

Conversing with children

CHILDREN'S QUESTIONS: THE HIDDEN MEANINGS

Conversing with children is a unique art with rules and meanings of its own. Children are rarely naive in their communications. Their messages are often in a code, that requires deciphering.

Andy, age ten, asked his father, "What is the number of abandoned children in Harlem?"

Father, a chemist and an intellectual, was glad to see his son take an interest in social problems. He gave a long lecture on the subject and then looked up the figure. But Andy was not satisfied and kept on asking questions on the same subject: "What is the number of abandoned children in New York City?" "in the United States?" "in Europe?" "in the world?"

Finally it occurred to father that his son was concerned, not about a social problem, but by a personal one. His questions stemmed not so much from sympathy for abandoned children as from fear of being abandoned. He was looking, not for a figure representing the number of deserted children, but for reassurance that he would not be deserted.

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On his first visit to kindergarten, while mother was still with him, Bruce, age five, looked over the paintings on the wall and asked loudly, "Who made these ugly pictures?"

Mother was embarrassed. She looked at her son disapprovingly, and hastened to tell him, "It's not nice to call the pictures ugly when they are so pretty."

The teacher, who understood the meaning of the question, smiled and said, "In here you don't have to paint pretty pictures. You can paint mean pictures if you feel like it." A big smile appeared on Bruce's face, for now he had the answer to his hidden question: "What happens to a boy who doesn't paint so well?"

Next Bruce picked up a broken fire engine and asked self-righteously, "Who broke this fire engine?" Mother answered, "What difference does it make to you who broke it? You don't know anyone here."

Bruce was not really interested in names. He wanted to find out what happened to boys who break toys. Understanding the question, the teacher gave an appropriate answer: "Toys are for playing. Sometimes they get broken. It happens."

Bruce seemed satisfied. His interviewing skill had netted him the necessary information: "This grownup is pretty nice. She does not get angry quickly, even when a picture comes out ugly or a toy is broken. I don't have to be afraid. It is safe to stay here." Bruce waved good-bye to his mother and went over to the teacher to start his first day in kindergarten.

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Carol, age twelve, was tense and tearful. Her favorite cousin was going home after staying with her during the summer.

CAROL (*with tears in her eyes*): Susie is going away. I'll be all alone again.

MOTHER: You'll find another friend.

CAROL: I'll be so lonely.

MOTHER: You'll get over it.

CAROL: Oh, mother! (*Sobs.*)

MOTHER: You are twelve years old and still such a crybaby.

Carol gave mother a deadly look and escaped to her room, closing the door behind her.

This episode should have had a happier ending. A child's feeling must be taken seriously, even though the situation itself is not very serious. In mother's eyes a summer separation may be too minor a crisis for tears, but her response need not have lacked sympathy. Mother might have said to herself, "Carol is distressed. I can help her best by showing that I understand what pains her." To her daughter she might have said any or all of the following:

"It will be lonely without Susie."

"You miss her already."

"It is hard to be apart when you are so used to being together."

"The house must seem kind of empty to you without Susie around."

Such responses create intimacy between parent and