Volume II, No 3

THE SOUND OF SILENCE

JUST IMAGINE

You're curled up on the sofa, warmed by the light of the afternoon sun. Slowly you blink your eyes, stretching as you awaken, and the small child beside you shifts in response. Both of you lie dozing, cuddling and soaking in the absolute silence around you. This is serenity... As your thoughts drift through a twilight state, both of you feel in harmony with the world around you. You aren't going anywhere, you aren't doing anything; your whole being is absorbed in the pleasure of being alive.

QUIETUDE

What happens during those times of quietude is as miraculous as the wonder of human growth. With quiet comes a time for reflection, a time for deepening our understanding of ourselves and our relationship to the world. Noisy distractions require that we tune out our environment in order to find peace. When the environment is naturally quiet, we are freed to tune in to the world without dealing with the stresses of overstimulation.

There have been numerous studies of the deleterious effects of high levels of noise. We may vary in our individual definitions of what is too much noise,

but most of us will agree that excessive noise causes stress, fatigue and irritability.

Our moods or level of activity often affect how we respond to noise. A barking dog is much more difficult to accept at 3:00 in the morning than at 3:00 in the afternoon. A stereo doesn't seem nearly as loud if it's playing one of our favorite pieces. Even the noise of children blends into the environment much more readily when it's in the form of laughing or singing, as opposed to the wailing in a disagreement.

SENSITIVE EARS

Children in our culture can certainly make their share of noise, but they, like adults, thrive in an environment which is free of stress—inducing noise.

In fact, young children are more sensitive to noise than adults are. Research indicates that children under five hear four times as much as adults. Adults tend to hear sounds which relate to what they're thinking about and tune out the rest.

Generally, our range of hearing decreases each year. This is due largely to the constant assault on our sense of hearing. Over 85 decibels of noise is irreparably damaging to the ear.

Ordinary conversation is usually about 60 decibels. Common noises in the kitchen can reach 100 to 120 decibels. Rock concerts frequently measure at about 195 to 200 decibels.

Up until age five, children generally absorb 35 to 40% of their learning through hearing. After age five, 25% or less learning comes through sound. Furthermore, at age five, children hear about 40,000 cycles per second. Adults of age 21 usually hear about 20,000 cycles per second. At age 60, it is more common to hear about 7,000 cycles per second. Fortunately, most conversation is about 3,000 cycles per second and sixty-year-olds can still function “normally.” Nonetheless, the loss of hearing is a great one.

TUNING IN

It’s interesting to note that little ones have a remarkable capacity to absorb information from their surroundings. Although this is largely associated with their rapid growth during the formative years, it may also be linked with the fact that they haven’t become experienced in tuning out the world.

While children aren’t as sophisticated in processing information, they do take in sights and sounds which adults fail to notice. When this early receptiveness is nurtured through encouragement to hear quiet sounds, children greatly increase their awareness of the world around them.

Children with only average hearing can listen to voices or music at a notably lower volume than is characteristic in our culture today. This is most apparent when someone cranks up the stereo and the baby suddenly starts crying. Other examples can be seen when children’s behavior becomes boisterous as they listen to a loud record player or television.

Repeated exposure to such excessive noise will lead to a kind of “adaptation,” but the price which is paid is high.

THE “NORMALIZED” ENVIRONMENT

Most of us don’t want continual quiet. The problem seems to come when we do want quiet

and we can’t find it. We may have become quiet for the moment, but the rest of the world blares away.

If we could all become more aware of how the noise we produce affects our neighbors or family, we could reduce many irritations in the world. Even children can begin to practice this courtesy at an early age.

Many Montessori classrooms offer a model of how children can work together in a quiet, yet expressive way. Maria Montessori coined the term “normalized” in describing Montessori classrooms which are running ideally. Observation of a normalized classroom reveals some children who are absorbed in independent projects and others who are quietly talking as they work together. There is a soft, pleasant hum of activity in the classroom, and the children are noted for their concentration on chosen areas of interest.

Sometimes there are disappointments when two children want to use the same piece of equipment, but this is resolved by discussing the children’s feelings and classroom expectations.

THE DELICATE BALANCE

There’s a delicate balance between helping children to express their naturally egocentric feelings and teaching them how to function in a world of other people. Learning to express feelings in ways that heighten communication is vital to healthy development and personal happiness.

Allowing the healthy expression of feelings need not prevent creating a quieter world. On the contrary, helping children learn how to better express their feelings may actually reduce their boisterousness.

Observe the conditions accompanying times when the children get loud. Are they raising their voices as a way to say, “I want to be comforted” or “Billy isn’t listening to me”? A comforting hug while helping them recognize what they’re feeling may quickly restore normal communications. (Your Child’s Self-Esteem by

(continued on page 4)

Basic

Principles

• PART TWO •

THE RELATION BETWEEN *SELF-ESTEEM* AND DEVELOPMENT

“High self-esteem is based on your child’s belief that he is lovable and worthwhile.”

Your Child’s Self-Esteem
Dorothy Corkille Briggs

Essentially everything parents need to know about self—esteem has already been written. The most useful treatment we’ve found in *Your Child’s Self-Esteem* by Dorothy Briggs. It’s the first book we at Stelle recommend to new parents—but it hasn’t always been the first. Several years ago our first recommendation was Glenn Doman’s *How to Teach Your Baby to Read*. It gives a rationale for the early intellectual stimulation of young children—a concept we consider extremely important. In fact, we think that young human beings need a great deal more of it than is now considered “normal” if they are to have any hope of even approaching their potential. We’re also aware that appropriate early mental stimulation increases a child’s self-esteem; so why did a book on early learning get moved to second place on our list of recommended reading?

SELF-ESTEEM AS A FOUNDATION

Now self-esteem comes first because we’ve learned that it is the foundation upon which intellectual growth occurs. What children think of themselves significantly affects how well they learn. When parents know the ingredients of strong self-regard, they are both more effective in teaching their children and more convinced of how important that early teaching is.

HOW SELF-IMAGE EVOLVES

Jon and Ben are both three years old. At home, Jon hears a lot of communication like this:

“Don’t touch that knife; you might cut yourself!”

“Oh no! You spilled milk all over the floor again.”

“How long did we leave for the zoo? Oh, it won’t be long now.”

Ben hears a lot of communication like this:

“That knife you’re holding is very sharp. I’ll stand here beside you while you’re inspecting it and help you learn to handle it safely. Look at the two edges of the knife; can you tell which one is sharp?”

“Whoops! That’s too bad, but we can fix it. Here towel for wiping it up. Would you like me to help you?”

“How long ‘til we leave for the zoo? Well, let’s go look the clock and find out. We’ll leave about 2:00, when small hand points to two and the big hand points straight up. Where is the small hand pointing now?”

Jon frequently hears that something bad is going to happen to him (get cut). Because his parents are the ones who make such statements, Jon believes they must be true. He gradually comes to expect problems—especially if he follows his natural urge to explore. Ben, on the other hand, is not frightened into obedience. Instead, he is given appropriate assistance, patient supervision, and information (look for the sharp edge).

Jon gets many messages that he does things his parents don't like (spilled milk again). Ben also may spill milk, but he is spoken to encouragingly and given the means to remedy his mistake. When Jon asks questions, the answers he gets are often vague, implying that he wouldn't understand anything more specific, or that his question isn't serious. The answers are also usually short and tend to stop further communication. Ben's questions elicit specific information plus help in figuring out the answers for himself. The responses he gets tend to call for further thinking and conversation from him.

Looking carefully at such small interactions in everyday life, we find the building blocks of self-esteem—physical contact, tone of voice, facial expressions, body language, words used, amount and kind of information shared—all are signals telling our children what we feel about them. From these cues they build, bit by bit, their definition of themselves, Jon is well on the way to feeling unimportant, fearful and clumsy. Ben has a good start on feeling secure, capable, and important. Both may have loving parents, but the two boys are getting very different self-images.

They are probably also experiencing very different rates of intellectual growth. If both boys go on a field trip, for instance, Ben will use most his energy taking in new information, Jon is designed to do the same, but a part of him will be holding back, convinced, from past experience, that his questions will not be taken seriously, investigation will bring a reprimand, and that he needs to be very careful not to get hurt. All the energy Jon uses to protect himself is energy not going into learning.

High self-esteem frees the ability to learn; therefore, parents can enhance their child's intellectual development by improving their child's self-esteem. Conversely, learning strengthens self-esteem.

LEARNING STRENGTHENS SELF-ESTEEM — ONE HALF OF THE GIFT

And how does a parent improve a child's self-esteem? There are two basic ways. One is to help a child learn more.

One reason Ben feels so good about himself is that he knows he can do a lot—handle a knife safely, wipe spills, tell time, etc. A parent aware of the significance of self-esteem will make it a point to teach Jon these and many other skills. With each skill he learns, Jon will feel a bit more at home in the world, more secure and confident. He will come to feel worthwhile.

THE OTHER HALF

The other part of enhancing self-esteem is nurturing, cherishing, valuing the child. That means a lot of simple things, like eye contact, holding, putting down work to give a child full attention, acknowledging a child's efforts in any endeavor, and just being there consistently. As psychoanalyst Scott Peck puts it in *The Road Less Traveled*, "There is no better and ultimately no other way to teach your children that they are valuable people than by valuing them." How? "The time and quality of the time that their parents devote to them indicates to children the degree to which they are valued by their parents." Most parents love their children. The trick is to be sure the children feel it. The patterns of parenting we absorbed from our own parents may communicate that love to our children—or may not. The encouraging thing is that we can learn new patterns.

If you can read only one book about parenting, make it Your Child's Self-Esteem. If you can manage two, add How to Teach Your Baby to Read. Then reread them, a little bit each day, and incorporate some new practices into your parenting. The gift of self-esteem comes in two mutually reinforcing parts. Give both!

J.C.

TO MOTHER — OF FATHER — IS TO TEACH

by Joanna Carnahan

ACHESON, MORTIMER, ROWF, AND FRIENDS

A finger puppet, a hand puppet, a doll, a small bendable figure, a toy dog, a simple marionette, and a thumb; these are some of the characters Stelle's mothers have used to teach their children everything from reading to manners.

PETER AND DUDLEY

When Peter was two, Becky, his mother, arranged to meet some friends for an hour's lunch in a restaurant once a week, taking Peter with her. She helped him to be content sitting for an hour by taking along Dudley, a small, bendable figure who talked to Peter in a special voice about how to act in a restaurant and what "they" would order from the menu. If Dudley thought it was fun to use a whispery, quiet voice, Peter wanted to speak quietly too. If banging the spoon hurt Dudley's ears, Peter agreed to stop; and if Dudley wanted Peter to draw him a picture on some paper Becky had brought, Peter was usually glad to draw it. Peter had a normal two-year-old's need to assert independence from his mother, but could graciously assent to requests from his small, playful friend Dudley.

JOHN PAUL AND ROWF

John Paul, almost four, enjoys reading out loud to Rowf, his special toy dog. John Paul's mother, Sue, sometimes initiates reading sessions by saying, "Rowf really wants you to come cuddle up here and read him a story," and John Paul will usually comply. That way, John Paul gets to strengthen his reading, and Sue hears what words or other reading skills she needs to help her son learn next.

A year ago when John Paul was still learning to read, Sue used Rowf for teaching new words, math, and many of the other subjects they were learning. One time, Rowf would be hungry for 47 cookies, so John Paul would lead him to the card showing 47 dots. Another time Rowf would want to find "water" or "grass" or "house," and John Paul would gladly search through the word cards Sue had placed on the floor until he found the right word for Rowf.

Since "Rowf is only a dog and can't read (well, maybe one word sometimes)," Sue and John Paul undertook to teach him. Rowf made lots of mistakes, and John Paul was a very patient teacher. If John Paul felt like just watching, Sue might teach only Rowf—knowing that John Paul would hear and see too.

VANESSA AND JENNY

One of the many techniques Kathleen used in teaching her daughter to read was letting Vanessa be the Mommy and teach her doll, Jenny, the words. They included Jenny most often at the point when Vanessa knew many words and was beginning to put them together into sentences. Kathleen reviewed ten or twelve word cards, then put them on the floor and let Vanessa choose words like, "Jenny loves Vanessa," or "Vanessa can run" to put into sentence order and teach to Jenny.

ACHESON IS ... YOU KNOW

Acheson is a timid finger puppet who wanted to learn to read—and counted on Colin to help him learn. Acheson got terribly excited when Colin could read a whole sentence at once! They each got raisins when they could read new words, and Colin ate his right away. Acheson saved his, of course. (Puppets eat only at night, you know!).

Mortimer is a hand puppet who tried to learn to read as fast as Nathan did. Eric will usually do anything for Thumbelina, a face painted on a thumb. Thumbelina pops out now and then to help with a job or teach a fact. And Gooney Bird is a marionette who's enlarging Adam's vocabulary.

Try a puppet! Call a doll into service. Paint a thumb. Give a voice to a stick figure. Children love being the teacher—the older, wiser, helpful friend. Parent plus puppet can often excite more wonder about the world than a parent alone. Get yourself a helper!

Dorothy C. Briggs has many suggestions for doing this.)

Another approach to increasing children's awareness is to reduce household noises. Try this experiment: Whenever you turn on the stereo, television, or tape recorder, see how much you can turn down the volume and still hear what is being played. If you make a game of it, there's a good chance that the children will want to join you in this experiment: I can turn the knob to "1" and still hear the words... 'Old McDonald had a farm'..."

Of course, you won't want to continually listen to things at an ear-straining volume. The idea is to develop the family's ability to tune in to the environment by making an effort to really listen. You may even find that when you turn

the volume back up, you don't turn it as high as you did before the experiment.

As an adjunct to this experiment you might want to see how quietly you can do some of your household chores: Can you put the silverware in the sink without a sound? How quietly can you put away the pots and pans? How softly can you shut the cabinet door?

It is absolutely amazing how much noise most of us make just "knocking around the house." A lot of this noise can be reduced without being needlessly overzealous and the rewards are definitely worth the effort. There's more time to hear the robin outside the window or Daddy's footsteps coming up the walk—or to hear Mommy's heartbeat while resting a head against her breast. There's even time for the serenity that is found in a quiet; spontaneous rest.

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