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## CHILDREN'S HOURS - A SPECIAL LISTEN

There is little doubt that our earliest years are the most important ones of our lives. For it is during our childhood that the foundations are laid for the development of individuality and our successful adaptation to the world around us. At this time too, our responses to life experiences are moulded. As young we are almost entirely dependent upon adults for food essential for healthy physical growth. In a similar way we are also dependent for another ingredient vital to our emotional nurture - the attention of caring adults. Given the importance of this factor it is perhaps surprising how little time we spend being truly attentive to children. Indeed, as a result children are forced into various strategies to have this need met. Most of us are aware of some of these - tantrums, excessive clinging, and disobedient 'notice and acknowledge me' behaviour being only a few. For some children, so desperate is the need to extract what they feel is their due, that they resort to extreme lengths to achieve it. Few ever give up the attempt to gain caring attention and approval from adults special to them. Most of us carry this need into adulthood. Many adult suicide attempts are rationalized with the remark 'I only did it for attention'.

To be heard and appreciated, then, is essential to a child's growth yet it must sadly be a reflection of the complexity of our lives that increasing social pressures often outweigh the needs of the individual, leaving less and less opportunity for active listening to occur. It is clear therefore that we must devise ways of creating space in which adults are able to give children the gift of single units of time, when real attention can be paid to them. 'Children's Hours' or 'Special Time' provides a vehicle for this to take place.

During a Children's Hour an adult gives undivided attention to one child. With no attempt to direct, evaluate or even understand, the adult takes full responsibility for damage, danger and impropriety. The term 'impropriety' is used to convey aspects of behaviour which may, in the view of the adult, cause offence to any other party and thus indirectly undermine the child, within the context of the 'Hour'. One may choose, for example, not to allow unacceptable noise or behaviour which may cause provocation, such as spitting on the walls. Introducing a five year old child to the idea might go something like this:



*"Hello David. How would you like to have a Special Time, playing at whatever you want to, with me? You can do whatever you want to and I'll make sure you don't hurt yourself, or damage anything too much. You can have a special time here with me until the big hand on the clock gets to 12".*

Non direction is achieved by allowing the child to play freely in whatever way he or she may choose within the boundaries of damage, danger, and impropriety. Play is the first language of children and it is through this medium that a child communicates his/her inner self to the world. Non evaluation excludes any opinion on the part of the adult - either to encourage or discourage. Non understanding gives the child the opportunity to be listened to without the intrusion of adult interpretation. In order to convey to the child that total attention is being paid to her, the adult switches himself **off** and the child **on**, and feeds back her activities to the child who is always in the lead in initiating the behaviour. This verbal feedback is called "recapping". A typical recap might sound like this . . . . .

*"Now you're rattling the pencils together and making a scrunching sound . . . and smiling to yourself. And now you've picked up the green pencil and you're pushing it into the paper . . . very hard . . ."*

The recap need not and should not be a parroting exercise. If the child says "Look how high I can go;" the adult might respond "Yes you **can** go high, can't you?"

Once children grasp the concept of Children's Hours they are usually overjoyed by the strange new experience. A tremendous sense of freedom is gained together with a simultaneous feeling of security. Such an experience leads to a removal of tension, a restoration of growth and is a source of happiness. The process of being truly attentive to, otherwise termed "being with" a child in this way for a unit of time provides in itself an important trigger for personal growth within the child. There are however certain guidelines which need to be applied.

### **Special Time Guidelines**

(1) The adult offering hours to a child must be physically able to take charge of damage, danger and impropriety. Since this may include having to restrain the child physically, it is important that the adult has the physical capacity to maintain the limits.



(2) Confidentiality is another important aspect, and the adult taking the hour must be able to give the child the assurance that it will not be broken. This allows the child permission to express him/herself freely and safely within the context of the Hour. It is also important to help the child understand that they themselves are not limited by this condition and are free to discuss the content of the Hour, outside, should they wish to do so. It is, after all, their time to be used in whatever way he chooses.

(3) 'Children's Hours' is not a haphazard 'anything goes' experience. Each adult will have his or her own limits beyond which the child may not venture. Knowledge that these limits will apply serves to increase the feeling of security in the child. Depending upon the individual child, the environment and the tolerance threshold of the taker it is often necessary to restrict an activity. This must be done in a reasonable, consistent and above all non-judgemental way. "I'm sorry Sarah, I can't let you put sand in the clock because I think it might get damaged". Then if necessary a reinforcing "I'm sorry, I said I can't let you do that" if the child persists.

(Contrast this with the usual adult responses to this situation which the child may experience in normal life. These may range from the condemnatory "Give that to me you naughty girl" to the dismissive "Leave that clock alone, Sarah" through to the perplexing and intimidating non verbal grabbing the clock from the child's grasp, coupled with a quick smacked bottom).

(4) It is important to be firm, also, about time limit and give the child some warning of the fact that Special Time will end soon. "In two minutes" or "After I've counted to 10, your Special Time will be over for the day". It is not usually wise, either, to succumb to plays for more time. This can convey to the child that sometimes you don't mean what you say. The adult can learn the difference between the blackmail nature of delaying tactics and the real need to finish an activity.

(5) Before offering a Special Time to a child it is necessary to put outside the playroom any objects which in the view of the adult taking the Hour, and bearing in mind the age and capacity of the child, may actually cause harm. One may for example want to remove open scissors or small beads from a room before a session with a two year old or an upset and frustrated 5 year old. Of equal importance is the fact that the child must not be expected to clear up after him or make good any damage which the taker has permitted to happen, unless he particularly wants to.

(6) The distinction between what can be allowed in a Special Time weighed against what may be permissible outside must be drawn out and emphasized to the child whenever appropriate. A child pouring sand down the taker's neck therefore, may be met with

*"And now the sand is trickling down my neck and on to my shoes and you're patting my jersey and laughing. Remember it's lovely to do this in Special Time but it really wouldn't be OK to do it outside".*

### **The Benefits of Children's Hours**

There can be little dispute that children who receive regular hours have many advantages over less fortunate contemporaries. For during an Hour the child is left in no doubts s/he is a unique and important person who is in charge of their own behaviour and can make their own decisions and mistakes without fear of adult dismay or condemnation. Their inner security grows as does their capacity to trust both themselves and others. They are able to explore experiences, the nature of which would be closed to them in their normal living environment. There is evidence that a child who knows that this facility awaits him/her is able to store up tensions and release them safely in Special Time. Negative behaviour at home born out of frustration decreases therefore and tensions lessen. During a Special Time the child gains a belief in his/her self and their self-esteem increases. As a lovable and capable person the child is therefore more able to deal with the myriad of conflicts and frustrations which are part of any child's life. S/He is a richer human being.

The process itself is essentially a therapeutic one in that it allows children to be themselves without having to employ strategies to gain attention. For they already have the gift of total attention. Children's Hours differ from other forms of play therapy in that no attempt is made to interpret or understand the behaviour. The process of being fully attended to and accepted is in itself a healing and enriching one. Any caring adult can learn to employ the techniques.

### **Educational Implications**

The process has additional educational implications too. Opportunities often do not exist for non-directive learning since we as adults conditioned to believe we are actually helpful to children by constantly providing advice, information and solutions. We prompt and suggest, therefore, almost without being aware of the blocks we unwittingly put in the way of the child's ability to reason for himself.

During a session Chris aged nearly five was playing with some rather blunt-ended darts which I had taken the decision to leave in the room. He picked up a handful and threw them up in the air. They landed on the carpet and two of them, which happened by chance to be red, stuck upwards into the carpet. The others had fallen down and were lying flat.

*"Red darts stick up, don't they?"* He said.

*"You think red darts stick up?"* I replied.

*"Yes".*

(At this point, outside a session, I would almost certainly have answered with the explanation I thought he ought to have).

Chris then picked up the two red darts and threw them up again. This time they landed flat. He looked at me, then back at the darts on the floor. Then with a triumphant grin

*"It isn't because they're red that they stick up, is it? It's because of how I threw them".*

*"You suspect it's the way you threw them?"*

*"Yes, I **know** that's why".*

The Children's Hours process has universal application and is a source of individual growth and happiness to all children. It may be of particular benefit to children whose responses to the world around them commonly evoke adult disapproval and children undergoing particular stress such as the birth of a younger sibling, loss, or divorce. Parent/child relationships can benefit from Special Time although the experience with one's own children is essentially different from that which takes place between a child and someone who is not his parent. Parents who are friends can for example undertake Special Times with each other's children. In an Hour between parent and child it is especially important for the parent to make clear to the child the beginning and end of Special Time and to add the reminder that certain pieces of behaviour which happen in a Special Time could not be entertained outside, thus minimising possible confusion for the child. Another limitation of the parent/child Special Time is that it is in this relationship that many of the tensions which are an impediment to growth occur. The child may need Hours with a caring adult other than the parent to work through these conflicts. This does not mean

however that Special Time with a parent is not an enriching experience in itself. Indeed, to be able to explore the process whether with his/her own parents or another caring adult, the child will need, first and foremost, to have the parents' commitment to it.

The impact which Children's Hours implies for healthy emotional growth is yet to be measured. There is little doubt that the children who regularly receive Hours develop a belief in themselves and inner confidence the nature of which cannot easily be defined. The aim must be to create a generation of young people better able to deal successfully with the process of living in an increasingly complex world in which respect for the individual becomes increasingly less evident.

*"Children's Hours" was originated by Dr. Rachel Pinney who in 1974 co-founded the Children's Hours clinic in Toronto, where she successfully adapted her Creative Listening method for work with children. Dr. Pinney has recently published a book "Bobby, Breakthrough of an Autistic Child", which is an account of her application of the techniques to an autistic boy. Children's Hours are now taking place in various parts of Britain and are being taught, and applied via Children's Growth Workshops - details available from 'Children's Growth Workshops', 24 Victoria Road, Meole Brace, Shrewsbury, Shropshire.*

### **Bibliography**

**"Bobby, Breakthrough of an Autistic Child"** by Rachel Pinney. (Collins/Harvill 1983).

**"Creative Listening"** booklet available from "Children's Hours Charity Trust", 28 Wallace House, Caledonian Estate, London N7.

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