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Early experience, developmental tasks and the blossoming of the capacity to learn

Trudy Klauber*

Illustrations from one infant observation are used to discuss the early development of the capacity to learn and develop the mind. A description of the psychoanalytic theory of learning beginning with Freud and moving to Klein, Bion and Winnicott is the theoretical context for the illustrations. The paper moves on to discuss hypotheses about the baby's mental and cognitive development. The baby and his mother are able, the author suggests, to work through a less than ideal start to their relationship and to learn together in a way that fosters creative learning from experience.

Keywords: infant observation; early experience; anxiety; healthy learning; importance of close relationships; emotional; cognitive and mental development

Introduction

Child psychoanalytic psychotherapy, as taught in the Tavistock model has much to say about teaching and learning. Child psychotherapists often work with children who have some learning difficulties, which need to be distinguished from organic learning disability or handicap. Many learning difficulties have psychogenic origins. These include difficulties in being able to make use of the experience of being at nursery or at school, often linked with an inability to separate properly from parent or primary caregiver, in the mind as well as physically. Some children are not able to feel sufficiently free from anxiety or from preoccupation. One example might be an anxiety that Mummy is totally involved with a new baby, and will not have her older child in her mind. Another might be an over preoccupation with a phantasy that Mummy and Daddy are together and absorbed totally in each other. These are two rather generalised examples, but they are powerful ones, and when they dominate the mind of little, or indeed older children, they inhibit the possibility of welcoming new experiences or finding them exciting or thought-provoking. They are often associated with the broader difficulties of so many children whose early

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experiences are not quite 'good enough' (as Winnicott might have thought) to counterbalance the internal fear or anxiety (Winnicott, 1953).

Many of the children seen in clinics have difficulties in concentration, in focusing the mind, and they struggle to take in information or instruction. Problematic or traumatic early experiences often leave children in fear of having any quiet, mental space, because what so readily floods into their minds feels like a re-experience of the early trauma, even if, in reality, it was relatively mild.

Other children remain rivalrous, competitive, or envious. This may be the result of inadequate experiences of care, support, or attunement, or may in some cases link to early parenting which has been over-protective and lacking in enough ordinary experience of frustration and struggle. When parents who are mature know that some experience of 'no' or 'wait' is not the end of the world, they are more able to bear the real or apparent distress of seeing their children frustrated, and indeed to understand that setting reasonable limits supports their children's healthy development.

Children, whose difficulties have not been contained or understood, cannot bear 'not knowing' or learning a bit at a time. They cannot engage in the struggle to learn, cannot risk making mistakes. For them, mistakes feel like the humiliation of being accused of being a baby – their idea of a baby is, of course, despised. They cannot really tolerate the presence of others, either. So everything about nursery or school which involves having to wait or to take their turn, to share the space with other children, is intolerable.

Learning

Learning has many psychological components. What is cognitive and conscious in learning has links with the unconscious, with the unique internal world within each child. Powerful, unconscious phantasies so dominate the mind that they often feel more real than the external world and the opportunities which it offers. In this paper, I want to focus on the healthier aspects of learning, and to link them with the experiences of one particular baby. He has been observed by a student undertaking an observational studies course in Italy.

The little boy, whom I shall call Antonio, is fortunate. He is loved, wanted and cared for; he has two parents who are together and the extracts from the observations which I shall use as illustrations give a picture of 'ordinary' and vitally important events in his life. Using examples from observations I want to think about how, as he grows older, we can begin to see him striving to use his body and his mind and what he has been given. His earlier experiences, just after his birth, when his mother was much less experienced and was anxious because she could not breast-feed, appear to have presented opportunities for struggle and for a rich development of his mind and his interests in the world.

Theoretical framework

Following Freud, psycho-analytic theories, particularly those of Melanie Klein (1948/1975, 1952a/1975, 1952b/1975), focus strongly on feeding and its links with taking in love, care, and comfort; Klein based her developing theory on her detailed psychoanalytic work with young children, and Wilfred Bion (1962), an analysand of Klein, took these ideas forward in relating feeding of the body, to feeding the mind, and to an understanding of healthy mental development.

Freud's earlier exposition of the Oedipus complex is also extremely important. His understanding of infantile sexuality and of children's phantasies developed from his work with hysterical patients. Later he wrote his *Three Essays on Sexuality* (Freud, 1905/1962), and his fascinating paper about the boy he called Little Hans. Freud links children's curiosity with their struggle to find a place in the world beyond *myself and mother*. Freud wrote about Little Hans' curiosity, his anxiety, his fears linked to phantasies about his father and mother together, and the birth of his little sister Hannah. Freud suggested that Hans was in competition with his father, who he feared would become so angry he might attack and castrate Hans. He later related this to an idea of the little boy's own aggression towards father who had a grown-up relationship with mother, could share a bed with her in the night time, and could make babies with her, leaving Hans excluded and, no doubt, very angry, upset, and sad at times. Freud's conception of the Oedipus complex, much worked on ever since, is powerful and compelling and, for him, linked at its 'resolution' with the idea that children could overcome the powerful feelings of toddlerhood, and sublimate them in learning, games, and so on.

Klein (e.g., Klein, 1948/1975) developed her own ideas on the Oedipus complex, suggesting that it began much earlier in life. She stressed how innately aggressive or 'sadistic' little children were, how attacked and fearful they could feel and how good experiences, often felt to be wonderful or perfect, could quickly turn bad or dangerous; early on these were much more focused on mother, her breasts, face, arms, lap, and so on. She believed that children tried physically and psychically to get these feelings out of their bodies and minds. She further developed the concept of splitting and later introduced the term *paranoid schizoid* for a state of mind which, in extreme form, dominates the very early weeks and months of the baby's life. She became convinced that children around five or six months of age were beginning to build up and keep within themselves an accumulation of good experiences of care and feeding which allowed them to integrate their experiences little by little in what she termed the *depressive position* – a state of mind vitally important for mental health and for the capacity to learn.

Klein (1928/1975) strongly linked what she called the epistemophilic instinct with the future development of an appetite for knowledge and curiosity about the wider world and linked it with aggression and with feelings of fear and guilt.

The early connection between the epistemophilic impulse and sadism is very important for the whole mental development. This instinct, roused by the striving

of the Oedipus tendencies, at first mainly concerns itself with the mother's womb, which is assumed to be the scene of all sexual processes and developments. The child is still dominated by the libido-position which impels him to wish to appropriate the contents of the womb. He thus begins to be curious about what it contains; what it is like, etc. So the epistemophilic instinct and the desire to take possession come quite early to be most intimately connected with one another and at the same time with the sense of guilt aroused by the incipient Oedipus conflict. (p. 188)

Klein (1948/1975) links phantasy explicitly to curiosity. She considers that the child's curiosity about mother and father's relationship and about how (and why) they make more babies to be linked closely with an intense interest in mother and what is inside her. In the extract I have quoted she is focusing on the baby's anger, or sadism, which she strongly relates to the development of the baby's own mind. Klein writes elsewhere about real physical care. She describes it as central to a sense of security and an experience of being loved. She also writes that good care is closely linked with a reduction of hostile impulses in babies and little children and, therefore with sound mental health. It is the predominance of good experience which allows the child to feel able with confidence to be curious and to explore without feeling overcome by extreme fears, inhibition or isolation from reality.

For Mrs Klein, the child's curiosity focuses first on the closest relationship, with mother. 'What is she like?' 'What is my position?' 'Have I been ousted from paradise?' 'Since I am not inside Mummy is there another baby inside her?' 'How did the baby get in, who put him there?' 'What does Daddy do – can he get inside?' 'Is Daddy an ally or a foe?' These questions are rarely voiced directly, but without their expression, in feeling, and later in action and play, children cannot explore other relationships or the wider world. Klein is clear that cognitive development is inextricably linked with interest, curiosity, and the full range of conflicting feelings, first to parts of Mummy then all of Mummy and then on to Mummy and Daddy.

Bion's (1962) expansion of Klein's work concentrated on the parallels between milk for bodily nourishment, and good experiences and truthfulness as food for the mind. He described a direct link between feeding, and feeling loved and cared for, and, later between physical care and the active thoughtfulness of a mother trying to understand her non-verbal infant as a function he called alpha function, which he linked with 'containment' – a kind of psychological digestive process metabolising the baby's worst anxieties, including the fear of dying or of abandonment. Mothers contain by putting their minds and their imagination at the disposal of the baby, thinking about them, feeling with them, filtering and mentally digesting their experience for them. Over time, the baby begins to identify with the mother who sticks at her task day in and day out, even when the baby is unsettled and unresponsive. Bion also relates the baby's internalisation of mother, mindful of her baby, to the baby's capacity to begin to think, stimulated by mother's absence; she is not there, but, in his mind, he can begin

the process of continuing to be related to her and to think a bit like her. This process begins, of course, with the gradual accumulation of good experience *together* over time.

Observation of Antonio

Antonio is the first baby of a well-to-do couple. Father is a professional who works long hours and sometimes has to work away from home. Mother has her own business. The family moved house three weeks after Antonio was born – from an elegant town apartment to one in an old villa on the edge of the city. Mother had apparently already decided before Antonio was born that she would return to work part time as soon as possible.

It is not clear whether mother's decision was influenced by unexpected events. The baby was born by Caesarean section after the episiotomy 'cut more than they thought' towards the end of labour. There was a sense of struggle as mother described the Caesarean scar as a 'smile on her tummy'.

The parents are good-looking, and elegant, and despite mother's assertion, 'I am not a model . . . now I am a mum,' she seemed to be struggling with disappointment, and perhaps felt she was a little scarred or wounded by the experience, just after the birth. She was not able to breast-feed and described that her milk had disappeared very quickly. She complained that the midwives had not helped her with breast-feeding; they had bottle-fed Antonio in the nursing home where he was delivered and did not let her try to feed him; her paediatrician was angry with her for not making an effort. The observer's personal impression, only seven days after the birth, was that mother looked too thin.

Immediately after the house move, the new apartment was extremely tidy, pictures were arranged ready for the walls and Antonio was already in his own room, with a baby alarm. On most occasions, for the early Monday morning observation, mother was in pyjamas, the baby just waking for a feed or asleep just after one. Mother was anxious about preparing bottles and warming them, but also declaring that the baby only cried when he woke hungry, and that it was more difficult during the night. The first observed feed, at seven days old, did seem difficult – he sucked with difficulty, pausing from time to time as if he needed a break or needed to catch his breath. After being winded he continued, looking ahead, each arm stretched down along either side of his body. He seemed to relax visibly only after the feed when mother held him, walking up and down rocking him gently. He opened and closed his eyes slowly and fell asleep in her arms. At this point he was very small and thin. Mother spoke to him sweetly, handled him gently, lifted him with great delicacy and declared him to be enchanting.

Yet the observer also noticed, in the early weeks, that she did not seem to look into her baby's eyes, although she talked to him a lot. The baby also seemed somewhat unsure about really opening his eyes to look. He slept a lot. Mother only held him to feed, wash, or change him. She openly expressed a fear of harming him

and said she followed all professional advice very closely. The atmosphere of the early morning observations seemed rather hazy, in the half light, both mother and baby somewhere between night and day as if there was some kind of hesitation about fully waking, fully engaging; yet mother talked about the baby with great interest and concern. Perhaps this apparent contradiction was associated with mother's real disappointment about not being able to breast-feed, and a repeated anxiety that not breast-feeding the baby might have done him real damage. Antonio himself slept a lot and seemed to wake up very slowly. When he was about a month old in his own room the observer writes,

Antonio at 4 weeks

He slept, arms down each side of his body, right hand in a fist, left hand open, with long fingers extended and relaxed. He stretched, moving his lips from time to time, as if sucking something, then drew up his legs, going very red in the face and still sleeping; he stretched again and did not open his eyes. He turned his head from time to time, with a frown, extending his arms into the air as if stretching and making small shrill sounds which brought his mother to him from the kitchen.

Mother employed a nanny to help to look after the baby and returned to work half time when Antonio was six weeks old. Antonio by this time was feeding well, had grown quickly, had found his fingers and sucked on them. He often fed holding on to one of his mother's fingers.

Mother commented frequently that Antonio did not understand the observer and looked at her in puzzlement because the observer did not pick him up or talk to him. (Perhaps we see here that mother located in the observer her own difficulty in picking up the baby just to hold him and enjoy him in the very early weeks. Perhaps she felt a little persecuted that the observer was not talkative, while mother herself spoke a lot, perhaps using speech to keep some distance from her disappointment, sadness, or fears for the baby.)

One observation in early December, at 6.30 pm (a different time) when Antonio was two months old, mother had been back at work for three weeks, and the paternal grandparents had called without any warning.

Antonio at 2 months

Antonio is crying desperately and grandmother keeps on repeating that he is hungry, while mother insists he could not possibly be hungry as it is only three hours since his last feed. Antonio cries and cries, screwing up his eyes, opening his mouth wide, clenching his fist, while first grandfather, then grandmother holds him. Mother, silent and tense, makes up a bottle in the kitchen, appearing very alone and anxious. Eventually grandmother takes the baby from grandfather and hands him over to mother who holds him, gazing at him intently, stroking his face, kissing him, asking why he is crying; is he hungry? She sits with him to give him the bottle still looking very worried, stroking his lips with her finger. He is breathing deeply, crying less desperately, eyes open and arms still. Mother helps him to latch on to the bottle, he

sucks immediately and she starts to smile, exclaiming, 'You *were* hungry!' He looks up at his bottle and at his mother's face as she caresses his hand with the little finger of the hand with which she holds the bottle; he raises his arms and his two hands touch the bottle and mother's hand, very lightly. The observer thinks it looks as if he might really take hold of the bottle. He sucks willingly, with tiny breaks for breath. The grandparents leave, and mother, now relaxed, complains about their intrusiveness, while she also describes Antonio's recent developments, his smiles, his curiosity, and his expressive face; she and her husband can watch him for hours.

The baby gazes intently at his mother's face, then turns towards the observer and looks at her very carefully; she feels embarrassed. He suddenly refuses any more milk, and as Mother helps him to bring up wind he regurgitates a little with each burp. Mother's anxiety rushes back – she is afraid he isn't growing well – then she looks at him again and all her fears seem to disappear. Again she seems enraptured. The baby smiles as she holds him up on her lap and regurgitates again. She talks to the observer about pictures she has put up which belong to her father's partner, her much-loved stepmother, and holding the baby she goes to a mirror where she says Antonio is looking at her in the reflection and follows her every movement.

Later in the living room, Antonio is in his little reclining chair reaching out to the toys his Mother is offering to him, taking hold and smiling as mother repeats the game – the first time the observer has seen play.

The hazy, part-merged, part-engaged early mornings might not have been typical of the whole day, although the atmosphere did seem to persist for quite a time and could have been a counterbalance to the difficulty for both of them in experiencing the reality of mother's return to work. Perhaps this is illustrated in mother's stress and Antonio's desperate cries on her return from work observed because the time of this observation had to be changed. Antonio is desperate for a feed, not able to wait as long as he normally could, making a different kind of urgent demand on his mother. The 'bad' grandparents/grandmother who did not seem warm and supportive to mother are aware of the baby's hunger. The baby is much more demanding and he is hungry. Mother discovers this reality when she does finally concede and make up the bottle. She then sees for herself that he is hungry, and that he needed her, not only to provide the milk, but *for herself*. Perhaps the little regurgitations which occur after this particular feed are also significant. There was something difficult to digest about it, but something which could allow each of them to develop their understanding; to learn something from the experience they were going through. The regurgitation perhaps represents mother and baby reworking and digesting their high anxieties, anger and distress and then feeling relieved to rediscover each other and to feel better.

Mother talked warmly about how captivated she and her husband felt, noticing tiny details. The observer notices that mother and baby really look into each other's eyes and at each other in the mirror. The baby's hand is on mother's finger and on the bottle; he looks as if he might keep a hold if it, an

indication of his need to keep it fixed, not allowing it, or his mother, to move away. Perhaps his embarrassingly intense look at the observer indicates that she is also an object of interest. She might be someone to get to know from the safety of his mother's arms, and she might be perceived, if mother and baby at this moment have now formed a more actively involved, interested, loving couple, as an intruder in a private scene, an uninvited third party.

The closer bond between mother and Antonio, when both are more aware of the separateness, seems to stimulate interest in each other, and in others. It also provides evidence of the baby's developing mind, interest and curiosity, for example about his bottle, the reflections in the mirror, and the observer. Later, such an interest can link to many aspects of healthy learning and development: an ability to focus and to enjoy family narratives or stories in books; the development of images in the mind leading to the gradual formation of questions about how things work in the world of relationships and in the wider world. As I noted at the beginning of the paper, Klein linked this with the baby's interest in the contents of mother's body. Bion would, I think, have added the contents of mother's mind and, perhaps how the baby identifies with the qualities he absorbs, little by little from her, her style, her liveliness of mind, and the quality of her response to his engagement.

In the observation reported above, mother mentions a much loved grandmother-figure, her father's partner; a markedly different figure in her mind from father's mother, who is experienced as a persecutor and critic. A division is clear between a loved and a disliked figure in her mind. This is not at all unusual in the early weeks for a new mother. It seems to echo something of the baby's experience of the world at that point – heavenly or hellish: needs magically met, or feeling the terror of abandonment, starvation or even annihilation. The desperate crying of the baby can sound, as it probably did on that occasion, as if it signals the end of the world. All surrounding Antonio were themselves desperate to do something about it.

This 'falling in love' which began to develop towards Antonio's third month coincided with mother's decision to work less and to involve grandparents more regularly. She expressly went to the park so that Antonio could meet other babies, but, more likely, to have some company herself with other mothers. She continued to experience strong anxiety, for example about sudden infant death syndrome, and Antonio returned to sleep in his parents' room. Mother's moments of intimate and passionate contact with him continued to counterbalance further moments of worry, for example, about his occasional constipation.

The baby continued to feed well, to grow and to flourish. He liked to sit with his back against his mother's body, looking out. From this position he seemed to drink everything in, looking out of the window; smiling, sometimes seeming to recall a feed, as he regurgitated a little milk. He seemed to have an appetite for life and experiences, with the support of his mother (and probably, though not

observed, his father). It was absolutely clear that his mother was the centre of his world. Her support and her fascination with everything he did seemed clearly and inextricably linked with a number of developing capacities. He and she created lovely dialogues, he replying with new noises to her. She always talked to him, and he listened hard when she was in and out of the room. Conversation was often accompanied by touch and gaze as his repertoire of sounds increased. At this point he seemed more able to communicate some ambivalence, mixed feeling, about tolerating separation. So, for example, at around four months he would take his time before opening his eyes, although he was waking up, and then mother would have to wait again before he smiled. He sometimes waited until she talked to him for quite a long time, as if he had to take his time to readjust or even, perhaps, to feel cross and to forgive her, for leaving him alone all night. He could not resist smiling in the end. He also began to protest when he was put down or changed.

The ability to protest, to resist smiling, to make someone wait, giving mother something of his experience of her, is interesting within the context of internalising a learning framework. It implies that he had a growing confidence in his mother. Perhaps some of what might have happened in the earlier weeks, had mother been a little less distant, came in to be worked through at this point as well. But in terms of a development he seemed confident in letting mother know he did not like the separation, even if part of it was his own need to sleep; he did not like the waiting or being out of contact with mother. His vigorous protest suggests also, that he had an experience of a sufficiently strong and lively mother at this point who would tolerate, or as Bion might have said, would metabolise, what he communicated through projection. The benign receptivity of mother to his mild but evident displeasure becomes a prototypical experience which he can take back into himself – this is not destructive. He protests, it is taken in by mother and transformed. It is a communication taken in, and he experiences a mother who continues to love, to be interested and to take care of him, strengthening internal structures which can be carried forward into future relationships, separate from mother.

Antonio continues, by five and a half months, to develop. He stretches to get things and grab them; he tries to roll and to pull himself up to standing. He is very expressive, and is serious when new people present themselves or his mum leaves him. He is beginning to get into real conversations with more sounds. One month later, when the observer comes at an evening time on a different day (because of the Easter holiday) he looks, to her mind, much tougher, wrinkling his forehead when she arrives. He also has 'd' consonants in his sounds. Not just 'Aaaah,' but 'Dad . . . a'. He is more possessive with his mother, grabbing hold of her hair, mouth wide open, making more noises and ending with what the observer describes as a hard laugh. He is continuing to comment robustly in his own way on changes, perhaps even on a change of observation day. He is also willing to take fruit from a spoon, does not like purées and is drinking rather less

milk. Weaning has begun with the pain of change and loss and with new and different opportunities, some with a harder edge to them, like the consonants he can now pronounce.

The hardness of the spoon's edge, the journey from bowl to mouth, different textures, and a sense of space between baby and mother all contribute to opportunities for the baby to get his mind, with mother's support and containment, around experiences which may either be felt as new adventures and exploration, or as an exile from physical intimacy and softness. The baby is presented with the opportunity to work at this transition and with many other developmental challenges at this point. The 'd' sound is suggestive of something more difficult, challenging, potentially exciting, perhaps becoming associated with something more masculine; intimations of a greater sense of the reality of Daddy.

Going to nursery

At 13 months old Antonio has just begun to go to nursery two afternoons a week. He is in his third week. He also goes to baby gymnastics. Mother wants him to have social contact with children his own age and the staff find him friendly, sociable and skilled in many ways.

Antonio at 13 months

As mother talks, Antonio, in the hall, has been hitting the flat of his hands against the closed doors of the lift. Back in the apartment, he keeps an eye on the observer as he reaches up to take a tube of lip balm, removes the cap, replaces it and hands it to the observer. He repeats his action. He licks the balm as mother leaves to prepare his lunch.

Doors, and opening and closing, seem to be on his mind as does something to lick as mother moves into the kitchen.

Antonio continues to play with the lip balm then turns and walks, for the first time in the observers' presence, towards his father's office where he moves slowly to hide the lip balm behind a big table. He bends down, gets up and rises on to his tiptoes, trying to see what is on the table, and then, scanning the bookshelves, moving his hand along the edge of the shelves, reaching up and skimming the papers and books with his fingertips. After a while, again on tiptoes he stretches himself tall, drops down out of sight for a second and reappears in the middle of the room. He is studying everything around him with concentration. He notices the cupboard near the door and moves to it slowly, stops in front of it and opens the sliding door. He places his hands on the door and presses so hard his fingers turn red. He looks inside, moves his hands over some towels and on to a sports bag. He leaves the closet and goes back towards the table, behaving, as the observer notes, 'like a young Indiana Jones in unknown territory'. He rises again on tiptoes, walking along the length of the table with one hand running along its edge. He still has the lip balm held tightly in his other hand.

Suddenly he stops, looks down beyond the table, and then again on his tiptoes tries to see over the top. He walks back and forth looking at everything, and as he moves he trips over his father's slipper, staggers and rocks. The observer fears he will fall, but he keeps his balance, and after a second of unease he comes towards her wearing the slipper and continuing on his way.

Mother pops her head in and comes to watch as Antonio walks with one huge slipper on his foot. She asks him what is he doing and says he is silly. He takes off the slipper and looks again into the cupboard, and picks up the lip balm he had dropped. He checks, smiling, that the observer is following him, and he trips on the rug, throws his hands forward, lets go of the lip balm and it rolls under the bed. He holds on to the bedspread, looking under the bed for the balm which he cannot reach. He tries lying down and manages to brush it with his finger tips. It rolls out of reach and he stares silently at the observer, looks under the bed, looks back at her and utters a loud 'Eeee'. She bends down, and rolls the lip balm back towards him. He grabs it, stands up, smiles, and points to a tape measure on the wall saying 'Mba' (*Bambino*-baby, thinks the observer).

Then in the living room he tries to press buttons on the TV – but it is switched off so nothing happens. He lets go of the lip balm and studies the situation. The tube rolls under the TV, and his mother calls him to have lunch. Mother tells the observer that his father is on a business trip to Asia and that mother and Antonio have been 'orphans' for two days.

There is a lot of activity in Antonio's mind. He seems to be working hard, thinking and working through a number of themes, with his mother and away from her in the presence of the observer. It is only three weeks since he has been going out with his mother to the baby gymnastics and spending time away from her at nursery. This is a much bigger step away from his mother than any earlier ones. In addition, at the time of this observation, his father is away on business. His first act, slapping the lift doors, suggests at the least that doors are on his mind – openings to the outside world and into his home. Certainly they may be immediately associated with the arrival of the observer, but surely there must be other links – with being away from Mummy all morning, with the opening through which father left. He hits them – perhaps to assert that he could have control, perhaps in anger? Perhaps he wants to leave and give his mother a taste of how it feels. The opening and closing theme continues when he takes the lid on and off the lip balm, licking it as mother goes to the kitchen. Again he is the one in control and also the one who needs to keep a tight hold on something – which might remind him of his mother.

As he hides the lip balm behind the table and finds it again, he seems to be elaborating further a game of 'gone' and 'come back again,' replaying it over and over in his mind, in play working his mind around the idea that 'come back' is also there – an elaboration of playing peek-a-boo with the observer after the gap when he did not see her nor she him.

He is getting up on tiptoes quite a lot – perhaps he needs to do some of this work while projecting himself into the identity of a taller person, a man, in anticipation of being as big and capable as Daddy. On tiptoe he looks under the table, across its surface, and wants to touch a lot of papers and books on the shelves. He wants to check with look and touch where everything is, and to look up and down and along as if to check and check again on whether things continue to be there, or, perhaps whether they might move or disappear. It seems like a very serious game for which he needs to be as tall as possible to keep an eye on it all – whether being Daddy or being a bit like him, a bigger version of Antonio.

Then the ‘young Indiana Jones’ finds the cupboard, slides its door open, touches the contents, the towels and sports bag, pressing very hard on the sliding door, and turning back again to the table, runs his finger along the whole length of the edge of its surface, exploring, looking around, needing to check everything repeatedly. He needs to be on tiptoes to see above, as well as to bend and look under, and to look along and around. So much needs to be explored at the same time. As he turns to the observer, he staggers and nearly falls – now seeming not to be quite able to control everything – but managing a recovery – wearing one of Daddy’s shoes. Now perhaps he does feel he has really stepped right into father’s shoes and identity – *being* Daddy. As he loses hold of the lip balm and has to find it again, one can begin to imagine a lot of things going on in his mind. Mother has just been in and gone out again. She has called him ‘silly’ in his Daddy’s slipper, and he seems to have lost something, he needs to find again – something perhaps which links him back with his mother (the balm), comfort, and reassurance in a moment of anxiety. When the observer helps him to retrieve it he regains his confidence.

Discussion

Antonio is discovering, little by little, that he can survive away from his mother for slightly longer periods of time. He is also struggling with his father’s absence and working at a number of questions. Some are clearly related to coming and going, and to working through, with the lift and the cupboard doors and the dropped and re-discovered lip balm, that separation can end in rapprochement, or reuniting.

Father, represented by his office and its contents, is very alive in Antonio’s mind. This seems, for Antonio, to be linked with certain other questions, and with acquiring certain skills in order to deal with them. He becomes big to manage his little boy anxiety in the absence of Daddy (and Mummy is not in the room either), he steps into Daddy’s slipper, slipping into a more fully projective identification with Daddy, who, in a tiny boy’s mind is all powerful and all knowing. He also trips and falls, discovering that growing up or being big, is not quite so easy or pain-free as he had imagined. He has so much to

think about all at once. He becomes anxious and angry when Mummy or Daddy is not there. He does not know that books and papers are not animate – isn't quite sure at any rate – and suddenly feels he has to watch everything all the time. Anything, or anyone, might move (away) from him, out of his control. The anxiety is palpable but not so pervasive that he is unable to use his mind. And his work rate, like that of so many healthy, developing little children, is phenomenal.

As he learns more, more questions emerge, and he again shows his mixed feelings. He is at times angry or frustrated that things don't just stay where he wants them to be or do what he wants, and there is always more work. For example, it seems clear that Mummy does things without Antonio, and so does Daddy. His interest in Daddy's cupboard is interesting. He puts his hand on the contents, touching the towel and the sports bag – seeming reassured and strengthened by the touch once in there, having seemed driven to slide the door open, exerting pressure until his hand goes red – as if he must see the contents of the cupboard; he is not to be excluded. This seems to illustrate Klein's concept of interest in the contents of mother's body represented by the cupboard. Perhaps his father's absence lends him the boldness to explore paternal territory and his phantasies about father, perhaps his separations have led him to begin to conceptualise that another baby might displace him inside his mother – and that father has some part in putting a baby in there.

His learning is fascinating to observe and he has entranced the observer as well as his loving parents. It is possible that a different baby and mother couple who had similar early experiences might have developed very differently, with much less energy, drive and greater timidity. Antonio with his mother, most likely well supported by father as well as others, has made use of certain experiences and frustrations as spurs to the development of his capacity to communicate and to play linked to a growing liveliness and expansion of his mind.

Conclusion

Infant observation, among other things, affords the opportunity to see the development of a growing mind and the links between the mother's (and father's) capacity to feel supported and to learn and grow from the new experience, and the baby's capacity to feel supported and contained. Adverse as well as favourable experiences stimulate an enthusiasm and appetite for life and promote curiosity about other people and the wider world which, in turn, through play and symbol enrich internal mental life and the relationship with internal objects. The essence of this is the quality of early and close relationships which are internalised by the baby from birth and which form the complex template of identifications, both projective and introjective, which over time determine the particular character and focus of future formal and informal learning.

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