

For Our Young Poets

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After WWII, many mental health professionals in Europe were engaged in the reconstruction of psychiatry and psychoanalysis. Many wanted to integrate psychoanalysis into society at large. This movement allowed for the transformation and evolution of the offer of assistance to children and young people. The efforts of these professionals brought about new propositions, interdisciplinary approaches, studies and rigorous research, which led to further insights about the practice and the broadening of reflection within the field. Across the world, we, mental health professionals, kept going in that direction, providing help to those who would not normally have access to our offices, or would find themselves in a difficult situation or simply struggle with classic psychoanalytical assistance.

Winnicott, an important thinker in the field of Child and Adolescent Psychoanalysis proposed the concept of the “transitional object”. The idea of separation from the loved object has initially been described as the cause of great internal conflict for the baby. Nevertheless, Winnicott demonstrated that, despite dramatic moments such as these separations, what characterizes the baby’s relationships with adults are states of tranquility and wellbeing. He suggests the existence of a “calm zone”, a sphere of quiet, within which are elaborated the first relations towards the object of love: a transitional area. This area comprises shared experiences made of gestures, verbal exchanges (lullabies, games etc.) and of a privileged object called “the transitional object.”

René Diatkine enriched the analysis of a baby’s activities by introducing the notion of an early “pleasure of mental functioning”. He insisted on the importance of pre-linguistic games. According to Diatkine, the baby’s capacity for pleasure and serenity through playing is acquired from the beginning of life, with language present in the first verbal games.

Turbulences at the beginnings of life – such as lack of care or language – can lead to disharmonies in the development of children. In Brazil, social inequality and precarious access to health and education are not the only cause of turbulence, but certainly reinforce existent problems. Aiming to provide care within the complicated Brazilian context, teams of mental health professionals have decided to undertake cultural actions through the use of poetic objects of mediation in order to communicate with un(der)privileged children and their families. These actions and the observation of their results conveyed surprising insights that help the professionals involved assist both children and adults, as well as inspire our clinic and new actions in the same direction.

One example of actions that has allowed for such insight is the use of literature, that is, reading books (objects of culture and art) to children, their mothers and those who accompany them.

We were able to verify that art, when mediated by an important relationship, reconstitutes spaces of language. It helps people talk to each other and to their children, and is fundamental for the transmission of dialogue through generations and groups.

Babies are poetic audiences. The mother who sings to her baby introduces it to the culture by way of language and the drama of living. We are all poets in essence and “to poetize” is crucial for our psychological health.

Adults talk to each other in front of babies, and the aspiration to be part of this intimacy stimulates the children in the desire to own words. The narrative form allows the child to perform its own representations. The child plays mentally with language through its babbles. In adolescence, this becomes our capacity for fantasizing. Those skills are inextricable from the human being.

The possibility of creating, imagining, abstracting, playing through thinking, can be inhibited and come to fail in situations of great adversity. In such moments of retreat, we find it difficult to express ourselves, to dream, to welcome and talk to our children.

As the Head Psychologist of the nursery of a community center, I implemented the procedure of educators reading stories to babies. They were 1 month to 2 years old, and the majority of them had some kind of development issue. The reasons they were at this institution were diverse and only a few children were visited by their relatives.

One day, I chose to read “Tanto, Tanto!” [So much, So much!]. This book tells the story of a family waiting for the father to throw a surprise birthday party. The story is pleasant because of its content – a reunion in which affection circulates. The long narrative contains many words, images, colors, language structures and forms – the story is full of semantic, rhythmic, aesthetic and ludic richness. Another educator was also reading it, while a number of babies explored other books and toys. Eighteen-month-old Rafael was starting to walk. He got closer, tottering. I could see that he was attentive to my reading. He looked at me, at the book, at my mouth, again at the book. He smiled and babbled. Every time the subtle black and white image of a baby would appear, he would celebrate and touch the drawing. Rafael asked me to stay on these pages longer. When I finished reading, I closed the book and Rafael began to complain. He sat on the floor and cried. I spoke to him, asking whether he wanted to hear the story once more. He calmed down and seemed to understand what I was proposing. When I opened the book, he smiled and stood up. So, there we went, sharing exclamations, words, images, gestures, emotions!

When Rafael asks me to re-read “Tanto, Tanto!”, he makes a choice (even if he does not speak yet); he sustains his attention for a long time, interacts with everyone. This reading allows his contact with me, with the other children, with the book and the narrative. Rafael listens and asks for repetition, taking pleasure in participating. Thus, he extends the time of the relationship, which enables him to play with the narrative that he already knows.

Babies reveal themselves as formidable researchers as well as active and dynamic partners. We learn with them. The importance of accompanying them, going towards them, becomes clear. This realization is very mobilizing for adults and teaches a fundamental lesson for those who work with children of all ages. Babies have their own way of thinking and we cannot learn everything. They absorb experiences and perhaps at a later moment develop an elaborate thought of their own fashion. A baby – this enigmatic person in formation – needs care, respect towards its movements and our attention to the signs it offers. To introduce this practice into a nursery was fundamental in order to sensitize its educators about the importance of speaking to and playing with the babies.

Children show us their capacity for choice and ludic composition. They teach us how our forms of listening and playing can be diverse and how this diversity carries marvelous richness. I was surprised, learned to feel the rhythm of what was happening, to welcome everyone, to respect and accept those listening from a distance, as well as refusals, silences, interruptions, repetitions. It is a composition by simultaneous, multiple authors in which we, adults, make discoveries through the “readings” and requests of the little ones. These are spaces of liberty, exercise, exploration,

observation, reflection, creation and sharing, all without assessment or expectation. It is a fertile practice at every age. Many of these actions happen in collective and public environments. Teenagers and professionals from the institutions that receive us came to join the babies and their parents.

I have read stories to babies, children and young people. I have listened to accounts from colleagues. These experiences reveal something important: although the baby is close to us in sentimental terms, it is also very distinct, which sometimes make us perplexed, as if we have discovered something strange in ourselves. We are obliged to synchronize what we dream with what happens in there. This allows an understanding of the conflict and sense of abandonment that occurs between the baby and its parents, between the babies we dream of and the ones that are there, whole and vigorous.

When we speak with or read to a baby, we feel bizarre and funny. Babies are usually more silent, serious and have subtler reactions than older children. The way a baby registers and receives what we propose intrigues us. We overlook all that the little ones can capture, and this can be unsettling.

When we read a story, the child chooses what, in that particular moment, is relevant to them, and a relationship is established between us, the child and the narrative. With Rafael, the story speaks about connections and encounters. I knew that encounters, both little and large, would be part of this story. Although we cannot define exactly what happened, it is clear that Rafael liked it and this was important.

Rafael demonstrated and exercised many complex abilities. He identified the black and white illustrations, subtle elements of the story that do not appear in the written narrative. In them, the baby is alone and active, expressing emotions: it plays, reads, dances, asks for a cuddle, laughs, observes the adult, runs, gets annoyed and sleepily sucks its thumb. All this interested Rafael, which drew my attention and made me speak about the illustrations. At tapping the images, Rafael was indicating them. It was a banal situation, as when we point to something with our finger. However, it was the first time he did so and this moment is fundamental for the non-speaking child. When it indicates an image, it is capable of separating, discriminating this image/object from all the rest. At this moment, the adult identifies themselves with the child and usually names what the little one is pointing to, creating a game between them – a game that goes back and forth around this gesture that precedes language. It is likely that, in no time, the first words will appear.

Rafael stayed involved with the reading and got interested in new experiences, brought about by the language, the illustrations and his and other people's reactions. Many things helped him at this: the reading carried out by an adult, the physical contact (he stood up, leaning against my knees), the eye contact (he looked at me, at the book and to where I looked – other children, adults, images, letters) and the rhythm of the narrative.

To be with children is a constant lesson, filled with surprises.

Literature allows us to approach the most difficult situations with joy and pleasure. It brings both known and unknown elements from which everyone can imagine and learn. The story being read establishes spaces of hospitality and language. It stimulates the exchange between generations and groups; it strengthens and enriches links.

We open spaces for language through stories, within the possible timescale and in places where it seemed impossible.

"I approached the incubator where Lia lay. Her mother, Cleurimar, told me that Lia had heart issues. I offered to read stories, and she accepted. I started reading and Cleurimar got emotional and started weeping. I was worried and asked what had happened. She made a hand gesture, telling me to wait. Then she told me "her baby's" story. When she finished, I asked if she wanted me to resume my stories. She accepted and, at some points, she laughed. I said that it would be good for her to speak, tell stories, sing to Lia. I approached the incubator and began to talk to Lia. At that moment, the heart rate monitor showed that her heartbeat was accelerating." Ilan Brenman.[1]

Here we see the reestablishment of space of encounter. The mother expresses herself: speaks, cries, tells her baby's story. After that, she enjoys the reading and other thoughts appear, beyond sadness and disquietude. The mother observes Ian speaking to Lia, observes the movement it imparts to him and the baby. A "weaving" of language and affection happens and helps her to support her anguish – it is a gesture towards expression and thinking.

Such cultural actions allow the decentering from difficult situations. An ultra-secret, intimate and transgressive pleasure reminds us of who we are and awakens our capacity to dream of other possibilities. The introduction of a rhythm allows the psychological apparatus to be unlocked, untying a knot, freeing the desire to symbolize and dramatize, to invent stories, play and share. This is valid for everyone – children and adults.

The many emotional conflicts lived by a child or a young person, their cultural references, their life conditions and their well-being have serious impact on their future. Random encounters and/or situations have a decisive – and unpredictable – effect on a person's fate. Therefore, we learn with the children that enabling this relationship through literature and the written language is essential.

References

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[1] This situation took place at the Children's Institute (São Paulo) during the implementation of the Project of Hospital Humanization – Live Library in Hospitals, of which I was the coordinator (<http://hygeia.fsp.usp.br/cepedoc/trabalhos/Trabalho%20482.htm>). This project became an official program in some pediatric units and is still running today. Ilan Brenman, one of the staff members, is a writer, holds a PhD in education and has more than 70 books published in Brazil, Europe and Asia.

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