



The Home

The Child's Self-Regarding Instinct



ONE of the first and strongest instincts in man is the tendency to self-preservation; and like all human instincts, it can be modified by reason, education and environment.

The presence of this tendency is particularly noticeable when reason is dormant or suppressed. Then it acts in all its native intensity. We see vivid examples of this in panics, or under the stress of some terrifying accident. Ordinarily the instinct becomes well trained. In healthy persons, there is always found a dread of whatever endangers their lives or personal safety. And even when one is bent on self-destruction, the instinct will unconsciously assert itself. There is a case on record of a man who, while going to a river to drown himself, met a wild animal on the way. To escape the infuriated beast, he hurriedly climbed a tree, and hid himself in its foliage.

The self-regarding instinct early manifests itself in the child in the natural manner in which he feeds himself at his mother's breast. But in the infant, it is extremely vague. The child as yet possesses no idea of self. In fact, for the first two or three years of his life, he is only vaguely concerned with the problem of self, for the reason that he is not conscious of his own individuality. Only after the fourth year do we begin to notice indications of deliberate selfishness. We use this term without attaching any morality to it, for the child is too young to appreciate moral values. It simply indicates the growth of his appreciation of self, and the gradual assertion of his individuality in the presence of others. Now he begins to conceive of himself as a person, a thing quite apart from the multiplicity of objects about him, the very center of his little world. He grows proud and boastful of himself, of his possessions, of his parents, of everything that in any manner appeals to his personal interests. This tendency is often construed as a defect. It is nothing of the kind, but rather a wise provision of nature. For it aids most beneficially in the natural development of the child, particularly in awaken-

ing his initiative in the things of life and in the direction, on a small scale, of his own individual affairs.

Whatever the child does at this period of growing selfhood is in some way related to his own person. This is to be expected. He estimates others with reference to himself, for that is his only standard. The self-regarding instinct cannot be uprooted, for it is firmly imbedded in the nature of the child, and was placed there to serve a purpose. But it **MUST BE TRAINED**. The child must be made to feel the rights of others and to conform his desires accordingly, without violating or infringing upon the just claims of those about him to personal consideration.

Furthermore, he must enlarge his ideas of self and extensively widen his views of the broad horizon of life before he can become solidly interested in the affairs of other people or cultivate a genuine spirit of unselfishness. The strong self-seeking tendency, by proper handling, may thus be made to subserve high and noble social purposes.

One of the best correctives for offensive habits of selfishness is to be found in the child's contact with other children of his own age and inclinations. For in community play, or wherever children meet together, it is inevitable that conflicts should arise. Private interests are divided or pitted against each other, quarrels ensue, and blows are often made the court of final appeal. This is an excellent means of forcibly readjusting the child to the demands of his companions, and provides a really wholesome remedy against conceited or exaggerated notions of self-importance. The spoiled child is one who has never outgrown his early egoism. This may be due to his insufficient association with other children, or to the failure of the parents to correct and modify the boastful outpourings of their child. Naturally there would be some tendency to pass off these expressions lightly when they refer to the parents in a satisfactory manner. This is a weak excuse for laxity. Such parental complacency in the smart and braggart remarks of their offspring provides an influence that is stimulating in the highest degree to the growth of habits of unwarranted self-esteem in the child that must later be learned at a tremendous sacrifice.