

Separation and Attachment

Birth is certainly a wrenching, although absolutely necessary separation from the previous state of being. There is a moment in prenatal life when the child has already utilized all the possibilities of the womb. All that was so essential within the womb becomes absolutely useless outside.

Birth is a great separation from all that was part of the previous environment, but if we look carefully at the situation, we can see that nature has planned birth in a way that facilitates the transition and favors its positive aspects.

At birth, the relationship between mother and infant are both biological and psychological and is essential to both of them. Only this relationship can transform the separation of birth into a new attachment that reproduces the unity of life that has been the basic characteristics of pregnancy. The mother is eager to see, touch and hold the child in her arms and the child wants to be touched, held and accepted by its mother. In addition to their mutual desire to stay together, only the mother has the appropriate food, maternal milk it is the only food the infant can digest completely in the first months of life.

The road to independence is both biological and psychological and as one helps the other we must never separate the two. Weaning is an important stage in advancing along this road. There is a time for everything, and the good use of each stage for education can help the child to develop much better.

The mother's milk, so precious at the beginning of life, soon needs to be supplemented with the solid food. At the fifth month there are usually very clear signs that a child has arrived at the "sensitive period of weaning":

- The teeth start appearing.
- Ptyalin an enzyme capable of digesting starch, is now present in the saliva.
- The child can move in the surrounding environment.
- The child can use his hands for holding some food and eating it at his own pace.
- The child can sit with some help.
- The child shows a strong interest in the external world, and different foods are part of this interest.

When all this new signs appear, we can see a big change in the child. The ability to eat is also an expression of the readiness for greater independence. The child's independence is biological in the sense that the mother is not needed any more as food –producer. It is psychological because the child can now receive the new food in a different way. Sucking is about to give way to chewing.

Since nursing is not longer always necessary, both the food and the feeding position change. At this time the mother should sit in front of the child when receiving any food other than milk. The little

physical space establish during feeding, with a little table between the mother and the child, is a concrete expression of a psychological space. It is the beginning of “detachment”, in a positive sense, and it enables the child to develop his feelings of autonomy and independence.

The child at six months begins to sit up, and at nine to crawl, or slide himself along on hands and feet. Then he stands at ten months and walks at twelve to thirteen months. By fifteenth month he is sure on his legs, which finally gives them an independence of motion that is extremely important, since it does not require any help from the adult, and allows the infant to “distance himself” physically from the mother. Learning to walk and the formation of language go side by side on the first year of life. This is a crucial psychological event.

So men develop by stages and the freedom he enjoys comes from these steps towards independence taken in turn.

It is not just a case of deciding to “set him free” or of wanting him to be free, his independence is a physiological state, a change wrought by the processes of growth.

It is nature which bestows independence upon him and guides him to success in achieving his freedom.

The child can only develop fully by means of experience in his environment; we call each experience “work”. The child who has extended his independence by acquiring new power, can only develop normally if left free to exert those powers. The child develops by the exercise of that independence which he has gained.

What we mean by education is to help the child’s developing life. The child tends always to enlarge his independence, he wants to act on his own accord, to carry things, to dress and undress himself. And this is not due to any suggestions from us, his impulses are so energetic, for the child’s will is in tune with nature, and he is obeying her laws one by one, he becomes ever less dependent on the persons about him.

How does he achieve this independence? He does it by means of a continuous activity.

How does he become free? By means of constant effort.

The child’s first instinct is to carry out his actions by himself without any one helping him, he defends himself against those who try to do the action for him. To succeed by himself he intensifies his efforts.

The child seeks for independence by means of “work” an independence of body and mind. Little he cares about the knowledge of others, he wants to acquire knowledge of his own. We must clearly understand that when we give the child freedom and independence we are giving freedom to a “worker” already braced for action, who cannot live without working or being active.

We have to adjust our minds to doing a work of collaboration with nature, to being obedient to one of her laws, the law which decrees that development comes from ‘environmental experience’.

M. Montessori, The Absorbent Mind. S. Montanaro, Understanding the Human Being.

