

## **Why such emphasis on 'picking-up and putting-in' and on 'banging and scraping'?**

Why do these simple activities play such an important role in the application of 'Waldon' to the education of children with difficulties?

Is it a quirk of the author which is best tolerated for the sake of other truly important elements in the teaching system?

Are the activities included because they have seemed empirically to produce a beneficial effect in children with difficulties and are also convenient 'time-fillers' or 'holding' activities?

Anyway, if 'picking up' and 'banging' are so beneficial, why do unskilled manual workers engaged in such activities remain unskilled manual workers? (Cf. if the active exercise of bodily movement is so important to space-structuring and to logical thinking, why are dancers and gymnasts not necessarily good mathematicians?)

I have realised these questions since I suspect that they lurk in a half-formed or spectral state in the minds of some parents and teachers, and certainly the activities referred to are all too commonly neglected, as if not taken seriously.

Whether or not we do already recognise the importance of these basic behaviours, it will be profitable to review some of the features of the first year or so.

### **The First Two Years**

If one really believes that all fundamental understanding grows out of that established during the early months and years and that nothing basic is later 'revealed' or switched into being ...

If one really believes that all later understanding not only develops from and on the basis of earlier but actually contains in some way all that has gone before ...

If one really believes therefore that the adequate exercising of later understanding depends wholly upon the continuing development and expansion of the earliest abilities, and the activities which gave rise to them ...

- Then surely one should pay more attention, not to say reverence, to the study of the first two years, and the more so the earlier the phase we examine.

With this in mind, let us skim through the first twenty four months of development in General Understanding, thinking in terms of the predominant 'trend' at each of a number of convenient-to-study 'stages'.

ACTIVITY: From before birth and throughout the period of major physical growth, perhaps the first twenty years or so of life, a steady increase in the amount, forms, range, variety and vigour of the daily physical activity is necessary in order to compensate for the changes in size, shape and strength within the growing body, as well as to provide the motive power for the essential build-up of bodily experience and the exploring of the space in which the child acts and moves.

The child's inclination to be active and to do things is referred to as **motivation**.

Hence, in order to increase motivation in the child with difficulties we need to encourage prolonged periods of simple effortful work.

### **What kinds of activities to choose?**

UNIFICATION: During the early weeks the various parts of the baby's body may be seen to move relatively independently of one another. Before the baby can become a whole integrated person, an organism, the parts must learn to work together as a complex unit.

Each limb - whether it consists of an arm and hand moving laterally from the upper end of the trunk, a leg and foot from the lower, or the neck, head and eyes, or neck, head and ears moving on the backbone - steadily increases its range and variety of movements and the extent of 'familiar' space through which it moves.

To increase the child's experience of the potential range of his or her bodily movements we need a simple task which can be repeated in a great variety of ways over prolonged periods.

### **What activity would be suitable?**

In due course, the various 'limbs' come into contact and interfere with one another, and subsequently come to 'cooperate' in acting on the surroundings.

As the regions of limb-explored space increase in range and familiarity they must overlap and coalesce to form eventually one common region of bodily near-space thoroughly familiar to the organism, which has similarly become integrated as a result of the innumerable liaisons between the various 'limbs'.

To bring about unification in the child with difficulties so that the organism might come to function as a whole, any one part representing the understanding of the whole, simple active movements in which the various parts work in a complementary fashion and/or alternate with one another, need to be practised over long periods of time. But which ones?

### **Which simple active movements?**

STRUCTURING SPACE, necessary to the location of objects etc and to the recognition of behaviours, is accomplished through the organised use of active movements which explore the space which surrounds the body. This is particularly difficult for many children who have difficulties.

### **Which are the best activities to choose?**

ACTING ON THE ENVIRONMENT: As the different 'limbs' come to act together, the child as a whole learns to focus its interest through any part of its body towards any position within its regions of space-interest. In this way it acts upon whatever occupies such a position in the surroundings, whether it be an object to be touched, looked at or listened to. The whole body through its parts can fix onto, follow the movements of, or explore the contours of an object or surface, can pick up things, use and dispose of them, within the region of structured or understood space. This needs constant practice to perfect the coordination between hand and eye.

### **What activity would exercise the child most profitably in this respect?**

THE USE OF HAND-HELD TOOLS: In his constant reaching to grasp objects the child sometimes fails to notice that he is still holding an object in his reaching hand. Such an object, if projecting from the hand, will strike against the other object, producing a sensation, a sound, and cause it to move. In due course, objects will be deliberately retained and used to poke at other objects.

Herein lies the origin of the use of hand-tools experience which has normally reached such a level of competence by the end of the first year that the use of a spoon in feeding and of a pencil in scribbling is readily acquired as personal particular skills within a matter of weeks when opportunity presents itself or occasion demands.

### **How might we best exercise this general foundation of hand-tool usage?**

FULL RANGE OF CHOICE IN ACTING ON THE ENVIRONMENT: The child's activities give rise to every kind of action towards all kinds of things, and

extend to every part of the available regions of interest. The free use of the space allows the child to experience all degrees of intensity of interest according to the direction and distance of the focus of attention. This experience of different strengths of interest gives rise to the capacity for deciding between rival objects of interest – the capacity for making choices. The child with difficulties is short on this kind of experience.

### **How can we best help him to gain it?**

**MENTAL ANTICIPATION OF THE COMPLETION AND OUTCOME OF AN ACTION:** The accumulating experience of different actions, acting in different directions and over different distances on various objects for varying periods of time, culminates not only in an ability to follow through and monitor actions from beginning to end but also in consciously planning the actions and anticipating the outcomes, and effects of the actions. The child can now 'consciously' pick up an object in order to strike on something. Things can be done *with a purpose*, and activities can be continued 'mentally' even when in practice they are aborted. Such a capacity for imagining a sequence of events implies a memory for such actions – an *inertial* memory. Acquiring this facility is difficult for the child with difficulties, whose actions may be too repetitive or too abortive.

### **How might he best learn to overcome this?**

**CONTINUANT BEHAVIOURS:** Once the child is competent at making choices as to where to direct his interest and action as well as being able to continue to think about actions and objects even when not present to the senses (see Mental Anticipation, above), he is able to make choices between what is sensuous to him and what is imagined or remembered from a previous encounter.

This means that instead of continually putting something into a container and then taking it out again, only to return it, etc, as is characteristic of children of eleven or twelve months, the more mature child can transfer an object to a container and then return to the source of the objects in order to secure another and another. This capacity for transferring numbers of objects from one place to another one after another I call 'continuant' behaviour and consider it to be the characteristic activity of children between 14 and 30 months.

Such repetitive ongoing or continuant behaviours result in a massive build-up of experience about appearances and attributes, associations, spatial positions and relationships, actions and rhythms, etc.

These are the sorts of information which will be made use of in the construction of the learning-how-to-learn tools and which will be better understood eventually as a result of the use of these tools.

## **How is the child with difficulties to acquire the momentum and rhythm necessary to gain the more advanced kinds of experience?**

The answer to all the urgent questions listed above is either:

- Picking up and putting in activities, or
- Banging and scraping activities, or
- **Both**

These activities (or, occasionally, a limited equivalent of them) are essential for normal human development during the first few years.

A young child engaging vigorously and enduringly in these activities is sure to acquire a clear idea of his body and its basic actions, and the foundations of an *understanding of space*.

Exercise in these activities later in life can still go a long way towards firming up the fundamentals of understanding, even in older children with severe difficulties, and may help the average person a little.

However, the more practised the individual in adult attitudes, the more mean in expending effort, the less abandoned in movement, the more adept at rounding corners and taking short cuts - all quite unconsciously - the less likely he is to benefit from any but the *most carefully designed effort-requiring activities*.

Geoffrey Waldon  
1984

Dr Waldon produced this paper a couple of months after running four workshops at a training weekend in May 1984 for the Continuing Education Unit at Meanwood Park Hospital, Leeds. He gave it to a group of us who had visited him several times after his workshops and who had been, in his opinion, largely *failing to appreciate the unique importance of the earliest months of the baby's learning-development*.

He was insistent that we read it, think about it, and come back and ask him about it. We did, and over the subsequent years in his study group we started to get our understanding of *Waldon* [the philosophy] into some kind of coherent form.

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