

Notes on Psychic Work Related to Absence

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“Absence” cannot be experienced or conceptualized without its opposite, “presence”.

This article describes how children’s games are valuable in elaborating absence.

Winnicott (1951), an accomplished analyst, described the Transitional Object (TO) as a typical toy, e.g., a teddy bear that a mother gives to her children in their very first years. Babies all around the world pet, play, watch and get dirty this TO in early age. Children develop an endearing relationship with these toys that accompanies them at different times of their growth, especially at the critical time when they stop experiencing their mother as part of them, and she begins to be perceived as someone separate, with her own life. The teddy bear represents the first “not-me” possession, in a transitional zone between the inside and the outside.

This transitional zone goes beyond the traditional differentiation between being and not-being. Green (1988) explains that, for children, the TO may simultaneously be and not be their mother; her attitude is essential in this. It requires an unquestioned look, that makes it possible to sustain what her child experience, a zone of illusion according to the child’s evolutionary development.

The TO is situated in a time and a space in which the baby is in the transition between feeling a degree of fusion with the mother and feeling her as an external object. The pattern established may be used later on by the child when he/she experiences the threat of privation. If this pattern is missing, a pathology may be forthcoming.

On this topic, Freud (1920) studied a children’s game, called *Fort-Da*. He observed it during the first years of his grandson and he used it to describe the traumatic relationship of the child facing the departure of his mother.

The relationship presence-absence is worked on from the first years of life by the child, who actively makes an elaborate game. The absence of the mother was represented by a wooden toy that slides. Throughout a concordant language the child exclaimed o-o-o, which meant ‘gone’, when the wooden toy was going away, and "Da", or here, when it was returning. The language made it feasible to evocate and sustain her absence, a way of accounting for the difference between what the child perceived about the departure of his mother and her return.

In the widespread play of peekaboo, the mother actively presents to her child the announcement of her presence and her absence. When the mother reappears they smile with joy of getting back together.

As another example, we can consider the *Gran Bonete* game.

In this game, the child in the *Gran Bonete* role claims that Blue (another child) has the bird he has lost, and Blue must answer quickly that she does not have it. During the time the object remains lost – the words make it present; they give the object a name, a context, and turn the absence into presence. Maybe the game is about the lost. Where does the lost object go? Or not being evocated by the fantasy is felt as lost? How do we distinguish the lost from the absent?

Let's consider Winnicott (1967) again. He also studied privation in children and its effects on psychism. He wrote the formula $x+y+z$, in reference to the period of time that a little child can endure the absence of his/her mother without experiencing a sense of threat, confusion, etc. The developmental stage of the child determines the duration that they can enjoy and accept moments of separation from their mother.

In Green's text (1988) we find:

the psychism is the effect of the relationship of two bodies in which one of them is absent, the condition of absence of one of these two bodies decides the destiny of representation, it remains to know what the other body can do with this no presence.

This interesting thought considers the corporal presence as the necessary cause of psychic life, defines the absence as irreplaceable, and the child's behavior in front of it. The child signifies the absence, but the absence will also define him.

Early on, Freud (1886-99) wrote about the concept of mnemic trace, as the traces of past experiences. It is a form of subsistence in the unconscious that later on suffers different transformations. These traces are not inherent but acquired during life.

Winnicott (1958) expressed "the capacity to be alone in the presence of the mother", a paradox of psychic development that requires an absence in presence.

Absence is essential for the development of psychism and its complexity. Absence accompanies the presence and belongs to the domain of representation. If subjective constitution is not possible without the presence of another, a sufficient filial relationship will prepare the conditions to give birth to absence, a form of potential presence according to Winnicott (1967) and Green (1975)).

Absence, independent from the space-time of the object, fertilizes the experiences that soften feelings of abandonment, and brings certain self-confidence and self-sufficiency.

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