The Educational Value of the Nursery School

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Foreword

This year, Early Education is celebrating its 90th anniversary. It comes during hard times for all early childhood education settings. For those who see early childhood as a valuable stage in its own right; for those who wish to resist top down pressure to get children ‘school ready’ to the detriment of their right to play; for those who are convinced that knowledge of child development should guide practice, The Educational Value of the Nursery School is a clarion call for child-centred provision. Through Susan Isaacs’ deep knowledge of child development and her detailed observations of young children she comes to conclusions about their entitlements that are as modern and relevant today as they were when she wrote them.

Born in Bolton, Lancashire in 1885, Isaacs sets out with great clarity why play and imagination are fundamental to child development and learning. She is not frightened to be forthright in asserting what she believes is right. She was after all a remarkable woman who fought for the education she desired, eventually training as an infant school teacher, obtaining a degree in philosophy and embarking on a lifelong interest in psychoanalysis.

Early Education (or the Nursery School Association as it then was) first published this Isaacs-authored pamphlet in 1937. This anniversary reprint has added contrasting photographs, old and new, to bring alive Isaacs’ powerful words. They illustrate some important and unchanging facts about young children.

In common with most writers of the time Isaacs uses ‘he’ throughout when talking about the child. This and other rather stereotyped views about roles of men and women as well as parents may jar but do not detract from the relevance of the main messages. The ‘old fashioned’ language she uses may seem rather stark and unsympathetic yet this shows Isaacs as a product of her time and class. She did not have the benefit of more modern research
which acknowledges the power of parents as their child’s first educators and the vital importance of valuing and working with them to support their children’s learning.

For Isaacs the ‘master key’ to unlock what adults need to understand about young children’s education is play and the benefits it brings for the young learner. She explores at length the importance of problems and the ways in which play and exploration can help the child to more fully understand the world and become a good problem solver. In later chapters she links language, play and logical thinking and hypothesising. A constant theme is the role of the adult and an appropriate environment for supporting and extending learning.

Isaacs talks about how different two-year-olds are from three and four year olds –a topical message for policy makers who are entrusted with decisions about the sort of practice we should encourage as more two-year-olds are funded to attend early education settings. Isaacs touches on what we would today refer to as ratios and recognises the need for adults to provide a ‘generous’ environment built upon understanding and emotional warmth which builds security and confidence.

This book is fresh and passionate in its advocacy of the rights of young children to the very best provision. Through every chapter are threaded wonderful observations of children at play. There is much to delight and challenge in this pamphlet but as Isaacs herself says:

“If we were asked to mention one supreme psychological need of the young child, the answer would have to be ‘play’ – the opportunity for free play in all its various forms. Play is the child’s means of living and of understanding life.”

Helen Moylett, President, Early Education, September 2013
Introduction

The purpose of this pamphlet is to make clear the educational value of the nursery school for the young child. We shall focus our attention mainly upon the child's mental life and his needs as a human being, with wishes and purposes in relation to other people, and shall say very little about the service which the nursery school renders to his bodily health and growth. Much has already been written on the value of the nursery school in providing air and space and exercise, proper rest and good food, and thus remedying the serious lack from which so many children of the nursery age in our large towns suffer. Its function in these respects is now well established and widely acknowledged.

The wider educational work of the nursery school, however, is not yet so generally appreciated. This is true, largely, because our knowledge of the child's feelings and purposes, of his ways of learning and thinking, has itself only recently been won, and is by no means yet complete. We still have much to learn about the child's activities with different materials and his play with other children at different ages, and the various ways in which we can best foster his mental health. We now do understand something of all this, however, and are beginning to admit its immense importance.

We cannot, of course, sharply separate the care of the body from the welfare of the mind. Bodily health itself may depend as much upon the child's active play and happy relations with people as upon the right food and air and sunshine. Conversely, the child cannot be happy if he is starved and confined or suffers from lack of sleep. Whilst these two aspects of his development are thus intimately bound up with each other, it is yet possible to focus our attention chiefly upon the one or upon the other, for the purpose of study. In this pamphlet we shall be concerned
more with the child’s personality than with his bodily hygiene; we shall refer to his body, not so much as an end in itself, but as an instrument of his feelings and intelligence.

The benefit which the little child gains from nursery school life is no longer a mere matter of opinion; it rests upon actual experience and demonstrable facts. General scientific knowledge of the child's needs of growth, and actual comparison of children who have attended nursery schools with those in the same general condition of life who have not, both provide evidence in favour of nursery school life.

**Scientific study gives knowledge of children’s needs**

The scientific study of the behaviour of young children has in recent years enabled us to understand the general lines of normal development from infancy to school life. Every mother and nurse and teacher has experience of her own to draw upon in trying to appreciate the needs of the children she deals with and coming to some opinion about children in general. But nowadays we are not confined to the narrow circle of our own experience. The knowledge and judgment of a great many observers has been pooled in scientific study. We have learnt how to watch and record the behaviour of children and how to arrange and classify the facts we have gathered, so as to come to more reliable and widely applicable conclusions about their development than can be hoped from the limited contact of any one of us, and especially from any one engaged all the time in the practical work of tending or teaching. We have learnt to observe large numbers of children both individually and in groups, either by giving them problems to solve under precise conditions, experiments and tests; or by watching their behaviour under ordinary conditions, in their daily lives, when they play together in the home and garden, and are at work in the school. We have learnt that
above every other source of knowledge about children stands the study of their ordinary spontaneous play, whether in the home, the school playground, the street or the parks. The great educators taught us long ago that the child reveals himself in his play. In recent years we have come to understand more fully than ever before the deeper meanings of the little child’s play. If we watch him when he is free to play as he will, the child shows us all that he is wishing and fearing, all that he is pondering over and aiming to do. He shows us what the grown-ups are to him, what attitudes he perceives in them, what his feelings are about them, and what are the happenings in the physical world which stir him to seek understanding and control. It is through his play that the child tells us most about his needs of growth.

Taking all these sources of knowledge together, we now have a considerable degree of understanding of the various aspects of the ordinary child’s mental life as he grows from birth to the middle years of childhood, of its normal outline, its ups and downs, its movements in this and that direction, and the many and varied differences between one ordinary child and another. But we have still another important source of information. Many children do not develop straightforwardly with ease and happiness, but show difficulties of one sort or another in these early years. The infant welfare centres and the child guidance clinics all over the world have been now for many years helping these less happy children, those who are not able to learn as they should, do not talk at the normal age, cannot learn to read and write, suffer from tantrums, night terrors and fears, lie and steal, are destructive or aggressive to other children, or unable to play with them. These children, whose needs of growth have not been met by their normal environment and who need special help and remedial treatment of one sort or another, nevertheless teach us a great deal by their mistakes and unhappiness. In trying to help them we learn also what the lack has been, in what way the home or the school has
failed them, and how we can avoid such breakdowns and difficulties in other children. By comparing these more unhappy children with ordinary children in home and school, we discover that the difference is not that ordinary children do not have any emotional troubles. The more we study the matter, the more we learn that emotional troubles of one sort or another are general and normal in the early years of childhood. The ordinary child in the good home, however, grows out of his difficulties. These other children suffer with a greater intensity and do not leave their troubles behind with normal growth. We are thus able to discover what are the ways of handling the difficulties of the little child which will help him to grow out of them, and what sort of attitude and behaviour in the grown-up increases and confirms the difficulties of development in the young child. Again, the study of the play of these more difficult children has provided another illumination of their needs of development. The unhappy child plays differently from the successfully developing child. He shows us the deeper sources of his trouble through his play.

Our study of these more difficult children who need special forms of help has, therefore, added to our understanding of normal development, and helped us to see more widely and deeply what are the child’s needs of growth in the early years.

**Experience of nursery schools gives knowledge of children’s needs**

Besides this general knowledge, however, we are now able to draw upon the experience of many years of *nursery school practice* in different countries. For more than twenty years, a varying number of young children have been attending nursery schools in many parts of the world, and we have been able to watch and record the details of their development under these conditions. We can compare it with other children of the same sort who are not attending nursery schools. Careful comparisons
have been made which show beyond question how much benefit in their mental life the nursery school can bring to little children. By comparing children from the same sort of family and the same general surroundings, of the same racial origin and the same degree of natural intelligence, we can measure more or less accurately the degree and direction of difference which the nursery school will make to their development. So far, all such studies have shown that children in the nursery school learn more easily, play more actively and thrive better in every way than similar children who have not this advantage even if they live in good homes. We can, therefore, look upon it as settled that the nursery school is a great help to the young child in his personal feelings and his intellectual life. It increases his happiness and helps him over the normal trials of early childhood.
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The master key

In order to understand the service which the nursery school renders to the little child, we must consider what are his needs of growth during the earliest years after infancy. We have only to watch his play with a discerning eye, and to listen to his comments and questions, in order to realise how his mind is beset with problems of one sort or another – problems of skill, problems of seeing and understanding, problems of feeling and behaving. The appreciation of the central fact may be looked upon as the master key to the child’s mental development. People have long sought such a master key, to unlock the meaning of the child’s behaviour. Some have deemed they found it in the rôle of habit. Many teachers and textbooks have emphasised the importance of habits and of training in the right habits in early education. And the child’s readiness to learn particular sorts of habit, his general love of order and ritual, is indeed an important influence and a valuable aid in his life. But it is far from being the whole story of his relation to life. We cannot make the best use of habit unless we understand something of its true nature and function, of what it means to the child himself. Habit is one of the minor servants of life, the instrument of profound desires and purposes in the little child’s mind. It is valuable because it helps him to solve some of his problems of feeling and behaving towards other people and towards his own body and his physical surroundings.

The ways in which life sets problems for the little child are endless. Let us look at some of the more characteristic problems which confront him – space will not allow us to do more than illustrate some of the main issues with which he has to deal during these years of early childhood.
Problems of perceiving and handling objects

These two aspects of the child’s development – his sense of perception and his skill – used to be considered separately, and indeed as if they occurred in successive phases. Nowadays we know that they develop together and that the child is never concerned with his own seeing and hearing, tasting and touching as such, nor with his own skill, independent of the object upon which it is exercised. He is always, in his own mind, concerned with watching and trying to understand and to deal with things and people, the objects in the world outside him, which he so much needs to master and to comprehend. He is always trying to see things better, to make out the differences between table and chair, cup and spoon, apple and orange, the flowers and birds, the fire and the sun, the dog and the cat, the smiles and frowns of his mother, the faces of this person and that. His pursuit of these differences leads to the maturing of his sense discrimination and the storing of his mind with external knowledge, just as his pleasure in life and his wish to be like his parents and his older brothers and sisters leads to his zest in movement and the development of his skills.

Whilst the two-year-old child is well able to walk, and even to run, his balance and poise are by no means secure: he easily stumbles and is easily pushed over. His lack of balance and bodily security and his imperfect perception of sizes and distances naturally affect his feelings as well as his judgment. He is, for example, more readily afraid of other children, because he can so easily be pushed over, and his general sense of insecurity in life is the greater when he feels himself so unstable upon his feet, so unsure in reaching and handling objects. It is, therefore, not surprising that he shows immense pleasure in the attempt to master his own bodily mechanism, climbing up and on and over obstacles of all sorts, balancing and jumping, sliding, going up and down stairs. He loves moving in a way that employs the body as a whole. Later on, he is
also fascinated by problems of manipulation, throwing pebbles, sand, pulling and pushing carts or horses on wheels, moving bricks about and arranging them in irregular masses, and occasionally piling them up and building.

Even at three years he seeks plenty of this general bodily activity, with now better balance and stronger movements. He delights in arranging objects with meticulous care, putting dolls neatly into their beds, tucking blankets smoothly in, arranging or piling blocks in definite patterns which have a clear meaning (for example, an attempt at an aeroplane or bridge).

One of the child’s passions at two to three years is fitting sticks or blocks into holes of one sort or another. This impulse finds satisfaction in simple things like dropping pebbles into a pail, bricks into a box, tipping them out and putting them back again, as well as, later on, threading beads, putting blocks and sticks of different shapes into appropriate holes, and thus learning geometrical relations; moreover, just as the child loves putting little objects into larger, so he loves turning things out of containers – emptying drawers, pulling books out of bookshelves, tipping blocks or stones out of a cart.

Problems of pouring and dribbling, patting and digging and, later, modelling, with sand and water, give the child endless delight. In all the child’s movements at two to three years, there is much pleasure in repetition.

A striking characteristic of the three-year-old when he is attempting to master some skill (for example, the use of the scissors) is the bringing of his whole body into play to aid the local movement: his tongue comes out or is twisted about, his legs move with his hands and arms, and his whole body may grow rigid in the attempt to master the particular movement desired. Only slowly, as the general bodily poise of the child increases
and the manipulative movements of his hands and arms become more skilful, does he lose this rigidity of the body as a whole when attempting to perform some particular movement.

After three years, the child’s power of manipulating such things as spades, brushes, pencils greatly increases. When running amongst other children, he can judge distances and speeds better, and is less liable to bump into them or to stumble and fall if others touch him when they are running. He still has enormous zest in the larger bodily activities, running, jumping and climbing, and needs plenty of opportunity for large free movement; but he has much greater capacity for the finer movements of hand and eye, involved in manipulating smaller objects. The bodily and manipulative play becomes less repetitive, the child’s activities become more varied and he can play with several objects at the same time, combining them with definite meanings. He can respond to changes in the external situation more quickly and more fully, as, for example, when he needs to change his direction of running, or understand and obey an order or a suggestion, or seize a situation in the play of others. If anything is spilt or broken he will more quickly see what needs to be done to put it right. He can co-ordinate his muscles in the use of a tricycle or a scooter, and his use of all materials is more complex and more varied.

At two years of age the child still has very much to learn about spaces and distances and the relative size even of large objects. This was shown when a little boy of two, who loves to sit in a large packing case in the garden and pretend he is in a train, attempted, on one wet day when he could not go out, to fit himself into a small cardboard shoe box in order to enjoy his beloved game. He stood first on one foot and then on the other, doing his utmost to squat down inside this small box, as he did inside the large wooden one in the garden.
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All the ordinary objects which surround the tiny child – chairs and tables, water and fire, sun and rain, cold and heat, animals and things, present problems to be understood. Everyday events which to us are a mere matter of fact – problems solved so long ago that we have ceased to remember they ever were such – are to him a puzzle and a challenge. A little boy of two, for instance, gazes out of the window on a cold winter day and sees the earth and houses and trees covered with a white sparkling powder. He says wonderingly: “Sugar”, and is surprised to see “sugar” all over the garden and houses, until touching and tasting and the words of the grown-ups show him that this is a different sort of “sugar” – in fact, “snow”. The same little boy is found powdering himself with a tin of Gospo. His wordless thought obviously runs: “Powder coming out of holes in the lid of a tin is what you put on the baby” – until he feels the grittiness of this powder, perhaps then sees that the colour is not quite the same, and is told that this is “Gospo”.

Another two-year-old sees his older brother bring home a balloon from a party and pat it gaily upwards until it sails near the ceiling. The little one has never seen a balloon before, and gazes in astonishment, then runs to fetch his large rubber ball and tries to make this behave in the same way. Why will his ball not go up to the ceiling like his brother’s “ball” does? The child seems to think the solution of this problem lies in the way his brother stands when he hits his “ball”, for he tries to put his feet in the same position and assume the same posture as the older boy when the balloon sails up to the ceiling. This, of course, brings disappointment, and it is not until he can get hold of the balloon and feel the difference in its weight, and then perhaps notice the slight difference in appearance of the ball and the balloon, that he realises that the solution lies in these characteristics, rather than in the way his brother stands.
A four-year-old boy playing with a bowl of water and little toy animals and men cries in distress when he sees his little toys “get smaller in the water”, and sees his stick “broken” when he puts it in the water. “Why does it break my stick?” We adults may say that the toys do not really get smaller and the stick is not really broken – it only “seems so”. We can “explain” the appearance; but to the boy, appearance is reality, and he cannot understand that his toys only appear to be altered.

The ordinary everyday world is full of such puzzling situations for the young child. All through the years from infancy onwards he is struggling with the discrepancies and bewildering inconsistencies in the behaviour of things, with the puzzle of distances and sizes and shapes, of cause and effect. All these things have to be understood before he can hope to control them and satisfy his needs, and thus feel secure in a strange and puzzling world.

Even more full of problems to the little child is the behaviour of the grown-ups. So many attitudes which to us are simple and obviously right, so many values which seem clear and unquestioned are to the young child open questions, perhaps bewildering puzzles, to be conned over and struggled with. “Why won’t people do nothing if people don’t say nothing?” asks a boy of three years referring to the puzzling connection between saying “Please” and “Thank you”, and having good things given to one. The child knows what the feeling of politeness is, from the surge of love and consideration within himself, but he does not understand the magic of this special formula, to which some adults attach such a vast importance. Nor can he readily deal with the many inconsistencies of adult behaviour, and their to him incomprehensible reasons for giving or refusing, for going or coming, for times and seasons.
In general, however, the young child is fascinated by what grown-up people do. He loves to watch his mother cooking and cleaning and washing, and wants to join in with her activities; just as he loves to watch and to imitate his father, the bus conductor, the engine driver, the policeman, the postman. He is struggling to feel and do as they feel and do, to understand their aims and purposes and acquire their skills.

**Problems of feeling and behaviour**

Let us now look at some of the problems of feeling and of conduct which the child between two and six or seven years of age has to face. In these early years, the child’s feelings are very intense. He has little power of control and little understanding of the situations which stir him. His affections are warm and passionate and his delight in the presence of those whom he loves very great. Disappointment and the fear of loss arouse painful anxiety and anger. At times he may be completely mastered by feeling, when he goes rigid or lies on the floor and kicks and screams. Such times are frequent in the third year, but tend to get less as he grows older, partly through greater trust in other people and partly through growing confidence in himself. Temper tantrums may be stirred up not only by unexpected interferences by the environment, such as not getting what he wants or being told to do something he does not wish to do, but by disappointments at his own failures and insufficiencies and exasperation at not being understood.

An important problem of personal life for children of the third year is the control of bladder and bowels. Whether or not there has been early training, children of this age are rarely quite secure in their control. Any emotional upset may express itself in a more or less temporary breakdown in cleanliness. The child’s feelings about his excretions and his failure in controlling them, may be very intense. He may show acute
anxiety, expressed in screaming, great obstinacy, or in phobias of the pot or the lavatory. Difficulties in feeding and idiosyncrasies about food are common, too, and are again an index of acute emotion. Both feeding difficulties and troubles about cleanliness are an expression of the child’s feelings about people, and can never be understood as merely local or physiological matters. Nor can they be dealt with in simple terms of habit. To overcome them the child needs not only specific training, but, even more, the general help of a happy, sound life and the opportunity of varied play with other children.

The child of this age has very little power of co-operating with others. The three-year-old loves to be with other children, but only gradually does he come to feel them as equal partners in his own activity. The very young child naturally turns to his mother or to a nurse or other adult for attention, protection and love, seeking a warm personal relation. He finds it difficult to share the services of his beloved grown-up with other children of his own age, his chief attitude to them being one of rivalry and hostility. He will more readily be friendly to older children, but is suspicious and hostile to younger ones. He may have attacks of acute shyness either with grown-ups or other children. Towards the middle of the fourth year he begins to develop a strong wish for independence and is more ready to play happily, and actively with other children. Under three he will rarely play for long with more than one other child, and three remains the commonest number of children playing together up to five years of age. In their love of a grown-up children of this age are very possessive, just as they are of toys. The wish to share with others develops clearly only after this period. Throughout this period, however, there is an increase in the amount of play with others and more varied ways of joining together. The frequency and size of social groups increases. Children play together for longer periods and a larger number will join in in one activity. It is rarely that more than four children sustain a
common activity, but very often five or six others will come in and move out of the group according to their changing impulses, perhaps joining with one group now and another a few minutes later, or going off to play solitarily and then coming back to watch or join in again with the first group, and so on. The four-year-old child’s attitude is, “I want someone to play with me”. The attitude of the child of five or six is, “I want to go and play with the others”.

Group play becomes by degrees more active and more varied, the different roles fitting into each other and showing more individuality. After three and a half, children are less dependent on adults, they turn to them for protection or approval and love less frequently, since they are becoming more confident in their active play with other children. They show less suspicion and less aggression towards others. They become capable of more tenderness towards younger children and of a protective and helpful attitude.

The very young child is often greatly afraid of his own hostile impulses to others. When he feels an intense surge of jealousy of another child, or anger at being interfered with by another child, he is also very troubled for the sake of the other child, and even very unhappy lest he should injure him in his anger. If he lacks the experience of playing with others, he is unable to measure the extent of his own control. If his positive attitudes to others are not strengthened by real experience, his distrust of himself and fear of his own hostilities remain unmodified. Later on, when the ordinary school years come, the child who has not had the experience of play with others is in a very different situation from those who have learnt, on the one hand, that it is possible to shout and run and sometimes be angry and jealous, without doing too much harm and, on the other, that other children are friends and helpers as well as rivals. The very small child is liable to demand an impossible standard of goodness and perfection from himself, and to feel bitterly disappointed
and anxious if he fails, if, for example, he should be clumsy or angry. Active social life with others gives him not only confidence, but a sense of proportion.

In his struggle with his own desire and urge, his own love and aggression, his own weakness and insufficiencies, the little child has recourse to many different ways of ensuring love and protection from others and lessening the tension of his feeling. One characteristic of these years is the occurrence of phobias – specific fears of many sorts, such as biting insects and animals, dark shadows and moving wind, the coalman, the soldier or policeman, being bathed or having one’s hair washed. Such fears in the little child are manifold. They are very real and intense to the little child, and often quite unmanageable. What he gains by them, however, are the love and protection of the grown-ups and the feeling that it is the animals which bite, the coalman who is dirty, not himself.

To help him grow out of his phobias, as out of his tantrums, the child needs experience which will foster his trust in his own power of being clean and loving, sensible and controlled like his parents, help in learning how to make things instead of spoiling them, how to protect instead of attacking, how to trust his own love instead of being compulsorily defiant and obstinate. Play with other children in surroundings that develop his affection and his skill is a great help in this direction.

Play with other children gives the child confidence in himself, no less than in his little friends, and not only helps him to feel less suspicious and aggressive to other children, and therefore less dependent upon the grown-ups, but by giving him the delights of active sharing and helping him to discover the way in which he can carry out his own practical or imaginative pursuits with others lays the foundation for a co-operative social life in the later school years. The child finds there are many things he can make with the help of others and many varied roles that he can
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play with them that he could not carry out alone. All his creative and artistic interests are sustained and furthered by companionship with other children. The experiences of a child in a small group under happy conditions are infinitely richer in every direction than those of the solitary child or member of the very small family in the private nursery or garden, and those real experiences of sharing reciprocal satisfactions increase the child’s belief in himself and his acceptance of life in general.

**Problems of language and understanding**

At two years of age the child is immensely interested in words and the use of words. He longs to be able to express his wishes and his ideas in words, to communicate his impressions of things, to ask for what he wants, and in general to have the intimate contact with other people through speech which he sees the grown-ups or older children have with each other. If we watch his face when he is listening to conversation and note the intensity with which he will try to imitate the talk of his elders or his exasperation when, through lack of words or faulty pronunciation, he cannot make us understand what he wants, we can see how strong is his desire to master this marvellous instrument of living. The ordinary child of two years of age is beginning to use words in combination; his sentences consist typically of a noun and a verb, although he will still use single words that have the function of a sentence. But most intelligent children are rapidly acquiring a vocabulary, and they develop a passion for naming, asking, “What’s this?” “What’s that?” all day long. Not only so, but they make immense efforts to put all their experience into words. For example, the mother of one little boy recorded how he would spend almost the whole of his day in making a running commentary on everything that happened and all that he remembered of his own or other people’s activities. Many children, when they are left tucked up in bed at night, can be heard going over the experiences of the day, either in a string of single words or in attempts at a sentence, sometimes appropriately
used, sometimes imperfectly understood. One can hear their pleasure in speech and the zest with which they try to make it intelligible. Many children of this age, however, are still afraid and silent and need the stimulus of play and companionship and of talk with the grown-ups to enable them to master language.

Where their store of real words is inadequate, children may invent their own, or will speak in expressive rhythms a hotchpotch of words and phrases, fragments of adult conversation. Children of this age usually understand a great many more words than they use, as is shown by their response to stories or commands. Intelligent children from cultured homes will naturally have a much larger vocabulary than duller children or those from homes where books and papers play very little part. Moreover, children who are not talked to or played with by the grown-ups or older children are poorer in speech at any given age than those who enjoy the stimulus of conversation.

Children’s inventiveness is often shown in language. For example, two little girls of two-and-a-half and three-and-a-half had an amusing game of saying “Beetons on you” to any grown-up friend whom they liked. As they said “Beetons on you”, they attempted to pick off some small imaginary object (beetles? or buttons?) from the garments of the approved grown-ups. These two children loved abbreviating words: strawberries became “strawbs”; “dogs’ mercury” became “dogs’ merc”. Many children of two and three invent onomatopoeic expressions, e.g. when one child says, “It’s raining?” another listens, and remarks: “Pitpatting”.
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The love of repetition in movement is paralleled by the delight in jingles, in nursery rhymes, in chanting and in spontaneous rhythmic expressions of everyday experience: “And I came home, and Daddy came home, and Johnnie came home”, and so on.

Apart from differences of circumstance and of natural ability, the child’s feelings play a great part in his speech development. Some children become inhibited in their learning and use of words, or develop special speech defects such as stammer, because this function is charged with intense emotion. Any unhappiness or conflict or temporary difficulty in the home, such as fear or jealousy of another child, the loss of a nurse or a beloved grand-parent, too frequent change of surroundings, or physical illness, may bring some check to normal speech development. A happy life and good relations with parents and brothers and sisters play a great part in fostering the child’s use of language, whether for learning or art. Many words which to us are neutral may become highly charged with emotion to the little child, perhaps through some misunderstanding; as when a little boy sees some Scotch soldiers wearing kilts and hears the word “kilt” as “killed”, and not surprisingly develops a terror of all soldiers he passes.

As the child grows from three to five years, his vocabulary is greatly extended and his capacity for expressing his wishes, his commands, his experiences and his opinions grows very rapidly. His sentences become longer and more varied in their construction. His talk is still, however, mostly an accompaniment to his building or drawing or painting or digging, his play with dolls and his make-believe. Mealtimes are favourable to an interchange of talk, too. It is only in the most intimate contact with activity and actual experience that he begins to talk freely and to exchange ideas. He has little power for sustaining conversation as such, and needs the opportunity to talk with people who talk well. Grown-ups, or older children who will listen to what he has to say and respond appropriately are of
far more value to him than specific lessons in clear speech. It is under the stimulus of wishes and emotions that language develops most freely and fully. At the beginning of this period children often talk about what they are doing without expecting much reply, but genuine discussion and even argument about what is going on do occur – always, however, in some practical play situation.

Intimately bound up with the development of speech is the growth of the child’s power of reasoning. It is only as he learns to use words that he can effectively draw upon the experience of other people and deal with problems less immediate and concrete than those involved in actual handling of material. The puzzle which faced the little boy who saw snow for the first time was clarified for him by giving the word “snow” to mark the distinction between this white powder and the white powder called “sugar”. Reasoning in words begins with intelligent children in the third year. When, for example, the little two-year-old coming home from a walk on a wet day takes out his handkerchief to wipe the gatepost dry and his mother says, “I shouldn’t do that – the wind will dry it”, he stands thoughtfully for a moment and says, “Wind dry it, wind got hankie”, he is recalling his previous experience and making a leap of constructive logical imagination to solve the problem of how the wind can dry the gatepost. The same little boy sees a signal go down on the railway line in which he is greatly interested. He jumps with delight and says, “Sigernal down!” And then presently, “Sigernal down – man put it down”. And after a few moments’ further reflection, “Man put it down -man got ladder, man put it down” – an excellent piece of reasoning, drawing upon previous experience by means of verbal logic.

Throughout these years verbal logic, whilst always very simple, very concrete and immediate, yet shows continuous development.
The child is constantly attempting to master the problems that concern him by drawing upon other people’s experiences in the generalised form of words. From three years onwards he seeks verbal explanation more and more eagerly. His earliest questions are, “What’s that?” Then presently, “What for?” and a little later, “Why?” In the “why” questions of the four-year-old and five-year old, we see the most intense effort at ordering experience in a logical and reasonable way. “Why doesn’t the ink run down out of my fountain pen when I hold it upside down?” “How can the hippopotamus get down into his tank when his little back legs are so far from his little front ones?” are typical attempts to resolve the puzzles which confront him.

The power to reason in words and to formulate his experience grows in the little child through the opportunity to talk, to ask questions and to make statements whilst actually engaged in his practical pursuits. A rich experience, freely discussed, is the only means of learning to talk well and to think logically.
The Educational Value of the Nursery School
The child’s needs

Let us now consider in broad outline the ways in which the child’s environment and the people in it can aid him in solving the many and varied problems of learning, of feeling and of understanding which life brings to him.

Warm human relationships

In the first place, we cannot begin to help the child in his major difficulties unless we are aware how real his feelings are, how human and how like ourselves he is, how warm his affections, how acute his anger and dread, how despairing his grief and his sense of insufficiency. No method of education based upon the notion that the little child is a simple bodily machine or a mere creature of habit and reflex response can sustain him in his deepest difficulties. Such notions have led many people in recent years to deny the child the natural expressions of love in tender caress and simple responses to his cries and wish for companionship. Above everything else, a child needs warm human relationships, and spontaneous feelings of friendliness.

Growth in skill and confidence and social understanding come through pleasurable satisfaction in movement, in the expression of his wishes and his friendly responses to others, in food that is pleasant to eat as well as nourishing and well-balanced. Joy and zest in life affect the child’s posture, his digestion and his learning – just as much as do food and clothing and exercise.
Real and active experience

Another essential for happy development is real and active experience. No one can solve the child’s problems for him, only his own moving and exploring and experimenting, his own play with toys suitable for his phase of development, can advance his skill and his learning. It is the answers to his, not to our questions, which increase his knowledge. His efforts to understand the activities of the grown-ups and, above all, his interest in the primary biological processes of the household – the shopping and cooking and preparation of meals, the washing and cleaning and use of fire and water – form the nucleus of his intellectual interests. From these develops his wish to read and write; his later understanding of number and geography and history, of literature and the human arts, is rooted in these primary interests in the life of his family and home.

He needs, thus, not only the opportunity to run and jump and climb, to build and model and paint and count and measure, but also the companionship of grown-ups who have the patience and the skill to answer his questions when he cannot answer them himself, and to provide material for his activities as they progress and develop from day to day. He needs a generous environment, generous in warmth of feeling, and in opportunity for activity. He needs appropriate materials to work upon and an attitude of encouragement and eagerness in those who work with him.

Security

One of the basic needs of the young child is security. Without security as a background of his life he cannot dare to explore or experiment, to express his feelings, or to try out new relations to people.
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The Educational Value of the Nursery School

Security has many facets: (a) First of all, he needs order and routine and rhythm in the plan of the day. Regular meals and rest and tending are not only important for the child’s bodily health, they also have profound significance for his feelings. A rhythmic pattern in the details of daily life, no less than in music and in verse, means life and love and safety to the young child. The child’s own habits of bodily hygiene have the same significance to him. Habit eases the necessity for decision and control and is a relief to the tension of feeling; but the possibility of building up good habits in the child rests upon order and rhythm in the behaviour of the people around him and in the general pattern of his life. (b) Secondly, security means a stable attitude in the people who are with him. If the grown-ups are changeable and uncertain, he has to watch for their smiles or frowns with a painful intensity. He cannot learn control of his own feelings if he does not know where the wind will blow from them. He needs serenity and constant love from mother and nurse alike. (c) Lastly, security means trust in the power of the grown-ups to help him to control his aggressive and destructive tendencies. He needs to feel that they will not let him bite or kick or hurt them, nor spoil, dirty or break up everything. He needs to know that they love him in spite of his faults and angers, and that they will not revenge themselves upon him by severe punishments. Mere indulgence, however, is no help. The child seeks control from the outside just because he has yet so little control in himself, and becomes so afraid of his own jealousy and anger and destructive wishes, unless he is sustained against them by the grown-ups’ decisions. If the grown-ups are variable in their moods, he feels that he can too readily act upon them and make them pleased or angry, and thus he becomes frightened of his own power. The little child loves to obey when obedience is reasonable and is demanded by grown-ups who also allow him freedom to play and who understand his constructive impulses. The right use of the prestige and power of the grown-up in maintaining justice and order and in fostering constructive impulses is as necessary to the child as is the chance to assert himself in appropriate ways.
Opportunity for self-assertion and independence

The opportunity for self-assertion and independence is another of the needs of the child's development. He needs the chance to learn to feed himself, to experiment in play, to jump and climb, to renounce the protecting hand, to make his own mistakes. It is a great advantage if the grown-ups know something of the average age at which the developing skills appear, but equally important that they should realise the differences between one child and another, and not try to force every child to keep the same pace. It is also a great help to the child if the grown-ups in charge know something of the normal age for perfection of the various bodily skills, if they can see when a defiant movement is really an impulse of growth, a search for an independence which can be achieved because body and mind are ready for it, and when, on the other hand, it is an expression of inner unhappiness. The child, moreover, thrives better if the grown-ups take pleasure in his growing independence; if they do not merely say he “ought” to be feeding himself or putting on his own shoes, etc., but enjoy it when he can do so. Independence which is yielded to the child for love and for pleasure in his growth is much more valuable to him than independence which he wrests from his parents as a result of his tempers and defiances.

There are times when the little child needs comfort, bodily caresses, encouragement and solace. When his phobias are enthralling him, when his anxiety about his own destructive impulses is uppermost, or when he fears he may never see his mother again because she leaves him after he has been angry or dirty, then he needs unstinted love and comfort; when he is puzzled about things which he cannot understand by his own efforts, he needs our answers to his questions. But at other times, what he needs most of all is the chance to experiment and to discover, to seek the answers to his own questions, to turn his back upon us and
solve his own problems. The grown-ups who are tending little children need to have a sense of fitness and proportion, to know when to give and when to withhold, when to see the baby in the child, and when to respond to the man that he is to be.

**Play with other children**

And thus we come to the major need of the young child – the chance to play with other children. As we have seen in speaking of his problems of feeling and behaving, it is only by the real social experience of togetherness and mutual play – by finding out that the dangers feared from contact with other children are not real, and the harm one can do to them is limited, whereas the gains in other directions are so real and positive – that the child can develop into a social being. Many of the little child’s troubles in his feelings about the grown-ups are solved in his play with his fellows. For example, it is commonly found in the nursery schools that feeding difficulties disappear very readily when children have their meals in common, and the tendency to thumb-suck or masturbate is considerably lessened. Night terrors, again, very often disappear when children attend the nursery school. Appetites improve and physical health is greatly enhanced. Through the lessening of anxieties connected, for example, with the child’s own sense of helplessness and smallness, his clumsiness, and dread of losing his parents if other children come, play with other children fosters the child’s growth and sense of security and happiness, and overcomes the inherent difficulties of his development.

It is not the mere presence of other children, however, which will do this for him, but *active* social experience – the working through of the difficulties of rivalry and aggression through free play, the forming and dissolving of groups according to the interests of the moment, leadership and following, even quarrels and fights, provided these are not allowed
to go beyond a certain point. The child can only attain independence of the grown-ups and confidence in himself and in his own gifts if he has the chance of active play with other children. He can only develop the arts of expression in language and art fully and freely if he shares these gifts with others. The two-year-old child still needs a close relation with a grown-up, and at this age, nursery school groups need to be small in proportion to the number of the staff; but even at two years, play with other children under favourable conditions is a great pleasure and support to the child.

If we were asked to mention one supreme psychological need of the young child, the answer would have to be “play” – the opportunity for free play in all its various forms. Play is the child’s means of living, and of understanding life. Much has already been said about the child’s delight in physical skills and the aid which these bring to his learning and understanding. Another aspect of his play is make-believe. He needs the opportunity for imaginative play, free and unhampered by adult limits or teachings, just as much as he needs the chance to run and jump and thread beads. It is in this regard that our understanding of the child’s mind and the way in which he develops has deepened and broadened in recent years.

Even the two-year old already shows evidence of a vivid imagination – sometimes in wordless games, sometimes giving us hints of what he has in his mind by fragments of talk. But he has so little skill in expressing his phantasies clearly and articulately that it is very easy to overlook them and to think that he is “just” climbing or running or sitting still when, in fact, he is climbing in order to be “as big as Daddy”, running in order to “be” an engine or a dog, sitting still and sucking his thumb in order to imagine himself once again a baby in his mother’s arms.
The two-year-old uses his own body for his imaginative play, since he has as yet so little skill in subordinating materials. But every now and then a child of this age will give us a vivid glimpse of the large imaginative world that lies behind his simple actions. A little girl as young as sixteen months, for example, has a favourite game of picking off some imaginary fragment – presumably of food – from an embossed leather screen in the dining-room, carrying “it” with meticulous care across the room between her finger and thumb and placing it alternately in her mother’s mouth and her father’s. A little boy of two, who has enjoyed having his finger nails cut, begs his mother to cut them again, and when she insists that she cannot do so since the nails are already short, he makes a movement as if turning some imaginary taps, draws on to his hands, an imaginary pair of gloves, and then turns to his mother, “Got more hands, cut finger nails now”, thus solving the problem of his disappointment by this magical action.

The child under three-and-half will use cupboards, as well as stairs and cushions, in fact, all the larger objects of his environment, as a means of imaginative expression. The most frequent form of play with dolls at this age is putting them to bed and tucking them up, taking them out, comforting them, and tucking them up once more with care and patience.

Already at this age companions or brothers or sisters are invented and talked to and played with, and it appears that such imaginary companions are intensely real and vivid to the child himself. They share in a tea-party, for example, just as do the dolls or the teddy bears. Some little children become completely absorbed in the phantasy of being an animal: perhaps for three months on end they will “be” the cat or the dog, and insist on being treated in the proper way; or they will be Mr. So-and-So, “the man with spectacles on”, “grandfather”, or the tram conductor, and although
their play will show very little appropriate detail, we can see from the child’s voice and expression and gestures that he himself is lost in his feelings of identity with the person he is acting. Indeed, he seems to be more fully absorbed in this identity with the imagined person than an older child, who can work out the details in a more articulated way.

How little distinction the child of this age can make between what is real and what is pretended is shown when a boy of two years and nine months asks the older friend who is playing with him to “be cross and scold me”, and when she responds very mildly he takes it so seriously to heart that he weeps and hides from her. It is only towards the end of this period that enough distinction develops between reality and pretence to make it possible to tell him ordinary fairy stories – those stories which are such a great pleasure to the older child but too real and too intense for the younger one.

The imaginative play of children of three to five years is extremely vivid and rich in expression. Every object in the environment will be pressed into service for make-believe play, which will be largely occupied with the reproduction of the typical situations of life – father, mother, children, washing, dressing, cooking, cleaning the babies, going on journeys, defending the family against dangers of wild animals, giants and ogres, and with the externalisation of the child’s own feelings about himself and other people. Wild animals will represent the child’s anger and greed and fear of punishment, just as the loving mother and babies and kind protective father will represent his belief in love and the goodness of parents. A great variety of experience is now represented. The doll’s house in which several children can join is much enjoyed, and co-operative play with different children filling out different roles begins to be entertained. By six years of age the child is representing most of the everyday grown-up activities which he sees around him. There is a great passion for dressing
up and long-sustained dramatic activity. The child becomes intensely absorbed in this dramatic make-believe, but nevertheless one can see the distinction between what is imagined and what is real growing clearer and more secure in his mind. However vividly he throws himself into his part it is clear that he now realises that it is make-believe.

We have come to see that the child’s spontaneous make-believe play has two fundamental values to him. In the first place, it is a great stimulus to his intellectual growth. When he pretends to be father or mother, bus conductor, ploughman, engine driver, his play creates actual situations which lead him to remember and observe and compare and reflect upon his real experience, and which cause him to turn back to the real experience and look at it again and understand it further, so as to be able to make his dramatic play more vivid and more true to life. When, for example, half a dozen children are playing at father, mother and babies going for a train journey, and have arranged a row of chairs and are acting out the journey itself in the train, and the youngest child, impatient to be at the journey’s end, jumps out of the train and says, “Here we are!” the oldest of the group, who is acting the part of the father, says in a stern voice, “Don’t be so silly – we haven’t got there yet”, we see how his wish for dramatic similitude will stimulate the reflections of the younger ones on the realities of making a journey by train.

Again, make-believe play develops in the child the sense of past and future. He recalls his former experiences and envisages what may happen in order to solve the immediate problem. In general he exercises in his make-believe play the characteristic human function of bringing the past and the future to bear upon the present.

Moreover, it is in his make-believe play that the child first glimpses the possibility of hypothesis, “as-ifness”, without which no science is
possible, no reasoning can be sustained. The very young child is quite literal-minded. If we ask a child of two years old, “What does Kitty say?” he will look round for the cat. It is only later that he can hold the image of a cat in his mind and remember what the cat does without confounding the image with the perception, only slowly that he comes to be able to work out the consequences of a hypothetical action without treating it as real. Yet to be able to hold a notion in his mind and develop its implications, “if so-and-so, then so-and-so”, is an absolutely necessary step for this logical development. It is in his make-believe play that this capacity first shows itself.

The young child needs not only the chance to sit and dream his dreams alone, but to express them actively in his dramatic play with other children or with sympathetic grown-ups. It is by means of active dramatic play of this kind that he reaps the full value to his intellectual life of his imaginative processes.

We know, however, that make-believe play does far more for the child than this. It not only helps him to solve intellectual problems in understanding the behaviour of things and people, trying out now this, now that notion and developing it to its logical conclusions and testing it against the real facts, like the young scientist that he is, but also it helps him to achieve inner balance and harmony through the active expression of his inner world of feelings and impulses, and of the people that dwell in his inner world. When the child plays at being father and mummy and the family of babies, the giant and giant-killer, a wild animal and the hunter, the teacher and the pupils, the policeman and the bus driver, he is externalising his inner drama – the various aspects of his inner personality – in just the way in which the creative artist in literature or painting does. The tiny child has not only his own conflicting impulses to contend with, he has also to deal with his first pictures of the grown-ups themselves as well as of the other children: his first notions of mother and father, the great,
the terrible, the loving, the deserting parents. When he can, through the happy co-operation of other children, express these phantasies in active play, his inner tension is eased and a new equilibrium of mental health and happiness is attained. The solitary child, or the child with only one or two brothers and sisters at home, has less opportunity to work out his feelings in dramatic play. He is too close to the grown-ups then and has not varied enough contacts to give him ease and stimulus. In the nursery school, the greater number of children, the greater variety of personalities and the lessened pressure of external life enable him to come more freely to artistic expression and so to mental health.

Many of the child’s interests in his actual environment and real life can only be satisfied in the larger group of the nursery school. When he wishes to construct and carry out activities of a shop, a hospital, post office, the train, he can do this better in the larger group. When his first interests in reading, writing and number work connected with these imaginative pursuits begin to appear, it is easier for the nursery school than for the mother in the solitary home to seize the golden moment and give him the technical help he needs.
The special value of the nursery school

In describing the development and the needs of the child from two to five years, much has already been said to point to the value of the nursery school. All that need be done now is to summarise these points and bring out one or two more clearly.

The nursery school is not in its essence a substitute for a good home. Sensible and loving parents in reasonable circumstances can and do meet the child’s deepest needs. They give him love and security, understanding and sympathy, pleasant intercourse and happy play. There are many homes which fail to meet some or all of these needs, and where the home is ill-equipped or poor or the parents stupid or unhappy or, in some way, lost to the child, the nursery school has to make up for these lacks. That it can do so astonishingly well is shown by the way in which children from the slums, from the depressed areas or from broken homes, thrive when they are taken into the nursery school. But its prime function is not to take the place of the home: it is to supplement the normal services which the home renders to its children and to make a link between the natural and indispensable fostering of the child in the home and social life in the world at large. The nursery school is an excellent bridge between the home and the larger world. It meets certain needs which the home either cannot satisfy or cannot satisfy in full measure, and it prepares the child for his later life in school in a way which nothing else can do. Even children from a large family, so rare in these days, find support in the nursery school. In the larger family, the two-year-old or three-year-old often feels displaced and neglected when a new baby arrives. The nursery school, where he can make his own little friends and have his own life, is a great help to him in such a crisis. Conversely, the only child or the child from the family of two or three, gains the companionship he so much needs.
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Speaking from the educational point of view alone, two-year-old children undoubtedly thrive in their homes, provided their homes are what they should be. The two-year-old still needs an intimate relation with one grown-up and does not easily tolerate the rivalry of a large number of other children. Towards the end of his third year, however, even where his home is ideal, he begins to need a certain amount of companionship with other children, and a well-staffed nursery school, where he can play with a few children of his own age or a little older, is a great help to his development. Those who come from poor homes in narrow streets, those who suffer from lack of nourishment or badly chosen food, those who long to play with other children and are alone in a family, will prosper greatly in a well-run nursery school even at two years of age. Whatever the home conditions, it is desirable to let a child from two to three years and onwards have some period each day in play with other children; and this is most easily provided in the well-equipped and properly staffed nursery school.

Let us now sum up briefly the many advantages which the nursery school offers as compared even with the ideal home. Any one of these benefits may be found in superior homes, but very rarely if ever are they all found together, except where two or three families living under very favourable circumstances join forces to provide the special conditions which very little children need, thus creating a nursery school.

**Space**

Space to run and throw balls, space to allow for the larger play apparatus – ladders, balancing boards, the climbing frame, boxes to jump from; space to trundle carts, to try out the scooter and the tricycle, space to shout without worrying the grown-ups and the neighbours, indoor space for wet days, as well as the outdoor play-ground and garden.
Little children need space, both for their physical efforts and so that they shall not be too much in each other's way and annoy each other by contact or noise. To be boxed up in the small nursery or sitting-room of the ordinary middle-class villa or superior cottage is a very trying experience for vigorous, healthy children of three to five years of age and a source of great irritation and nervous strain. Space has in itself a calming and beneficent effect.

**Appropriate play-material**

There is much play-material needed for developing balance and poise and skill, for the first essays in artistic expression and constructive handwork, the first attempts to understand number and space relations, and all this is far more easily provided for the group than for the small family. Moreover, much of it is better used in common than individually. The child’s intellectual growth and social poise very often depend upon his having the right material at each successive phase of development, the right means of expression or of understanding at the moment when he is ready to create or to learn. The provision of the right material involves much knowledge of the growth of children during these years, knowledge which very few parents possess. Most parents rely upon the commercial toy-shop for their choice and thus waste not only their own money but the child’s purposes. Nor can they as a rule easily provide the wide variety of constructive materials and the toys embodying an appropriate intellectual stimulus. This can, however, easily be done in the larger group, and it is part of the technical equipment of the nursery school teacher to understand the play-material needed for each phase of growth.
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Skilled help

Children need not only the right play-material, but skilled help in their own efforts to learn and understand, and in their struggles with their anti-social impulses. To know what is the right word to say to the shy or inhibited child, the angry and destructive child, to have the right answer ready to an intellectual problem, to see when to introduce the child to a new piece of number apparatus, to understand when to interfere and when to leave alone, when to check defiance or stop a quarrel, and when to allow the child to solve his own problem, when to encourage and when to remain silent, is not a wisdom that comes simply by nature. Certainly it rests upon natural qualities. The nursery school teacher no less than the mother must have love and sympathy, natural insight and the patience to learn; but children need more than this in their struggles with the many problems we have glimpsed. They need true scientific understanding as well as mother-wit and mother-love. The nursery school teacher can often help where the mother would fail. On the other hand, the good nursery school teacher will see the problem from the mother’s point of view as well and can often help her as much as the child. She is not there to take the place of the mother, but to serve both mother and child. Very often the intensity of the child’s more difficult feelings about his mother and his brothers and sisters is lessened by the mere fact of having a friendly nursery school helper as well, especially if she is a person of knowledge and insight.
Companionship

Enough has already been said to show the various ways in which the child’s play with his fellows, with children older and younger than himself, in pursuit of his imaginative or his constructive activities, eases his psychological problems and fosters the development of his personality. The wider contacts both with adults and with other children ease the pressure of feeling in the child’s relation to his own parents and to his brothers and sisters, and make for balance and harmony in the whole of his development.
Conclusion

In conclusion, let us say once again that the nursery school is an extension of the function of the home, not a substitute for it; but experience has shown that it brings to the child such a great variety of benefits that it can be looked upon as a normal institution in the social life of any civilised community.
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