Emidio Tribulato

THE CHILD AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Volume One

-Influence of the affective-relational environment in child development and psychic pathology-

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Preface

Joy and suffering accompany living beings throughout their lives.

Plants suffer when the sun beats down on their leaves and makes them arid, crumpled and pale, or worse still, burns and dries them out. Trees suffer when the storm rips their leaves off and then mercilessly breaks their branches and sweeps them away in an infernal whirlwind.

Plants suffer when large hailstones hit them and injure them or, even worse, when the cruel bulldozer of men runs over them and condemns them to certain death.

Animals suffer when we neglect them, when we attack them, when, with unprecedented lightness, we abandon them for hours in an empty house or in places that should be shelters, but which lead to madness, because they are too crowded and dirty. They suffer when we abandon them on the roads, so as to condemn them to a certain and atrocious death, at the mercy of the wheels of cars and trucks.

But we men also suffer.

Already when we are born, our first contact with the world is a lacerating cry of suffering and protest at being torn from the warm, soft and comfortable nest, represented by the mother's womb, to be laid in a cold, inhospitable and sterile cot. Over time, suffering accompanies us throughout our lives. Often, without our realising it, pain is present and is shared by many children, even those we wrongly believe

to be 'happy, content and satisfied' with the thousand things we surround them with. They too can suffer.

They may suffer from our absences, from the rights we deny them, from the clumsy care we give them, from the daily battles and wars we surround them with. They may suffer from our distraction, from our difficult character, sometimes irritable, aggressive, grumpy, closed, anxious, melancholic or overly fussy. They suffer for kisses, for presence, for listening, for examples, for advice, for words, for safe and serene guidance that we do not offer them.

Sometimes they cry in silence. Other times they cry out their suffering, in an attempt to communicate it better and so that we can better understand it, deal with it and resolve it.

Sometimes they react with restlessness, so they get restless at school, at home or in churches and in all places where they 'have to be still'. Sometimes they attack others or themselves by lacerating their faces and bodies in a fit of rebellion, anger and self-destruction. Often, despite a lively intelligence, they do not learn, they do not remember, they are indifferent to every cultural instance. At other times they close in on themselves, suffocated and terrified by their intense and anguished fears. Overwhelmed by anguish, they move away from us and the world around them, escaping our eyes or looking at us absently, from a corner of the house or a classroom, to find, in the solitude of endless play and silence, a minimum of inner serenity.

But joy is also universal and accompanies all living things. There is joy in the trees of the forest when the first rains of autumn wash the leaves, soiled by the sand accumulated throughout the torrid summer. They rejoice when the rushing water of the rain brings relief and hope to thirst

and waiting after the long months of arid summer heat. The plants rejoice when the farmer cures their diseases and accompanies them in their growth, or when in their shade lovers make love, children play, travellers shelter from the scorching sun, men and women of all ages gather their fruits, and then place them like splendid treasures in fragrant baskets, first to admire them and then to enjoy them.

Animals rejoice when they can scratch about freely in the farmyard or on a lush meadow, or when, frolicking in the mountains and woods, they seek each other out, meet, like each other and, happily, mate. And there is no doubt that their eyes are filled with joy when, in the springtime, a thousand cubs of every species are born from them and begin to walk the earth.

But also among us men, feelings of joy tenderly envelop our hearts when a caress rests on our head; when a hug surrounds our body; when someone listens to us and welcomes us; when love bursts in our souls or when we meet, by chance or luck, an open face, a smiling and warm face, available for a meeting or an affectionate dialogue.

In this book we will deal with the influence of the external environment in a particular period of our lives: childhood.

An age that is increasingly 'invisible' in the eyes of society, as Campanini (1993, p. 25) says: *Due to the tendency of social policies to systematically privilege adults and the elderly and to leave the rights of the child in the shade; "invisible", sometimes even within the family itself, because despite the vaunted "puerocentrism" the child very often appears on the periphery rather than at the centre of the family and ends up taking on the role of a sort of "depen-*

dent variable" with respect to the parents' self-fulfilment projects'.

All this, despite the fact that it is well known that childhood is the crucial period in which the men and women of the future are formed. It is at this age that humanity's hopes become reality. It is at this age that the human soul can structure itself serene and strong, so as to soar lightly among its fellows, to reach the highest heights of human ingenuity and relationship, or, on the contrary, it can become entangled in suffering and pain, and then clumsily trudge, sick and crippled, along the roads of life, as if it were the abortion of a betrayed humanity.

In the second volume of the work, however, we will deal with making visible the children's signs of suffering and pain, but also their expectations and requests, as well as the possibilities we all have: parents, specialists and educators to avoid, diminish or remove such suffering from their souls by means of appropriate measures and therapies.

To do this, in order to make the feelings and emotions in the children's souls more evident to the reader, we have used, in addition to our own experience and that of the scholars who preceded us, many drawings and stories of the children who came to our observation.

These drawings and stories, at times tender and naive, at other times distressing and upsetting, give us in a clear and evident manner not only the reasons for a child's suffering but also their deepest desires, which are designed to alleviate or eliminate it. Ultimately, these drawings and stories tell us directly and unvarnished why a child may suffer, what or who is the cause of this suffering, but also what might help to lessen or defeat its anguish.

This essay has not been written to pillory or accuse anyone as we could all be in the dock. It was born out of the need to clarify to us adults what responsibility we have towards children and what it means to respect the future of humanity, which grows up alongside us and expects due recognition from us.

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Indoor and outdoor environment

Around us, but also within us, lives and moves a complex and articulated world: the environment.

We call our inner *environment* that inner world made of flesh and blood, of hormones and genes, of cells and apparatuses, but also of feelings and emotions, of thoughts and desires, of hopes and disappointments, of joys and anxieties, of loves and hates, of anger and acceptance. This internal or intrapsychic reality is, after all, more real to us than material reality, because our perception of external reality is greatly influenced by the intrapsychic reality; it is therefore the latter that acts most upon us

We define the *external environment* as the world in which we move and interact. A world made up of people, animals, objects, natural and man-made environments.

The ego, except in childhood, dreams, delusions or hallucinations, is able to distinguish stimuli from the external world from those from the internal world by means of the reality check. However, contact with external reality is not the same in all people, just as it is not the same at all times of life. It is highest during wakefulness and lowest during sleep, during which our brain almost totally excludes external reality. But even during the day, contact with external reality is greatly diminished: when we are distracted by fatigue, stress or when worries and frustrations force us to

close in on ourselves. This is most evident when difficult, sad and distressing issues and problems prevail in the inner world or when we are overwhelmed by intense conflicts and emotions that are difficult to manage and deal with, such as fear, anxiety, jealousy and anger.

In children, this distancing from the outside world in order to live and follow one's own emotions happens more easily. This is why many parents are at pains to 'bring their children back to earth' to carry out their daily tasks, but teachers also complain when perfectly normal children, after a few hours in the classroom, become distracted and follow their fantasies and daydreams more than explanations of school topics. This is more evident in children with psycho-affective problems, whereby, the more serious the psychological problems, the more labile, scarce, uncertain and intermittent is the link with external reality. This link is markedly lacking in children with Pervasive Developmental Disorder, in whom the need to remain closed and immersed in the inner world is greatest and the desire, but also the possibility, to remain in contact with the outside world is lowest.

Man has always wondered how these two environments interact with each other and how much one influences the other. The millennia-long observation of the plant and animal environment has given him the first answers. If a seed carries within it, in its genes, a life project, which may be that of a great majestic tree, rich in juicy fruit, in the first days of its existence it will be surrounded by a warm, moist, light humus that, like a nest, will envelop it, warm it, help it to sprout and nourish it sufficiently, and if then in relation to this sprout the insects, the animals, but also the people around it will be benevolent and give it what it

needs to grow, we can well hope that from this small life, almost just a project, a robust seedling will develop, which will have remarkable capabilities in facing the pitfalls of the environment. But if, on the contrary, a seed carrying the same genetic heritage is surrounded by a hostile environment, such as that provided by low humidity, intense cold or excessive heat, while at the same time the animals or human beings around it, rather than protecting it will be intent on crushing and trampling it, the result will surely be detrimental to that seed, so much so that that hope of life may grow shabby and crippled or may even cease to exist.

We also know that the external environment intervenes even when the seed has turned into a sapling. When, in the countryside, its tender little top rises up together with those of the other trees, if the insects, worms and animals large or small, which live and thrive around it, are ready to welcome it and exchange elements of life, the chances of it growing tall, luxuriant and strong, so as to give, in due time, its flowers and fruit, will increase considerably. On the contrary, if the environment that surrounds it is the bearer of lacerating wounds, of intense or repeated trauma, it is not unlikely that elements of disease, deformity, if not death, will prevail. Whatever its genetic make-up.

In any case, this living being has already undergone, for better or for worse, the modifications of the environment around him, but he too has contributed to modifying, by his presence, the environment around him in that, if and when it is possible for him to do so, he too will try to collaborate, adapt or defend himself against his surroundings. We are not always aware of this exchange. This exchange is not always desired and desired but, constantly, at all ages

and in all conditions in which every being lives, it takes place.

On the other hand, these interactions are also present in the non-living world: does the water of a river not modify the landscape and the bed in which it flows, allowing thousands of plant and animal life forms to grow and develop along its riverbed? And is a river not modified by all the elements that surround it: trees, rocks, animals, human beings, which can alter and/or hinder its progress towards the sea? Is not a landslide enough to alter its course? And cannot its waters, crystal clear at their source, be polluted by the animals, including man, who use them?

Therefore in the sphere of living beings, but also in that of non-living beings such as a physical environment, mutual influence is the rule and not the exception.

As we have said, these exchanges are present in all living beings, as well as in the physical environment, but the quality of the exchanges and also their complexity is different. And it is for this reason that the theories on 'how', 'what', 'why' and 'how much' is exchanged between human beings and their environment are many and not always consistent with each other. And it is for this reason that studying the hypotheses that scholars have laboured to research and test, and then make them available to all and disseminate them with their articles and treatises, one gets the distinct impression of a much more arduous and complex endeavour than our poor human capacities. But this does not exempt us from neglecting them, or worse, disregarding them in our daily behaviour.

As far as human beings are concerned, we are probably still a long way from giving a definitive answer to the question of how much and how the external environment acts

on their development, since in humans the reciprocal influences are much richer and more complex; but, as Bowlby (1988, p. 58) says

"We know that today the central task of developmental psychiatry is precisely to study the never-ending interaction between the inner and outer worlds and how one constantly influences the other, not only during childhood, but also during adolescence and adult life. It has become evident that events within the family during childhood and adolescence play an important role in determining whether a person will grow up mentally healthy or not'.

Human beings and their environment

In humans, the external environment consists of many elements: people, animals, plants and other natural elements, but it is also made up of objects, such as a book, a television set, a tablet or a mobile phone.

As for people, some of them: such as parents, siblings, family members and friends, with whom we share our innermost thoughts, our deepest joys, our most agonising sorrows, are very close to our heart, so their influence will certainly be greater and more fundamental to our life, our well-being or discomfort, but also to our very survival.

However, we should by no means underestimate all the other human beings with whom we are in contact in some way during the day. Even these, with whom we only exchange a cold greeting or a polite 'good morning' or 'good evening', even these, albeit in a minor way, are important in illuminating our days with flashes of joy or, on the contrary, in disturbing our souls for a longer or shorter time.

Many of these people are not chosen by us: parents and all the family members with whom we have established a blood or membership bond are not chosen; teachers, school or sports companions are not chosen; neither are work or study colleagues. Only in some cases do we have the opportunity and the good fortune to select ourselves, with care, the people with whom we relate. We choose, for example, the closest friends with whom we share part of our lives and our free time. We choose the most important and deepest loves with whom to experience lasting tender and warm feelings or even important projects.

As for frequency, with some we will have almost daily relationships, with others contacts will be more sporadic, and with still others relationships will be sporadic, if not rare. When relationships are frequent and intimate, we accept more easily the frustrations, anxieties, and anxieties that may come from these people, since they are compensated for by the richness of the relationship, made up of presence, listening, comfort, stimulation and help, for which we are grateful. We are, on the other hand, more sensitive and reactive towards unknown or recently met people. From these we constantly expect at least formal respect.

The feelings we experience or exchange also vary. With some human beings we exchange love, with others resentment and hatred, with others desires and passions, while some, inevitably, will be partly or completely indifferent to us.

People are also those we hear and see in the media: on the radio, on TV screens, on computers, on the Internet, on mobile phones. People are also those who have gone before us and who have left, through their writings and words, the thoughts, stories, fantasies, reflections and opinions of

which our minds are fond. People are those who through the various arts: music, painting, sculpture, architecture, manage to communicate to us, even after centuries and millennia, beauty, harmony, pleasure and joy, but also at other times melancholy, anguish and sadness. All these human beings, even if we never knew them directly or they have been dead for thousands of years, still have the ability to move us, amuse us, instruct us and teach us some fundamental truths that are always relevant. These human beings also have the power to make us grow, to make us more serene and strong or, on the contrary, despite the passage of time, they still have the power to disturb us; they have the power to inflict discomfort on us.

The external environment is not only made up of human beings. Animals, plants, and even objects and the physical environment as a whole, can contribute a great deal to both our well-being and our psychological discomfort. For example, the type of house that accommodates us is not indifferent: just as it is pleasant to enter and live in a sunny, clean, tidy, warm, spacious and bright house, on the contrary it is certainly unpleasant to lead one's existence in a damp, cold, dirty, dark or dilapidated house. It is not unpleasant to live next to paved roads on which roaring cars and stinking lorries run, or to have the possibility of living in a green and quiet park or in a fragrant country house, so as to enjoy the richness, beauty, scents and colours of nature.

People, animals, plants, objects, natural environments, all influence our physical and psychic life, as they are all capable, albeit in different ways, of improving or worsening our inner world and are therefore capable of creating and

promoting our wellbeing, just as they are capable of pushing us towards malaise.

Of the two *environments: the internal and the external*, we know that one conditions the other, one is linked to the other, one is capable of being modified positively or negatively by the other.

Suffering or joy can arise from our *genetic* constitution *(basic heritage of a genetic nature)* (De Ajuriaguerra, 1993, p. 11), from biochemical and hormonal disorders, or from diseases that can affect us at any time in our lives. In the same way, however, suffering and joy can arise from the positive or negative, easy or difficult, normal or disturbed, hot or cold, intense or rare relationship we have had and have every day with the environment outside us, with which we relate. It is natural then that in accordance with how we interpreted our first experiences with our parents, the unconscious leads us to think that the world either accepts and approves of us, or rejects and disapproves of us (Bettelheim, 1987, p. 25).

Therefore, everything and everyone can cause bitter disappointments, lacerating conflicts, oppressive anxieties; just as, fortunately, everything and everyone can bring serenity and joy, pleasure and well-being, warmth and openness. Ultimately, every human person carries biological, psychological and social elements that are intimately linked and fused with each other at every moment of his or her life, so that it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to separate them.

Relationship between external and internal environment

With regard to the relationship between the internal and external environment, many authors have ventured to affirm this, but also to try to explain the ways in which this relationship is established and evolves.

Not only Freud and the other psychoanalysts but also many other authors have strongly reaffirmed, throughout their works, the evidence that the roots of our emotional life lie in childhood and especially in early childhood.

Per Osterrieth (1965, pp. 15-16):

"One does not inherit intelligence, the ability to concentrate, laziness, virtue or business sense in the same way as one inherits a pearl necklace or tableware. Inheritance probably does not ensure the transmission of fine psychological or moral characteristics, as is commonly thought. It is certainly fairer to think that what is transmitted are predispositions, sensitivities or insensitivities, which allow the acquisition in the course of life of certain aptitudes or behavioural characteristics. Moreover, it is necessary that circumstances allow these predispositions to manifest themselves and offer the ways in which they will be moulded'.

And again the same author:

"It is perhaps useful to remember that, in reality, organism and environment are in continuous interaction, and that, depending on the characteristics of the environment, certain hereditary tendencies will not only be allowed but favoured, taking the form of aptitudes or character traits, others will be inhibited, and will only appear in an altered form, and finally others will never be stimulated and the

concomitant reactions will never occur" (Osterrieth,1965, p.16).

'In short, whatever the importance and weight of hereditary factors, man is not only conditioned by them: he is equally so by the conditions in which he lives and in which his development took place' (Osterrieth, 1965, p. 19).

'It can certainly be said that the individual's life circumstances and experiences largely determine the way in which his or her hereditary structure will find expression'. And again: 'It is underestimated that most of the time it is not diseases but predispositions towards certain diseases rather than others that are transmitted. A greater or lesser sensitivity to psychic trauma is transmitted rather than psychic disorders or diseases. Not least because even in true twins there is no uniform behaviour so that several attitudes and character traits are found in the individual because they have been encouraged by the environment, while others have been constantly inhibited' (Osterrieth, 1965, p. 18).

Per De Ajuriaguerra (1993, p. 116):

"There is no comprehensible development outside its environment.

"No doubt there are patterns characteristic of each species, transmitted through heredity, that manifest themselves in equivalent forms in a set of individuals of the same species. But patterns may be activated by the environment, by tactile, visual, auditory stimuli, etc., or modified by the absence or qualitatively or quantitatively inadequate action of environmental inputs' (De, Ajuriaguerra, 1993, p. 116).

Bowlby (1982, p. 22) states:

"The point of view I advocate, as you will see, is based on the belief that a large part of mental disorders and un-

happiness are due to environmental influences that we are able to intervene in and modify.

"Whether a child is serene and secure or unhappy and out of harmony with society depends largely on the adequacy or otherwise of the early care he or she received" (Bowlby, 1982, p. 2).

Per Ackerman (1970, p. 69):

"Heredity sets limits to the potential development of personality, but it is social experience that gives it concrete form".

For Bettelheim (1987, p. 23):

"Freudian theory emphasises both the immodifiability of much of our evolutionary inheritance and the importance of early experiences: although it is not possible to alter this inheritance in the slightest, early experiences determine the ways in which it will find expression in one's personality.

"Early childhood experiences not only influence the formation of self-esteem and self-perception in relation to others, but also determine how we will interpret later experiences" (Bettelheim, 1987, p. 26).

For Mastrangelo (1975 p. 307):

"As for environmental factors understood in a broad sense, those related to the absence of the mother or both parents, or to the frustrating personality of the parents, (sometimes already frustrated as children and therefore rejecting their own children) prevail. they contribute, as is now appropriately emphasised, to the onset or worsening of the initial 'communication difficulty'.

The influence of the environment in the development of living beings is all the greater the greater its complexity so, as Portmann quoted by Osterrieth (1987, p. 23):

"the animal is born in a certain sense 'ready' for life, biologically 'complete' or almost complete, but enclosed, one might say, in the relatively reduced and immutable possibilities that this completeness assures him. The 'unfinished' child, on the contrary, will proceed in its bodily formation and will provide itself with the means of adaptation in contact with the social and material universe in which it is prematurely placed, responding to conditions that are necessarily uncertain and variable. Since we do not have beautiful and made mechanisms, we are forced to manufacture them for ourselves; hence our childhood is the response to the initial incompleteness, to the almost total impotence of the child, which had so affected Jean-Jacques Rousseau'.

The same concept is taken up by Isaacs (1995, p. 20):

"We can state that, in general, the more the young of a given animal species need assistance and the longer they remain dependent on their parents, the more intelligent and adaptable they are, the less they live by the rules laid down by the laws of heredity and genetics".

AND Winnicott (1973, p. 130):

"Nowadays we talk a lot about maladjusted children: but maladjusted children are maladjusted because the world failed to adapt properly to them at the beginning and during the early days".

Per Wolff (1970, p.9):

"Childhood experiences are not lost. When they are positive, the individual reaches maturity preserving intact his potential with regard to human relationships, work, happiness. He responds to his environment realistically and is able to adapt to changing circumstances. When childhood experiences overwhelm him, personality development

comes to a halt and a maladaptive pattern of behaviour can be set in motion, which will be repeated throughout life. It, like an evil fate, forever prevents the individual from realising his or her full potential in adult life'.

Arrest in development does not mean, however, that everything will become static from then on, but that there will be a deviation of personality with a delay in the manifestations of change that characterise the normal course of a child's development.

The same author adds:

"But certain circumstances can be harmful to children, not because of what they provide, but because of what they do not provide: they can deprive children of essential learning experiences" (Wolff, 1970, p. 10).

In this regard, we cannot but recall what Imbasciati, Dabrassi and Cena (2007, p. 4) say:

"We know that brain maturation is related to experience and that this begins to be experienced as early as the foetus. It is experience that regulates the micromorphological and functional development of the brain'

The same authors (Imbasciati, Debrassi and Cena, 2007, p. 7) add:

"It was believed for a long time, and in part is still believed by some, that the maturation of the nervous tissue, as found morphologically and physiologically, depends exclusively on the realisation of the genetic programme concerning the morpho-functional completion of all the body organs and which would therefore also affect the brain, which would thus be 'completed' gradually, before and after birth, in the first few months. The mind would thus arise from the biologically predetermined maturation of the brain. On the contrary, it has been shown that maturation is a process

that only takes place if there is experience: not only that, but that the quality of the experience determines the type of maturation. [...] Animal studies have long shown that cortical histological architecture is related to the type of learning to which the animal has been subjected. More modern techniques, including neuro-imaging methods (PET), show, even in humans, how it is the experience that is acquired, i.e. the type of learning achieved, that conditions so-called neural maturation'.

For Stefana and Gamba (2013, p. 357):

"Ultimately, it is common experience that the 'psyche system' is far more complex than any other known system: it is therefore inevitable, 'physiological', that our knowledge of it and of the pathogenesis of the disorders that afflict it is still partial. Consequently, one cannot limit oneself to the chemistry and physiology of the brain, or even the observable behaviour, or the findings that modern diagnostic technology allows, since the importance of such approaches to the patient and his psychopathology does not exhaust the understanding of the human being and his experience, which is embedded in a context and an environment whose separation from the elements of understanding introduces a simplification that is not without risk. It is therefore not a question of abandoning certain classical tools, but of enriching them: 'in order to see into the mind of another, we must repeatedly immerse ourselves in the flood of his associations and feelings; we ourselves must be the instrument that probes him, abandoning a simplistic dichotomous separation between biological aspects and psychosocial influences. It is not a matter of 'aut-aut, but of et-et or rather, a matter of inextricable fusion (understood as a state of confluence) of the one into the other'.

Biological evolution is thus the platform on which psychological and social evolution is embedded.

Although this knowledge has been well known for decades, cyclically, in the various historical periods and societies, the emphasis is sometimes placed on one cause, sometimes on another. In some epochs and in some cultures, the role of the internal environment is emphasised, while in other epochs and in other cultures, the influence of the external environment is predominantly brought to society's attention. Sometimes factors related to our genetic make-up are emphasised above all, at other times it is diseases caused by microbes, viruses and bacteria that are brought to the fore. Just as in some historical periods and in some cultures the emphasis is on pathologies linked to an altered hormonal or biochemical structure, in others the harmful influences of socio-economic conditions are emphasised.

There is no doubt that of the multiple realities that accompany and are activated in a positive or negative sense in the formation of the well-being or malaise of human beings, in recent decades the genetic and biological elements have been largely emphasised and, therefore, over-emphasised, to the detriment of the social, environmental and relational components that are mostly overlooked, while in some cases one even tries to erase them.

Time and again the public is informed of the discovery of a new gene that would have a marked influence on this or that disease, this or that disorder or abnormal or excessive behaviour. This has developed in the public mind the false opinion that most of the psychological illnesses and disorders from which we adults, but also our children, suffer, such as anxieties, phobias, addictions, autism, psychomotor instability, character or behavioural disorders, de-

pressive psychosis and dissociative psychosis, are genetically based and therefore incurable until the genes concerned can be modified so as to cure the genetically altered nuclei and areas of the brain. The trust and expectations placed in this research by an ill-informed public become enormous and incongruous, since it is from the geneticists or the drugs tested and produced, and not from our personal, group, political and social behaviour, that the solution(s) to the many serious problems that beset children are expected.

This casts a poor light and debases what has been established and studied by the illustrious scholars of the human soul.

Unfortunately, however, while waiting for genetic research to bear fruit, the study of environmental and relational aspects is neglected, both in the field of prevention and in the field of therapeutic interventions. Therefore, as Osterrieth (1965, p. 10) puts it so well:

"The fatalistic notion of heredity easily encourages one to refrain from any effort at education and any attempt to change the environment in which the child grows up; it constitutes, as someone said, an imposing pillow of pedagogical laziness".

This attitude leads one to consider many mental illnesses as chronic and incurable diseases, to be dealt with mainly with psychotropic drugs or through habilitative and rehabilitative therapies, until an unlikely, future genetic intervention can address and eliminate them. In the meantime, we are all acquitted. Absolved are the parents who neglect their children and force them, through their incongruous and selfish behaviour, into innumerable sufferings. Absolved are the politicians and administrators, who can with

impunity use public money and direct a good part of the resources to improve economic welfare or worse to build more and more instruments of war, neglecting social welfare, family and couple welfare and, therefore, the living environment of the child, as of the young person, the adult or the elderly. The services on the ground are absolved, and they are not asked about the effectiveness of their interventions but only about the number of services provided.

Needless to say, this is a fundamentally false and misleading message because, while mankind has always understood and accepted the presence of the genetic and biological component in human development, at the same time it has always endeavoured to ensure that the environmental components were the best possible, in order to avoid the onset or aggravation of diseases of the body and especially those of the psyche, in which the affective-relational components clearly prevail, and therefore communication, dialogue and emotional exchange prevail.

Influence of the environment on living beings

With regard to living beings, the exchange with the environment is not always consistently favourable or unfavourable. This exchange can be positive at certain times and at certain moments, while at other times and at other moments it can be negative. Like all living beings, humans also have biological times that cannot be ignored or neglected. The period of one's life in which positive or negative events affect the human being is not indifferent. For example, the absence of a mother or father for a few weeks does not have the same effect on a child's psyche if this event occurs when the child is a few months old or when he is several years

old. In particular, if the unfavourable element acts when the living being is small and fragile, the negative consequences will be much more severe than when the same damaging or negative conditions act when the living being is already large and robust. "The hypothesis is that the earlier the damage, the more likely it is to leave a mark on the structure that is being shaped" (Pesavento et al., p.55). "Having experienced adverse life events in the past years and/or during the past twelve months significantly increases the risk of the onset of psychopathological disorders (internalising and externalising) at both pre-school, school and adolescent ages" (Carla Sogos et al., p. 462).

Moreover, if the unfavourable element acts for a short time, the damage will be less than if it acts for a long time *(cumulative effect of several negative events)*. "Clinical and scientific research has shown that 'fragile' children and adolescents, who have experienced negative events throughout their lives, sometimes with a cumulative effect over time, are at greater risk for the development of various disorders and are also more likely to experience potentially 'traumatic' situations" (Carla Sogos et al., p. 461).
Sexual gender differences should also not be overlooked. The same stressful or traumatic element does not have the same negative valence if it affects a girl or a boy.

In summary, as far as life events are concerned, it is important to highlight:
1. The quality of the event: there can be *positive life* events for the psyche of the individual, *negative* or *neutral* life events.

2. Life events can be *recent* or belong to the more or less distant past *(past events).*

3. Events may be *single* or they may be *repeated over time*.

4. The events may be *more or less serious* (weight of the event according to its psycho-social consequences).

5. The weight of the event also varies according to the child's developmental stage and level of development (Carla Sogos et al., p. 464).

6. Events have a different weight according to *sexual gender*

7. The *concomitance or non-concurrence with other organic or psychic pathologies* influences the events.

But just as unfavourable events can harm a child, so can favourable situations help him in his recovery, so all attempts to change his living environment in a positive direction are very important and useful.

Before birth

The human being, when he blossoms in his mother's womb, is already in relationship with his external environment, since the womb is not only the cradle but also the first world with which he comes into contact. And it is this external world that helps to build his inner world. Already, around the five months of pregnancy, the mother can tell from her baby's movements whether he is sleeping peacefully or is awake or restless. Already, towards the middle of the pregnancy, the developing child hears sounds, takes from his mother's blood the food he needs, feels pain. Already he conditions, without wanting to and without being aware of it, the body but also the psyche of the mother, to adapt one and the other to his essential needs.

In turn, however, this little growing human being is capable of giving the world around him, and *first and foremost* his mother, father and other family members, but also the society in which he lives, something that, if at times it is a cause of anxiety and disquiet, is most often experienced as a precious gift, desired and yearned for. To its parents it can still give, without knowing it and without wanting to, the fulfilment of their dreams; the pleasure and pride of realised motherhood and fatherhood; the immense joy of participating, initially with their bodies and then with their care, their words, their affection, their attention and sacrifices, in

the formation of the most important and complex living being known to us.

When mum and dad, caressing the baby bump together, find themselves more united, more supportive, closer, but also stronger and more determined to face the world to change it in a positive direction for them, but above all for their child, they, faced with the mystery of life that they have helped to create, feel more eager and open to tenderness, more ready to welcome, more confident in their challenges. To grandparents and other family members, the little one who is to be born can give the pleasure of knowing that in a few months' time they will have a joyful new life in their arms; a warm, cheerful little human being with whom they can dialogue, communicate and exchange. To the community and society of humans, surely the little one offers itself as a new brick indispensable for the building and very existence of society, but also for its progress and expansion.

There is therefore not a single moment in which the child takes from the outside and does not give; just as there is not a single moment in which the new human being gives and does not take from the outside world. Thus, whether for good or evil, he modifies the world around him in a positive or negative sense and, in turn, is modified by it. The child, like all living beings, tries to adapt and adjust its environment to its needs. The success or failure of these attempts depends on the particular interplay between the environmental characteristics and the individual's ability to implement the most appropriate strategies.

We have said that the human being's first contact with the outside world is the body, the blood, but also the mother's humours. We do not know exactly what the embryo and then the foetus feel of the mother's psychic life. Cer-

tainly not its thoughts and reflections. She certainly cannot know whether this woman has, beside her, a man and a family who knows how to welcome and protect her, reassure and comfort her, listen to her and advise her, or whether, on the contrary, she is alone in facing this wonderful but impervious path.

The unborn child certainly does not yet have the opportunity to fully perceive whether the mother is prey to the commitments of work and the anxieties of daily life, which chase and overwhelm her, or whether, serenely and consistently with her commitment as a mother, she is building a safe, warm and comfortable nest-like environment for her child.

We know, however, that before birth the child already feels the consequences that the mother's experiences have on his or her body, since the mother's well-being soon becomes his or her well-being, just as the mother's malaise is likely to become his or her malaise. We know that at the beginning of his human adventure communication is only biochemical, hormonal, immunological, but this then gradually, with the development of logical-perceptive capacities, becomes full and complete.

Therefore, every variation in a woman's physiology, such as her biochemical and hormonal make-up, influences not only her body and mind, but also the mind of the child, which she carries in her womb.

Already from the beating of the mother's heart, the tension in her abdomen and other biological signals, the unborn child can sense whether the mother is spending herself anxiously on many, too many tasks, or whether she is concentrating on her inner world, seeking out for her child all those maternal characteristics that it needs.

In turn, the child that is forming in the mother's womb modifies its surroundings. Even before the mother knows that she is expecting a child, it has begun to change her body, but also certain aspects of the way she lives and feels about herself and the world. One of the main signs that the mother easily recognises is the disappearance of menstruation and thus the lack of ovulation. The suspicion, which with the appropriate tests becomes a certainty, that a human being is forming in her womb, certainly does not go unnoticed; indeed, for many women, it is the highlight of their life and existence.

On the other hand, the mother's feelings, before and during pregnancy, can profoundly influence her attitude towards the child to be born, just as they can condition the way she welcomes and behaves towards it (Osterrieth, 1965, p. 45)

Similarly, maternal feelings, before and during pregnancy, will condition her future life. Necessarily, relationships with the father of the child, work and other commitments, family and friends will undergo some change. Nothing will be the same as before! Expecting a child can mean that a dream has come true. A dream born at a distant time in your life. A dream that blossomed when, as a child, she started playing with her first doll 'who always wanted baby food and she had to constantly prepare it for her or else she would cry, so that she had to rock her for a long time before she finally fell asleep quietly'. Or that dream had arisen when, for the first time, her mother had given her permission to touch her newborn brother's little hands or body, but only for a moment and very gently; or when, trusting her more, she had allowed her to rest him for a moment on her little lap; or when, trusting her abilities, she had en-

trusted her little brother's care to her for a few minutes and the little girl had proudly felt like a loving mother in those moments.

Expecting a child can mean the completion of a relationship born many years before in school and conducted with commitment, consistency, fidelity and trust for a long time, before being crowned by the marriage ceremony and then, finally, by the expectation of a child.

For a couple considered infertile, the knowledge that they are expecting a child is already something different. After a thousand sacrifices, after so much waiting, after endless disappointments, the unexpected joy can have shocking characteristics that, sometimes, precisely for these reasons and because of the fear that this new life will vanish fleetingly, one cannot fully enjoy.

Expecting a child can, unfortunately, mean much more, when this event is only the fruit of a chance encounter, the passion of a night, or is only the consequence of a mistake made by two. In all these cases, a new human life can turn a dark and dramatic hue in the parents' souls.

In a very poor and disadvantaged family, a new pregnancy may mean having to face new sacrifices, new renunciations, new and heavier commitments.

These and a thousand other different situations have the capacity to envelop the new sprout of humanity in a kaleidoscope of feelings and emotions, which can entail considerable material, psychological and social consequences that, in turn, will affect, both positively and negatively, the quality of the relationship, not only between parents and child, but also between family members and the new born, between society and the new citizen.

Conditions facilitating the well-being of the foetus and baby

Since the variables are many, numerous and complex, it is not possible to define, with good approximation, the consequences that the multiple situations will have on the future well-being of the new human being. We can only hypothesise, using some elements of study and personal experience, some of the many possible scenarios.

The conditions that can facilitate a good educational and relational journey are numerous:

α) An appropriate age.

β) The personal maturity of parents.

χ) The serenity of the environment.

δ) The willingness to adapt to the needs of the unborn child and thus the positive and constant communion with them.

ε) The ability to perceive the child as a gift.

φ) A stable couple reality.

a) **An appropriate age**

As far as age is concerned, it is difficult to indicate an ideal, since one can be mature and capable of bringing up a child well when one still, by the laws of states, cannot marry; just as, on the other hand, one can be affectively and psychologically immature at a clearly advanced age. This is

because a person's maturity is only partly linked to chronological age. It is well known, however, that physiologically too young an age, under eighteen, leads not only to possible problems of an organic nature, but also to educational difficulties due to a lack of authority and the presence of excessively friendly behaviour that is not in keeping with the parental role.[1] On the other hand, at too advanced an age, above thirty-five to forty, in the relationship and education of a child there is the risk that, in addition to the wide generational gap, more intense emotionality, greater psychological fragility, less mental elasticity may contribute negatively. Therefore, anxious and pathological bonds may be more frequent between *elderly parents* and their children. How, for example, can one let the child freely choose the path to take in life when, experiencing a situation of fragility and melancholy, one would like him or her to be more intensely and for a longer time attached to him or her?

Also not to be underestimated is the more intense anxiety present in the children of elderly parents, due to the more serious and frequent illnesses present in the latter and the greater fear of their possible demise.

Now that the causes of early motherhood are essentially due to the extreme sexual freedom enjoyed by adolescents, preventive measures can only be educational. There should be no lack of constant authoritative and moral guidance for adolescents and young people from parents and family members. On the other hand, public institutions should be the guarantors of the images and contents that are

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[1]　In Italy, over 4700 mothers are under 19 years old. The highest concentration is in the south: Sicily 780, Campania (644) Apulia (441). Data from Adnkronos Health 2008

proposed daily to minors and young people, so as to enhance and stimulate in them an attentive and responsible use of sexuality, avoiding making it appear, as often happens in numerous films and shows, as a pleasant game, an amusing pastime or just one of the many ways in which one can express feelings of love.

   b) **The personal maturity of parents**

   Affectively and psychologically mature parents are greatly favoured in their acceptance of and relationship with a child, due to their better resistance to stress, greater vivacity and inner serenity, and better control of impulses. In addition, mature parents can more easily apply a more linear and balanced educational style. Therefore, these parents will be able to cope and live better with all life experiences: not only the easy and joyful ones, but also the difficult and sad ones. They will more easily know how to select and wisely choose what can be useful to the unborn child and the entire family, without being excessively influenced by the fashions of the moment. Mature parents also have the necessary skills to be able to limit their individual needs. They will therefore be happy to donate their time, their energy, their attention, their presence, their availability, to their unborn child, limiting, when necessary and for as long as necessary, all other recreational or work activities, without regretting anything: neither the tender and comfortable dependence on their parents of origin, nor the ephemeral amusements and pastimes of adolescence, nor the gratifying work. They will also be able to create the most favourable environment for their unborn child, keeping away both physical pollutants, such as drugs, adulterated food and dangerous radiation, and psychological pollu-

tants, such as anxiety, fatigue, inner tension, conflict and stress, because they know that these represent potential risks for the unborn child.

It is easy, moreover, for these parents to be better able to choose carefully and wisely the most appropriate time to expect a child. They will want to be and feel ready to welcome it well. Ready from a physical point of view, as adults but not too old. Financially ready, in that they are able to support and educate their child by giving them the necessities, even if not the superfluities. Socially ready, as a couple united in a stable and lasting way, through an empowering bond like that of marriage.

c) *The serenity of the environment*

The fragile human being forming in the womb needs to grow and develop in a serene environment. And since the child's environment prior to birth is mainly provided by the mother, the baby needs this woman to experience motherhood with relaxation, joy and optimism, as these conditions greatly facilitate the biological aspects of pregnancy and the establishment of a positive and intense mother-child relationship.

A psychologically balanced and serene mother is much better able to cope with any discomfort and problems that may arise during the nine months of pregnancy, without excessive fears and without easily and unnecessarily becoming anxious. Anxiety and fears that, if lasting or too intense, risk compromising and damaging the physiological course of the pregnancy.

If it is true that a mother's equilibrium and serenity are given above all by her psychological characteristics, it is equally true that the help and support she can receive from

the people who are close to her and with whom she is in contact are fundamental. In many cultures, enormous attention is paid to expectant mothers, towards whom considerable protection is implemented not only by their families but also by the entire community in which they live, in order to avoid any trauma to them: both physical and psychological.

Meanwhile, the contribution of the husband, or at any rate the father of the child, is very important. The latter, during the entire period of gestation and rearing of the baby, has the task of creating around the mother and in the family, an environment that is as calm, warm and comfortable as possible, so as to allow his woman to indulge in that special atmosphere and intimacy, which is indispensable in order to enter into the fundamental empathic relationship with their child. It is also the father's task to shield the woman, through his work and his attentions and behaviour, from tiring activities and polluting or stressful environments that could damage the product of conception.

For Wenner (in Bowlby, 1982, p. 111) a good mother *"...has a close relationship with her husband and is eager and happy to rely on his help. She in turn is able to give spontaneously to others, including her own child. In contrast, a woman who has great emotional difficulties during pregnancy and puerperium has great difficulty relying on others. She is either incapable of expressing her desire for support, or she does so by demanding it aggressively, reflecting in both cases her lack of confidence that it will happen'.*

Equally important is the contribution of the other family members, who also have the task of offering, by their presence, words and behaviour, unequivocal signals of sup-

port, availability and backing to the couple, so that the latter can better understand, experience and cope with both the positive and negative events of this particular phase in the life of the mother and child.

Fundamental is the task of the women in the family: mother, mother-in-law, aunts, older cousins. They should be able to support, help and advise the new mother, especially in the first weeks of her return home after the birth. This task should be carried out with gentleness, serenity and affection, respecting the needs of the new mother, without being excessively intrusive or oppressive. In many countries and cultures this support is constant and stable. Unfortunately, this is not always the case in modern western countries, where, for various reasons: excessive work commitments, the couple's closure towards the parental network, the considerable physical distance between the expectant mother's home and her family, the new mother is left alone, at the mercy of her doubts, insecurities and lack of knowledge on how best to manage both the pregnancy and, later on, the newborn baby. The knowledge gained from reading articles on the Internet, books and magazines on the subject fails to provide them with sufficient support for a very complex and varied task that requires considerable practical experience.

Doctors, on the other hand, should not shirk their obligation to build, cultivate and maintain with their words and their behaviour in the mind of the mother and the pregnant woman's family a good balance and psychic well-being, avoiding recommending all those unnecessary or superfluous examinations, therapies and tests that could cause stress to both the mother and her baby.

d) **Positive and constant communion with the unborn child**

Under normal conditions, the bond with the child often precedes, at least in the imagination and hearts of more mature parents, the event of pregnancy itself. This bond should become more solid and tangible when the new life knocks at the door of existence and asks to develop and grow, not only as an organic and material element, but also and above all as a human being rich in intellectual, affective, relational and moral capacities.

When this bond is solid, continuous and emotionally joyful, the hearts of parents and relatives become wide, warm and welcoming, so that all those examinations that tend to highlight a possible disability, for the sole purpose of then putting the couple in the dreadful alternative of whether or not to perform a therapeutic or eugenic abortion, are of little importance. If the parents have faith in nature's capacities and possibilities, they will not even accept the excess of clinical examinations and gynaecological examinations, which make both the woman and the unborn child suffer, but will stick only to those deemed useful and indispensable. And it does not matter, as is suggested today, that the mother feels the duty to make the child living in her womb listen to soft, soothing symphonic music: the calm beating of her heart as she lives and savours every moment of expectation with serenity and joy, and her spontaneous singing as she attends to her normal daily chores, will be the best melodies for the child that is to be born. And it does not matter whether the mother is obliged or encouraged to tell him fairy tales. There is time for fairy tales. The serene voices, coming from a home where harmony reigns,

will, in the months of expectation, be his favourite fairy tales.

e) **The ability to perceive the child as a gift.**

When the human being in the process of being formed has the good fortune to be welcomed by parents and a family open to life, generous to themselves and to others, the expectation of a child can give much because, that new human being, absolutely unique and unrepeatable, is perceived as a gift. A gift to the little one who will be born. A gift to oneself, one's family and society. A gift to the world. And if the parents and other family members know how to constantly communicate this inner availability to him at every moment of his life, the child will feel, within himself and around him, this splendid reality: to be for everyone a gift and never a burden. This will be a source of security, warmth and gratitude for him. It will serve to strengthen his self-esteem. It will be useful in creating a solid, stable and trusting bond with his parents and with the reality that surrounds him.

But the gifts are to be accepted as they are. If, on the other hand, parents have unrealistic expectations and an unrealistic image of the child to be born, if they expect only positive qualities: 'He will be, highly intelligent, beautiful, always and absolutely healthy, incapable of throwing tantrums; he will certainly be able to respond to our every need and conscious and unconscious aspiration'. In all these cases, the disappointment and frustration will only be heavy and invalidating for the parent-child relationship. Just as painful will be the implications for the child, who will perceive himself as incapable of giving pleasure and joy to his parents, as any child would wish (Zattoni, Gillini, 2003, p.

19). On the other hand, if the child conforms to this excessive and unrealistic idealisation, on the part of the parents there will be the risk of contributing to a hypertrophy of their own ego, with signs of omnipotence that could lead them to experience any frustration excessively, when, in the course of life, they will be forced to confront their limits and their mistakes (Zattoni, Gillini, 2003, p. 20).

f) **A stable couple reality**

The presence of a stable couple, made up of two persons of different sexes, united by a strong social bond, is an essential element both for living well during pregnancy and for the future upbringing and rearing of the child. The presence of a strong social bond, such as that of marriage, in all peoples and in all ages is consequential to this need. There are numerous reasons why a stable couple, and therefore a solid and lasting family, is important, both during pregnancy and afterwards:

- human beings are extremely complex to be brought up by a single parent;
- in two you face difficult moments better;
- The inner life of the child needs two parental figures;
- possible reasons for crisis or discomfort can be more easily overcome if two parents are present next to the child;
- two parents of the opposite sex make it easier to introduce a correct sexual identity and role;
- the educational function is easier when two parents are present;
- a single parent has greater economic problems;
- the couple is essential for the good socialisation of the child.

1) **The human being is extremely complex to be brought up by a single parent.**

Man is the most complex organism known to us. His remarkable possibilities in language, intelligence, his rich and varied social and relational life, his culture, cannot be developed and realised without the intervention of several human beings, each with its own specific task. The mother, precisely because she is the bearer of particular feminine qualities, has the possibility of developing in the child, whether male or female, those communicative, affective, emotional and relational qualities, typical of the feminine genius, that are indispensable to the new human being. While a father, if he is educated and works in a masculine sense, as he should, can add to his mother's heritage his masculine characteristics: strength, courage, rationality, consistency, linearity and firmness. Qualities that are equally useful to both boys and girls.

2) **Two people cope better with difficult moments.**

The period of pregnancy, and then of childbirth, is often marked by difficult moments, for both organic and psychological reasons, as the woman's body and mind are put to the test by the numerous and complex adaptations that are necessary to welcome the new life that is forming. Above all, the mother's inner equilibrium can be disturbed due to her greater emotional fragility, anxiety and fears that can arise in her soul, as she is forced to face this new, shattering experience and the various difficulties and problems that can arise during the nine months. Her anxieties, about how the pregnancy will proceed and her fears: of a malformed

baby, of a premature birth, of the death of the foetus, of its death, will be considerably alleviated if, next to this woman, there is a man, the father of the child, bound to her by stable social ties and love, capable of being close to her and reassuring her. The certainty that she is not alone in those moments and in the possible shocks that could involve her, makes the woman more serene and secure. And this serenity and security will inevitably be passed on to the child she carries in her womb. But even after childbirth, a possible depressive syndrome can be better prevented, faced and overcome, if there is the presence of a man who knows how to support and comfort. Even afterwards, when we have to deal with the many material, social and educational problems, the presence of two parents permanently united by a social and emotional bond is essential. We realise this especially when this bond does not exist. In such cases it is common to observe both the man and the woman fretting insecurely and discouragedly each time they are forced to face a new difficult event or problem.

3) **The inner life of the child needs two parental figures**

The child has, towards his parents but also towards the world around him, mixed feelings from birth. If he gets from the person who cares for him and is close to him what he wants at that moment: constant attention, tenderness, pleasure and satisfaction of his needs, he feels love towards this person. He rejoices in this love and enjoys this positive feeling that satisfies his soul and fills his heart with serenity and security. But if that same person, at a given moment, for whatever reason: physical illness, mental disorders, work or social problems, is no longer in tune with him, so

that he reproaches him, contradicts him in his desires or does not please him as he should, this person takes on the appearance of a bad being, so that towards him he is likely to feel resentment and sometimes a desire for death and destruction. This prompts him to seek understanding and attention elsewhere. If next to his mother there is a father, at that moment available to him and capable of acceptance and care, his sadness subsides, his hunger for joy is satisfied, his heart is reassured and it is easier, for this child, to recover the inner balance that has momentarily broken down. So that a good trust, openness and inner vitality remains in him, encouraging him to open up to others and to the world. But if this is not possible for him, because next to his mother there is no father, no man bound to him by blood and love, who can accommodate and satisfy his needs, he remains trapped in his negative and conflicting desires and thoughts. Consciously or unconsciously destroying or hating the person who appears bad to him at that moment is like destroying and hating the only source of love, pleasure and care available to him, so it is like destroying and hating himself and the world. Under such conditions, the child will try to find the 'good' element outside the family or in his own ego.

The limits of this possible strategy and defence are obvious since there are not always, outside his family, people who are reliable, constantly available, present and closely bound to him by bonds of love. Therefore there is a real risk of further disappointments that will accentuate his anger and pessimism. Among other things, he may at the same time be embroiled in guilt feelings towards his own parent, since the search for love outside his family may be experienced as a betrayal towards the person who, up to that point, has

cared for him. The other possibility: closing in on himself, seeking in the intimacy of his ego the good consoling element, forces him to renounce the feeling of trust and openness towards human beings and towards the world; this, inevitably, will lead to a considerable reduction in his vital and social drive and thus force him into closure and loneliness that can only accentuate his malaise.

For Bettelheim (1987, p. 204): *'This demonstrates, once again, how important it is for the child to have both parents close by, so that, when relations with one are disturbed, he can find comfort in the fundamentally different reactions of the other, thus counterbalancing the negativity of the first parent'.*

4) **Possible moments of crisis or discomfort can be more easily overcome if two parents are present next to the child.**

We know that a person's life, even the healthiest and most balanced, undergoes moments of crisis due to organic or psychological causes. Illnesses that can impede or impair a parent's capacity for care and attention are not uncommon, nor are psychological problems, even momentary or reactive to some difficult or mournful event, that can impede a serene and constructive relationship with their children. Such malaise is part of the human condition. The possibility that at such junctures there may be another person to replace, in whole or in part, the parent in difficulty, allows the child that continuity of education and care that he or she cannot do without.

5) **Two parents of the opposite sex make it easier to introduce a correct sexual identity and role.**

If there are constantly two parental figures of the opposite sex at the child's side, it is possible to guarantee the child a correct identity and an adequate sexual role. These qualities are important for a good psychic balance, which will allow him to live serenely the affective and loving relationships with the opposite sex and, at the same time, will give him in the future the possibility of offering his woman and his children the specific male characteristics: strength, determination, coherence, linearity; and the female ones: gentleness, ability to listen and care, understanding, tenderness, acceptance.

6) **The educational function is easier when two parents are present.**

When two parents are present, it is easier for a team game to be established in the educational functions, in which each takes on a specific task, supported and helped by his or her partner. Knowing that one can count on another gives security and serenity, removes doubts, perplexities and fears, so the result will certainly be better than thinking or pretending to take on all roles and tasks.

Today, unfortunately, this need is increasingly underestimated because of the false, increased confidence in one's own economic, physical and psychic capacities, but also because of the excessive and misplaced trust in social services, which should accompany the lonely person throughout the course of his or her existence. "Why worry about having a man, the father of the child, at my side when I am earning

a very good income, so I can easily do without this man's material contribution?" "Why worry about having a man at my side when I have a strong and decisive character, so I will have no problem facing with determination all the possible difficulties that life may present me with?" "Why ask for a man's help when I am sure that the state will assist me with its social services, its doctors and its institutions, both during and after the pregnancy?"

We have said that services provide a false security, since they have, by their very nature, none of the characteristics necessary for a primary educational task. An educational task that needs to be supported by a stable, responsible and continuous affective bond over time.

Therefore, a lone parent runs the risk of swinging, in daily educational activity, from a too rigid behaviour to a too permissive one, without being able to find the right balance because he/she is gripped by the doubt and uncertainty of not doing what is most and best for his/her child. A lone parent often does not know and does not understand which is the most correct educational behaviour, as he or she does not have the possibility of confrontation and dialogue with the other. The lack of help and support easily makes him or her anxious, fearful and insecure. The lone parent is also deprived of the possibility of mediation with his or her children.

Often, a parent who performs his or her difficult task alone runs the risk of becoming involved in an overly encompassing relationship with his or her children, resulting in anxious or morbid attachment. In turn, this pathological attachment, as well as jealousy of one's own primacy and affective recognition, may in time limit or prevent the

offspring's normal affective and loving investments outside the family.

When there is only one mother to lead a family, a sense of loneliness, insecurity and the fear of not being able to cope, of not succeeding, of not being able to bring up the child well, resulting in anxiety and feelings of guilt, are frequent in the woman. The single mother wonders if she is really able to give her child everything he or she needs. She weighs every decision excessively, being constantly afraid of making mistakes; she tends to oscillate between permissive and authoritarian attitudes, without ever finding a stable balance, a coherent line of conduct (Stefani, 2006, p. 15). Alongside these fears are the fear and suspicion of transmitting their own insecurities and anxieties to their children, so much so as to prevent them from achieving a healthy balance. There is also the risk of establishing a symbiotic relationship with the children, who may take on the role of friends and girlfriends from time to time, so as to replace love for a man. In this way, their emotional and social growth is restricted.

But the single father also has his problems. The man, not being genetically predisposed for intimate and personal care, in his daily life with his children, finds it hard to assume a flexible, warm, delicate and welcoming relationship, as he finds it difficult to see and hear the emotional nuances in dialogues and situations, and is therefore more inclined to give immediate answers to the family's problems, rather than to revive and allow the children's emotions to settle.

7) **A single parent has greater economic problems**

When only one parent heads a family, economic conditions are often tighter and more precarious since, while ge-

neral expenses remain almost unchanged, economic income is halved.

8) **The couple is essential as an instrument of socialisation**

It is the couple that gives a concrete and living example of how to manage an interpersonal relationship, made up of accepting the other for what he or she is, and not for what one expects him or her to be, while, at the same time, allowing the beauty of mutual service between spouses to be highlighted. It is living as a couple that can show the child how a community life can be led, organised not on hierarchical supports but on integrative equality. It is the couple that accustoms the child to coming out of the 'I' to build the *'we'* (Moro, 1994, p. 22). It is, finally, the couple that helps and supports the overcoming of the oedipal phase.

Conditions that may compromise the well-being of the foetus and baby

The well-being of the child to be born can, on the contrary, be compromised when they are present:

a) a lack of personal maturity;

b) a modest ability to *commune* with the unborn child;

c) an anxious environment;

d) a distorted or altered view of pregnancy;

a) **Lack of personal maturity**

Poor maturity may be due to parents being too young, but more often today, rather than young age, the cause of poor maturity is to be found in an education that is ineffective and inattentive in stimulating and developing all those qualities that contribute to the formation of a mature, attentive and responsible man and woman.

b) **The lack of ability to enter into communion with the unborn child**

For some parents it is difficult to enter into communion with the unborn child.

Some, especially fathers, only feel the presence of their child after birth. While the latter is in the mother's womb, they feel it as something to be taken care of, rather than as a human being with whom they can begin to commune and bond. It is difficult for both parents to connect with their unborn child when their psychological disorders overpower and disrupt the necessary communication and empathy. Their absence makes it difficult if not impossible to understand the child's mental states, as one cannot perceive its innermost emotional aspects.

c) **The presence of an anxious environment**

An anxious mother is already on the alert before she even decides to have a child, so she is constantly asking herself whether or not it is good for her and her family to go through pregnancy and motherhood. A thousand hypothetical risks worry her. Age, for example: "Am I the right age to have a child?" "Am I perhaps too immature?" Or on the contrary: "Am I too old so that there may be risks for me and the unborn child?" She is anxious about medical and gynaecological risks, but also about hereditary risks: "What

will be the future of this child if his grandmother suffers from diabetes?" "If I have suffered from allergies and insomnia for years; if his aunt died of cancer, what will become of this child?" She worries about her own management and educational skills: "Will I be a good mother to him?" "Will I be able to educate him in the right way?" "Will I be able to defend him from all the dangers in our wretched society?"

This state of tension and indecision can last for years, disrupting even the lives of the partner and other more serene family members, to whom the anxious mother asks for a thousand pieces of advice and a thousand suggestions to dispel her doubts. On the other hand, when these tips and suggestions are offered to her, she is unable to take them up and implement them except for short periods.

By the time the long-awaited decision has been made and she finds herself expecting a child, in order to allay all the worries she had and continues to have, she needs numerous and frequent medical examinations and examinations which, if they allay her anxiety for a few hours, give rise to further doubts and fears the next day, prompting her to carry out further examinations in search of absolute security, which she cannot achieve.

This continuous and incessant maternal tension cannot but be reflected on the child in the womb who, not only feels the mother's excessively frequent heartbeat and the tension in her abdomen, but is invaded, in turn, by the adrenalin hormones that she releases abundantly into her bloodstream. Hormones that also alarm the body and mind of the unborn child, unnecessarily stressing it. If the anxious mother then perceives any signs of risk for her child, the alarm situation is greatly increased. In such cases, the

unborn child can become in the eyes of the woman, but also of the entire family, a burden that is difficult to bear, both economically and psychologically. And from that, to considering it a child that causes trouble even before it comes into the world, the step is short! Ultimately, it is as if an orchestra starts its overture with a few off-key notes. The listeners will get a negative feeling from this throughout the performance of the opera.

During pregnancy, even normal mothers have moments of anxiety, due to a situation of increased fragility and psychic vulnerability. These moments of anxiety become more frequent and the emotion felt becomes more intense, when the person, by nature, has a fragile emotionality. In these cases, if the mother of the little one has beside her to support, help and comfort her, a serene, calm and balanced husband, who sees life and events objectively and positively, the problem, at least in part, will be reduced. The spouse's reassuring words, kisses, suggestions, special attention, will be able to greatly diminish the spouse's state of tension. If, on the other hand, the father also complains of the same problems, it will be difficult for him to be that serene, stable and secure sideboard, on which the mother can rely and lean on to calm her doubts, perplexities or even her fits of anxiety. In these cases, with regard to the unborn child, the problems caused by the alarm condition will be much more serious. The same applies to the other people who are close to the mother: parents, grandparents, uncles, cousins. They, too, play an active and important role in the child's environment, as they can positively or negatively affect the pregnant woman's well-being. Considerable anxiety may also come from paediatricians or family members, who someti-

mes overwhelm the new mother with excessive advice, suggestions and attention.

d) **A distorted and distorted view of pregnancy**

A distorted view of pregnancy can also compromise the future well-being of the foetus and then the child. This can be seen as:

- blackmail and duress;

- intrusion;

- risk;

- reason for anxiety and distress;

- disturbing element in the relationship.

Pregnancy as blackmail and duress.

Cases in which pregnancy becomes an instrument of blackmail and coercion against others are not uncommon. For easily understandable biological reasons, it is usually the woman who carries out this kind of blackmail against the man and his family: 'You are not asking me to marry you. You want to get rid of me. Well then, I will force you, by getting pregnant, to marry me or, if you insist on not tying yourself to me, you will have to support this child for tens of years'. "Your parents don't want me. Your parents don't like me, so by marrying you I will force them to accept me.

The aggressiveness and violence that underlie blackmail frequently have, as a counterpart, a negative impact both on the woman who carries it out and on the child.

Thoughts of this kind may arise in the man who is subjected to blackmail: 'Yes, you forced me to marry you, but I...I will not respect you, I will betray you with the first coming, I will not contribute to the education and training of this child, as an instrument of your blackmail, on the contrary, when you least expect it, I will take my revenge on you and <u>your child</u>'. In such cases, rejection affects the child but also the mother. It is not difficult to imagine how tense and destructive an environment filled with coercion, spite, revenge and rejection can be.

Pregnancy as intrusion.

When, for example, the relationship between the two partners is made up only of affective and sexual exchanges, or worse, only of the latter, without a great, demanding common project, that child being formed in the womb is easily perceived as foreign to the feelings and desires of the couple at that moment and, consequently, rejection may arise. In these circumstances, when love is considered only as a pleasant game to be played by two, there is no place for responsibility, commitment, care, education and the growth of a new human being, so the rejection motherhood (*maternal rejection)* emerges and prevails.

The child of those spouses in whom emotional disharmony is present can also be perceived as an intruder. These live their relationship without that union of souls and deep dialogue that should always permeate a relationship.

Rejection of motherhood may be caused by the difficulty of accepting an adult role from immature parents or parents in whom the Oedipal bond is still evident. Finally, other reasons for difficulties may stem from financial constraints or excessive professional or career commitments.

Sometimes, only one of the two partners, especially the woman, instinctively or even rationally seeks the pregnancy, without the consent of the other. In such cases, only one of the two parents perceives the child that has become part of the family and the couple as a stranger, while for the other, the child that is to be born is a source of gratification and responds to the expression of a desire. If this situation persists even after the birth, it is easy for the child to feel a solid emotional bond only with those who have desired and accepted it, while with those who did not want it and openly reject it, there will be no real bond, or the relationship will be experienced with great distrust, if not open hostility.

Parental *rejection* may be *conscious or unconscious, transient or lasting* (De Negri et al., 1970, p. 130). It is evident that the child will suffer greater psychological damage the longer the rejection persists. Moreover, the feeling of *rejection may be intense, moderate or mild.* Therefore, the consequences may also be more or less severe. Feelings of rejection may lead to increased aggression and conflict between the parents and the child. Sometimes there is an excessively perfectionist educational attitude, but also an overprotectionism and compensatory hypersensitivity due precisely to the intimate rejection felt with a sense of guilt (De Negri et al., 1970, p. 130).

Pregnancy as a risk.

Pregnancy may be experienced as a risk in those societies that condemn, as an act of grave immorality, any sexual intercourse outside of marriage. In these societies, sexual intercourse, evidenced by pregnancy, is severely punished by both parents and the social and judicial environment. Equally risky is pregnancy when the environmental and economic conditions are not adequate to welcome and sup-

port the child, or when the psychological, anatomical or medical conditions of the mother are not capable of welcoming a new human being.

It is difficult, in these cases, to define a priori the parents' experience and thus the consequences for the child, since there are many elements at play. There is the possibility that feelings of rejection are felt towards this child and that he or she is perceived as a source of problems, trouble and danger, but it is also possible that these mothers or parents become even more attached to the child they conceived with courage and in a situation of difficulty and risk.

Pregnancy as a reason for anxiety and distress.

When the mother's or father's psychological condition is such that he experiences any change in the pre-existing reality with apprehension and excessive worry, the gratifying and pleasant element of waiting is replaced by anxious thoughts about what to do, how to do it, whom to ask for help, and so on.

Pregnancy as a disturbing element in the relationship.

Pregnancy, because of its considerable impact on the couple, forces a change in previous relational patterns, as the relationship in two becomes, necessarily, a relationship in three. The insertion of another element: the unborn child, can only be properly managed if the parents possess the maturity, sensitivity, pliability and availability necessary to share this experience. Sharing, however, does not mean swapping or confusing roles, but should commit each element of the couple to take action to deal with this event in the most appropriate way, bringing to bear the specific qualities of their sex. In recent decades, however, sharing has focused on marginal aspects, neglecting the basic elements. The father-to-be is forced to participate in birth preparation

exercises, but he is not encouraged to implement those attitudes of presence, support, protection and reassurance that are necessary for the expectant woman, who often, being psychologically more fragile during this period, can easily fall prey to fears, insecurities and anxieties. The same applies to participation in childbirth. While women are left in the waiting room, such as mothers and mothers-in-law, who by culture, specific feminine qualities and personal experience could give the woman more qualified and serene care, the husband is forced to remain at his wife's side at the moment of delivery. In these cases, no account is taken of the fact that this event, as natural and physiological as it may be, is almost always associated with considerable anxiety and with images, gestures and smells that are unpleasant, if not downright bloody and distressing for those who witness it for the first time, especially if those who witness it are the woman's husband and father of the child. This coercive participation, rather than uniting the couple, can leave unpleasant or even distressing residues in the man's soul, with feelings of resentment both towards his wife, who forced him into this type of participation, and towards the child who, in order to come into the world, needed to involve his woman in such dramatic and painful situations.

In conclusion, if, as we have said, the feelings of the mother, but not only the mother, before and during pregnancy, can profoundly influence her attitude towards the child to be born, there is no doubt that proper prevention, both at a social and family level, should commit practitioners to addressing not only the medical aspects but above all the psychological and relational aspects linked to this event.

BIRTH AND FIRST YEAR OF LIFE

Just as for the mother, for the baby too the moment of birth is a difficult one, indeed, in some ways it can be experienced as a traumatic moment. For the woman, especially the primipara, this much-dreamed-of but also much-feared event can be one of the most physically painful and demanding moments of her life and a turning point in her existence. Bringing a child into the world is also an important moment to test various skills and qualities: to be able to handle pain and physical suffering well, to try to control anxieties and fears, to be able to welcome a new human life well, and finally, to be able to make your husband or partner and your parents accept this child.

But it is also a difficult time for the son. It is certainly painful for them to leave something very soft and warm for an unpleasant and cold environment. It is exhausting to leave a serene, quiet and muffled environment to enter a noisy and chaotic environment like our world. It is not easy to start taking in oxygen and food from outside. It is complicated to communicate with other human beings, being provided with only rudimentary means of dialogue. However, both mother and child, if they fall within that very broad band that we call '*normality*', are ready and prepared for this. Not least because nature and the environment should have provided one and the other with the appropriate tools to cope with and overcome these and all the other difficulties that will inevitably arise in the future.

The world of the newborn

With adult judgement and mentality, it is difficult to understand how problematic the condition of an infant is.

He is an extraordinarily helpless being, lacking in means, dependent and in a certain way, as we have said, 'unfinished' (Osterrieth, 1965, p. 27). Therefore, the task of parents, and mothers in particular, in establishing a good, effective and lasting relationship with their little one is arduous and delicate. The reasons for these difficulties are many.

For the newborn baby, the mother is the whole world

The world of adults is rich, wide and varied. In the adult world there is work and leisure, there are friends and family, loves and passions, sport and play, entertainment and culture, religion and politics. The world of the infant is small and undifferentiated. The affective-relational components that give depth and warmth to life are reduced to one and only one person: their mother. Therefore, in the newborn child, the relationship with the mother figure is totalising, since she represents the whole world, but also himself. If the mother is anxious, or worse, distressed, this tension produces anguish in the infant (Sullivan, 1962, p. 59). If the mother is serene and happy, this condition of serenity and joy will be reflected in the infant. The mother, therefore, merges with the child by whom she is perceived as part of herself. By feeding he absorbs the mother almost losing himself in her. By loving the pleasurable sensations that the mother brings him, he loves himself and her at the same time, so that the mother is his ego, until this is formed.

The needs of the child, in order to be satisfied, need another person.

Characteristic of the infant is his helplessness and his complete dependence on his mother. Without someone to take care of him, he would die. The adult organises the environment in which he lives in such a way that he can satisfy his needs. He goes to the supermarket to shop and chooses the products he wants or that are congenial to him at that time and in that situation. He has the possibility of lessening his suffering by selecting the most appropriate person or persons and means. The infant cannot do any of this. He cannot walk alone, he cannot feed himself, he has no possibility of seeking the means to diminish his discomfort. It is others who have the task of choosing for him, interpreting his needs. He can only signal, with the few means at his disposal, his condition of joy and satisfaction or, on the contrary, his discomfort, dissatisfaction or anger.

An infant does not have the possibility to understand the cause of its suffering and to remedy it.

An adult can understand the reasons for his suffering, especially if it comes from the external environment. When a parent or a loved one falls ill, when the love of his life fails him, when the closest friend betrays him, when a conflict within the family shakes his soul, he has an awareness of the causes of the anguish that oppresses him. When his suffering comes from the depths of his soul, even if he does not know the cause, he at least knows where his anguish comes from. Therefore, when he manages to identify the cause(s), he has the possibility of seeking and then finding the most appropriate remedies in a good psychologist or psychiatrist, in a more effective and rewarding relationship, in a useful medicine for his malaise, in sport, and so on. An

infant can do none of these things. To alleviate his distress he is forced to rely totally on the people who are close to him and who care for him.

The infant cannot choose the most suitable environment.

We adults can, within certain limits, choose the people, animals or objects that are most congenial to us or that best satisfy our needs. If a friend or group of friends disappoints us, does not gratify us sufficiently, is not attentive to our requests and desires, we can, albeit with difficulty, change them for others. Just as we can change our girlfriend, and through divorce or separation, we can also replace the partner or companion in our life. For the child this is not possible. He is forced to accept the environment where nature has placed him. He is forced to accept that mother, that father, those siblings and those grandparents whom fate has made him find and placed beside him.

The newborn child cannot choose where to live.

We adults can, according to our temperament, based on our personal tastes and needs of the moment, choose to live in the country, rather than in the city; and if we have chosen the city, we can live in the centre or in the suburbs. We can, therefore, choose a lively, albeit noisy, environment, or for a quiet and peaceful one. The infant cannot do this. Therefore, the amount of frustration he may have to endure is very high.

The newborn child cannot change its environment

We adults can, at least in part, change our environment. If it is too bright, we can pull down the blinds. If it is too hot, we can open the window or turn on the air conditioning. If a chair is uncomfortable, we can sit on a comfortable sofa. If a piece of clothing causes us discomfort or itching, we can change it for another. The newborn baby cannot do any of this.

The newborn child can little change the attitude of the people who are close to him and who relate to him.

By explaining why we feel unwell and what is the best way to make us feel good, we can ask others to change their behaviour towards us. A wife may say to her husband or partner: 'Please don't shout, speak softly'; 'When I come home tired and nervous, I ask you not to pester me with your problems'; 'I am nervous and sad, hold me close, hug me tight, make me feel protected and safe'. The infant cannot do this. Therefore, when the caregiver manifests unsuitable attitudes and behaviour, he cannot change them except by communicating his displeasure or disappointment. Nor does the infant have any means of alleviating the negative mood of anguish, sadness, anger or rage of the caregiver, so that, directly or indirectly, he or she risks becoming involved in the negative feelings and emotions of others.

The infant has rudimentary means of communication

We have a wide variety of dialogue tools. When we need to communicate to others our needs, our wants but also the reasons for our restlessness and anger, we can do so verbally, in writing, with the use of gestures and so on. The

means an infant can use are scarce and rudimentary. "I don't fuss, I don't cry, I sleep peacefully: I am fine". "I cry, I scream, I shake my little hands and feet, I am red in the face: I am sick". But the intensity, cause(s), and possible remedy(s) of this malaise can only be perceived, interpreted, understood and discovered, only by a good mother or a good family team that knows how to make good use of empathy, instinct, experience and acquired knowledge.

The infant has no experience to use.

If our wife is late, so that we cannot sit down and have lunch, knowing her character, which often makes us wait, or the problems her work gives her, just to ease the hunger pangs, we can open the fridge and have a snack with what we find, or, armed with holy patience, we can wait for her to come back, as we know how long her delay usually lasts. The infant, not knowing his mother's habits and problems, if she delays in feeding him, can easily think that she has disappeared or that she has no desire to satisfy her needs and, therefore, that there is no human being to relieve his hunger. This terrifies and upsets him.

An infant has poor psychological defences.

A situation is stressful according to the level of development attained: the more mature an individual is and the more chronologically or mentally aged he or she is, the better he or she will cope with trauma and stress. From this we deduce that while a mature and serene adult can metabolise a considerable amount of stressful situations, an infant cannot do so, as he has not yet developed effective defensive

systems. Therefore, anything outside the normal context can greatly alarm him.

In the infant, emotionality prevails over emotion

In adults, emotions are, at least in part, controlled and managed. In babies and young children, due to the immaturity of their nervous system, emotionality prevails over emotion. So much so that, at this age, emotional reactions do not always have a clearly explainable cause. They can therefore be greatly out of proportion to their causes and can spread and abruptly subside for no apparent reason. The child rejoices at most as it becomes sad at most. Affective phenomena therefore have a way of manifesting themselves marked *by characteristics of wholeness, elementarity and indifferentiation.* They do not have the fixed and conventional character that we find in adults, since they spring from a psychic structure that is much less controlled, not socialised, not mature, in which reasoning and capacity for representation are still lacking. What is more, his psyche still has few elements in memory, and is therefore dominated by the present moment (Osterrieth, 1965, p. 60). It is only later that the small human being understands that a satisfaction can be delayed, without being denied, or that a frustration can be entirely momentary and involve later compensation, so that he can momentarily curb his needs along with his impetuosity or anger.

For the infant, the world around him is an unknown place

We adults know what is in the room next to the one we are in, what is outside our home, beyond our city. We also

know what is happening on the other side of the world, if only from seeing it in pictures or on TV. The small child knows almost nothing about the world around him. If his mother or carer disappears from his sight, he may think she has disappeared altogether. If he cries because he is hungry or thirsty and no one comes to console him and satisfy his needs, he may think that he will always be like this and that he is in danger of dying. This is why children like to sleep in a room with some noise in the background, rather than being alone and in the dark in a room away from their parents. These small noises reassure him of his parents' presence and let him know that he is not alone and abandoned.

The feelings of the newborn baby

At birth, the infant's senses are almost fully developed, although he is not yet able to recognise objects and persons as such, nor does he have self-awareness as a distinct entity. For Piaget (1964, p. 17), a Copernican revolution begins with birth: 'Whereas at the starting point of this development the infant refers everything to himself, or rather to his own body, at the point of arrival, that is, when thought and language begin, he places himself practically as an element or body among others, in a universe which he has built up little by little, and which he now feels to be external to himself'. Although we cannot directly know the psychic life of a newborn child, we can probably imagine it as a succession of sensations and impressions that overlap one another in a chaotic and confused way, due to the poor ca-

pacity of the nervous system to receive, select, understand and manage the incoming information.

Some of these sensations, such as tactile, thermal, auditory, olfactory, come from the world outside him.

Tactile sensations are elicited by his or her clothes, the fabric of the cradle, the water in the bath, the body of the mother and the people who care for him or her. Therefore, the tactile-emotional dialogue, already present in the prenatal phase, continues after birth. These sensations can be pleasant, when the baby feels welcomed, caressed, kissed, or unpleasant if the hands and arms that handle him are tense, rigid, trembling, uncertain, unwelcoming and soft, or worse, refusing, violent or aggressive.

The baby receives *thermal sensations* from the warmth of the breast or the body of the mother and the caregivers, but also from the bath water and the environment in which she lives.

He experiences auditory sensations by listening to his mother's heartbeat while being nursed, or by hearing her words, noises and sounds in the environment.

She perceives *olfactory sensations* coming from the smell of her mother, family members, milk, her own and the room's cleaning products.

He experiences coenesthetic sensations when he is rocked, manipulated, moved, or when those near him play with his hands and limbs.

Internal sensations, on the other hand, come from his body: from his irritated skin, his breathing, the mumbling and other contractions of his abdomen, the beating of his heart.

Some perceptions are painful or unpleasant and cause tension and the need for someone to eliminate them, while

others are pleasant and enjoyable and the infant would like them never to end, as they give him a sense of well-being. However, all these sensations are not sharp and clear but confused and uncertain. The infant still does not know, does not understand where they come from and why they come, as he has not yet interpreted, defined and catalogued them. The *adualism* in which he lives, so well described by Piaget, makes it impossible for him to distinguish his inner world from the outer world, the *ego* from the non-ego. Similarly, time and space do not yet exist at the level of consciousness, nor is there cause and effect or relations of any kind. For the infant there is only a kind of now, undifferentiated from which the child cannot escape (Osterrieth, 1965, p. 48).

When he sleeps, and the infant sleeps most of his time, his impressions are even more vague and confused (Osterrieth, 1965, p. 49). This may explain, at least in part, his winces during sleep, his early fears, his sudden, and for us unmotivated, outbursts of crying.

Beginning of reports

However, soon after this initial undifferentiated, inconsistent and fluctuating moment, the frequent repetition of a number of identical situations: the need for nutrition, cleanliness, specific noises and smells such as those preparatory to feeding, cleaning or bathing, auditory sensations such as the constant words of the mother and other family members in his presence, as well as the caresses, kisses and cuddles directed at him; all these situations that are repeated over time quickly graft a beginning of organisation whereby, from that moment on, extra-uterine life is nourished, built

up and lived in and of relationships. The relationship with the environment outside of him or her is fundamental not only for enhancing experience and culture but is indispensable for the very formation of the ego and for the healthy and balanced growth of the future man or woman.

The basic element of the relationship is communication, between him and the *mother-world*.

For De Pinto (2004, p. 13):

"When the child discovers that there are other minds besides his own, he builds the field of the intersubjective relation that includes, in addition to physical presence, subjective states of emotions, feelings, motivations and interactions. In this intersubjective field, one develops the ability to read the other's mental states, to conform, to align, to tune in with them (or the other way around)".

For the infant is only a candidate for the human condition: *the still 'unfinished' child* will proceed in its own psychic and bodily formation and will provide itself with the means of adaptation in contact with the social and material universe in which it is prematurely placed, responding to conditions that are necessarily uncertain and variable. Since he does not have nice and ready mechanisms, he is forced to make them for himself (Osterrieth, 1965, p. 28). His apprenticeship to become an adult is a long one, since the level to be reached as an adult is considerably complex and evolved.

Childhood is then the period necessary for the individual's 'becoming human'. It is the apprenticeship that leads to full human maturity. Hence the need, for the human being who has the characteristic of being very complex, for a long childhood; hence its weakness but also its richness

and the almost infinite possibilities for adaptation (Oster-rieth, 1965, p. 28).

The child is thus an *animal educandum*, a being that demands education, as Langeveld rightly pointed out, because without it it cannot become an adult. Therefore, childhood, and therefore education, cannot be taken too seriously (Osterrieth, 1965, p. 29).

The relationship with the mother

The most important relationship is certainly the one the infant establishes with its mother. For Klein (1969, p. 13):

"In all my work I have emphasised the importance of the child's first object relationship - the relationship with the mother's breast and with the mother - and I have come to the conclusion that if this primary object, which is introjected, puts down firm enough roots in the ego, a solid basis for satisfactory development is laid.

In the phase in which there is not only an 'I' but something outside of him, the *phase of dualism,* his external world is made up almost exclusively of this figure, with whom the infant establishes tactile, thermal, proprioceptive, coenesthetic, sonorous and olfactory relationships, but also and above all establishes special affective-emotional relationships. Therefore, the quality and richness of the communication between mother and child have an enormous importance for the psycho-affective development of the infant (De Negri et al., 1970, p. 126).

Levy (in De Negri et al., 1970, p. 127) defines the child's dependence on the mother with the expression: *'primary hunger for love'* in that it satisfies basic biological

needs and is active in alleviating all the various recurring imbalances.

Initially, the mother is something very vague, but this does not detract from the fact that she soon becomes more than a breast that feeds the baby or arms that cradle him. For the newborn baby, his mother becomes something that comforts, reassures, makes him feel good, caresses and provides pleasant sensations, so it is from his mother that he asks for food, cleanliness, physical and psychic wellbeing, it is with his mother that he tries to adapt and establish a deep, intense and mutually beneficial bond and dialogue, and it is to her that he first offers his smiles after the fifth week. All of his or her first initiation therefore takes place in the tonality of the familiar security that emanates from the person of the mother, in that atmosphere of tenderness and affection that today we know how indispensable it is to the child, because it determines his or her personal feeling of security, a condition for all subsequent progress (Oster-rieth, 1965, p. 58). Given the fundamental importance of mothers for the future well-being of children and, therefore, of future citizens, it is difficult to understand society's satisfaction with every mother who leaves her child in the care of foreign and therefore unsuitable arms in order to engage in work. Just as it is equally difficult for us to understand the social environment's regret when mothers are 'forced' to care for their child due to a 'lack of suitable facilities'. Read: crèches! We would expect opposite reactions. Politicians and the media should shout 'Shame' whenever, for economic reasons, society forces a mother and child to prematurely interrupt their affectionate and fundamental dialogue, on which the future of a piece of human society depends.

The breastfeeding period

Symbolic of this physical mother-child intimacy is the breastfeeding period. "It is around the act of feeding that the first relationship is formed. The infant depends in every way on its nurse, with whom it establishes a very intimate, intense and meaningful bond. From the very first feedings, feeding takes place in a social context rich in sensations. Not only taste and smell are involved, but also touch: the baby's lips cling to the nipple, the baby touches and squeezes the mother's breast, the mother supports and caresses the baby. This close contact creates an emotional climate in which sucking, swallowing, digestion and later chewing take on psychological values that go far beyond the act of feeding itself. Milk merges with the mother's body. It is not only good to suck, but also to imagine and dream about. Its smell and taste are associated with feelings of well-being, serenity and affection' (Ferraris, 2006, p. 40).

For Klein (1969, pp. 13-14):

"Under the dominance of oral impulses, the breast is instinctively perceived as the source of nourishment and thus, in a deeper sense, of life itself. When things go well, this contact, both physical and psychic, with the gratifying breast establishes, up to a certain point, the lost prenatal unity with the mother and the feeling of security connected with it [...] in this way the mother becomes a love object'. And again *Klein (1969, p. 14). 'The good breast is introjected, becomes part of the ego; the child, once part of the mother, now has the mother within him'.*

With the mother, therefore, the child initially comes into intimate contact above all with the mouth. This organ is not only a means of nourishment or pleasure, but an instru-

ment that allows it to make contact with the outside world in order to have its first experiences (Isaacs,1995, p. 32). We understand this from the child's behaviour.

Isaacs (1995, p. 33) describes a lactation moment as follows:

"But if the mother withdraws her breast, how quickly her attitude changes! The baby's face becomes flushed, he blushes, he shrieks in pain and anger, he shakes his fists, and his whole body wiggles in protest. If the nipple is returned to him, his body relaxes, his face relaxes, the baby sighs or mutters with relief, and his mouth begins again to satisfy his hunger for nourishment and affection. To offer the breast to the baby, in its first moments of life, is to offer it love; to withdraw or reject the breast is to withdraw or reject love' (Isaacs, 1995, p. 33)

Therefore, delaying feeding the child does not only mean leaving him hungry for a while but also disturbing the flow of his affective gratification. He does not only cry and protest because he is hungry, but also because he feels deprived of affection and does not enjoy the pleasure of sucking.

With regard to the type of breastfeeding there is no doubt that breastfeeding is clearly to be preferred, not only for biological reasons but above all for psychological reasons, since as Winnicott says, (1973, p. 156):

"The offering of the bottle instead of the breast or the substitution of the breast with the bottle during the first weeks of breastfeeding represents, to some extent, a barrier dividing the baby and the mother rather than a bond uniting them. Overall, the bottle cannot adequately replace the breast'.

However, after the first few weeks, the child begins to get used to the regularity of feeding and the rest of the care given to him, so that, certain of constant and stable affection, he has no reason to immediately abandon himself to anxiety and loneliness (Isaacs, 1995, p. 40). Mothers notice this initial growth of the child as they sense that he now knows how to wait more for his needs to be satisfied. "He is more patient", they say.

The mother's arms are not just arms either. If they know how to hold the child and welcome it with softness and openness, they are a source of pleasant and reassuring sensations, they offer the child something very similar to a womb or a soft, warm and welcoming nest. All these pleasant and serene sensations allow it to maintain and grow in confidence in itself, but also in the world in which it is gradually becoming part. This will allow the little human being to travel the road to emotional growth and independence.

The expectations of the infant

The baby recognises the nursing situation and calms down as soon as the mother lifts him up to feed him, as he has quickly learnt to connect the various internal and external sensations. When he is hungry or tense and nervous, he expects his mother to breastfeed or cuddle him, just as when he is dirty or in discomfort, he trusts his mother to clean him. When he is tired of being in the same position, he knows that his mother will come to settle him in a more comfortable position more suitable for his rest. When too much light disturbs his eyes he expects his mother to pull down the blinds. If his mother's behaviour is sufficiently attentive and stable to his needs, his trust in her and thus in

the world outside him increases, while at the same time his esteem in her ability to establish effective relationships increases. If, on the other hand, what he expects does not happen, he remains disoriented and distressed (Osterrieth, 1965, p. 50) and cultivates mistrust and resentment both towards others, as they are incapable of listening, and towards himself, feeling himself to be a powerless victim but also to be incapable.

Per Ackerman[2] (1970, p. 69):

"At birth the child is not a tabula rasa. There are significant hereditary and congenital differences between one child and another. Children vary in physical type, intellectual potential, temperament, metabolism, affectivity, motor activity, nervous reactions. Nevertheless, the influence of the environment in definitively shaping the expression of these potentials is enormous...'.

Therefore, the mother's adaptive capacities to the child's different qualities and realities are crucial. For Bowlby (1982, p. 18):

"Apart from intellectual understanding, which I certainly do not wish to criticise, the right way to bring up a child stems from the mother's sensitivity to her child's reactions and her ability to intuitively adapt her behaviour to the child's needs."

For Winnicott (1987, p. 93) the *'sufficiently good mothers'* at the moment when they have a child in their arms, in order to understand him better, to tune in better with him, regress and make themselves as small as their child. Others,

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[2]   Ackerman N.W., (1970), *Psychodynamics of* Family *Life*, Turin, Boringhieri.

on the other hand, especially today, caught up in work and professional commitments, frightened by this total sharing with their child "... fear this state and are afraid of becoming vegetables, with the consequence that they cling to the vestiges of a career as a precious life and do not even temporarily allow themselves to be totally involved". This can then trigger a vicious circle between mother and child *(negative reciprocity)* that will heavily interfere in the differentiation and development of both partners.

Mother - child messages

During this period, parents and relatives, but especially the mother, send constant messages to the child.

They are auditory messages.

Mothers, all mothers of every culture, race and nation, using a particular tone and words try to cradle, reassure, comfort, express understanding, closeness, attention, pleasure and joy towards their child. They also try to establish understandings that are mutually helpful and compatible. It is not uncommon to hear whispered phrases such as:

'I get it... you want to eat, wait for me to get you. Now... come on... don't be impatient, here's lots of good milk for you. It's really nice my little darling, suck... slowly, please don't be greedy and don't hurt your mommy. Now let's have a nice little burp and go back to sleep. You don't want to sleep? But your mommy does. How are we going to solve this problem? Wait...I'll put you next to me in the bed and you can stay awake as long as you want while your mummy continues her nap...do you like that solution? Yes, I can see that it's to your taste...but don't kick me or I won't be able to get back to sleep.

During the day, mothers talk to their babies to communicate their feelings, expectations, emotions: 'I understand that you are hungry, eat quietly and abundantly but calmly, without stuffing yourself or you won't digest it and you'll get 'colicky'. Your father and grandmother will be here soon. After you've eaten, I'll change you and you'll make a good impression on them. Do you know you are handsome? Do you know that you are the most beautiful baby in the world and that your mummy and daddy love you very much?"

It is easy to hear sentences and speeches such as these, made by mothers to their infants who certainly cannot understand the words but the tone and intentionality underlying the words, yes.

When, on the other hand, mothers have an altered relationship with the child, the most frequently heard phrases are of a very different tenor: 'What is wrong with this child? I've fed him, I've washed him, I've cleaned him: why is he screaming so much? I just don't understand it! I have done everything possible for him and he is never happy. Phew! How boring he is! I'm sure he's as capricious as his father. Besides, with his regurgitations of milk, he's made me all dirty. What a stink I make! I can't take it anymore! As soon as his grandmother comes I'll leave him with her and go outside".

Later, as the areas responsible for interpreting verbal messages mature, the repetition of the same words and phrases on similar occasions enables the child to understand the verbal meaning.

They are visual messages.

The baby, while sucking his mother's breast, often finds himself looking at his mother's face who, in turn,

looks at him smiling, communicating her joy in having him in her arms, her pleasure in holding him to her heart, the gratification she feels in giving him, with her milk, a part of herself. Ultimately the mother, while nourishing her child's body, also gives nourishment to his heart because, as Bartolo (2003, p. 27) says: 'Affective nourishment is as essential to development as, and more so than, the milk that comes from the mother's breast'.

They are tactile messages.

Parents use this type of message a lot: such as kisses and caresses to the face, hands, feet, chest. To calm their child they massage his tummy, give firm, rhythmic taps on his little bottom. Hugs and kisses have not only the purpose of calming but above all tend to gratify, to communicate joy, pleasure, tenderness, attention, acceptance, closeness and trust.

The child receives confirmation of his expectation whenever things happen as usual. This gives him security, since he has definite points of reference, so that his overall situation takes on a positive, beneficial and reassuring value.

The son - mother messages

If maternal messages are numerous, so are the messages sent by the newborn child, although qualitatively different, so that the mother understands its moods: pleasure, interest, joy, or on the contrary anguish, anger, disgust, fear, surprise.

These are *visual messages from the newborn* baby: facial expressions, skin colour, the postures the baby assumes, limb movements.

These are *auditory messages*: the bellowing, the crying, or rather the various types of crying, the vocalisations. For Spiegel (in Aries, 1970, p. 2116)

"In the first two weeks of life, his vocal emissions are not recognisably related to the situation or stimuli. Between the second and fifth week particular sounds come to correspond to particular discomforts and are understood as signs.[...] In the period after early infancy (two to four months), the child becomes more active in communication, and participates more in it both as a receiver and as a sender'.

These are tactile messages: the temperature of his skin, its moisture and texture.

These are odour messages: body odour, sweat, exhaled air.

It is then necessary for the mother, or those who care for the child, to have the possibility and the ability to interpret these various types of messages, giving each of them the most appropriate meaning.

Through these various types of communication, infants not only make their needs known to their mothers but also send them rewards for how hard they work. These rewards are made up of smiles, touches, grimaces, which communicate to the mother: 'You did good. You understood me. You have remedied my need, my discomfort. Thank you for taking action right away!". Such rewards, by gratifying the mother, in turn, are able to enhance the mother's attachment to the baby, activating her more to her caring tasks. 'In a fundamental biological sense, it is not true that the infant expands at the expense of the mother, except under abnormal conditions. We have strong evidence to show that, under normal conditions, the mother's well-being and that of

the infant are one and the same. What is good for the child is good for the mother and vice versa'[3] (Ackerman, 1970, p. 102).

On the contrary, these messages may convey anger, rage, dissatisfaction, disappointment at the mother's lack of ability or modest commitment to her child. In these cases, the woman's frustration may lead, if not well understood and used by her to improve herself, to a greater emotional detachment from the child, but also to negative judgements on him: 'This child has fed me, he is bad and therefore does not deserve much attention and care from me'. A dangerous vicious circle can then be triggered, resulting in severe suffering for both.

For the mother, having good communication skills means being able to listen to and understand her child's needs as expressed by his signals, and then adapting to his needs by providing *correct, coherent and valid responses.* But it also means being able to enjoy and feel fully satisfied with the positive messages sent to her by her little one.

The effects of good and correct mother-child communication lead to openness and acceptance of a place outside the child and thus to openness to the outside world, with the integration of external and internal reality (Winnicott,1987, p.18). The child assimilates external reality by transforming it, if he can, according to his own patterns. He tries to modify himself to suit external reality and to modify external reality to suit himself.

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[3]   Ackerman N.W., (1970), *Psychodynamics of* Family *Life*, Turin, Boringhieri.

The man cub then manages to distinguish *the self* from the other, from the outside, and can construct a boundary membrane, so that it can say: 'I am'. At the same time, having acquired its own individuality, it can truly be part of a group. Subsequently, within this *self*, memories and experiences can be collected and the infinitely complex structure that is proper to the human being's ego, with its numerous physiological and psychological needs, can be built. On the contrary, considerable suffering is caused to the child when, due to misinterpretation or laziness and lack of willingness and commitment, answers are given to him that do not correspond to his needs, are incomplete or partial. In such cases, there can be a kind of disconnection between mother and child, with considerable consequences on the level of mutual attachment.

Correct decoding and consistent answers

Communication does not automatically produce understanding. We adults are also aware of this. Many times, when talking to a spouse or close friend, we say the fateful phrase: 'You didn't understand me'. Yet our mature and rich adult language should be extremely clear to the receiver!

The correct decoding of messages requires certain indispensable conditions:

1. good intellectual abilities;

2. sufficient empathic skills;

3. proper education and good training;

4. willingness to listen;

5. inner serenity;

6. **good skills and willingness to give consistent, stable, complete and satisfactory answers.**

1) **Good intellectual abilities**

These capacities enable the correct acquisition, memorisation, analysis and processing of signals emitted by the child. Morin *(2001. P.98)* calls it*: intellectual or objective understanding.* In this way, at all times, the mother or carer of the infant can use the right and effective keys to interpret. Modest or poor intellectual capacities do not allow this to be done, as the exact interpretation of what is seen, heard, touched, escapes a lacunar and incomplete examination.

2) **Sufficient empathic skills**

Alongside good intellectual abilities, parents, but especially the mother, must have good empathic abilities. That is, they must be able to empathise and identify with the child, to the point of grasping his or her innermost thoughts and moods at all times, without the need for rational analysis. These capacities, which today some scholars link to the good functioning of mirror neurons, allow the mother to be 'particularly receptive in intuitively grasping the emotional and bodily stimuli of the child as if she were experiencing them herself' (Fornaro, 2010, p.10).

3) **Proper education and good training**

A *good mother* or even a *sufficiently good mother* possesses, in her chromosomal makeup, all the potential for a

good interpretation of messages if she has also received an adequate education. The so-called *maternal instinct* is not enough if it is not constantly stimulated, strengthened and developed through education and experience. Unfortunately, this preparation is very much lacking in modern western societies, since in these societies, both at school and in the family, technical-professional preparation is emphasised, useful, in part, only for future employment. Emotional-affective education, on the other hand, is scarcely present, the purpose of which is the development of skills that are indispensable for tackling future roles as mothers and fathers in the best possible way. Therefore, the fundamental specific information and knowledge concerning children's needs, their communication tools, the use they make of them, and the meanings of the signals they emit are not transmitted adequately and at the most opportune times.

Parents also lack the necessary baggage of the most adequate and appropriate responses to be given to the urgings of young children. This difficulty is also compounded by the lack of a long and proper apprenticeship that should be carried out with the little ones in the family sphere: siblings, cousins, nieces and nephews. This deficiency is due to the low number of births, but also to the modest composition of the family network. Even when young children are present, there is often a lack of good, continuous and efficient maternal mentoring, as children are increasingly being entrusted to other institutions such as crèches or to other hands and hearts such as nannies and babysitters.

4) **Willingness to listen**

In order to be able to understand a small human being, such as a newborn child, who mainly uses non-verbal mes-

sages that are difficult to interpret, it is essential that the parents, and especially the mother, manage to create a remarkable silence around and within them. Meanwhile, being able to create *silence on the outside* is easier said than done. If in simpler societies poorer in technological objects, this type of recollection is facilitated, since the living environment favours it, welcomes it and values it, in more complex societies richer in communication tools such as ours, achieving this goal is considerably more difficult and problematic, since others - friends, relatives, colleagues, etc. - expect, demand and want from us certain types of behaviour and not others. They expect us to have at least a mobile phone, a TV set, a radio and a computer connected to the Internet with e-mail where they receive various e-mails and are surprised if they do not see our face on Facebook. Others expect quick, if not immediate responses to every message they send, just as they want our mobile phones and other means of communication to always be active, ready to receive the various calls and messages.

Ultimately, others expect us to be always connected to the global communication network and constantly ready to interact with them. Detaching oneself from this network, even if temporarily, is perceived and judged negatively: only an original, old-fashioned being or one with little education and desire for sociability would behave this way. Therefore, in order not to be misjudged, one is forced to adapt quickly and fully to current usage.

It is equally difficult to create *inner silence*. The expectations and demands of the world of work and the various administrations, the needs of the social environment, are so many that it is extremely difficult to exclude, for the time necessary for reflection, the worries and commitments

that, like a background noise, stir within us, creating confusion, restlessness and anxiety. It therefore becomes difficult and complex to be able to listen to the delicate, subtle and complex signals emitted by the newborn.

It is also difficult to create inner silence when anxiety, depression or stress agitate the soul of those suffering from these problems. Lidz (1977, p.105) had pointed out in the families of schizophrenic patients *"...the parents' inability to perceive, understand or tolerate what does not fit into their rigid defence system. 'Inaccessible' is a term frequently applied to the mothers or fathers of schizophrenic patients to indicate their inability to perceive the emotional needs of the child. The parent can 'hear' but not 'listen' to what the child is saying, and is even more deaf to mute calls'.*

In our super-competitive society, both men and women suffer from this type of stress, especially women, as they are forced to juggle the many roles that modern Western society imposes on them so that they feel perfectly 'free, committed and integrated'. Sarchielli (2010, p.68) describes this type of women as follows:

"Are you a woman who has an agenda full of appointments and things to do, who puts the same commitment, enthusiasm and dedication into small and big tasks at home and at work? In your working environment, are you always busy with different tasks, also tackled simultaneously, and do you find in them the main source of your personal identity? Do they require you to handle every responsibility to the best of your ability, without compromise and delegation and without ever saying no? Do you strive to get the most out of your various roles as an individual, daughter, girlfriend, wife, mother, career woman? Do you always want to

prove that you are better than others in your work, childca-
re, family, sports, appearance, emotional relationships, and
social life? Do you rarely tend to pull the plug, to stop and
give yourself a rest? If all this fits your profile, you pro-
bably belong to the category of superwomen.

These types of superwomen who want to do *everything and well*, realise sooner or later that they are doing *too much and too badly* and that they have fallen into a self-imposed social trap (Sarchielli, 2010, p.69), as they soon notice that their malaise is also associated with the malaise of their children and those close to them.

Another characteristic that restricts and limits the ability and possibility to listen is the personality in which a hypertrophic ego is present. This personality type is often inclined to reflect little, as it believes it already possesses all the information needed to understand and make decisions. In these cases, the overconfidence, resulting in a lack of thoughtfulness, prevents one from pausing to check both what the small child feels and the quality and usefulness of the answers given.

5) **Sufficient inner serenity**

A good inner serenity is indispensable for correct and healthy communication between mother and child.

All the psychological alterations caused by anxiety, depression, irritability, easy excitability, but also by excessive stress, the use of alcohol and drugs of all kinds, disturb the parent-child dialogue more or less intensely, more or less severely. These alterations of the psyche especially affect the most delicate and complex communications such as those between a young child and its mother.

6) **Good ability and willingness to give consistent, stable, complete and satisfactory answers**

It is not enough to listen to a message, it is not enough to interpret it correctly, it is also necessary to be able to give stable and coherent answers over time, complete and satisfactory with respect to the infant's needs. *The coherent response* involves subsequent actions that are in tune with the request contained in the message. "I realised you are thirsty so I am giving you a drink". *The incoherent response,* on the other hand, disregards the incoming message: "I understand that you are thirsty but since I am arguing at the moment and don't feel like getting up, I pretend not to understand and tell you to be good and quiet". To avoid giving a coherent answer one can do even worse, such as accusing the son of making inappropriate requests: "Is it possible that every time I enjoy chatting with friends you have to disturb me with your requests?"

The response is stable over time when the subject continues to offer the same type of positive behaviour. *Responses are complete and satisfactory* when the child's needs are fully and not only partially satisfied.

Incorrect decoding and inconsistent answers

Difficulties in correct decoding and in giving stable, coherent, complete and satisfactory answers can be caused by:

1. Poor sensitivity to incoming signals.

2. Misinterpretation of signals.

3. Negative judgements of the son.

4. Incorrect or excessive assumptions.

5. Egocentric view of reality.

6. Difficulties in adapting to the needs of the child.

1. *Poor sensitivity to incoming signals*

There are parents who only sense a signal from their child if it is very intense, vigorous and constant. Otherwise, it is as if it does not exist. One can take the example of deaf-mutes who are only activated when the signal that reaches the auditory system is very strong. Similarly, in some people, due to inner problems, anxieties, worries and stress, the perceptive threshold is higher than normal, so that they only perceive the message if it is loud and exceeds the barrier of their inner thoughts. This naturally irritates the infant who would like, instead, to be quickly understood and satisfied in his essential needs, without the need to cry loudly and despair before getting his due.

2. *Misinterpretation of signals*

The signal or signals that the small child emits may come to our consciousness normally, but be misinterpreted. For example: the mother may mistakenly think that her baby is crying because he needs to be rocked, when in fact he only wants to be changed position. Therefore, being rocked not only fails to achieve the goal of calming him down, but on the contrary may make him more nervous, as he feels misunderstood or, worse, fears that he is unable to make

himself understood. The same thing happens when the mother thinks that his crying is due to hunger, so she tries to feed him, whereas his crying was caused by abdominal colic and therefore the added food only increases the child's indisposition. And again: the mother thinks that the wriggling in the cot means that he is no longer sleepy and so she turns on the light and opens the shutters so that the baby wakes up completely, when in fact these movements of the baby are due to the lack of restful sleep that makes him restless.

As we have seen, sometimes behaviour is carried out that is the exact opposite of what is necessary and useful at the time. It must be added, however, that although they make mistakes, some mothers learn quickly from their mistakes and correct their aim, while others, inflexible, continue undaunted to maintain the same unsuitable behaviour, so that the suffering of the child, also made up of anger, will be more intense and prolonged over time.

3. *Negative judgments about the son*

Some parents, in order not to admit their own errors of judgement, blame their child by giving him undeserved negative judgements: 'This child is naughty and capricious, he doesn't even know what he wants and does nothing but bother me unnecessarily. So get on with it. Cry and scream all you want. I will not get involved in his whims. The same behaviour is practised by those parents who tend to focus their attention on themselves and are therefore unwilling to listen to the needs of others if they are not in line with their own. These parents, if they find an infant who is quickly attuned to their needs and habits so that he easily accepts

their schedules, so he sleeps when they sleep, stays awake when they are awake, eats when they eat, and so on, they manage to establish a good relationship with him, but if by chance the little one has different sleep-wake rhythms or feeds at different times than they had planned, they get hung up and resist his calls. "Not to give in to his whims and to educate him well!" they will say, when in reality they are only defending their own needs and habits.

4. *Incorrect or excessive assumptions*

Wrong assumptions can arise from personal ideas, influenced by preconceptions or from partial and limited experience. Wrong assumptions can also come from the passive acceptance of one of the many theories circulating on the Internet, in books, newspapers, in unqualified magazines, on TV and radio. This phenomenon has expanded considerably today as, unlike in the past, we are constantly bombarded by a great mass of unreliable and serious information. The large number of hours of broadcasting and the numerous pages of newspapers to be filled with content mean that it is difficult for the editors of TV and radio stations or newspapers to accurately select and verify information. This often results in little or no adherence to a minimum of truth and scientific seriousness. Among other things, many information tools, in order to report something different and unusual, search for and present not the most usual and reliable news, but those that may strike the attention and imagination of listeners or readers.

All this negatively affects parents, especially the more fragile, immature and anxious mothers and fathers. Hence a considerable variety of attitudes and behaviour from one

parent to another, as some accept a certain theory and make it their own, while others put into practice a very different, if not opposite theory. Often the same parents, over time, change their behaviour and attitudes, according to the prevailing and fashionable theory at the time, or choose the one most congenial to their personal and individual needs. In this babel of information we find, in the relationship with minors, a great variety of attitudes and behaviour. Even worse, it can happen that within the same couple the father implements a certain educational line and the mother implements a completely different and contrasting educational project. It can happen, for example, that the father insists that the mother breast-feed the baby when he cries and demands to eat (*breast-feeding on demand),* while the mother insists that the baby eat at specific times, so as to educate him to accept physiological times between feeds (*timetabled breast-feeding).* Similarly, some parents, not wanting the child to 'get used to it badly', never pick up their children, while others, following the example of the Maasai in Tanzania, always keep them on their arms.

This multiplicity of educational and caring behaviours and attitudes does not seem very rational to us since we know that the true and deep needs of minors do not change over time and therefore educational methods should not be excessively different from one couple to another or from one person to another. Having lost, because it is erroneously considered unscientific, the traditional culture filtered through millions of direct experiences and transmitted orally to successive generations, does considerable damage to the consistency and educational style of new parents.

5. *Egocentric view of reality*

The *egocentric view of* reality becomes evident whenever we think that the child must love, desire or reject and hate, what we love, desire, reject or hate: "Since I feel hot, I think my child must also feel hot". "Since I like a certain food, I think the child must also necessarily like the same food". The egocentric view inserts, as the basis of one's behaviour, one's own feelings, desires, emotions, personal view of reality and not the tastes, desires and needs of the other. This seeing reality with one's own eyes and with one's own feeling and not with the needs of others, makes it difficult to accept other ways of being and other experiences. Therefore, consequent behaviour follows these incorrect parallels.

6. ***Difficulties in adapting to the infant's needs.***

Sometimes parents fully understand their child's request(s), but do not have sufficient energy or desire to fulfil them: "I understand that he asks me to feed him but, at this moment, despite my good will, I do not have sufficient strength to satisfy him". "I understand that he would like to be hugged to feel protected but, since I feel fragile at this moment and therefore it is I who would like to be hugged, so that I feel safe and comforted, I cannot fulfil his wish and need".

The lack of willingness, strength and energy to give the child the necessary care may be due:

❖ *to numerous organic conditions* such as debilitating diseases, hormonal deficits, alcohol abuse, drug use or psychotropic drugs;

❖ *to psychological disorders of* a certain severity, such as psychosis (depression, schizophrenia), stress after-effects, anxiety or severe and persistent neurosis;

❖ *to excessive, psychologically or physically debilitating work commitments and activities.* This is a very common situation today. The consumer society stimulates and succeeds in convincing many parents to become over-active in their work commitments, in order to have the money necessary to satisfy ever-increasing and more often than not absolutely superfluous demands and needs, proposed by advertising as essential. Thus, awareness of the emotional and care needs of children clashes with the need to replenish the bank account as much as possible.

❖ to the *presence, in the parents, of a lazy or selfishly immature ego*;

❖ *the lack of a deep emotional attachment to* the child. In these cases of disaffection, there is often an unwillingness to meet demands, perceived as boring or excessive occupations. In this case, the parents, while understanding the child's needs, prefer to occupy themselves with other things they consider more pleasant, interesting and gratifying;

❖ *loneliness in coping with care and educational tasks.* Loneliness due to the physical absence or lack of cooperation of the other spouse and the family network. Here too, children are given unstable, inconsistent or unsatisfactory answers. This is the case

both when it is only the mother who leads the family (*mother-centred* family), and conversely, when it is only the father who leads the family *(father-centred family)*. There is ample evidence that the most attentive and effective care takes place when both parents are present and relate harmoniously with help, support and mutual respect.

The consequences

When parents have problems in communication or do not give consistent and stable, complete and satisfactory answers, the consequences are considerably severe:

- the child feels that there is no point in communicating if one is not heard or if one's requests are not granted (Lidz, 1977, p. 115).

- the child may imagine something even more serious: that it is harmful to communicate if his or her requests have a negative effect on others. For example, if it increases their anxiety, if it leads them to clash, if it accentuates their aggressive and rejecting behaviour;

- the child can learn not to trust in the possibilities inherent in communication;

- the child may believe that one should not rely on parents, adults and human beings in general. When serious flaws in communication between parent and child persist, mistrust of others may spread to all external reality and, consequently, a closure *(autism)* to

the real world may set in. The child in such cases remains alone and a prisoner of his anxieties, fears, fantasies and mental processing (Winnicott,1987, p.7).

These difficulties or this communicative and affective illiteracy appears to be constantly, continuously increasing in the Western world for various reasons:

- the formation of parental couples takes place, in the best of cases, on the basis of amorous sentiment, while, in the worst cases, the fire of falling in love, passion or the sexual attraction of the moment is sometimes enough to start a couple. Thus, in these choices and decisions, one's own and the other's capacities, which are indispensable for being good mothers or fathers, are not properly valued;

- the commitment to cultural acquisitions is mainly aimed at notions useful for first passing school-type questions and examinations, while, subsequently, such training is often aimed at obtaining good professional skills or, worse still, only a rich curriculum to present in various competitions. Meanwhile, preparation for effective communication, which is necessary when dealing with a young child, is underestimated;

- training in caring for and listening to an infant is absent or scarcely present in the lives of both men and women;

- the increase in the number of young people with more or less serious psychological disorders, increases the number of cases of parents presenting serious difficulties in communication, together with little possibility and willingness to give consistent, stable, complete and satisfactory answers.

The qualities of the mother-child relationship

Per Sullivan (1962, p. 22):

"Even before they learn language, all human beings, including those of the lowest mental level, have learnt certain patterns of relationship with a mother or whoever is raising them. These early patterns become the foundations, completely underground but very solid, on which so many things will later come to rest'.

The characteristics of the infant and the mother give rise to the complexity of this relationship, which can be made up of encounters and clashes, emotional agreements or disagreements, gratifying or frustrating for one and the other (De Negri et al., 1970, p. 127).

For Klein (1969, p. 15):

"It is inevitable that disappointments and pleasant experiences arise together and reinforce the innate conflict between love and hate, i.e. between the instincts of life and death; this leads the child to feel that there is a good breast and a bad breast".

Since a symbiotic union is initially present between child and mother, for Ackerman :

"The mother's stabilising faculties, appropriate to the needs of growth and change, must cover the needs of the

two persons functioning as one. Any deficiency or distortion in the mother's homeostatic faculties will immediately reveal itself in the form of malfunctioning complementarity and interchange between mother and child. The result will be a weakening of the infant's homeostatic development' (Ackerman, 1970, p. 101).

For these reasons there can be, in the eyes and heart of the child, a *'good mother' and 'a bad mother'.*

Characteristics of the 'good' mother

For an infant, a mother is good when:

❖ She knows how to read his or her needs, wants, hopes and desires in his or her soul and face. For Winnicott (1987, p. 93) 'a good mother knows what the child needs at that particular moment';

❖ understands and knows everything that brings him satisfaction, joy, serenity and security, but also everything that gives him anxiety, anguish, fear, tension, insecurity. For Sullivan (1962, p.58), tension due to the child's needs induces tension in the mother. This tension is experienced as tenderness and as an impulse to activities that bring relief to the child's needs;

❖ quickly adapts and learns to offer positive elements for his or her soul, while managing to push away the causes that provoke negative emotions. "This capacity to adapt is the most important thing for the child's emotional development and the mother adapts to his needs, especially in the beginning, when he is only able to grasp the simplest situations" (Winnicott, 1973, p. 143). Adaptive capacities are indispensable

as children are significantly different from one another. Not only that, but their needs and requirements change over time;

❖ He knows how to make his home warm and welcoming through love. He knows how to illuminate it with his smile. He knows how to make it alive and palpitating with his presence;

❖ is able to welcome her child into her arms naturally and spontaneously, easily finding the best position for him to breastfeed and to make him feel comfortable: protected and safe;

❖ With his smile and his words, he knows how to offer the newborn's heart numerous signals of presence, relaxation, communion and sharing;

❖ can protect him from all situations that could cause him excessive trauma or stress, fears and anxieties: loud and sudden noises, sudden bumps and touches, excessive changes in temperature, frequent changes in daily routine;

❖ is happy when her son is asleep, but she is equally happy when he is awake and wants to eat, play and be cuddled by her;

❖ manages effortlessly to derive satisfaction, gratification and joy from his care and education tasks;

❖ is happy when her baby wants to hold her hands, wants to touch her arms, neck, hair and breasts;

❖ she is not afraid of being woken in the middle of the night to quench her baby's hunger, thirst, suffering and discomfort;

❖ is readily and happily activated to satisfy not only his physical needs but also his affective ones, as when the little one, in order to banish anxieties and fears, needs and desires his presence, seeks his contact, waits for his cuddles, wants to be intoxicated by his perfume;

❖ she does not go into crisis because of her screams that seem uncontrollable, as she has confidence in herself, in her ability to understand and respond adequately to the needs of her child, but she also has confidence and esteem in the child's ability to overcome, with her help, moments of crisis and discouragement;

❖ She does not see her son as a little devil ready to cry his eyes out to get her and the others who look after him into trouble. She does not see him as a cruel tyrant who prevents her from resting or sleeping when and how she wishes. She does not see him as a capricious brat, never content and paid for, nor as an insubordinate little being who wants to eat, sleep or stay awake outside the canonical hours;

❖ has fun with him at many times of the day: when he has to be changed and his tummy, his little hands, are there ready to be kissed and caressed; or when it is bath time and the little one is happy to splash the water from the tub all around the room!

- ❖ the good mother rejoices, together with her son, at his first 'stunts', such as when he finally manages to take off his annoying little woollen shoes and can wiggle his bare feet in the air or, even better, when these little feet can greedily lick and suck them!

- ❖ She also makes mistakes but, from her son's reactions, she soon learns where and why she went wrong and quickly corrects herself;

- ❖ consistently tries to maintain a good stability and continuity in care and schedules so as to avoid unforeseen events, so odious for young children as a source of alarm and insecurity. For Bowlby, (1982, p. 109): *'We have ample evidence that human beings of all ages are more serene and able to hone their wits to greater advantage if they can trust that there are trustworthy people at their side who will come to their aid in case of difficulty'. The trusted person, also known as the attachment figure, can be seen as the one who provides companionship along with a secure base from which to operate';*

- ❖ she does not feel disgusted by the smelly liquid and solid 'presents' that her child lavishes on her at the most inopportune moments and she does not get upset at having to wipe her little bottom while, ready to go out, she has just put on the most elegant dress and put on the most seductive perfume, to make him and herself look good;

- ❖ He is in no hurry. She is in no hurry when she has to change him. She is in no hurry when he goes to the

breast or bottle, she is in no hurry to get him to sleep, she is in no hurry when she has to clean him or bathe him. A good mother is never in a hurry, in short.

❖ doesn't watch TV when she breastfeeds him or wants to play with her, because she judges her baby's little face as beautiful and interesting when, with his beautiful smiles, he looks at her, when, with his little grimaces and big yawns, he wants to fall asleep;

❖ does not talk on the mobile phone when he is eating or wants to play and communicate with her. She knows that if it is nice to talk with friends or with one's parents and relatives, it is even nicer to play and talk with one's child;

❖ never raises her voice, let alone shouts. The good mother speaks softly, does not get angry but understands and forgets;

❖ does not neglect him or continually leave his child in extraneous hands. Nor does she place her child in those institutional places called nests, but which have nothing of the true family nest. She knows that for her child safety and serenity are his warm, bright face, his soothing voice, his body that smells of milk and mother.

Ultimately, a mother is 'good' when she manages to meet the physical and psycho-affective needs of her child. The innate characteristics present in children are capable of making up, at least in part, for maternal deficiencies, so it is

not absolutely necessary for a mother to be perfect. A *sufficiently good mother* is already suited to giving her child what is necessary for its healthy development.

Characteristics of the 'bad' mother

Contrary to what they said above, for a newborn child a mother is '*bad*' when:

- ❖ *He absents himself excessively, without giving due consideration to his son's anxieties and fears.* For these, any separation from the mother is harmful (Osterrieth, 1965, p. 55), since her absence deprives him of fundamental and stable points of reference. We know that these anxieties and fears drive the child into a situation of suffering and chaos, and so negative emotions tend to prevail in such situations. For Bowlby (1982, p. 51), when the mother leaves him for some time, the child goes through three phases. In the first phase (*protest phase),* which can last many days, the child protests his mother's absence by asking for her, crying profusely and becoming angry even for trivial reasons. In the second phase (*phase of despair)* the child, as he realises that his hopes for his mother's return are unsuccessful, calms down but becomes consumed with the desire for her to return. Often these two phases alternate. In the third *phase (detachment phase),* the child seems to have forgotten about the mother. He appears disinterested when talking about her and when

she reappears he may show signs of not recognising her. In each of these phases the child is easily subject to excesses of anger and episodes of destructive behaviour, often of a violent kind (Bowlby 1982, p. 52). When the mother returns home, she remains insensitive for a while and does not manifest any needs. When she collapses, her ambivalent feelings manifest themselves. On the one hand there is a clinging to the mother: when she leaves him, even if only for a short time, he manifests intense anguish and anger, on the other hand he manifests considerable anger and aggression towards her, as if to punish her for her behaviour. If, however, the separation has been excessive, there is a risk that the child will no longer bond with the mother (Bowlby 1982, p. 52). If the child's care is entrusted to a person with distinctly maternal characteristics, the disappearance of the mother is not felt until the age of three months, as he is not aware of people and objects as entities distinct from him, subsequently, but especially after the age of seven months, he suffers greatly. Around the age of four, when the child is in an egocentric phase, he may even think that his mother has disappeared because he has been bad (Wolff, 1970, p. 8), or has had negative thoughts about her in the past.

❖ *He frequently changes his normal habits,* disregarding the fact that children, like all small animals, are creatures of habit. They only feel tranquillity and trust when events around them always unfold in the same way. Changes, especially if sudden and inadequately prepared, make them anxious and burden them with fears that, in the eyes of adults, appear strange and excessive, when in fact they are only the logical consequence of inappropriate behaviour and attitudes.

❖ *He frequently performs unpleasant or painful actions on himself* or has others (doctors, therapists, nurses, etc.) perform them without real necessity.

❖ *She lives her relationship with her child with anxiety and fear.* An anxious mother is alarmed too often and unnecessarily. She is alarmed if she sometimes eats little, does not eat or eats too much. She worries if at the usual time she does not, as she should, take her 'good poop' or takes too much. She is afraid that her breasts might infect him, and she washes and squeezes the nipple so that it is perfectly clean and sterile, disregarding the baby's desire to satisfy his hunger and thirst, but also to feel the 'real taste and smell' of her body. She is distressed for the most trivial reasons: sometimes she fears that her child's face is too red, sometimes that it is too pale. Someti-

mes she fears seeing him 'too sleepy', other times 'too awake to be "normal". The restless mind of an anxious mother cannot correctly distinguish the boundary between normality and pathology, between wellbeing and illness, so she involves the child in visits, check-ups, therapies and treatments that are absolutely useless but often counterproductive for her and the infant's psychological wellbeing.

❖ *He perceives his son as a capricious and uncontrollable stranger*, difficult to understand and above all impossible to satisfy. "What else do I have to do for him: I have nursed him, I have cleaned him, I have changed him, and he keeps screaming like an obsessive. I give him my breast and he spits out the nipple. I give him milk and he squeals as he seems to drown himself. The more I rock him, the more restless he gets. No, this is not a baby: he is a raging devil'.

❖ Contrary to what we have just said, *she can be extremely cold and imperturbable.* Indifferent to everything concerning her son. Deaf to his calls, she continues to read the book that excites her; she insists on watching her favourite programme on TV; she continues to chat with her friends or whoever is willing to listen. This type of mother cares little whether her child sleeps or is awake, smiles or

squeals, fidgets or quietly admires the world around him. When she is forced to feed him or give him a drink, when she has to rock him to sleep, she does it reluctantly, as a duty to be fulfilled, to avoid being disturbed too much by his shrieking or being blamed by her mother-in-law or husband for not caring about the child. Her happiest moment is when she can place her child in someone else's hands, no matter which. It can be the hands of her husband, those of her mother or mother-in-law, those of the baby sitter or nanny. The important thing is that someone takes that burden and care away from her, so that she can return to her favourite occupations.

- ❖ *She is strict in the care and satisfaction of her newborn's needs*: 'If the paediatrician has told me that I have to feed him every four hours, it is useless for him to scream: if the four hours are not up, I won't give him any milk'. "The paediatrician recommended that I keep him well covered, so it is useless for him to kick in the heat to try to take off the blankets I put on him; I will continue to put them back on".

- ❖ *She is not able to read her child's needs,* nor can she understand the dark mysteries of infant crying, so she is not consistent in her attitudes. Often, when the child cries, the mother puts the advice she receives into practice in a haphazard manner, without

ever being able to fully understand whether what she is doing is good or not, whether her behaviour will have positive or negative effects.

❖ *She has great difficulty in learning from mistakes,* so the indications suggested by her son's attitudes, but also those expressed by the people around her or by the doctors consulted, do not change or change very little her erroneous behaviour.

❖ *She asks herself every day: "What did I do wrong to be born a woman and thus have to take care of this little monster called a child?"*

❖ *He sees his fulfilment in everything he does or could do*, rather than in emotional experiences. The more she does, the more capable and strong she feels. When she does not occupy herself with something she feels depressed, sad and dull. She feels she has irretrievably lost the time spent taking care of things 'that all women are capable of doing', precisely because of their female biology, such as bringing a child into the world, nursing it, cleaning it, pampering it. These purely maternal actions she deems insulting, as well as boring and unworthy of a real woman.

If we had to summarise, we could then say that a mother is 'bad' when she is unable, either because of her limita-

tions or because of her choices, to satisfy and enjoy the physical and psycho-affective needs of her child. Therefore, the amount, duration and intensity of the frustrations she makes him suffer are excessive.

From what we have said we can conclude that the affective fulfilment of the infant and the infant is not measured, therefore, only by generic expressions of sympathy or loving words spoken towards him. Affective satisfaction is made up of commitment to its physical and psychological needs, a continuous and effective commitment, expressed and implemented in a climate of love, joy, serenity and balance (De Negri et al., 1970, p.143).

Who is the mother?

All scholars agree that for the peaceful growth of a child, the relationship with the mother is the most important and fundamental. But who is the mother in the first days and months of the new human being's life? As we have said, at birth the child does not yet have an awareness of anything outside him. He does not yet have the development of the self, nor does he have the concept of a person different from another. When this something outside him begins to form and materialise *(the dyad)* the whole external environment takes on the contours of what we call 'mother'.

Therefore, *the good mother* is made by her warm bosom from which nourishment but also fulfilment flows.

The good mother is her soft and welcoming womb, it is her arms that welcome the child, cradle it and comfort it, when anguish grips it.

The good mother is also a clean and bright environment in which there are no excessive or sudden noises, let alone irritated cries or outbursts of anger.

A good mother is a father who knows how to cradle and protect him. A father who knows how to gently caress his child's body, knows how to make his life partner serene and secure.

A good mother is a grandmother or grandfather who gently relates to him, while at the same time, giving advice and teaching the mother-in-law, but also the new father, how to meet their child's needs, his needs, his wishes, but also how to allay his fears and anxieties. A good mother is a grandfather or grandmother who makes an effort to make the new parents understand the meanings of crying, which always seems to be the same in every circumstance but which little by little differs and therefore is not the same.

A good mother is also the child's feeling when there is mutual respect, benevolence and helpfulness between the parents combined with a warm, serene understanding. Understanding that he feels from the relaxed, serene arms that welcome him, from the tone of their voice, from the attention they pay to each other.

Likewise, we have a duty to extend the concept of the *bad mother.*

A bad mother can also have the appearance of a *nursery* where children are cared for in an aseptic and formal manner by 'specialised' personnel, but unable to relate in a warm and welcoming manner with the little guests, while mothers and children are robbed of that magical and precious moment in which their union, closeness and contact should have led to a fruitful dialogue, a strong understanding and a close bond. A bond that is indispensable for both

mothers and children to establish and get off to a good start on a common, fruitful path.

A bad mother can be a hospital or rehabilitation environment that pays little attention to the psychological needs of young children. For Winnicott (1987, p. 75), in some cases offences are also perpetrated by the doctors, nurses and staff who care for the child on the days when he or she is in an in-patient facility. These staff are sometimes more concerned with the cleanliness, management and organisation of the facility than with the emotions and feelings that stir and live in the souls of their young guests.

A bad mother can look like a kindergarten where the staff caring for the children lack the qualities, skills and maternal love, but above all they do not provide the child with the dialogue, continuity, stability and communion that he is looking for.

A bad mother can also be a father who fears diverting attention and time away from his myriad occupations, thereby neglecting his specific tasks of caring for his child.

A bad mother can take the form of a grandmother or grandfather who, rather than giving their own contribution, closeness and care to the parents and child, prefer to engage their time in other occupations, depriving their grandchild of the multiplicity of contributions that could and should have enriched and satisfied them.

A bad mother may look like a family or two parents in which conflict, coldness, confrontation and fighting rage. A family in which aggressive attitudes, verbal and non-verbal violence, distrust and intransigence are frequent and usual.

It therefore seems right to us to extend, as many scholars have done before us: Sullivan, Fromm, Horney, Erikson, Haley, the concept of the mother, to the environment

surrounding the child, since it is this environment that, in many cases, positively or negatively conditions the child's inner world.

Per Lidz (1977, p.28):

"The family, of course, is not the only factor influencing the evolution of the child. All societies depend on other institutions outside the family to provide for its acculturation process, and this requirement increases as society becomes more complex'.

For these reasons, whenever a child is harmed, we must all feel responsible for it, individually and collectively, without placing the blame solely on the shoulders of the mother or father. The so-called 'disturbed' child is not only the result of a mother or father with problems, but is also the consequence of a sick society that directly or indirectly acts negatively on children.

We must also necessarily specify that unlike us adults, the young child does not, at least initially, make the *good or bad mother* an ethical or moral issue. For the infant, the behaviour of his caregivers is a vital issue. If a mother is good, he has a chance of surviving and growing up well; if not, there is a serious risk that he may be greatly impaired in his physical and/or psychic development.

It must also be added that the same person caring for the infant, the same family group, the same environment, can be good or bad depending on the circumstances or at different times. Good when their behaviour is appropriate to the infant's needs, bad when it is not. Since, as Sullivan (1962, p. 110) says, the good mother is a symbol of impending satisfaction, the bad mother is a symbol of malaise and distress. This is why it is natural for the child to establish a greater bond, understanding and availability with the good

mother, whereas it reacts towards the bad mother with more irritability, restlessness, aggression, little or modest bonding and dialogue, if not outright closure. For this reason, if he perceives that the mother with positive characteristics of helpfulness, affection and tenderness arrives at his call, he calms down, but if the 'bad' mother arrives, because she is anxious, tense, irritable, inattentive or with little helpfulness, he continues to cry and his restlessness is accentuated. This triggers a vicious circle: the more the mother neglects or does not understand the child's needs, the more the child responds with restlessness, crying, refusal of food, gastrointestinal disorders, decreased immune defences and thus more illnesses. Such illnesses and ailments, in turn, undermine the already poor patience of these parents and relatives, who will respond with more anxiety and nervousness that will be transmitted to the child by accentuating the symptoms of malaise.

The various maternal types.

We have spoken of a *good mother and a bad mother*. In reality, between these two extremes there are all those mothers and all those family environments in which on one side there is for the child the maximum of gratification, well-being and serenity, while on the opposite side there is for him the maximum of suffering and anxiety. Therefore, between a *very good mother* and a *very bad mother* there is no clear separation, but a *continuum* of attitudes and therefore of 'maternal' types in which the infant finds himself relating.

Judgements about the child by the mother and the living environment.

Just as the child identifies from the characteristics of the environment whether or not it is suited to his needs and requirements, the people around him: the mother, the father, the other family members and the social environment in which he lives, also make their own judgement on the new-born and the infant, just as they had already made their own judgement even before he was born, as to whether or not this event was appropriate.

These judgements and evaluations have objective traits but they also have many subjective elements linked to the people who are confronted with the new human being. And just as in the eyes of the child there may be a good mother or a bad mother, in the eyes of the parents and other family members there may be an *easy child or a difficult child*, ultimately a *good child or a bad child.* The elements that combine to designate in the eyes and hearts of the people who are close to the little human being, a greater or lesser underlining of positive or negative aspects, and therefore a greater or lesser acceptance, are numerous but also difficult to assess, not only by those who examine the problem from the outside, but also and above all by those involved in the relationship.

For Sullivan (1962, p.135): 'The mother's personification of the child is not the child but rather an organisation of developing experiences that takes place in the mother and includes many factors whose relationship to the real child is remote'. Genetic characteristics are included in the embodiment: there are infants who are much more accepting of their mother's mistakes and lack of attention than others,

while there are children who protest and get angry over the slightest thing.

Besides the peculiarities that the child carries in its genes, the image we have of the child is influenced by many other elements:

❖ there is meanwhile *the greater or lesser desirability of the event*. Is this child desired or not? And by whom is it desired? Only by the mother, only by the father, by both? Is it desired by the grandparents? Or do the latter fear that this pregnancy, which in some way involves them in helping and caring for the mother and child, is inappropriate? But how does society, as a whole, view the birth of a new human being? As a new problem to be dealt with, since even before birth this event entails commitments and expenses for the community, or as a gift that society can enjoy?

❖ the second element, which is equally important, is related to the *immediate consequences of her presence.* What has her existence, starting from the first months or days of pregnancy, caused? What has it changed in a positive or negative sense?

Anna's description is symptomatic of a good reception.
"Before I was expecting Mario, I was nervous and irritable because, since I was a child, I was afraid that I would

not be able to have children, whom I cared for very much. The moment I knew I was expecting him, however, I was relieved, in fact I was so happy that I felt like I could touch heaven with my finger. He too, Giulio, my husband, was happy and did not know what to do to make me understand his joy. I had never had so much attention from him: he cuddled me, he told me I had become more beautiful, sweeter, he immediately gave me an important gift. But his parents were also very sweet. Before we got married and even afterwards, I felt I was looked at by them strangely, with suspicion. As if to say: 'Let's see who this one is, let's see what she can do'. The moment I told them I was expecting a child, which was then their first grandchild, they changed radically. They started treating me like a queen. My mother-in-law brought me almost every day something good to eat that she had prepared and they immediately said they wanted to give us the cot and the pushchair. For the first time in my life I was the centre of attention of everyone except the boss of the shop where I work. But I didn't really care about him! I was also fine because I didn't have those vomits and ailments that so many women complain of."

Roberta's description is very different:

"I wanted a child at all costs. He, my husband, would have wanted it too, but he did nothing and was not willing to make any sacrifice to have it. Everything the doctors told us to do: tests, therapies, investigations, he protested. Then when they proposed artificial insemination and I agreed, he took me for a fool. I managed to convince him and we tried several times until I got pregnant. I was happy because I had achieved what I wanted, but he and his parents sulked at me. They didn't understand that I was sacrificing myself for them too.

Even during my pregnancy there was no shortage of problems. I was afraid of losing the baby and so the slightest hint of something going wrong made me run to the gynaecologist. He and also his people accused me of wasting money on my 'fixations'. We started fighting. I blamed him for not loving me and the baby I was expecting. He accused me of being a neurotic lunatic for doing all those things to get pregnant with Roberta. We had bought a house and there was the mortgage to pay, and he used to tell me that it would be my fault if, not being able to pay the instalment, we also lost the house. In short, a hell that reached its climax when I found out, from the numerous text messages on his mobile phone, that he was cheating on me with a girl much younger than me. Do you understand? While I was sacrificing myself in doing therapies and tests to get pregnant, he was with a girl he had met at work and with whom he was very much in love. At least that's how it seemed from the various text messages'.

> ❖ *considerations* about the child are already accentuated *after the birth.* Was this event easy, difficult or clearly pathological, so that painful and distressing interventions were necessary, which caused negative emotions in the mother but also in the father and family members? Did the mother suffer from postpartum depression or not? And overall, how much did pain, suffering and fear affect the parents and family members, and how much gratification and joy?

❖ To the desire or not to have a child, to the problems experienced during the pregnancy, to the relationships that have changed or not since the beginning of this event or even before, one must add *the expectations regarding sex.* Does the unborn child have the sex desired by one of the elements of the couple, by both, or by neither? Does it have the sex expected by the grandparents or not?

❖ On the judgement of the family members, but above all of the mother, the ease or difficulty of governing and caring for the child is also very important. *The easy child* quickly acquires regular sleeping, waking and eating habits; he adapts easily to the schedules and needs of his parents and family; he cries little, accepts the new foods offered to him and regularly increases his weight; he does not constantly soil himself. *The difficult child*, on the other hand, eats poorly, cries frequently, does not gain as much weight as he should; his sleeping and waking times do not coincide with his parents' needs and habits; he needs to be cleaned and changed constantly, because he gets dirty easily. Alongside the easy child and the difficult child, there is unfortunately also *the problem child*. The presence of an illness or disability complicates the parents' image

of him even more, with possible feelings of incapacity, disappointment, anger, guilt and/or mutual accusations;

❖ *The* parents' and family members' judgement is also influenced by *the newborn baby's outward appearance.* Feelings, reflections and emotions are aroused: his birth weight, hair and skin colour, facial features, body details. In the meantime, there is the game, which is not really a game as its consequences can be significant, about its similarities: "Does it resemble my husband whom I love or my mother-in-law whom I can't stand?" "Does it resemble the child I had always imagined or is it very different, even the opposite of the one I dreamt of?" "Is it a child judged beautiful by others, or do the people who come to visit me look at it with ill-concealed disappointment?" For Debray and Belot (2009, p. 36): "The appropriation of the infant by the father and mother is generally facilitated if one or the other can recognise themselves in its physical appearance. Being able to find similarities with oneself or one's relatives reduces the feeling of foreignness and integrates the newcomer into the extended family'. These and a thousand other questions are not irrelevant when establishing the first relationship with the

child. The consequences can be considerable. Since we often find in others what we are looking for, if we think that the child in our arms must be as good as its father, that child will be as good as its father. But if we imagine that he has to be a 'pest' like the grandfather, grandmother or uncle he resembles, he will most likely appear to us, and perhaps actually become, a 'pest' child. He will be the naughty child who 'does not let me sleep at the times I am used to resting'. He will be the baby who causes problems: "He does not latch on well to the breast and forces me to use the annoying breast pump". It will be the aggressive baby: "He plays at scratching and hurting me, biting my nipples". It will be the baby who generates anxiety because 'he does not gain weight and vomits what he swallows'. Later he will be the capricious child who 'cries constantly and continually gets sick and forces me to give up all the little pleasures of life'.

From what we have said, it is easy to deduce that just as for the child there is a very good mother and a very bad mother, and between these two categories there are all the other types of mothers, the judgement on the child may fluctuate between a *very good and a very bad child*, and between these two extremes there may be many other intermediate judgements. If parents feel gratified and satisfied

with the good child, this is not the case with the bad, diffi-
cult or problem child, towards whom they may feel resent-
ment, aggression, guilt, but also feelings of helplessness.

Judgements about oneself

Equally important is the way in which parents and
child judge themselves. Self-judgment arises from the rela-
tionship and conditions the relationship itself. "If I, the mo-
ther, cannot calm the child down, will it be because of her
fault or my fault?" The same may be said by the child: "If I
make mother despair, it may be her fault, but it may be my
fault, because I, as she sometimes says, am a naughty,
naughty child".

We are familiar with the effects of a positive self-
appraisal: 'If I am handsome, good and good, I certainly
make mum and dad, the other family members, and everyo-
ne who comes near me happy and, therefore, I am worth a
lot'. A good self-appraisal strengthens the ego, stimulates
maturation, fortifies the enjoyment of relationships and
cooperation with others, increases the feeling of serenity,
calm and inner peace. It also improves abilities and readi-
ness for all learning: language, motility, autonomy, etc.

If, on the other hand, there is a negative evaluation of
oneself, it is as if the child were saying: 'I am someone who
makes people suffer, I am bad, I am ugly, I am worth little,
so I am not one to be esteemed, I am not one to be loved
and approached but to be pushed away'. In these cases, the
suffering that the child imagines he is transmitting to others,
turns as if in a mirror towards himself. Anxiety, fear of
others and of the world increase; closure increases, relatio-

nal abilities diminish, the relationship with reality is altered, learning abilities worsen.

Evolution of the child

If, at *one month old,* the baby cries obstinately when he is hungry or uncomfortable, without caring at all about the needs of the adult or adults caring for him, while he only calms down when he is saturated and satisfied with everything, he later begins to regulate his life and his needs according to his mother's requirements. He learns to subordinate his physiological needs: feeding, sleeping, cuddling, according to his mother's needs and demands. He shows interest and excitement at the sound of approaching footsteps, the sound of water when his mother prepares his daily bath or the sound of pots and pans when she prepares his food. Between *six and twelve weeks* she smiles regularly and indiscriminately at all human faces and even at illustrations or life-size models, provided they are seen from the front and have some movement (Wolff, 1970. P.16).

Between *three and six months* the stereotyped smile becomes selective and is directed at familiar people. The child becomes capable of responding with a smile to a very specific stimulus. Therefore, the smile is no longer "...a simple reaction to internal or external excitement, it also enters into a framework of relationships as a metalanguage equipped with subtleties and melodic tones" (De Ajuriaguerra, 1993. P.118). The child at this age recognises its parents and has mental images of familiar people *(precursor object stage*).

At *five to seven months* he distinguishes adult facial expressions and reacts accordingly: he laughs, vocalises and

makes various noises of joy when others communicate with him. He is happy and turns his gaze towards his mother's voice speaking to him from another room. He is sensitive and shows an obvious responsiveness to the different emotional intonations of his mother's voice. From the age of *six to eight months* he has an interest in the games in which he is taken part, such as 'Cuckoo - there it is' and recognises himself in the mirror. "Alongside this fairly conspicuous progress in the child's relations with adults, one cannot fail to be struck by the relative poverty of relations with peers. Contrary to what we see in later ages, other children of the same age are practically uninterested in the child. Except for a few smiles and touches, he does not pay them much attention. He does not perceive them as participating in situations that are vital to him, he treats his peers as objects: he scrambles them, touches them with his hands, snatches toys that interest him. For Spitz, at this age, *the eight-month anxiety* appears. The child feels fear, if not anguish, in the presence of strangers. He instinctively fears and does not trust people he does not know. At the sight of them, he sulks, hides or cries, showing shyness.

In this period, the affective communication that comes from the mother's face and gestures is important. It is from these signals that the mother gives that the child understands whether the person in front of him is a friend or an enemy. Whether he can play with this person who approaches him or whether it is better to stay away. If it is appropriate to let oneself go in his arms or to stay close to the mother's neck.

Around the age of *nine months,* the playmate is taken more into consideration, especially with regard to the things he possesses. Fights and conflicts over objects of mutual in-

terest are frequent. It is still several months before contacts other than aggressive ones are established (Osterrieth, 1965, p. 59). At this age it already vocalises freely, with the meaning of interpersonal communication. He shouts to attract the attention of his mother and other adults. He speaks harmoniously by repeating and linking certain syllables such as ma-ma; pa-pa. He understands 'no' and says 'hello' with his little hand. At *twelve months* he already knows his own name and turns around when called. Shows, with appropriate movements, that he understands many familiar vocabulary words. Understands simple requests associated with gestures e.g. "Give me", "Say hello". Distributes kisses to parents and loved ones.

As the child is recognised as educable, i.e. capable of learning, the mother increasingly modifies her manifestations of tenderness towards him. Whereas before there was the belief that the child should always receive her help and support, now she wants him to learn certain things, so she tends to show cooperation and tenderness towards him as a reward when he behaves well or learns (Sullivan, 1962, p. 184). Therefore, it is the mother who is the protagonist of the child's first year of life, not only because it is she who feeds him and then feeds him, takes care of him, cleans him and checks that he does not hurt himself, but she is also the reference point, the child's guiding star when he is hurt, sore, sad, frightened or when he needs cuddles.

During the first year, communication with the father also begins. This type of communication has different tools, timing, goals and objectives than maternal communication.

Paternal communication tends to offer the child a firmer and stronger, more serene and stable example. This is why this communication appears tighter and more linear,

quieter and more rational, rougher and more decisive. It is a communication that, without frills, with the use of few and meagre adjectives, stimulates action, doing and creating. The father with his example communicates to the child decision, agility, dexterity, impetuosity. With his words he gives him the strength of rationality, stimulates in him the control of his emotions, the confidence to act. With her behaviour she gives her child the pleasure of conquest, and of quick decisions. Ultimately, if maternal communication emphasises the heart and feelings, paternal communication emphasises reason. If maternal communication aims to develop and comfort the child's ego, paternal communication aims to give impetus, strength, determination, courage, security to this ego.

At the end of the first year of life 'By looking at the eyes, and the expression of the caregiver, the child obtains information about his internal states - thoughts, intentions, beliefs, desires and emotions - and uses them to construct a link between what the caregiver might do and what he plans to do. *Access to one's own internal states is now coordinated with access to that of an* affectively significant *other*" (Barone, Bacchini, 2009, p. 26).

Attachment

Attachment can be defined as that strong bond felt by the child towards one or both parents or towards people who provide it with continuous and special care. In animals, this special bond has a biological function in that it enables the young to protect them from external dangers. In humans, the functions are more complex and numerous in that parents who care for a child not only protect it from physi-

cal dangers, but also nourish its body with food, its mind with information, and fill its heart with tenderness and love.

Therefore whoever, more than the others, cares for the child, will become the main figure to turn to in the event of physical needs, danger or emotional and affective needs. Naturally, this bond is greater towards the mother when she succeeds in establishing a good relationship with the child from birth. Attachment can also occur towards more than one person, but in this case there is a precise order of preference *(attachment specificity).*

The reality of attachment is self-evident: who has not noticed how the child becomes physically attached to the father's or mother's body when he or she finds himself or herself with strangers or in unusual situations that he or she judges dangerous? When children were still admitted to hospital without their mothers, Bowlby (1982, p. 10) had noticed that when they were admitted to the ward, they expressed intense restlessness and agitation. With the return home then, if they initially manifested aggression and rejection towards their mothers, when they saw them again, it was as if they blamed them heavily in their hearts for having abandoned them. Following these traumatic detachments, the children tended to constantly follow their mothers, as if afraid of losing them again, and clung to them, increasing their demands for cuddles and gratification.

In these cases, if the mothers gave the children for some time signals of understanding of their distress, love, affection and closeness, the little ones, after some time, regained a greater inner serenity, which allowed them to do without the constant maternal protection, but if the mothers shunned these affective and protective demands, considered

excessive, this refusal aroused in them an even more hostile, negative, or even worse regressive behaviour.

Attachment is mutual: of the child towards the mother and of the mother towards the child. These maternal and filial feelings develop fully and richly not only if there is continuous closeness between the two but, above all, if there is mutual understanding, dialogue and affective exchange between the two.

This bond, which is very strong after the second half of the first year and throughout the second and third years, from the fourth year onwards is aroused somewhat less easily than before, although the change is minimal. In this particular relationship there is a mutual dependence: of the child on the mother, for reasons of survival, and of the mother on the child, as the latter becomes her important and fundamental love object. It is important that attachment is established between child and mother, as the child, reassured by this special bond, can trust others, himself and the world.

Says Bowlby (1988, p. 59):

"The bonds that developmental psychiatry is primarily concerned with are those of children towards their parents and the complementary bonds of parents towards the child. The key hypothesis is that variations in the way these bonds develop and organise themselves during one's childhood and boyhood constitute the main variables that determine whether an individual will grow up mentally healthy or not'.

On the other hand, only the child who is strong and secure in his parents' love is capable of walking swiftly towards psychological and material independence. His security allows him to explore the world, to distance himself from childish patterns or from the people who until then constitu-

ted his fundamental emotional reference points. It is, therefore, attachment that enables him to face life's difficulties with strength and balance and to explore the world from a secure base. (Bowlby 1988, p. 59).

For Bowlby (1988, p. 59): "When an individual of any age feels secure, he is likely to begin to explore away from the attachment figure. When, on the other hand, he is alarmed, anxious, tired and ill, he will feel a need for closeness'.

This bond, when it is solid, secure and conducted in a physiological manner, not only leads towards greater autonomy but also develops in the child, and later in the young person and adult, a greater capacity to cope with and resist stressful or traumatic events. This capacity, called *resilience*, is markedly greater when the child has been able to develop meaningful emotional bonds in early childhood (Ovadia, 2010, p. 52). The function of attachment is prolonged throughout the individual's life as he or she will not only be safer and stronger but will have learned in the relationship with the mother the strategies necessary to establish and protect human relationships.

This particular bond can last, albeit with varying intensity, for a lifetime. Early attachments are never definitively abandoned.

As in all relationships, the attachment bond may fail to establish or may break down for a variety of reasons, which may affect one or the other element of the relationship or both.

Various types of attachment are described by Bowlby (1988, p. 61):

Secure attachment: The child who presents a secure attachment shows trust in the availability, understanding

and help of the attachment figure in difficult situations or when they are afraid. Secure attachment occurs when the parent has good empathic skills, is readily available, attentive and responsive to the child's signals and knows how to be affectionate at times when the child needs comfort and cuddles. A child who has a secure attachment is a happier child and achieves good independence more easily. Caring for him is more rewarding as he is less demanding than *an anxious child.*

Resistant anxious attachment occurs when the child is uncertain whether his or her parent will be available or present or active in giving help when asked.

An anxious-ambivalent attachment occurs when the child, having ascertained that the parent is too demanding, intrusive and threatening, but also inconstant in giving him or her help and is not always as close as he or she would like, is not at all sure that the parent will be ready to help or console him or her in case of need. This uncertainty causes him great distress whenever he is forced to leave his mother or reference figure. These children are usually whiny and not very autonomous. Their distress is soon communicated to their carers as they are more difficult to manage and reach a fair degree of autonomy later on.

Anxious-avoidant attachment occurs when the parents are constantly and strongly rejecting the child, so that they not only do not comfort and cuddle the child when he or she needs it, but drive him or her away. In such cases the child will have no confidence that when he seeks protection he will receive a ready response but rather expects to be rejected (Bowlby 1988, p. 61). In this case he will react by inhibiting his feelings, while at the same time trying to become self-sufficient as soon as possible. He will also tend

to be aggressive and overbearing towards other children and to keep his distance from all human beings.

Disorientated-disorganised attachment*:* in this type of attachment, avoidant and highly anxious aspects are mixed, whereby the child has difficulty exhibiting any organised pattern of behaviour tending towards an end and shows incoherent and paradoxical attitudes.

In our opinion, there can be a *lack of attachment* when the child does not find in the mother or other caregivers a minimum of interest and commitment to him or her. Lack of attachment always occurs for serious reasons: intense anxiety or depression in the mother; rejection of a child who is unwanted, unwanted, unloved or seen as a hindrance to her interests and goals of the moment; considerable ineptitude or unpreparedness for the maternal role; inability to establish effective communication. In all these circumstances, the child feels the mother's serious difficulties and limitations, so that disappointment, anger and distrust in her and therefore in the world she represents prevails in his or her soul. The others and the world will be perceived by the little one with suspicion, but also as a source of danger, since they are considered incapable of listening and caring adequately. If these negative emotions are repeated frequently over time or are particularly intense and painful, not only will there be no attachment, but anger, stigma and aggressiveness will arise in the little one, both towards others and towards himself. Attachment may also fail or fail for reasons concerning the child, when the latter presents considerable psychic fragility, resulting in excessive weakness in the face of the indispensable small frustrations present in every relationship.

Attachment patterns once developed tend to persist because parental behaviour tends to persist over time and is difficult to change (Bowlby 1988, p. 62). This persistence is not due to innate characteristics of the child. Says the author himself (Bowlby 1988, p. 62):

"The data on these changes collected by Stroufe show that the stability of partners, if any, cannot be attributed to the child's innate characteristics, as has often been claimed. On the contrary, observation infallibly leads to the conclusion that a number of personal characteristics, traditionally attributed to character and often ascribed to heredity, are environmentally induced. Repeated studies clearly show how infants described as difficult during the first few days of life have, thanks to sensitive maternal care, become calmer and more serene children'.

Sometimes parents and relatives use attachment in an incongruous way: in order to feel secure and serene, they try in every way to prevent their child from moving independently in the environment, binding them to themselves through their anxieties or fears. Some parents, especially mothers, would like their child to remain small and therefore work against the maturation process, in an attempt to keep their child in an infantile condition for as long as possible.

Until the age of three and a half years, the attachment remains intense, therefore the opposite behaviour of those parents, and today there are many, who prematurely push or force their child into an autonomy and responsibility that is not appropriate and not in keeping with the child's age or psycho-affective development, is equally negative. It is only after this age (three years and six months) "... a secure child will begin to become confident enough to increase the

time and distance he can be away, at first for half a day and later for the whole day" (Bowlby 1988, p. 59).

These parents often achieve the opposite effect, in that the child who does not feel supported by the parental attachment has greater difficulty in coping with the world around him; he therefore remains anchored at a level of development that is not appropriate to his chronological age.

Luisa's case well demonstrates this erroneous behaviour.

A failed pedagogical plan

Luisa, a young mother who taught in a primary school, when she knew she was expecting a child, devised a precise pedagogical plan to stimulate in her son, as quickly as possible, a good degree of autonomy, so that he could devote himself calmly to his work and continue his studies. Meanwhile, her plan was to avoid being with the child all the time, even in the first days of life. She wanted him to 'get used' to taking milk and being cared for, not only by her but also by the other family members, so as to avoid a specific attachment.

By placing him, after the first year, in an unfamiliar environment such as a kindergarten and then, at two years and six months, in a nursery school, she thought she had achieved the goal she had set herself: to quickly develop her child's autonomy. But at the age of five, while her son was still attending the kindergarten, the teachers very tactfully, as she was a colleague, began to tell her that 'the child perhaps had some problems: he did not socialise with others, he played alone in a corner, and only approached his classmates to snatch some toy that interested him, but he could not build a real game with them. His language was

also strange. He repeated every word he heard very well but put it in inappropriate contexts. There were also phrases that he repeated over and over again'. Moreover, when he was at home, it took little to make him scream, so both his mother and grandparents, 'to keep him quiet', often put him in front of the TV, where he preferred to watch the same tapes, with the same cartoons, for hours on end. At night, he would not leave his parents' bed at all and would stay with his mother like a lifeline but, at the same time, he would torment her by pulling her hair and eyelashes.

Clearly, the mother's plan had failed across the board! The development of a child's autonomy cannot be accelerated by much. Above all, this cannot be achieved without giving due consideration to the child's basic needs. Otherwise, one risks achieving the opposite effect.

SECOND YEAR OF LIFE

The conquest of language

In the second year of life, which coincides with the onset of childhood, infant verbal language makes its way. Already in the first months, even before uttering words that make sense to adults, the child uses its voice to play, continuously repeating sounds that it learns by imitating the voice sounds made by people in its environment. He becomes aware of the social value of the sounds he makes when, for example, he starts crying and shrieking and his mother rushes towards him; or when he wails and gurgles and she laughs happily. From people's reactions to his sounds he begins to link certain sounds with certain effects. He also

learns to recognise these same sounds when they are made by others. He learns to distinguish whether a voice is anxious, angry, sad or caressing. He is able to discriminate an angry face from a playful, serene one, so that he reacts appropriately to each type of verbal, gestural or mimic communication. He soon begins to use quite determined sounds to express precise feelings and desires.

At a later stage, the child is ready to use real language (Isaacs, 1995, p. 31); he is stimulated to learn sounds and to speak, driven by the need to communicate better with others, so that he can ask, search, tell. He, being a human being, is not satisfied with knowing the taste, smell, texture or weight of things; he is hungry to know and to know the names of the objects, people, animals and elements of nature that are around him and that interact with him. Being able to name them satiates his need for knowledge, but it also serves the purpose of having control and power over them. By knowing their names, it is as if he can directly or indirectly manage them.

Alongside verbal and mimic language, parents, but especially the mother, also construct the language of feelings and emotions. This type of communication is indispensable for making true and deep contact with others, so as to understand them, love them, and be close to them. From this most intimate and profound type of communication, the world of the heart develops, from which feelings of friendship, love, but also future helpfulness, generosity, sensitivity, acceptance, trust and tenderness spring. Language therefore also serves to build and develop in the child the world of feelings and emotions, the world of affection and relationships, the world of care and attention.

Although the child is never totally passive, it is with the development of verbal language that his action on the world becomes more decisive and incisive. It is not only the mother or others who look after him, who have the power to choose what is good and what is bad, but it is he who begins to select what he likes and what he dislikes, what makes him happy and what makes him sad, what excites him and what bores him. When he decisively takes away the cup in which his mother has put the milk and asks: 'Auntie's cup', he gives others, the people who love him and who are close to him, a very precise indication, not only of what he does not want but also of what his choice has fallen on: 'I want milk in the cup my auntie gave me'.

Later, as the child needs to understand the world around him and how best to relate to it, he is not only interested in the names of objects but also in their use and purpose. "What is it for?" "How does it work?" "What does it look like?" "What's inside?"

He is also interested in the relationships that exist between the objects, people and animals that surround him or arouse his interest: "Who is bigger? Who is smaller?" "Who is better? Who is meaner?" "Who is stronger?" "Who is weaker?" In this way he discovers the links that exist between people, animals and things. He is also interested in understanding the relationship that all objects have to him or to his family. And if we are willing to listen, there is nothing better for him than to let us share in his discoveries, his knowledge and his triumphs.

Ultimately, in man, the various types of communication: verbal, mimic and gestural are the indispensable tools for the growth and formation of the new living being.

The inner world of the child

The moment the child begins to speak and communicate his thoughts, his inner world in which *animism, egocentrism and precautionary logic* prevails is revealed.

In the phase of *animism* (Piaget, 1964, p. 34) in his eyes everything is not only living but also possesses intentionality, feelings and thoughts of its own. The psychological world and the physical world are one. There are no natural causes. The wind blows because it wishes to. The table the child hit his head against is bad because it hurt him and therefore deserves a just punishment. *In the phase of egocentrism*, which for Piaget lasts until the age of seven, there is a tendency on the part of the child to relate everything to his or her own person and experiences. In this phase, children believe that what concerns them occupies a privileged place in the minds of others. Not even inanimate things escape this rule: "Why, Daddy, when I walk, does the Moon follow me?" "It's true! the Moon is kind to illuminate us at night otherwise we would have to stay in the dark, and she knows that I am afraid of the dark!" "Why, mummy, doesn't the ball want to roll towards me?" "You know daddy the chair, poor thing, is broken and in pain: you who are a doctor can surely fix it, can't you?".

His *logic* is *precautionary*, and therefore unscientific in that the child does not reason from his observations, but from an inner model of the world. He accepts false explanations, whether they come from his parents or from his personal desires or aspirations. Until the age of three, the child lives as if in a fairytale world in which animals, plants but also objects can speak, have their own will, be good or bad. Moreover, since children of this age believe in the magic of

words, they have the same power as actions. If the child wishes in a moment of anger that his mother would die or that something bad would happen to his father, he will feel guilty because his thoughts might turn into reality.

The child's communication skills

Communication with himself and peers has special characteristics.

For Piaget (1964, p. 29):

"The small child does not only speak to others, he also speaks continuously to himself, with varied monologues accompanying his games and actions. These monologues are comparable to what will later be the continuous inner language of the adolescent and adult. These soliloquies differ from them, however, in that they are spoken aloud and in that they reinforce the immediate action'

In childhood, the child can use his imagination to calm his anxiety, to soothe his frustrations, to satisfy his needs. One will then see the child fight and destroy imaginary enemies using any toy or object. Similarly, one will see him build, with absolutely shapeless materials, castles and realms where ladies and knights, princes and queens, dragons and superheroes move about.

With regard to his peers, he only talks about his experiences (*intellectual monologue*). There are very few topics of discussion. Moreover, in the company of peers, for Piaget, each child only talks about what concerns him personally *(collective monologue).* It is easy to see how rudimentary conversations between children remain, linked as they are to concrete action in itself.

Rules and authoritarian morality

Rules are sacrosanct for children of this age and cannot be changed. The source of the rules are their parents, who are always right (*authoritarian morality*).

Also at this stage, every misdeed, in order to be forgiven or erased, needs a punishment that extinguishes the crime. And since the child lives in an egocentric world, it is a punishment for something wrong that he has done (Wolff, 1970, p. 21). If a running child disobeys his mother and falls down, he has fallen because he has been naughty (Wolff, 1970, 21). Attitudes learned through parental reactions are fundamental to the child's idea of himself. When he is rejected 'it is because he is not worth much'. During this period, threats that parents may make towards him can be taken literally (Osterrieth, 1965, p. 98).

It is only at a later age that children are able to conceive of democratic cooperation and reciprocal rule changes in which they too have an active role to play.

In the first years of life, the child gathers an impressive amount of information and every new experience and knowledge that he assimilates, not only adds to the others but also modifies them and is in turn modified by them, so that there is continual reorganisation and modification of relationships and perspectives (Osterrieth, 1965, p. 38).

The relationship with parents

The moment he begins to talk and walk, the child is able to recognise his father and mother as persons with their

own life and will and is able to love them as individuals different and distinct from himself. But his affection is not a calm and serene one. While he unwillingly accepts that his mother should be away from him even for a few hours, he consents to his father being away for the whole day or even for a few days. But no longer! When he is absent for many days, that attachment that seemed to be focused only on the mother, also becomes evident towards the father with all its corollary of suffering, fears, restlessness, but also anger when the latter's behaviour does not meet his expectations. Even during the second year of life, despite appreciating the much livelier and more impetuous games with the father, the mother continues to have priority. It is certainly to her that the child addresses his demands and it is to her that he gives most of his love and attachment. Although he has learnt to consider her as a person external to him and different from him, he increasingly needs the reassurance of her affection and presence (Osterrieth, 1965, p. 58).

The exploratory phase

It is always in the second year of life that the child acquires ambulation and, with ambulation, acquires the ability to move independently and freely in its environment. Its physical space expands. The *exploratory phase* begins. And there is no more resourceful, cunning, courageous, fast, but also meticulous, scrupulous and unfortunately also reckless explorer than a child at this age. Every object in the house attracts his attention and is subjected to meticulous investigation: its weight, consistency, taste and smell are assessed, but also its greater or lesser possibility of making noise, bouncing, breaking, hitting. Its range extends from the

room to the whole house. In the discovery of the world, nothing is underestimated or overlooked. Everything acquires value. Drawers are treasure chests to be emptied for hidden treasures. The kitchen doors are secret doors that lead him to unearth and take possession of the most interesting toys. Inside these doors are the pots to roll or to fill with paper, tubes, cubes and every good thing. There are the lids to bang against each other. There are the frying pans to brandish as secret weapons but also to bang on the floor to hear the deafening noise. There are funnels, great for putting in your mouth, blowing into and discovering the alterations they cause to your voice. And then there are the egg cups with which to try putting one inside the other.

The exploration of the house does not stop at the kitchen. From there we move on to the bathroom, where the toilet paper seems to have been put there on purpose to be pulled up to the bedroom! The bidet bowl filled with water is an excellent pool in which the paper boats built by daddy can swim. Opening the spray tap forms a splendid fountain, which can rival those in Rome. More fascinating but also more risky are the rooms of the older brothers and sisters. These rooms, not being tidy at all, provide a thousand forbidden objects to be stolen by running, then hiding them before the enraged germane man notices the theft.

It is at this age that the relationship with others becomes more interesting, but also more traumatic for the child, as he does not quite understand why, in such a rich and interesting world, made up of a thousand objects ready to be seized and used for his games and discoveries, there are so many limits, dangers, impediments and consequent scolding and punishments. He wanders around the house like a thief entering a supermarket for the first time. He just cannot un-

derstand why it is not possible to appropriate all that merchandise that is on display and is there, inviting, almost asking to be taken and carried away. And instead. And instead there is always some brute who prevents you, who tells you no and punishes you for doing so. Therefore, the occasions of conflict between the desires of the little ones and those of their parents and older siblings increase significantly (Isaacs, 1995, p. 74).

The period

The extension of his contacts with the world, during which successes and failures, satisfactions and frustrations are recorded, lead the child to discover his own power over people and things, but also the resistance that the adult world opposes to his needs, a world with which he is forced to continually struggle, especially during the *opposition period*. In this period, around the age of two years and six months, even to the detriment of his affective and protective needs, the child, rather than giving satisfaction to the adult, feels the need to assert his own personality and his own ego, by refusing to obey his parents and adults in general at all times. He becomes more rebellious, stubborn and intractable. He does the opposite of what is asked of him. He confronts the impositions of family members. He cries and shrieks for something, which, soon after, he abandons with indifference. With adults he seems to seek confrontation more than encounter, controversy more than understanding. In the search for greater self-confidence and the desire for greater independence and autonomy, the child wants to do everything and anything on his own. He constantly feels that his needs clash with those of others. He cannot bear to

start an activity and often fail to complete it because there are superior demands, those of his parents, grandparents and aunts and uncles, which force him to abruptly interrupt it. He therefore often feels that his family members are spoilers who unduly intrude on his games and explorations. At this stage, as Isaacs, (1995, p. 68) says: "You could not tell children a crueller or stupider thing than: "Don't touch". This is tantamount to saying: "Don't learn, don't grow, don't be intelligent". Since they are prevented from discovering, learning and growing'. The child learns above all by discovering things and not through our explanations.

In this regard, the observation of this author seems enlightening: "What pleasure they lose, for themselves and for their children, those parents who let this passionate urge to build and to make go unnoticed, and who, instead of providing the necessary material and space, try to compress this energy by forcing children to 'sit still' or to keep their clothes 'clean' ". The child needs space to move, act, play creative games, run, climb (Isaacs, 1995, p. 70).

Alongside the physical space, the psychological space also expands. The child acquires the ability to understand the chronological succession of events. Furthermore, the acquired production of language enables him to symbolise and represent reality.

Adult demands and punishments.

It is always at this age that demands from the outside world increase. Adults demand more cooperation from the child. They expect him to do as he is told and also to have more control over his acts and behaviour. Since his main relationship is with his mother, who is also his reference fi-

gure, it is she who begins to teach him the behaviour that society expects of him and thus the social rules. It is she who says the many 'no's', aided by paternal authority, for some of his dangerous, risky or inappropriate initiatives and therefore, his efforts to 'be good' are fundamental to having his mother's affection and understanding.

And if some mothers, after the first year, would like their child to remain small and therefore the rewards work against his maturation process in an attempt to keep him small, other mothers, in order to reduce their workload and commitment, would like the child to acquire as soon as possible those autonomies, especially in sphincter control, that they consider indispensable. They therefore make excessive use of reprimands and punishments if the child does not adapt to their needs, demands and wishes.

And it is always at this age that punishments become more frequent and painful! Punishments can be of various kinds. Some consist in inflicting physical pain, others are intended to cause psychological suffering, for example, by restricting the pleasure of motor activity: 'Stand with your face against the wall'. Some punishments consist of refusing or prohibiting a loved and desired object. Other times parents punish by withdrawing, at least momentarily, the esteem, trust, contact and cuddling of the mother or father themselves. As we shall see better in later chapters, punishments are not always helpful. When they are frequent and excessive, they accentuate irritability, instability, restlessness and even a surly and hostile attitude.

Three to five years

Throughout developmental age there is a great deal of 'emotional hunger'. This will be satisfied up to the age of eighteen to twenty months mainly by the mother; thereafter, the child's affective demands involve the whole family: father, uncles, brothers, cousins, but also people outside the family such as kindergarten teachers. At this age he is no longer a member of a couple, but a member of a group. Satisfying this hunger is a necessary and indispensable condition for normal psychological growth. When this does not happen, the affective deficiency will manifest itself with the characteristic symptoms of the age. For example, with attitudes of opposition, anxiety, insecurity, aggressive behaviour, enuresis, encopresis, pavor nocturnus crises, tendency to isolation, etc.

Whereas up to the age of three, as we have said, the relationship with peers is modest and unproductive, from the third year onwards the child begins to take them into consideration in a positive way and is able to exchange and communicate with them effectively and serenely. With his peers, whom he used to see as disturbing elements, he now manages to organise some simple games. To them he can now explain his needs and hobbies. He can tell them what is happening around him, in his home and in his family. He can profitably attract their attention.

The age of 'why'

It is always at this age that the child seeks not only the names of objects but their function and use. It is *the age of 'whys'*. With questions he acquires a myriad of information, but at the same time he has the opportunity to attract the at-

tention of adults and to converse with them, so that through emotional contact he finds serenity and security (Osterrieth, 1965, p. 91).

During this period, the mother tries to teach her child to control his or her stools so that he or she remains clean. The child, therefore, understands that faeces can be held or let go. If the mother is good to him, and if there is a good relationship between the two, and if the child is calm, it is good to fulfil her wishes; and this gives him satisfaction and pride, for if he does not soil himself, the mother approves and praises him, and he feels proud. But if this does not happen, if the poo 'escapes' into his nappy again and the mother is forced to clean it, he feels shame and humiliation as he feels the disapproval of his mother and other family members (Wolff, 1970, p. 24).

During this period, the child is able to remember his parents' prohibitions whenever a forbidden impulse arises in his mind. His parents and the norms and rules associated with them gradually become the voice of his conscience. Therefore, guilt becomes great when the rules, directives and prohibitions, are excessive and authoritarian attitudes are frequent. Since, moreover, for the child every misdeed presupposes a just punishment, since the law of retaliation applies to him, he expects the just sanction and when this does not come from outside, he punishes himself (Wolff, 1970, p. 27).

Also at this age, his inner world now includes the future. The child learns, therefore, to postpone the immediate satisfaction of his desires. He is capable of waiting: 'later', 'tomorrow', 'when I grow up', 'when I grow up'.

Comparisons

During this period, children begin to compare and contrast. They compare their own stature, their muscles, their age, their gender, the composition of their family to that of their peers: "I am stronger". "I am bigger than you". "My father is stronger than yours". "I have three brothers, you only have one". At the same time they become aware of their sexual identity: "I am a boy", "I am a girl". This awareness pushes them to explore their own bodies and those of others, to imitate the parent of the same sex and to feel towards the parent of the opposite sex a strong desire to have an exclusive relationship with him: the oedipal phase begins.

Oedipal phase

At this stage of psychological development the child for Freud develops an intense love for the parent of the opposite sex. In the case of the male child, he, loving his mother, is jealous of the father whose death he would like to see. But since this love of his is impossible, since the mother loves and continues to love the father, and since from the latter he fears violence to his body (*threat of castration*), the child finds himself forced to turn his amorous desires elsewhere, while at the same time he is stimulated to take on all the paternal characteristics *(identification with the father)*, and then successfully proposes his amorous offers outside his family.

The *process of* identification is important because through identification the child takes on the characteristics of the adult person of the same sex and thus assimilates the gentleness, caring skills, maternal tenderness or the strength, determination, security, paternal. In either case he

feels more adult and therefore more adequate and capable (Militerni, 2004, p. 98).

The oedipal phase, which has important positive implications in that it enhances and better defines both identity and sex role, will fail if there is not the due harmony and esteem between the parents or if the same-sex parent does not have a good acceptance of his or her masculinity or femininity.

Per Osterrieth (1965, p. 120):

"There are few other moments in the child's life when it is equally important for him to have parents who are affectively balanced, forming a united couple: the father truly virile, the mother truly feminine; both sufficiently self-confident to accept, with the same warm serenity, the expression of the child's feelings, from time to time tender or hostile, and capable of not fixing the child uncomfortably in his oedipal complex, increasing both his aggressiveness and his attachment and, in any case, his feelings of guilt".

School age - latency period

When the child moves from pre-school to primary school, he experiences a further transformation of his social life. His energies are diverted from intimate relationships with his family and are invested in two main activities: peer relationships and education. This period, which lasts from the age of six to twelve, is called the *latency period* because the erotic desires, jealousies and fears of early childhood associated with them will no longer become evident, until the psychological and social changes of puberty revive them again.

At school age, the child is forced to adapt to people other than his parents, whose image gradually diminishes. In this period, he also loses his egocentrism, animism, precautionary logic and authoritarian morality. In his social relationships he can manifest a democratic and cooperative attitude (Piaget, 1964, p. 47). Discussions become possible, whereby the child values not only his own ideas but also those of other peers. In his reasoning, he takes into account what he observes. He begins to understand that words, rules and thoughts are distinct from concrete objects and activities in the world. In explanations of physical phenomena he uses the concepts of time, forces and employs real logic (Wolff, 1970, p. 21). He discovers social life and mutual respect (Piaget, 1964, p. 63), as he is forced to adapt to a wide and varied environment with different people. He experiences an environment that is, from an emotional point of view, much more indifferent towards him than that experienced in the family with his parents. In the class and in the school he is just one of many, he is part of a group, he is on an equal footing with the others and is no longer, as he was before in the family, the favourite object of care. He has to adapt to inevitable constraints to which he is not accustomed. This *emotional weaning*, if it is not excessive and if the child is strong enough to support it, makes it more vigorous and autonomous. At this age, competition becomes intense. Comparisons with his peers concern intelligence, friendliness and cleverness (Wolff, 1970, p. 28).

Friendships

This is also the age at which strong bonds of affection and intimacy come into play with a best friend, with whom

it is nice to talk, to sit next to each other in the same desk, to meet after school at each other's homes, to experience birthday parties together. In this way, the sense of security is reinforced: 'Besides mum and dad there is also Giulio who can help me and supports me because he is my friend'. Added to this is a clear and distinct sexual identity and role. We are boys and therefore... we behave like boys, we are girls and therefore... we behave like girls.

Pre-adolescence

In pre-adolescence, which starts around the age of eight and a half, friends become increasingly important. They are not only useful for playing, but become affective realities, valuable for dialogue and confrontation. Friends allow the child to see himself through the eyes of another peer. With them it is possible to talk about everything: he can confide in them about his intimate life, his relationships with his parents and teachers. With them it is also possible to discuss the difficulties he encounters with the peer group. He loves his friends and, therefore, there is an effort on the part of the pre-adolescent to meet their needs and requirements. The bond that unites him with them is firm, strong and emotionally intense. When they move away, to pursue other paths with other peers, the preadolescent feels jealousy and pain. Conversely, when they prefer him to other playmates, he feels proud and secure. Pre-adolescents work with friends to solve problems that may cause them pain. With them they manage to find compromises even if they lose something of their own. Especially in the group of boys, games are organised with friends or plans are formulated to

achieve certain goals, in which strength, agility, courage, resourcefulness are compared.

Chapter 3- THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Houses

The physical environment in which children live has, in recent decades, changed for better or worse, substantially.

Homes have become larger, healthier, cleaner, but above all, they have become considerably enriched with household appliances and numerous entertainment and cultural tools. It is not uncommon in today's homes to find a television in every room and more than one computer available to the inhabitants. Not to mention the various mobile phones, notebooks, playstations, smartphones, tablets, and various players. To this must be added the various video game consoles, printers and other technological tools, and, of course, an impressive amount of toys. The furniture is also considerably richer, more colourful, varied and clean. Often the children, or the only child in the house, has his or her own little room, perfectly furnished with a wardrobe, desk, cot, carpets and pictures suited to the environment of the little ones.

Unfortunately, while there are many, indeed too many, televisions, computers, video games and electronic devices in our homes, there are few people in them. There are few activities and experiences shared between parents and children. There is little dialogue and listening to each other. Equally few, and often distant, are the relatives with whom

it is possible to dialogue and share both moments of joy as well as moments of sorrow and sadness. Even fewer, or totally absent, are friendships with neighbours. Very limited, moreover, are the possibilities of freely leaving these homes, even if only to go to the courtyard or the street below.

If a child is satisfied with the love and attention of his parents, he attaches himself to the physical environment in which he has experienced emotions, discoveries, games, affection. In such cases, the many moments of pleasure and joy experienced even in just a corner of his room or balcony elected as play spaces, make him see his home as precious, so when, due to a move, he loses these spaces full of feelings and emotions, as well as many characters created by his imagination, he is greatly saddened. His grief is very similar to mourning: with signs of depression, anger, a sense of helplessness, difficulty in readjusting, nostalgia and idealisation of the lost place. In other cases, on the other hand, when his home is invaded and shaken by prevailing negative emotions: whether due to a lack of dialogue and communion between the various members of the family, or due to conflicts between the parents, or due to excessive and stressful scolding and punishment, in all these cases he longs to move away from his home, as it is seen as a place of conflict, sadness and pain.

In Michele's account[4] , made as a comment on one of his spontaneous drawings, we find what has just been said:

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[4]   All names present are fictional.

A house in the country

"Once upon a time there was a little boy who had an idea: 'Let's go and live in the country'. In the city the house was ugly, he didn't sleep at night. The parents said, 'Let's wait until tomorrow'. The moving company put everything in boxes and they moved in. The child could run around as he wanted and rest in the coolness of the trees. He was happy. His parents were happy too. "You had a great idea," they told him. They bought lamps and new clothes suitable for the countryside. The child changed schools and lived happily in this new home. The child had no siblings but he had friends. His parents were happy about the move and made new friends. They too were more relaxed".

Michael, like many suffering children, searches around him and near him for the reasons for his suffering. In this case he identifies them in the hectic, and sometimes inhuman, life of the city (*In the city the house was ugly, he did*

not sleep at night). So most logical solution he sees is to move away from the city environment to enjoy the serenity of the countryside (*The child could run around as he wished and rest in the cool of the trees).* This imagined solution is happy for both him and his parents, who, in the new bucolic environment, have the chance to regain the serenity they did not possess before *(He was happy. His parents were also happy. "You had a great idea," they told him. They too were more relaxed*)

Cities

As far as cities are concerned, these, due to building speculation and the prevalence given to means of transport, offices, work and commercial activities, have been structured as environments poorly suited to children and their needs for movement, freedom, contact with nature, and socialising with other peers. In cities, it is increasingly difficult for children to move around, because they cannot move alone because of the dangers they actually run, but also because of the fears by which adults are conditioned. Not a day goes by, but even now, that the mass media do not speak, emphasising and dramatising them to the utmost, of some sad fact. This certainly does not reassure parents, especially the more anxious ones. As a result, a climate of widespread insecurity has established itself in our cities, which now effectively excludes the free movement of children. Their contacts with nature and friends are systematically mediated by adults, who also 'have no time'. They have no time or willingness to be with their children in safe and liveable parks. They do not have time to go with them to the seaside or the countryside. They do not have time and

willingness to accompany them to the homes of neighbours and friends, who, by the way, are also viewed with suspicion and as a source of danger. Urban living has become only the route to school by car and back (Campanini, 1993, p. 31), or, at most, to one of the many sporting activities in which children are involved.

Games

One of the fundamental elements of a satisfying and rich childhood is the opportunity to play. Play is perhaps the most important and frequent common element among higher animals. There is, moreover, a direct relationship between the intellectual and cognitive development of living beings and the aptitude to play. Lower animals, which have hereditary instincts that are already predetermined, do not play at all. Their young behave like adults from the very beginning of their existence and therefore the heritage of the species has no further development. Furthermore, the animals' abilities are related to the amount and duration they devote to play, as it is through this that they gain more and more experience. The little lamb plays little, the kitten much more, chimpanzees play even as adults, but none has the capacity to play as continuously and assiduously as the little man (Isaacs, 1995, p. 21).

But even the adult, whether man or woman, cannot do without play at certain times of the day, as this activity allows him or her some necessary and indispensable moments of exchange, escape, relaxation, pleasure and joy. Through play, moreover, the adult tries to keep both brain and body well-trained. All research has concluded that when a child plays, he is doing a very demanding job because he is con-

quering both physical reality and the world of imagination and creativity. It is therefore important to give them the right spaces and tools to help them move into the realm of fantasy, leaving them totally free. As Bettelheim (1987 p. 211) puts it:

"It may be that the resulting game seems meaningless or even inadvisable to us, since we do not know what purpose it serves or how it will end. For this reason, if no immediate danger is foreseen, it is always better to let our children play as they wish, without interfering when we see them so absorbed. Attempting to help them when they fail, even if dictated by the best of intentions, may distract them from seeking, and eventually finding, the solution that is most useful to them'.

Children who have little opportunity to play tend to show serious deficiencies or even a halt in intellectual development, because in and through play the child exercises its thought processes, and without such practice, thought flattens and atrophies (Bettelheim 1987 p. 214-215).

For the child, play is the main road to growth. Therefore for young children play is:

❖ *Enjoyment.* The child enjoys all the physical and affective experiences experienced during play.

❖ *A tool for exploration and knowledge.* Play is exploration of emotions and feelings. It is knowledge of one's own body and the bodies of others, of inanimate objects, of the world around him and of nature.

❖ *Stimulating motor and intellectual development.* Through play, the child stimulates and develops its

thinking, planning, agility, strength, memory, hand-eye coordination, spatiality, and so on.

❖ *A privileged vehicle for communication and sociali-sation.* Through play, the child broadens the context of his relationships; he learns to communicate more effectively with other peers, but also with adults. By understanding the point of view of those in front of him, he becomes aware of his feelings and needs. He learns the importance of rules and their acceptance. Play extends the child's first social exchanges with adults and, up to the age of three, is its only relational mode.

❖ *Means for the development of creativity and imagination.* By means of very simple objects: a few sticks, a few stones, a bit of mud, or a pencil and some paper, combined with a lot of imagination and inventiveness, the child is able to build a thousand fairy tales and infinite stories, in which heroes and princesses, dragons and flying machines, robots and space weapons move. The Nobel Prize winner for literature Tagore (1989, p.31) in one of his poems thus describes the child's enormous capacity for fantastic stories using very poor surroundings and tools.

❖ *Contact and control of one's own emotions.* By playing with others, the child recognises the joy of victory, the burning taste of defeat, the warmth of friendship, affection and love. He learns to deal with the

small contrasts and tensions that are felt in his relationship with himself and his neighbour. "When it takes on the guise of symbolic, dramatic, role-playing and make-believe games it performs, through iterative rituals and mechanisms of identification and projection, a valuable liberating and therapeutic function, exorcising fears and anxieties and liquidating aggressive, destructive impulses and experiences of hostility" (Nobile, 1994, p. 52).

❖ *Gymnasium for personal and social autonomy.* It is also through play that the child gains confidence in himself and in others and thus learns to do without the constant help and support of his parents in his daily needs.

❖ *It is an opportunity for his or her moral and civic formation.* In the group game, governed by fixed and binding rules, the individual learns to observe the rules, to base his or her behaviour on principles of loyalty, fair play and respect for the opponent. They learn to testify to attitudes of loyalty to their group or gang. Recognises the importance of rotation, cooperation, distribution of tasks, rostering. All these acquisitions flow into the broader chapter of the formation of man and citizen.

❖ *Therapy.* Play enables the child to solve unresolved problems of the past in a symbolic form, and to cope symbolically or directly with current problems, and is, moreover, the most important tool in the child's possession for preparing for future tasks (Bettelheim

1987 p. 214-215). "The games that children play spontaneously can indeed be therapeutic, as when, for example, they take care of a doll or teddy bear, or a pet as they would like their parents to take care of them, thus compensating, through an intermediary, for the shortcomings they feel" (Bettelheim 1987 p. 213). Or when they unload their aggression born of injustices suffered by adults, on the innocent little ants or the disobedient little doll.

❖ *Opportunity to strengthen the will.* Many patience, building, competitive, team games strengthen the will, shape character, and also serve to establish progressive control over one's emotions and impulses.

❖ *Opportunities to reconnect with nature.* Direct contact with nature is fundamental in the development of children, as well as adults. For millions of years, human beings have developed through contact with the flowers and fruits of plants, with the vivacity and love of animals, with the waters of rivers and streams.

The various types of games

The child's first games, which are then those of exploration of the reality in which he is immersed, are played with his mother and his own body. When his mother feeds him, he touches and squeezes her breast and, later, her face and hair. Later he will play with his own hands and feet. These are the *sensorimotor games or exercise games*,

through which the child perfects movements, gestures and builds motor patterns.

By imitating sounds, facial expressions and then words, the child learns to recognise and express emotions. The aspects present in play can therefore be of various kinds. There are games in which children are stimulated to build something *(construction games)* or those in which they compete with their peers but also with parents and adults, in which attention, skill, agility and knowledge must be used *(games of skill).* If a child, while his mother dusts or washes the house, asks her for a cloth to help her, we are in the presence of an *imitative game*. It is the same when two friends get together to dress their 'children' and then prepare them a nice lunch and finally take them for a walk or to bed after rocking them for a long time. If after watching a film or cartoon, a child arms himself with a sword and space shield and is ready to fight with his little friend to save the world, we are in the presence of *representative play.* When a small and fragile child pretends to be a strong adult, so as to correct reality by modifying it according to his wishes, we are in THE presence of a *compensatory game*. Then there are games that have the function of eliminating painful or disturbing experiences, of compensating for frustrations by reliving them through pretence *(functional games).* This is why for all child neuropsychiatrists and psychoanalysts, play represents the best situation to study the child's ego. In *social games*, the child experiences actions, emotions and behaviour of people, situations and roles. When he plays with his mum and dad, he assumes the same attitudes as his parents, and gains a certain understanding of what they say and do. In this way, empathic skills are developed that allow one to put oneself in the other's perspective. In those

moments, he or she feels their power and infinite gifts as his or her own. This kind of play develops social skills, a sense of self, and acquires and refines the norms that govern human conduct.

In games, the child can do everything that it cannot do in reality. And it is the play world itself that becomes a kind of refuge from the constant demands of the outside world, to which he can return more relaxed (Isaacs, 1995, p. 71). But games are not just imitation. When the child copies her mother who cooks, sews, does the shopping, looks after the little ones, she not only imitates her own mother or mothers in general, but also experiences new modes of behaviour and attitudes filtered through her personality and individual needs. In other games, it is fantasy that is used and brought to the fore to build fortresses and castles in which fairies, kings, queens and dragons live, but also heroes ready to save the weak and defenceless *(imaginative games).* Finally, the child also loves *didactic games* in which the pleasure of learning is predominant *(acquisition games).*

In the space of two hours, the average two-and-a-half-year-old participates in six to seven imaginary situations.

Games can be:

1. Solitaires

2. Guided;

3. Free;

4. Free and self-managed.

1. ***Solitary games***

Solitary play is often frowned upon because it is feared that it always represents an escape from reality and a need to get away from one's peers. In reality, this type of play is also to be valued if it is carried out without the compulsion imposed by video games or a TV screen, because if the child needs contact with others, he also needs moments of solitude and tranquillity during which, messing about in his own little corner with his personal treasures, he makes important discoveries and learns to act without being motivated or guided by others (Osterrieth, 1965, pp. 136-137). On these occasions it is easier to give free rein to imagination and creativity.

2. *Guided games*

In this type of play, parents, teachers or other adults, depending on the objectives they set themselves, play with the child in order to achieve the desired results: more complicity, more dialogue, more openness, more motor, intellectual, relational and affective skills. This type of play is all the more appreciated by children the more abundant decision-making capacity they are left with. Ultimately, children like to play with adults when the latter propose in a proactive and non-directive manner, and if, in their play proposals, adults take into account the child's age, development, sensitivity and needs.

One of the most loved and appreciated guided games by children is the one played with their parents. This allows the mutual bond to be created, developed and strengthened. A bond that is indispensable for harmonious growth, since it facilitates the beginning of a fruitful dialogue that is indispensable for getting to know the child better and being bet-

ter known by him. This playing together is an expression of communion of bodies, but also of thoughts and goals; for this reason, over time it becomes an instrument of understanding, trust, common experience.

This pleasurable activity should start very early on, since father and mother have a special value and fascination for their little one. Already immediately after birth, the caresses and touches that parents engage in with their child and accept from him, if they are aimed at getting along well together, allow the beginning of an intense, deep and remarkably rewarding dialogue. When parents caress the child's face and body and let his or her little hands touch and hold him or her; when they cover him or her with kisses and happily accept his or her kisses; when they roll him or her on the bed or bounce him or her on their legs: what they transmit to him or her is joy of life, it is pleasure in being well together, it is love, trust and understanding.

We have proof of this in observing how both parents and children respond, frequently, with more serene and relaxed behaviour after these games, as the bond between them becomes stronger, more intense, pleasant and gratifying. It is very sad to think that parents sometimes neglect these moments, caught up in the thousand things to do or the lust for money!

People often confuse all of education with part of it. It is certainly part of the educational role to dictate norms and rules. It is certainly part of the educational task to limit and, when appropriate, counter the excessive or very risky desires of children. These activities should, however, represent only one element, and not the most important, of the educational function, whose fundamental task is precisely that of experiencing moments of dialogue and play with the chil-

dren, which allow understanding, communion, attention and mutual understanding.

It is easy to understand that guided play has its limits in that the child feels compelled to do what is required by adults and does not experiment with new and original possibilities. If we choose this type of play, we avoid, as far as possible, imposing the various activities with our authority as adults, but let our children freely choose which game to play, from those we propose. Once the game has started, we only think about having fun with them.

We have said that games can be numerous. Even helping parents with normal daily chores can be play rather than work for children. For children, helping with some household tasks, such as cleaning, sweeping, dusting, cooking, tilling the garden, planting seeds and bulbs, shopping together with mum and dad, can become enjoyable play activities. In order for these activities to remain enjoyable, it is good to avoid criticism and remonstrances as far as possible when the child cannot perform the requested activity well or does not feel like doing it at the time. For the game to remain just a game, it must be a pleasurable activity.

3. *Free games*

In this type of play, children are totally independent of adult instructions and only follow rules and regulations that they give themselves: day by day, moment by moment. Parents, educators or adults in general only have the task of finding physical and temporal spaces in which the children can, without problems, move, act and play.

Although both guided and free play are useful, the latter is clearly to be preferred, as it allows the child to satisfy

his or her real needs at the moment. The ability and willingness of the child's environment to allow and encourage free play is, therefore, fundamental not only for the development of the child's motor qualities: reflexes, quickness, gradualness and motor coordination, but also for the acquisition of cultural, psycho-affective and social elements, indispensable for establishing a serene and dialoguing relationship with peers, adults and the environment in which he lives. Says A. Oliverio Ferraris (2011, p. 45):

"What pleasure they lose, for themselves and for their children, those parents who let this passionate urge to build and make go unnoticed, and who, instead of providing the necessary material and space, try to compress this energy by forcing children to 'sit still' or to keep 'their clothes clean'!

This mode of play is advisable for normal children as well as for children with psycho-affective disorders that are not particularly severe, and it is very important because the child, by relating with peers, feels equal in that he or she shares the same problems, tastes, needs and experiences. He will therefore be able to disagree with others without feeling judged, he will be able to discuss and negotiate in a climate of symmetrical reciprocity (Oliverio Ferraris, 2005, p. 62). He will learn in the field, and not only in theory, how to make friends, how to defend and assert one's rights, but also how to resolve conflicts and thus how to make peace. He will acquire the art of negotiation. He will take pleasure in learning from the other but also in teaching the other, thus increasing his own self-esteem. Finally, he will feel proud and happy to belong to a group, and this will help him not to feel lonely (Oliverio Ferraris, 2005, p. 62-63). By not having set rules, free play allows more creative

responses and makes a considerable contribution to the development of all brain functions.

Mistakenly, it is thought that only a responsible and capable adult is suitable for guiding children's games because, in the absence of this figure, 'anything could happen!' And in this sentence are condensed all the fears of today's parents: fear that their little one might hurt himself or herself, fear that he or she might meet another child older than him or her who might do physical or moral violence to him or her. Unfortunately, when one becomes entangled in fears, one runs the risk of devaluing the ability that all children have to handle themselves well. To reassure oneself, one only has to think that for hundreds of thousands of years, the puppies of man, like those of animals, were formed precisely through free play with other peers. Only this type of play, without the strict control of adults, allows the child to build up numerous and fruitful social contacts. These contacts give them the opportunity to carry out autonomous socialisation exercises, indispensable for learning to communicate, to be respected, "to test themselves to see whether certain strategies are functional or not, to discover new ways of relating to others, to learn how to get around obstacles in order to make friends, to be accepted" (Oliverio Ferraris, 2005, 62-63). Children learn, through free play, to take turns, as they cannot expect to always be protagonists, because then they will find themselves without playmates. For these reasons, they are willing to make an extra effort to please their playmates. If free play is scarce, social development will also be limited.

Free play also helps children reduce stress, trauma and frustration. As Oliverio Ferraris (2011, p. 44) says about symbolic play:

"Like spontaneous drawing, symbolic play allows internal contents to be brought outward, whether joyful or even distressing. But when these are distressing, play often takes on a therapeutic value. The emotionally charged inner phantoms take shape externally and this externalisation allows the excessive emotional charge that they have generated and that oppresses or troubles the child to be evacuated'.

"Symbolic play is a great resource for children: in it they find answers not only to problems of a certain importance, but also to the normal stresses of everyday life" "This space is a kind of protective buffer between him and the world, between his ego and the feeling of abandonment that seems to overwhelm him at that moment. In this space he invents a game: he talks to the teddy bear as if it were his daddy and to the doll as if it were his mummy. He recreates the presence of his absent parents by resorting to imagination and in so doing neutralises the feeling of abandonment, but above all he responds, autonomously, to a lack' (Oliverio Ferraris, 2011, p. 45).

The damage caused by the lack of free play is considerable: 'Using data collected in the USA, which cover very large samples, psychologist Peter Gray (2011, p. 443-463) carried out a study showing that, as free play and outdoor play decreased in childhood, psychological distress such as anxiety, depression, feelings of powerlessness and lack of personal control, and narcissism increased significantly in childhood and adolescence. In addition, when children's play is artificially reduced, the development of the frontal cortex is also reduced, so that social skills are also diminished.

Unfortunately, this type of play, in our society and in our historical period, is scarcely used, so much so that the time that children devote to free play was reduced by a quarter between 1981 and 1997. As early as kindergarten, children's free time revolves around music lessons and sports, while the amount of time devoted to spontaneous activities is decreasing.

The reasons are numerous:

❖ In the meantime, the yards and green spaces around, next to or near the houses, where children used to be able to play freely on their own with the materials they chose on the spot, are occupied by cars;

❖ The use of green spaces provided by the municipalities also requires an availability from parents that they often do not have, as at least one parent must be free. This is increasingly difficult in a society in which work has invaded leisure time and Sundays with the continuous opening of shops (so-called 'H24' opening) and the possibility of connecting to the Internet;

❖ Moreover, due to parents' increased anxieties about their children's physical health, it must not be too cold but also not too hot to leave the house and a car must be available;

❖ Even when the child is taken to the village or town hall, he is unable to organise free and spontaneous play, due to the presence of constantly changing

peers. Most of the time, having no possibility of real socialisation and real communicative exchange, he is forced to make use only of the games provided by the municipality, going in a stereotypical way up and down the swings or slides, without building a real shared game;

- ❖ On the other hand, there has been an increase in the traffic of cars that make the roads dangerous, while motorbikes manage to roar into even the most difficult and delimited places;

- ❖ even wanting to play inside homes, which, precisely because they are richer in trinkets and valuable objects such as carpets, paintings and expensive furniture, are ill-suited to the child's impetus and accentuate the parents' fear that the child might damage these valuable objects. This leads parents to severely limit this type of play, preferring children to be 'good and quiet' in front of a screen, no matter which one;

- ❖ Due to declining birth rates, as well as ever-increasing schoolwork and the various sporting, musical or social activities that children have to perform because they are scheduled by their parents or schools, there is a shortage of children of the same age and sex with whom they can play;

- ❖ Parents' and family members' fears have increased considerably because of television programmes that like to rehash the most gruesome news stories over many months; especially when minors are involved in these events. Not to mention the greatly magnified danger of paedophiles who, according to TV and newspaper reports at certain times, seem to be hiding around every corner of the house. This leads to a considerable amplification of anxieties and fears that prevent many parents from letting their children play freely, not only in their own neighbourhood, but also just near or around their homes;

- ❖ more and more time is spent by children in front of the TV, the video game console, or the keyboard of the computer, mobile phone and other electronic devices;

- ❖ the presence of parents in the home has decreased, both because of work and because of the increasing number of separations and divorces, so that the management of education is practically entrusted to a father or mother alone;

- ❖ the messages coming from advertising and the media are almost all geared *towards games led* by a 'responsible, capable, experienced' adult;

❖ In addition, advertising messages, which parents, grandparents and aunts and uncles cannot resist, clearly prevail with invitations to buy technically advanced and very expensive toys for the little ones, despite the fact that the best toys are those that can be manipulated to their liking, such as clay, bread dough and plasticine, or can be filled, pulled, pushed, put together in different structures and transformed into various objects, depending on the child's need at the time, such as constructions, boxes, boards, stones, pieces of wood;

❖ these types of games can rarely be played at school, as this institution sees it as its primary and indispensable duty to give children the maximum cultural education, as early and as quickly as possible. Moreover, in schools, teachers and headmasters, burdened by a sense of responsibility and the fear of accidents, which could be followed by investigations and scandals, with ensuing financial and/or judicial convictions, prefer children to be, as far as possible, quiet and peaceful in their classrooms but also, why not? sitting still in their desks!

❖ outdoor play has also decreased due to the fear of dirt that affects many mothers, despite the fact that the earth is rich in a valuable bacterium: *Mycobacterium vaccae*, which has an antidepressant

effect, as it activates a group of neurons that produce serotonin, a neurotransmitter that plays a key role in mood regulation;

❖ free play is little used by the family as parents, with the nagging of homework to be done by their children, force them into hours and hours of school activities. After which they leave them free to amuse themselves with the various electronic babysitters distributed in all the rooms of the house. Children, on the other hand, who have quickly become addicted to these electronic tools, prefer to play with them, rather than trying to organise and play games in the company of some of their peers.

Overcoming all these difficulties without hesitation and discouragement is the task of parents and educators. It is their job to do everything they can to get children out of the house, so that they can play freely with some peers or friends with whom they feel comfortable. It is, however, the task of state administrations to encourage these activities by removing all obstacles that prevent children from playing freely.

As for playmates, these can be of the same age (*play with peers)* or of different ages. Here, too, the modalities and purposes of play are different. When the playmates are the same age or close in age to his or her own, the child can be more freely active, developing imagination and, during play, can experience more social relationships (Isaacs, 1995, p. 104). However, even in this, it is good to leave the

child the choice. Therefore, depending on their inner needs at the time, some children will tend to play with peers, others, on the other hand, will prefer to play with children younger or older than themselves.

The consequences

The considerable decrease if not disappearance of free play has a major impact on both the motor skills of children and, above all, on their social, relational and affective development. In all societies where free play with peers is possible, a spontaneous play culture is formed and passed on from one generation of children to the next. This is unfortunately not the case when play is organised by adults or, even worse, is imposed by electronic tools or the fashions of the moment.

As children are increasingly left at home, free to use various electronic devices even for hours at a time, or are left at school for full time, extended time or with after-school teachers, numerous signs of stress or clear psycho-affective disorders with anxiety, irritability, motor instability, disturbance of attention spans, poor school performance, psychosomatic disorders are becoming increasingly evident.

4. *Free self-managed games*

The game can be managed by all the participants in the activity or by only one of them *(self-managed free play).* In the latter modality, it is only the child acting as leader who leads the game, while the adult next to him, who must have good welcoming, patient and empathic qualities, will only have the function of help and support (Tribulato, 2005, 110-111). This modality is particularly indicated in cases of autistic children or children with significant psycho-affective

disorders, in whom anxiety, fears, confusion, aggressiveness, uncontrollable restlessness and instability, prevent them from a fruitful exchange, relationship and collaboration with peers.

Sports Activities

One of the most recommended activities for children with psychological disorders, but also one for which almost all parents agree on its importance, is sporting activity. The old Latin adage '*Mens sana in corpore sano*' is universally accepted. Through *sporting activity*, various physical, psychological and social needs are met. All motor activities set in motion biological mechanisms that improve mood while decreasing anxiety and tension. Sport also offers the opportunity to make friends with peers and adults alike.

It is good, however, that this activity is requested and desired by the child and does not represent one of the many obligations he or she has to fulfil on a daily basis.

Parents generally try to choose the most comprehensive and most useful sport for the child. But even in this case, it would be a good idea for parents, after giving their opinion and advice, to leave the choice of the type of sport to the child.

Sport can be: *amateur or competitive*.

In *amateur sport,* it is the individual who decides which exercises to perform and for how long. *Competitive sport* imposes numerous rules and considerable discipline. In addition, the competition, which necessarily arises between children in the same team or between opposing teams, is likely to increase their anxiety. For children with psychological problems, amateur sport is generally prefe-

rable. However, for some of them, competing can be very useful as it allows them to divert their repressed aggression into competitiveness and physical exertion.

Since the coach is a very important figure, since it is on him or her that the correct use of the sporting activity depends, but also its greater or lesser enjoyment and acceptance, it is necessary that the choice of this figure be very careful and shrewd. The coach must be a very well-prepared person on a professional level, but also sensitive, attentive, affectionate and mature on a human level, so as to understand and be able to manage, in the relationship with the child, his or her deepest and truest needs. *Sport* can be *individual or team sport*. In *individual sport*, emphasis is placed on achieving certain goals that depend solely on the individual and not on his or her teammates, so the anxiety of failure, of making mistakes, may be excessive. Also missing in this type of sport is the pleasure and fun of playing together. For these reasons, if possible and if accepted by the children, it is preferable to practise *team sports,* in which children can learn the best ways of fitting into a group and interacting with it.

Many of the characteristics of the environment where the child lives are conferred above all by the personality characteristics of the people who are most in intimate contact with him: his parents and *first and foremost* his mother. If the mother's body and blood are irreplaceable in building the child's body and blood, her psychological characteristics, her communication skills, her readiness to listen, care and welcome, are equally irreplaceable in shaping the psychological structure of the new human being, his personal and sexual identity, his social and relational skills, and his mental health.

For Klein (1969, p. 14):

"While the prenatal state undoubtedly implies a feeling of unity and security, the maintenance of this state after birth depends on the psychological and physical condition of the mother and perhaps also on hitherto unexplored factors present in the child before birth.

For Winnicott (1987, p. 50):

"...the mental health of the individual is founded from the beginning by the mother who provides what I have called a facilitating environment, that is, one that allows the child's natural growth processes and interactions with the environment to evolve in accordance with the individual's inherited pattern. The mother, without knowing it, is laying the foundations of her mental health. Not only that. Beyond mental health, the mother (if she behaves in the right way) is laying the foundation for the individual's strength, character and richness of personality'.

This predominant influence of the mother on the children's mental health is also emphasised by Wolff (1970, p.

138), for whom while mothers who have severe or moderate personality disorders contribute both to marital disharmony and to the development of behavioural disorders in their children, the father's personality disorder must be quite imposing to have such effects.

For Bowlby (1982, p. 17), young children are more sensitive to the emotional attitudes of those around them than to anything else. Personality disorders among parents of children with behavioural disorders are found to a significantly greater extent. Precisely, more than half of the disturbed children have mothers who present serious difficulties in relationships with others. The fathers of these children are also disturbed more often than the fathers of normal children, but the difference is smaller.

While not denying the fundamental mother-child relationship, one should not, however, underestimate the psychological characteristics of the family members and people the child encounters in his or her social and school life, since each person present in the environment where the child lives and develops makes positive or negative contributions to his or her existence. On the other hand, today as in the past, alongside mothers, temporarily replacing mothers, engaged in other occupations, (a replacement that may last a few minutes or a few hours, but in some cases may last for days or months), there have always been other people: grandparents, uncles, nannies, babysitters, teachers, childminders, etc., who have made their contribution, both positive and negative.

From the characteristics of these people, from the capacities of these men and women to create and maintain around the child a welcoming, loving, warm, affectionate, dialoguing reality, will derive the birth and robustness of

the ego itself and the fundamental characteristics of the new human being.

For many authors, the psychological characteristics of the people around the child are crucial to the child's psychological health.

For Bowlby (1982, p. 17):

"Although the observation of children on a clinical level seems to indicate in some cases the origin of childhood disorders in the parents' ignorance of factors such as the pathological effects of lack of maternal care or premature and excessive punishment, more frequently it is found that the disorder stems from the parents' affective problems, problems of which they are only partly aware and which they are unable to control.

Per Wolff, (1970, p. 227):

"When adults suffer severe crises, their children suffer indirectly; and when children have to overcome inner obstacles or unfavourable life circumstances in their early years, their behaviour as adults is often damaged".

Since children cannot be separated from the influences of their parents, there is a continuous process of mutual influences between generations. "It is highly probable that satisfied parents, who perform their social functions adequately, will have well-adjusted children, and it is highly probable that those children who overcome the *stresses* of childhood satisfactorily will become well-adjusted persons in later life" (Wolff, 1970, p. 227).

We can then say that if everything goes well, if the mother and the other people very close to the child have appropriate characteristics and behaviour, there will be a greater chance that the child's inner world will harbour a smile, self-satisfaction and satisfaction with others, serenity,

warmth, openness and trust in oneself and in life. Otherwise, his world and thus also his ego will be invaded by suffering, disappointment and conflict. Suffering, disappointment and conflicts that he will manifest through various symptoms that in young children will be weeping, moaning, somatic disorders, restlessness and, in the most serious cases, closure to others and to the world while, in older children, fears, aggressiveness, motor instability, irritability, depression, etc. will predominate.

The affective messages that the child receives from the external environment can then colour his ego with positive feelings, such as love, joy, hope, pleasure, desire, affection. Ultimately, if all goes well, the result will be a good psychic balance; if not, if the psycho-affective messages are not good, his world and the world around him will be invested with negative elements, such as anger, aggressiveness, emotional instability, restlessness, fear, anxiety, depression, sadness, rejection, closure, conflict.

It should also be added that positive qualities are not stable: they need the continuous effort, emotional commonality and support of others in order to be preserved. Therefore, if we can produce specific improvements in our children's environment, this will also contribute to their mental health as adults (Wolff, 1970, p. 227).

Human beings also develop with less than perfect parents or caregivers, as the child possesses various means of defence to make up for the defects of parents and caregivers. This, however, can occur within certain limits, beyond which the suffering that results from these unsuitable or clearly traumatising contacts determines, even in the child with an excellent genetic make-up, psychic disturbances that will spread, in turn, into the social fabric, making him

or her more unstable, fragile, aggressive, and unsuitable for relational life.

Environmental variables

When discussing the influence of the characteristics of the environment on children's distress, the first observation that is made is that in the same family, with the same parents, there are children with very different psychological situations. Some, for example, have serious psychological problems, while others have no obvious psychological disorders.

In reality, apart from the genetic components and the diseases and physical traumas that must always be taken into due consideration, the environment in which the child lives presents a considerable variability over time, like all environments in which living beings coexist. It can happen then that a favourable environmental condition turns into an unfavourable one and vice versa, not only after months or years, but also after a few days or hours. Since, moreover, the will of the people involved influences every relationship, it is easy for it to happen that a child with the same people, but at different times, finds himself establishing very different interpersonal relationships.

The environmental variables in which the child finds himself are numerous. We will describe just a few of them:

1. The age of the parents.

2. Experience.

3. The composition of the family and the quality of the other educators.

4. Particular situations experienced by the family.

5. The quality, quantity and type of extra-family work or commitment.

6. The way in which social services are perceived and used.

7. The way in which personal relationships are experienced with the newborn and then with the child.

1. *The age of the parents.*

 Parents, over time, change their attitudes towards life, work, children. When one is younger, one has more energy to spend, one is less emotional, there is greater drive and impetus in facing every event, but there is also less patience and constancy. Above all, there is a greater propensity to commit one's time and energy to work in order to build a secure and consistent economic future for oneself and one's family. Couple relationships, in young parents, suffer from greater variability: periods full of love and passion may be succeeded by periods of frost, conflict or crisis. There is also, on the whole, less acceptance of each other's limits and difficulties: both adults and children. On the contrary, more mature parents have less enthusiasm, are more emotionally fragile, often suffer from physical and psychic problems and disorders, but are also more forgiving, more patient, more willing to understand the needs of others, so they accept the limitations of the person they are with better and more willingly.

2. *Experience.*

We all learn, above all, through the dictates of expe-rience, and therefore we also learn from our mistakes. This is why our beliefs, as well as our actions, change and shape, adapting. A mother or father who is a first-time parent does not and cannot have the same qualities as a parent who has had previous educational experience.

3. *The composition of the family and the qualities of the other educators.*

Environmental components, in the development of per-sonality, can modulate differently depending on the number and qualities of the people encountered along the way. Im-portant figures revolve alongside the parents: grandparents, uncles, cousins, neighbours, family friends, teachers, baby-sitters, etc. Each of them can make a personal positive or negative contribution, both to the parents themselves and to their children. These human presences can change conside-rably over time, due to relocations, deaths, greater or lesser commitment to the family or child, and the parents' own willingness to accept or reject their contribution and inter-vention.

4. *Particular situations experienced by the family.*

A job that is taken up or lost, an illness that intervenes, a deeply felt bereavement, a love affair that intensifies or breaks up, a relationship that disintegrates, the events of the day, tiredness and stress at a given time, frustrations or gra-

tifications, happy, sad or dramatic news, are all conditions that can change the state of mind of the person or persons caring for the child, so as to influence the relationship with them at that time, but also in subsequent periods. Thus, if these conditions persist, they can permanently change the child's living environment, making it more or less favourable to his or her development.

5. *The quality, quantity and type of extra-family work or commitment.*

The way of experiencing work and the importance given to it and to economic contributions can change over time. Just as there are other conditions that change the propensity towards commitments outside the family. First of all, there is the greater or lesser possibility of employment linked to the economic situation in the country where the parents live. The value placed on work commitments or extra-family activities may also change over time. In some historical periods, such as our own, not only all employment is highly valued, but all extra-familiar commitments, whether of a recreational, social or political nature, are also exalted, as they are judged to be essential and prevalent elements with respect to childcare. In other historical periods, on the other hand, the value of the affective relationship and the upbringing of children is prevalent or at least not subordinate to economic needs and recreational and social commitments.

6. *The way services are perceived and used.*

The social services offered to families and parents: crèches, schools, school canteens, are changing over the years in relation to the social policies of the various governments, but also in relation to the demands that come from the social fabric: families, industries, trade unions, media. These services, for example, have increased considerably in recent years, as the value placed on them by families has increased considerably, so that social demand is much greater than it was a few decades ago. Today, these services are seen as essential, not only to enable both parents to work and 'fulfil themselves', but they are also seen as important for the development of children, as the belief has been established that they are able to bring more knowledge and better socialising skills to the child.

7. ***The way relationships with the child are experienced.***

The relationships that are established between parents, relatives and child are different according to numerous variables concerning, as we have said, gender, somatic appearance, the time of onset of pregnancy, and the characteristics of childbirth, which can be more or less easy, more or less painful and traumatising. These relationships are, moreover, greatly influenced by the infant's early behaviour. A baby who in the first few days after birth appears serene during the day, attaches himself to the breast with ease, takes plenty of milk and at night sleeps and lets his parents sleep peacefully, there is no doubt that he has a much better chance of being judged and experienced well, than a baby who, for various reasons, including organic or genetic, does

not feed regularly, cries often and leaves dad and mum sleepless. Moreover, both parents and relatives are greatly influenced by the sex of the newborn. Desire or disappointment regarding sexual characteristics is still not irrelevant in our societies. "What a nuisance to have to take care of a male child for whom anything you put on him is fine, whereas it would have been nice and I would have been happy to take care of a pretty little girl to dress up and adorn with the richest and most prissy clothes!" "What a pity to have a girl daughter with whom you cannot do all the games and activities that boys like instead, like going to the game, talking about sports, running, playing, wrestling!" The likability of a particular sex is conditioned by childhood dreams, fantasies and experiences, but it also suffers the weight of the cultural stereotypes present at a given time in a certain social context. The same applies to *somatic appearance.* "How I would have wished for a blond, blue-eyed child and instead this child was born with raven black hair and eyes darker than mine". *The time of onset of pregnancy* is also important. "What a misfortune to get pregnant just when I had won that competition I was so keen on, which could allow me to settle down for life! "Or on the contrary: 'How fortunate that this baby has come at a time when I feel disillusioned with work and am looking for a deep, maternal-type stimulus to warm my soul! "The influence on a child's way of feeling and bonding is also given by its genetic characteristics and its initial way of relating to its mother or carer. If parents have cultivated in themselves, for years, the positive image of a 'plump and chubby' child who laughs and jokes in their arms, they are bound to be disappointed with a skinny, inappetent and se-

rious child. The relationship that is established with the child is, therefore, biunivocal.

We have said that just as the child judges the mother, the mother also judges the child. For example, for a certain type of particularly demanding mother, a child is 'good' and deserves to be treated with gentleness, affection and tenderness if it fits in with her timetable and wishes. A child is 'bad' if he does not quickly integrate with her expectations and needs of the moment. Therefore, towards this latter child it is difficult for this type of mother to control her aggressive and reactive feelings. As if to say: 'You get me into trouble with your behaviour and I punish you with my demeanour'. Of course, it is people with greater psychological disorders who indulge in this type of behaviour that is not rational and correct.

Ultimately, parents have different feelings and behave differently towards each child.

5 - THE VARIOUS TYPES OF ENVI-RONMENTS

Optimistic and joyful environment

There is no doubt that an optimistic and joyful outlook on life, a giving of space for trust in oneself, in others and in the future, has considerable advantages:

A mood full of optimism:

❖ greatly improves the physical and psychological well-being of both mother and child, and helps to better cope with any problems related to pregnancy, childbirth and the care and upbringing of the child;

❖ allows a positive relationship to be established with children because, like trees bear fruit, for man, children represent a gamble towards others and towards life. "Yes, it is true, today as in the past, not everything goes right, not all people are honest, charitable, helpful, loving, but there is a chance that something will change and change for the better. "Here, although I know the problems of the society in which I live, I give my son to the world, so that he can contribute to building, together with other human beings who believe in the same values, a better future". Incidentally, the children of optimistic parents are more successful than their peers who have pessimistic parents, are also more popular and integrate better into the peer group.

❖ gives the couple greater strength and serenity in the face of life's setbacks and adversities;

❖ enables better physical health as the immune system acts more effectively;

❖ makes recovery easier and quicker after a difficult or traumatic event;

❖ offers greater rewards and satisfaction in various daily activities and commitments;

❖ makes it easier and quicker to adapt and be flexible in facing new circumstances and challenges in life;

❖ makes problem-solving easier, as it allows one to see not only the negative aspects of a situation but also the positive ones, and thus reduces the stresses and frustrations that some difficult situations cause.

Living optimistically, however, does not mean having an unrealistic view of life and our surroundings. Approaching life in an unrealistic way carries considerable risks, as parents also have a duty to cope with any easy or difficult problems that arise by avoiding any false hopes or escapes from reality.

On the other hand, precisely because the world of the child is, at certain times, a source of unknowns and fears, children need people who can clarify and defeat ghosts and unnecessary, excessive fears.

A child who hated the rain

"Once upon a time there was a little boy called Gigi who never wanted it to rain. One day his mother explained to him that sooner or later this natural effect had to happen. If he didn't pay attention, the rain would only last a very short time. In fact at that very moment it started to rain and Gigi started talking to his mother and paid no attention (to the rain). *After a short time, the rain disappeared and the rainbow came.*

Children, all children, love peace, serenity, joy and acceptance *(the rainbow)* while they dislike melancholy and sadness (*it never wanted to rain).* Mothers like Gigi's, as well as fathers, should be able to make their children understand that it is impossible to eliminate bad things and melancholy from life, but that after these it is easy for serenity and joy to reappear, so that they do not easily get depressed in difficult moments and can fully enjoy the happy moments.

Serene environment

A serene environment is created by parents but also by family members who possess a good psychic balance. Having a good psychic balance means having a normally and harmoniously developed and structured Ego, which knows how to relate well with itself and with others and is able to observe reality objectively, being able to maintain good judgement and critical capabilities even in situations that require considerable personal commitment and control. Having a good psychic balance means living and possessing an inner reality that does not fall prey to conflicts, anxieties, fears, addictions, character disorders or worse, psychic illnesses of a certain importance such as psychosis. A serene environment is therefore made up of parents who are less anxious and mutually affectionate, attentive and caring, who are able to look after the physical and psychic well-being of their children, without harmful excesses.

In search of a joyful and serene world

"Once upon a time there was a little boy who lived alone in a house in the country. One day he decided to decorate it by putting pots with flowers. He mowed the lawn and saw birds flying in the sky.

One day the local residents went to the child's house, dined there and finally complimented him on the house he had.

He lived alone, because everyone made fun of him. He went to bed and dreamt of a family: he regretted living alone. He dreamt of a very rich family, consisting of father, mother, brother and sister. He heard a knock and it was a family that wanted to take him in. They were good, they bought a bit of everything, they were always cheerful".

Michele, in his search for a serene, peaceful environment, excludes his family of origin, perhaps thinking them incapable of giving him what he needs *(he lived alone in a house in the country)*. Initially, the solution he finds is to

live alone in a bucolic environment and in a house to be made beautiful and full of flowers. A house, therefore, capable of giving him serenity, peace, welcome and tenderness. He soon realises, however, that an idyllic environment lacking in family warmth is incomplete. And so he inserts a new family, an ideal family, that welcomes him into its bosom by giving him everything his heart had been waiting for: not only the desired toys *(they bought a bit of everything),* but also and above all they had a benevolent and joyful attitude and behaviour *(they were good; they were always cheerful)*. Attitudes that were very different from those of his real family in which he suffered greatly from paternal and maternal anxiety (note the bloody, dirty, almost black sun that highlights a father figure not only incapable of giving him protection but also the cause of fears and anxieties). The child inserts as a reason for his search for loneliness the fact that he is mocked by everyone. In reality, his parents did not have this kind of attitude towards him, but it was his psychological problems that made him easily vulnerable towards his schoolmates.

Authoritative environment

The authoritative environment is created by mature, wise and balanced adults who are clearly aware of their rights but also of their duties. These adults are able to approach children with love and a spirit of service (Lombardo, 1994, p.37). They are capable of loving, listening, respecting and educating minors because they possess a great inner strength that they are able to pass on to their pupils, so that they can better face the many problems and difficulties of life. For these reasons, these adults deeply feel the need

to be linear and consistent, between what they say and what they do, so as to fully embody the values they propose. Authoritative adults are not afraid of minors, but they do not need violence to make themselves obey and be respected, since they have embarked together with the children entrusted to them on a slow, arduous, sometimes painful path, but one that has important common goals and objectives (Lombardo, 1994, 61). They are well aware that developmental age subjects need effective and solid guidance and support. Therefore, while respecting the personality and sensitivity of each child, they know how to guide them along the path towards maturity and autonomy, with decision, serenity, balance, punctuality and attention. Authoritative adults hold the minors entrusted to them in esteem and, in order to provide security, joy, wealth and inner strength, know how to approach them with confidence, dialogue and listening. And because they regard them as important, they have confidence in their abilities, potential and possibilities. Authoritative adults know how to offer minors a balanced trust that takes into account their age, judgement and ability to handle dangers and risks, without exceeding either freedom or imposing limits.

In this type of environment there is a deep respect for minors and, therefore, they are rewarded for every positive behaviour and every effort to improve. In this environment, in order to avoid debasing the developing personality, the number, frequency and intensity of criticism and punishment, when attitudes and behaviour are clearly inadequate or not in keeping with civilised living, are few and are applied without "detracting from the value of the dignity of others" (Lombardo, 1997, p. 134).

The authoritative educator who loves freedom knows that the child, in order to be able to live it fully, needs limits, rules and norms, so that he can discern clearly: what is right and what is not right; what is possible and what is not possible; what is good and what is bad; what is useful to him, to the family, to the parents, to society, and what is useless or harmful.

That is why in this environment there are many 'yeses' expressed with joy, so that the child has plenty of room for his or her own discoveries and choices, but also a few, indispensable 'noes' said clearly and decisively, but also with love and kindness.

Available environment

We know that a child does not just ask but gives a lot to the people who care for him or her in a constant, caring and valuable way. Proof of this can be seen in adoptive couples and those who perform artificial insemination. In both cases, these are couples who are not afraid to face and accept a thousand sacrifices, to undertake heavy courses of treatment and huge expenses, just to have a child in their arms. Nature has linked motherhood and fatherhood to many reasons for joy, pleasure and gratification.

What could be more pleasant than a child falling asleep in its mother's arms, saturated with milk and affection, its chubby little face, from which shines, satiated, along with a few trickles of milk, a heavenly bliss? What could be more pleasant and gratifying than to see a child who responds with a smile to your smile, with grimaces to your grimaces, with kisses to your kisses, never satisfied to stay in touch with you, never satiated with moaning, hugging and play-

ing? What could be more gratifying than accompanying a child by the hand, so as to give him more confidence and courage, on his first day at school, while the rucksack, chosen together, bounces on his shoulders and the pinafore exudes its scent of clean, new fabric?

These and a thousand other pleasant moments are certainly also inextricably linked to the many sacrifices and limitations that parents accept and impose on themselves. Bringing up a child means committing a good part of one's energy and time to caring, educating, dialoguing, supporting, encouraging, cheering. This presupposes a great willingness to give oneself for the man-child that is being formed and which requires a great deal of dedication and attention, a great deal of presence and patience. Giving oneself for one's children entails sacrifices and renunciations: of one's time, one's personal aspirations and desires. These renunciations can only be made easily if, overcoming individualism and personal selfishness, they are experienced with pleasure and joy. It is difficult to think of parents who do not have the willingness to give freely and generously. However, this readiness is not always present.

More mature and psychologically serene and balanced people are more easily disposed to free giving. When one is affectively and psychologically small or immature, one tends more to ask than to give. Similarly, when one is psychologically ill, one hungers for simple and trivial pleasures and is more inclined to demand from others than to offer to others.

The readiness to give freely also stems from certain family values transmitted through education to the new generations. One can have an upbringing that emphasises social careerism, power, efficiency, intellectual and cultural

skills, aggression towards life from which to take honours, riches and glories for oneself, or, and this is what the new generations expect, it is possible to implement an upbringing that tends to stimulate and mature in future fathers and mothers, in future citizens, the pleasure of opening oneself to others, the joy of understanding, of relationship and of giving.

Safe and unsafe environment

One of the main elements indispensable for the serene psycho-affective development of the child is the subjective experience of security.

To understand what it feels like when children lose their sense of security in their hearts, we need only recall the anguished look they get on certain occasions. The classic image is of an experience that many of us, as parents or as children, have had at least once in our lives. Dad and mum go with their child to a folk festival. There are the merry-go-rounds slowly turning, while the band plays the usual cheerful tune. There are the colourful balloons looking down on the crowd. There is the sweet smell of almond nougat wafting and mingling with the more robust and acrid smell of roasted chickpeas, placed together with fine sand in the large pan over the fire. The child watches enraptured as the jugglers twirl their coloured balls and stops, while the parents, distracted for a moment, continue walking. Then he turns, thinking he will find them beside him, but he no longer sees them and finds himself alone. He searches for them in the crowd, running hither and thither, while at the same time anxiety begins to grow in his little heart, which beats faster and faster, while his eyes become

increasingly tense and reddened. At one point, the discouraged child stops, casts a bewildered look around him and, certain that he has lost his mother and father forever, bursts into an anguished cry.

Since children, but also the young of other animals, are creatures of habit, they only feel calm and trust when events around them always unfold in the same way. Changes, especially if sudden and inadequately prepared, make them anxious and burden them with fears that, in the eyes of adults, appear strange and excessive, when in fact they are only the logical consequence of inappropriate behaviour and attitudes.

Since the primary source of security for the child is its mother and father, but also other family members, an important element that gives peace of mind is the constant presence of the two parental figures in its home and life. A feeling of alarm and therefore of insecurity is experienced by the child when, before the age of three, he is away from home, even for a few hours and left in unfamiliar surroundings, in the company of unknown people. Especially when the child is young, a mother or father who is not or only occasionally present means insecurity for the child. Just as he feels insecurity when his family environment is disrupted by new presences entering his life: new girlfriends and boyfriends of father and mother, new half-brothers and half-sisters, new grandparents.

Contributing to a child's security is the consistency and straightforwardness of adults' behaviour. He feels secure when his parents use firm, decisive words with each other and with him, but in a serene, affectionate tone that is rich in listening and dialogue, or when they clearly communicate to him what he can do and what he cannot do. What is

permitted and what is forbidden. What is right and what is wrong. When parents give conflicting signals, very often related only to the state of well-being or malaise present in their soul at that moment, he does not know how to relate properly to them and to his living environment. The child feels a sense of security when he notices that mum and dad know how to deal with everyday problems, obstacles and vicissitudes firmly and calmly. He feels insecurity, on the other hand, when he notices that normal life events put mum and dad in crisis or cause them despondency and anger.

Severe economic difficulties can also be a source of insecurity, both because the child feels anxiety and concern in his or her surroundings about this difficult situation and because he or she feels belittled and 'different' in comparison with others. Considerable insecurity is felt due to family disagreements or disharmony (De Negri et al., 1970, p. 116-117). When there are persistent disagreements between the parents, he fears the risk of the family bond breaking, with the consequent loss of one or both parents. Since the child needs to feel accepted and loved by his or her family members, a source of security is being able to say at all times: 'I am something important and good for Dad and Mum. They are happy and proud of me, of what I am, what I do, how I behave'. The child, on the other hand, runs the risk of losing his confidence when scolding, reminders and reprimands are frequent and excessive. In such cases, it is easy for him to lose self-esteem and fear of losing the love of his parents or adults in general. The sense of *loss of security* may be *acute or chronic.* The consequences are more severe when the loss of security is chronic, rather than when the traumatic event is resolved in a short time.

In both cases, the child experiences, along with fear, pain and suffering.

Authoritarian environment

The authoritarian person likes to impose their opinions, thoughts, needs, desires, but also their decisions on others. Authoritarian people tend to think in cultural stereotypes. They do not allow arguments, demand absolute obedience from others and do not tolerate deviations from what is required. They exalt inflexibility and because they only accept blind obedience, they have difficulty listening to the needs of others. Ultimately, authoritarian people fail to see others as capable of autonomous wills, desires and decisions.

The authoritarian person considers commanding a pleasure and a need. A pleasure, in realising that others do what is asked of them; a need, in that command gives them greater inner security and the illusion of being superior to others.

This type of environment, therefore, is full of arrogance, aggression, oppression, and little respect for the needs of others. Above all, little respect is evident in this environment for the weakest and thus for children. The authoritarian environment can be found everywhere: in a home, in a school, or in another type of institution. In this environment, chastisements, repressions, punishments are frequently used in the education of minors. Therefore, children suffer, for what should be 'their good', continuous and repeated acts of violence, most often psychological, but sometimes also physical.

The authoritarian environment tends to mould closed, inhibited, dependent personalities or, on the contrary, people with reactive, aggressive and rebellious attitudes towards both the tyrant adult and the outside world in general. This is because authoritarian attitudes prevent the internalisation of norms.

An authoritarian mother

Dario was the son of a mother with the characteristics described above. She was the one who always and on every occasion knew what was good for her son, so she imposed her own ideas and convictions on everything: on what and how to study; with whom and how to make friends or socialise; on what and how much to eat; which subjects to study in the afternoon first, and which to study later; which friends to go out with, and so on. She therefore dragged and forced her son to implement, on every occasion, what she had arranged. At the same time, however, not being able to control everything, not being able to direct everything, she left him free to watch TV until three o'clock in the morning, without being able to implement any selection on programmes. She did this so as not to be disturbed by the fears of the child who was forced to seek the company of a TV screen that was always on in order to fall asleep. She also allowed him to play the most violent and frightening video-games, as these games, according to her, 'distracted him'.

One of the characteristics of authoritarian adults is precisely this: while on the one hand they are extremely directive in certain areas that they deem essential, in others they are extremely liberal and tolerant. It is as if they choose one or a few conditions that they consider fundamental, neglec-

ting everything else. In the final analysis, their style of education, besides being remarkably repressive, is neither harmonious nor balanced.

Permissive environment

If it is easy to understand how depressed, aggressive, irritable, anxious, nervous educators can unwittingly create psychological problems for their children, it is, on the other hand, difficult to imagine how very, excessively good and condescending educators can harm children. The latter do everything to avoid any displeasure to the children in their care. They try to please them in every request, they never scold them, on the contrary they ferociously attack anyone who dares to do so: no matter whether strangers, friends, relatives or teachers. They are ready to fulfil their every need and wish before it is even expressed, and therefore ultimately love to spoil them to the hilt.

Often, in dialogue, they strive to put themselves on a level with their children. In making decisions, they appeal to their conscience and their ability to choose, rather than to norms and rules. They justify everything and are too tolerant of the children entrusted to their care. They firmly believe in the educational capacity of experience, so their 'no's' are rare.

The causes of permissive behaviour by parents and educators are numerous:

> ❖ In the meantime, there are historical causes. Often, in human history, a period of considerable authoritarianism is contrasted with a period of permissiveness, as if to balance the previous excesses;

❖ also come into play in western societies, widespread theories and ideas concerning the concept of freedom, seen as the freedom of the individual from all conditioning, all limits and all norms;

❖ In western societies, the authoritative figure of the head of the family is confused, blurred or totally absent. Since the father is no longer given the ultimate responsibility for the social management of his family, he, in order to avoid continuous arguments, quarrels and conflicts with his spouse, prefers to leave the educational tasks to the female figure alone, relegating his paternal role to marginal tasks. The mother, in turn, not being able to use her father's authoritativeness, tends to oscillate between moments of exasperation, in which she clearly expresses anger and aggressiveness, resulting in excessive punishments and reproaches, to others of complete acceptance of her children's behaviour;

❖ Moreover, since in recent decades, authoritativeness has been mistaken for authoritarianism, parents and other educators, *primarily* teachers, are conditioned by the social environment, as well as institutions, to use very condescending attitudes, rather than being accused and denounced for excessive use of their authority;

❖ The poor or lukewarm moral and ethical outlook on life, which has spread across all social strata, should not be underestimated. Thus, in many parents, but also in many priests, the concept of sin and evil appears considerably reduced and blurred. Every attitude tends to be understood, accepted and justified, in the name of freedom of expression of one's impulses, both in the management of one's private life and in human relationships;

❖ Greater wealth and material well-being have induced vast strata of society to be more economically liberal with their children and grandchildren, without taking into account that easy access to money can greatly increase the risk of its misuse;

❖ Finally, it has been greatly underestimated that in human societies, as in those of many higher animals, a sign of maturity is knowing how to accept the norms, limits, and prohibitions that are useful to the smooth running of the social group, while it is a sign of immaturity not to accept any limits.

The negative consequences on child welfare are equally numerous:

❖ To be overindulgent in the face of children's demands is to extinguish in them the pleasure of desire, dreaming, waiting and conquest. Giving in excess also means making misuse of what is offered: toys, food, entertainment, free time or money;

❖ giving too much and too easily to children limits their drive towards maturity and autonomy, especially in the area of economic independence. Since these children have never learned to accept life as duty, cooperation and sacrifice, they ultimately show little commitment to others;

❖ Growing up in the bambagia, without having to fight to conquer what is desired, also leads to greater fragility and weakness in the face of frustrations, and this exposes minors to greater difficulties and mishaps when they are forced to face more aggressive and determined peers. These minors unprotected by a strong character, limited by their individualism, risk failing, as adults, to commit themselves to all those social, political and work activities that require sacrifice and renunciation;

❖ Since the human being loves action and achievements, the child takes pleasure in overcoming difficulties, if they are not excessive and if they are presented gradually. Having everything and everything now risks producing dissatisfaction, lack of inner

balance, inconsistency, emotional instability, imma-
turity;

❖ when parents and educators renounce their educa-
tional role, in order to place themselves almost as
peers next to minors and their whims, with their atti-
tude they prevent the latter from introjecting from
adults roles of responsibility towards their
neighbour;

❖ Since permissive parents assume in their children
more maturity, more capacity for judgement, more
control in the use of the will, than they actually pos-
sess, the physical, moral and social risks that these
parents and educators make minors run are far grea-
ter than those faced by their peers, who are granted
only that freedom and possibility of choice that they
are able to manage well. Therefore, the negative ex-
periences, which they frequently undergo and which
accumulate over time, risk marking them negatively
for life;

❖ These minors, living in a permissive environment,
often manifest provocative and irritating behaviour
and attitudes. Behaviour disorders are frequent in
them, due to a lack of self-control. Moreover, not
having introduced the indispensable norms and rules
of civilised living, the appearance of asocial or

clearly deviant attitudes may become evident in these minors during the adolescent and juvenile period;

❖ Finally, the use these parents make of moral blackmail, rather than reprimands and punishments, to make them obey or accept limits and prohibitions, exposes minors to increased feelings of guilt and inner conflict.

Environment that demands too much

For some parents, the child, or children, are experienced as medals of valour. Medals to be pinned on one's chest to communicate one's abilities and merits to oneself and others. For this type of parent, the first goal is to have a child at any cost, because the first thing one wants to communicate to others is one's fertilising capacity: 'I too am capable of having a child'. As if being able to have a child would mark one's image in a positive sense in the eyes of others. But, immediately afterwards, this type of parent needs to communicate other capacities: 'Not only do I, like you, have a child, but mine is more beautiful and better than yours'. What should <u>also be a</u> gift made to oneself but above all made to the child, to life and to society, becomes a gift made <u>only </u>to oneself. The child, for these parents, is someone to show off rather than to love. This burdens the new human being with considerable responsibility: he, to be *a child to show*, will have to be and will have to behave in a certain way. *A child to show off will* have to be not only the most beautiful, strong, tall, but also the most polite, the best at sports, the most capable in studies. Therefore, it is not

enough to be good at school, one must be 'the best'. Above all, one's own child must surpass in grades the child of one's friends, with whom there is an underground competition. And later, when he grows up, he must have a prestigious job, have a dream wedding, the most lavish wedding ever seen in town, and so on.

The child laden with these expectations and 'duties' will be as if gripped by an invisible psychological vice, whereby it will have to correspond in every way to the parents' wishes. If he does not do so, disesteem manifests itself. He warns that there are very precise conditions on the part of the parents: 'I will love you, you will be a beloved child, if you behave according to my demands, my wishes and needs. Otherwise you will lose my affection, my love, together with my esteem'.

Often these children are found in families that are wealthy or very prominent politically or socially; at other times even in humble families there is a need to elevate themselves in the eyes of others through the child. Sometimes this succeeds: the child adapts perfectly to its parents' wishes and makes them its own. More often, however, the child feels the violence of being used to bring prestige to the parents and, frustrated and tired, will react with apathy or with more or less open aggression. In some cases, in order to defend his own personality, he will try to be exactly the opposite of his parents' expectations. Not the best but the least good. Not the most polite but the least polite.

Affectively deficient environment

A child's intellectual and affective growth is closely conditioned by the quantity and quality of stimuli received.

Although a newborn child's nervous system is already programmed for his human development, his specific genetic potential will only be realised in a full, rich and harmonious manner if he has received the necessary communicative, affective, intellectual, motor and sensory stimuli at the appropriate times and in the appropriate manner and manner appropriate to his physiology. Otherwise, his cerebral development will come to a standstill or will be carried out in a partial or incorrect manner.

While in the adult we can partly distinguish affective stimuli from intellectual ones, in the child this distinction is very often not easy and not even possible because, for the human infant, the two components are closely linked to each other. When a father opens his arms and incites the child to take its first steps, when a mother holds it on her lap and leafs through a picture book, or when in the evening both parents tell the child a fairy tale before going to bed, it is not only a father or mother who stimulates its gross motor skills, or enriches its vocabulary and imagination: they also, and above all, perform an exquisitely affective - relational function made up of mutual communion, encouragement, reassurance and dialogue. This is why, despite the enormous amount of stimuli coming from books, TV, video games, the Internet or computers, even today, and perhaps especially today, one can rightly speak of children suffering from a lack of environmental stimuli. For while it is true that these tools have greatly enriched the intra-psychic life of children in some areas, they have impoverished it in others. While these new technologies have greatly enriched visual, auditory and visual-motor coordination stimuli, compared to the past and compared to populations in which children can carry out, together with their parents and fami-

ly members, activities and games for many hours a day, in the open air, immersed in the natural environment, there has been a considerable impoverishment of experiences and stimuli. Physical and emotional contacts and experiences coming from adults with whom there is a strong emotional bond have become too scarce and limited in recent decades. similarly, direct and spontaneous contacts with the plant and animal world have declined markedly. A world that is remarkably rich in affective-relational properties.

While overall there is a lack of effective stimuli for the harmonious development of minors in our society, there are even more critical situations within it. Just as there is at one extreme a family environment that is very attentive to the child, to whom much is given, but at the same time much is demanded, there is, in the opposite situation, a remarkably cold and indifferent environment, in which the child passes almost unnoticed, as if transparent or non-existent. This happens when the parents, despite expecting a child, continue to lead their usual lives: he at work outside the home, while she is busy with her household chores and activities outside the family. When the child is born, the mother looks after it as if it were one of the many tasks to which she is obliged to devote herself, one of the many tasks of the day, without making the slightest effort to have a good dialogue with the child. These mothers, even when they are at their child's side, do not seek out and do not allow themselves to have that special deep and solid bond that the child seeks and cannot do without. These inattentive mothers, while breastfeeding the baby, even when they are not busy on the phone or with the TV, do not experience the relationship in a profound way, as their thoughts wander to the things to be done, after that tedious occupation. But fathers, too, believe

that their task has ceased as soon as they have ensured the family's economic well-being through their work. These parents, when they can, prefer to delegate the indispensable care to others, to whoever is available. Their minds, distracted by commitments, projects, or worse, by the passions or loves of the moment, are unable to fully experience and enjoy their relationship with their child.

When these parents, for whatever reason, need to be away from home and the child for days or months on end, for study, work, or other reasons, they only strive to find someone to take care of him in their absence: to feed him, clean him, and put him to bed. Without caring at all about the suffering experienced by their child due to the lack of affection.

Throughout the developmental years there is an affective hunger in all areas of relationship life. When this hunger is not satisfied, the child's psycho-affective development suffers serious consequences. The mother and father are not the only ones responsible for the affective deficiency. Other family members are also responsible. This is because, while in the first eighteen to twenty months this demand for a solid affective bond is addressed exclusively to the mother and father, as the child acquires a position in the surrounding world, the need for affection, dialogue, care, security and protection is also demanded from the family environment.

Affective deficiencies can manifest themselves at different ages. There can be an *affective deficiency of early childhood, an affective deficiency of pre-school age, and one of school age*. The severity of the *deficiency syndrome* depends on the child's age, the duration of the parents' absence, and the presence or absence of figures with whom the

child has established a solid affective bond. The younger the child is, the longer the affective deficiency has been, the more serious and more difficult it will be to recover. In any case, the consequences of affective deficiencies caused by inattentive and unwilling parents can be mitigated by family members if they show themselves to be close and helpful to the child's care. Conversely, modest deficiencies on the part of the mother or father in caring for the child may be accentuated by the absence or lack of involvement of other family figures such as grandparents and aunts and uncles.

Individual characteristics must also be considered. Some children are particularly sensitive to these kinds of deficiencies and, therefore, react with major and severe symptoms when they occur, while others accept them better and react with milder, more transient symptoms. The increased resilience and resilience should not, however, delude parents, as an apparently neutral reaction often conceals and feeds invisible wounds and subterranean resentments.

The affective deficiency can present itself acutely or chronically. An *acute affective deficiency* is, for example, one in which the parents, fully available and close to the child up to that moment, are forced, for whatever reason, to move away from the child for some time. A *chronic deficiency*, on the other hand, is when, although there is no real estrangement, parents and family members constantly or frequently have a behaviour and attitude towards the child characterised by a lack of attention, care, commitment, willingness to listen and dialogue.

The damage caused by a lack of affection can be fully or partly recovered or can become more pronounced over time. If the mother, but also the other family members, when they become aware of the child's discomfort try, by

means of greater care, acceptance and dialogue, to be closer to the child's needs, the damage caused by the affective deficiency can be mitigated and to a large extent recovered. The consequences will be more serious, and in part irreversible if, as often happens, the discomfort expressed by the child is ignored or worse, misjudged. It is not uncommon to see the child's crying, fits of rage, closure and heightened irritability judged as unbearable tantrums, to be responded to with repressive and punitive attitudes, with the intention of making them stop.

Dario's case is an example of this.

A business trip

When Dario's mother went to Africa for work, her son was almost two years old. The woman thought she had left him in good hands as she had entrusted the child to his father and a nanny who lived permanently with the family. After a few months, when she returned from her successful assignment, she had no idea that she would have to face such a bad and difficult situation. Dario showed clear signs of suffering and regression: he no longer looked her in the eye, he appeared depressed, thoughtful, cried and shouted at the slightest thing, he had forgotten many of the words he knew. The mother, thinking that these behaviours and attitudes of her son were due to whims, rather than making it up to him by pampering him more, thought better of using a firmer and more decisive attitude towards the little one, which ended with enrolling him in a kindergarten where the mother knew that a particularly gruff and severe teacher taught. Finally, arguing that the nanny he had left with him during his absence had not done her duty well by not stimulating her son's communication, he dismissed her on the spot. When around the age of five he came to our observa-

tion, the child's psychological situation had further deterio-rated. He presented marked disinvestment in all relation-ships, both towards peers and adults; momentary but re-peated disconnections with reality; severe motor instability and restlessness; a sad attitude; major communication di-sorders with very little language and the presence of echo-lalia and the use of improper phrases and words. The child also presented ectopraxia, easy crying fits and, when upset, aggressive attitudes.

The mother tried to contain Dario's more disturbing behaviour with an increasingly firm and firm attitude, but with little or momentary result.

There is no doubt that at the root of this child's pro-blems was his mother's early estrangement for a few mon-ths, but there is also no doubt that the woman's subsequent behaviour, unwilling to make the child forgive her mistake, but rather tending to repress and punish Dario's manifesta-tions of suffering, was an attitude wholly inadequate to sol-ve the child's problems, and had thus, without intending to, greatly aggravated them.

Damage from emotional deficiencies can, as we have said, be wholly or partly recovered by others who intervene later. We find this, for instance, in adopted children. In the-se cases, the adoptive parents make an effort and often suc-ceed in satisfying the affective deficiencies of the child, thus remedying, at least in part, the damage previously suf-fered.

Causes of affective deficiencies

The scarce and/or occasional presence of parents in their children's lives is borne out by everyday reality and by numerous statistics. There is a decline in the number of hours spent with their children, but there is also a decline in the quality of time spent with their offspring. In recent decades, while there has been an increase in articles, works, and essays that tend to emphasise the importance of parental presence, parents themselves have been, and are increasingly, bombarded by a series of stimuli that tend to divert their attention, their commitment, and even their time devoted to caring for their children.

The causes of both acute and chronic affective deficiencies are numerous:

- Much time is taken away from work commitments. In modern Western societies there is an invitation, which is almost an obligation, for both parents to be involved in intra- and extra-family work. This is seen as a sign of modernity, democracy and necessity for families and society. It is also seen as a primary goal to be achieved in order to improve the GDP (Gross Domestic Product), to give more wealth to the nation and to enable the 'realisation' of women in the social sphere, so as to 'free' them from the slavery of the home, children and the cooker. Work outside the family is also reported as an obligation to improve women's culture and give them greater autonomy, so that they are not dependent on men. Necessity and obligation that also serve to lower wages and thus the cost of goods, so as to make our country more competitive in a global market.

- The search for a rewarding and fulfilling job, both economically as well as socially and personally, drives men and women to seek work not only far from their home but sometimes even far from their city or region.

- Much time is devoted by both men and women to enjoying, as much as possible, various kinds of entertainment: meeting friends, dancing, holidays and convivial dinners.

- Then there is the pressing call to improve one's physical appearance or to limit the damage inflicted by time on the face and body by frequenting gyms, wellness centres, but also operating theatres for cosmetic surgery.

- There is also no shortage of exhortations to improve one's culture by attending degrees, courses, master's degrees, apprenticeships, upgrades. It is continually stated by economists that a modern society is not satisfied with a modest basic culture, but requires people to be educated to university level and beyond.

- One is also urged to devote part of one's time and energy to the social and political arena.

- Also not to be underestimated is the frequent disharmony within couples and families. When parents devote a good deal of their energy to confronting the other, defending themselves against the other, accusing the other, hurting the other; caught up in soul-shattering feelings, such as jealousy, aggression, di-

sappointment, suffering and anger, these parents often do not have the opportunity to fully express those tender and delicate feelings that their children need. There is also insufficient willingness and serenity to care for and listen to their needs.

- The distancing of men and women from childcare is also caused by the loss of competence. Despite the fact that today there is a considerable increase in technical-professional culture, there has in fact been a considerable decrease in knowledge concerning the relationship with children, just as there has been a decrease in the acquisition of greater sensitivity and skills in the affective-relational field. All this contributes to alienating men and women from caring for their children, as parents are unable to have a serene and stable relationship with them, which is also the prerequisite for a gratifying and fulfilling relationship.

- If all this were not enough, modern societies have to contend with the tools that have invaded the homes and lives of city and town dwellers: televisions, computers, video game consoles, mobile phones, and so on. These tools that purport to improve communication between people, because they are used massively and improperly, take away energy and time that could be devoted to dialogue and the care of offspring.

The consequences

The consequences of emotional deficiencies are numerous:

1. The new generations are no longer passed on those elements of the basic culture of humanity, of their territory and their family, which are *the humus* not only formative but above all psychological, on which children, adolescents and young people need to sink the roots of their ego, to have stability, security and clarity.

2. The bond that should unite parents and children becomes fragile and weak, and incapable of supporting, guiding, comforting.

3. The occasional, erratic, unstable presence of parents prevents children from that inner development capable of building and then defending and strengthening the ego.

4. The sparse and occasional presence prevents nascent discomforts from being addressed in time and with appropriate measures. Increasingly, men and women, fathers and mothers 'do not have time'. They do not have time to devote to their children at a time when they should be contributing to their growth and education. Moreover, even when serious problems arise, parents themselves do not have time to deal with their children's discomfort with the necessary constancy, dedication and cooperation with the

operators. More and more often, in child neuropsy-chiatry outpatient clinics, when the child, as well as the family, needs therapy or psychological support, there is a blame game: fathers leave this task to mo-thers, mothers, who are too busy, have grandmo-thers come in or entrust nannies or baby-sitters with the task of accompanying the child for therapy.

5. The lack of a deep and valid bond between parents and children establishes frequent and numerous con-flicts, resulting in mutual mistrust, anger, resent-ment, aggression and dissatisfaction.

The child who wrote on trees

"Once upon a time there was a little boy who went around writing 'hello' on all the trees he came across, because he was lonely and had no friends. What he was doing was a way of making friends with the trees even though he knew better. One day a woodcutter met him and with the excuse that he too had something to do with trees, gave him some advice. This woodcutter served him as a friend to confide in and to express all that he had inside, so they calmly discussed this matter and this person convinced him that it was wrong both for him and for the trees. The woodcutter did not stop there, but went to tell all the people he knew to find some friends for the child. So he organised a party and invited all his friends and relatives and had many friends".

This tale is indicative of what children want. They need friends and if they have difficulty finding them, they even settle for 'tree friends', but it is only when someone helps them find real, flesh-and-blood friends that they are truly happy and satisfied.

A heart in the sky

A ten-year-old girl who, due to serious emotional and educational deficiencies on the part of both parents, lived in a nuns' home together with another brother and sister, sees only in Jesus, Our Lady and the Saints the possibility of love and attention:

"Once upon a time there was a heart in the sky. It was big and beautiful and red with love. This heart belonged to a female person, a little girl, who was two years old and named Alessia, who had become engaged to Jesus and had given him her heart. Alessia had a family and her parents were happy that she had become engaged to Jesus. Jesus was happy and his mother Mary and the disciples threw flowers on his heart and he was happy to be with them, he was happy...Her parents were happy that she had become engaged to Jesus".

Certainly living in a nunnery had a bearing on the story of the girl who chose to become engaged to Jesus. But what is striking in this tale is her identification with a little girl of barely two years old, while the girl was ten. It is as if the girl wished to regress to an age in which one imagines all children to be happy. Alongside this desire to be very small,

a desire due to the serious emotional deficiencies in her family, there is also, in this tale, a desire to escape from the sad reality in which the girl found herself living.

A child in the grave

"Once upon a time there was a little girl called Tindara. One day she died because her parents no longer wanted her. When they put her in the grave she was alive, but because she could not free herself she died."

This tale is by the girl herself. Here she expresses in the most grim way her real sufferings (*one day she died because her parents no longer wanted her),* but also her most terrible nightmares (*when they put her in the grave she was alive, but because she could not free herself she died)*. We ask ourselves: freeing herself from what? It probably refers to the need to drive away from oneself the terrible burden that oppresses children with emotional deficiencies!

Anxious environment

Just as serenity and inner balance can positively affect the well-being of the foetus and then of the child, anxiety and the resulting poor psychological balance can have a more or less serious negative influence on the lives of children. "The prevalence of anxiety disorders in the United States is estimated at 10 to 15 per cent (Kaplan, Sadock, 1993, p. 438).

Anxiety is an emotion that we all commonly experience throughout our lives. Who has not felt anxiety when as a child or teenager, sitting in the desk, head bowed, waiting for the professor to open the register to choose, based on his deep and inscrutable alchemy, who to question that day? Who has not felt anxiety while in a university lecture hall

watching the exams of the other candidates and wondering over and over again: "this question I know, this one I don't know?", "oh, God! he asks questions that are too difficult! What should I do? Isn't it better if I withdraw and give the subject another time?" Anxiety also keeps company with all the new fathers who, behind the delivery room door, wait for their spouse to give birth to their firstborn.

Alongside these *unpleasant anxieties* there are also *pleasant* ones, such as when, with yearning, we wait for our beloved on a first date. While in psychoanalysis the terms *anxiety and distress* are used as synonyms, in the field of psychiatry the term *distress* is preferred when anxiety is very intense and is accompanied by irrational fears, a general feeling of malaise, and sometimes dizziness, sweating, and heart palpitations, so that it has a paralysing power, producing confusion (Sullivan, 1962, p. 27).

It is not easy to describe anxiety: it is commonly referred to as a vague feeling of fear without a specific object. In this sense it differs from fear in which there is a well-defined object that is feared. According to Bressa (1991, pp. 1-2): 'anxiety can be defined as that functional phenomenon, designed to elicit in the mind-body complex that forms our universe, a syntonic and adaptive response to external stimuli'. The same author defines it as that feeling of painful anticipation, that malaise that prevents us from full realisation by making us experience even the most trivial situations badly (Bressa, 1991, p. 4). But anyone who has experienced it, at least once, knows that it is something more and different. It is an emotion that prevents us from thinking correctly and calmly. It is an anguish that blocks the breath. It is an unpleasant tension that envelops and upsets the body and mind. It is a storm in which one finds oneself

tossed about 'like leaves in the wind'. In other cases, one has the feeling of sailing on a fragile little boat in the middle of the storm, unable to have a precise destination, unable to concentrate even on very simple and trivial tasks.

Anxiety is considered a normal *emotion*, as it is remarkably present in everyday life: both in animals and humans. It is a particular form of fear that develops when one is exposed to a danger that is still uncertain in its nature and undefined in space and time. Anxiety has the function of alerting the body, so that it can face the most difficult and arduous trials in the best possible way: with more grit and effectiveness. This emotion is found more in the female sex, perhaps to enable mothers to activate readily and quickly in the protection and care of their young.

Anxiety is often accompanied by one or more unpleasant physical sensations: increased blood pressure and heart rate, sweating, chest pain, headache, shortness of breath, nausea, internal trembling, tingling, stomach pain and dry mouth. These symptoms are followed by fatigue and exhaustion, as when considerable exertion has been exerted.

Anxiety differs from outright fear in that it is non-specific and vague.

Pleasant anxiety - Unpleasant anxiety.

All of us have surely experienced the emotion of anxiety more than once in our lives, and we have learnt to clearly distinguish *pleasant* from *unpleasant anxiety*. When, while waiting for the arrival of a loved one, we have felt our heart beating fast, while our temples throbbed, our breath became short and our mouth became dry and parched, we have experienced what *pleasant anxiety* feels like. At other times,

of course, we have also experienced *unpleasant anxiety*, when, late for our return home, we anticipated a harsh reprimand from our parents.

Anxiety situations

Situations that provoke anxiety can be one or more than one and can vary over time depending on internal or external stimuli. Very much conditioned by what we read in the newspapers or see on TV, the danger can, from time to time, take on the guise of a paedophile, rapist or rapist ready to seize us or our child on the street corner. At other times and for other people, it is illnesses that can alarm us. For example, after the death of a loved one from an incurable disease, we become the experts in recognising the first symptoms of an impending tumour, so we subject ourselves and force our loved ones to undergo all possible examinations in order to detect and destroy this insidious disease in time.

But it is not only living beings, large or small, that stimulate our anxiety. Nature can also alarm us. After a catastrophe caused by a flood or an earthquake, we look with trepidation and suspicion at the placid river in our town. A river that, until then, had accompanied the happiest and most serene moments of our lives and childhood. In the same way, after a devastating earthquake far away from us, with the vision of walls crumpled and disembowelled by the waves of the quake, we watch with trepidation and suspicion the beams of the house where we live. Beams that had previously seemed strong and sturdy to us, whereas now they appear ridiculously fragile and ineffective at withstanding the slightest earth tremor.

Today, when the mass media, in order to sell, in order to attract and involve the public, film, sometimes for mon-

ths and years, the goriest and most shocking news, emphasising the most macabre details, the most morbid aspects as long as they are able to provoke fear, anger, rage, disgust in readers and listeners, the reasons for anxiety seem to increase every day.

Physiological anxiety and pathological anxiety

Physiological anxiety is that which is activated when the human being, in order to avoid taking risks in the face of a real or simply imagined danger, sets in motion the safeguard mechanisms that protect him or her from possible negative consequences (Bressa, 1991, p. 3). To achieve this, the entire organism is activated in order to quickly assess, by means of its knowledge and experience, the environment around it, and then face it in the best possible way with strength and determination.

A different situation is that of those who experience this emotion too frequently or with painfully heightened feeling (*pathological anxiety)*. In these cases, there is a considerable discrepancy between the situations to be faced and the tension that is set in motion, so that even very mild, trivial or not very difficult or dangerous problems are faced with enormous tension. On many occasions, even, without there being any external anxiogenic stimulus, the heart, mind, body, of people suffering from pathological anxiety, are as if invested and shocked for hours and sometimes for days and whole nights, by this state of alarm. A state of alarm that shakes one's mind, makes one remarkably indecisive about what to do and how to do it, alters and complicates even the most trivial activities, while diminishing one's capacity for attention and concentration. So that performance, especially intellectual performance, falls considerably. In this regard, it should not be forgotten that there

is a constant parallelism between the affective and the intellectual life, and that this parallelism continues throughout childhood and adolescence development, since for Piaget (1962, p. 23) 'Every conduct presupposes tools or a technique: these are movements and intelligence. Every conduct, however, also implies motives and final values (the value of aims): these are feelings. Affectivity and intelligence are inseparable and constitute two complementary aspects of all human conduct'.

When this state of mind pervades the mind of the anxious person, emotional and friendship relationships also suffer as anxiety spreads to the people with whom one relates. For this reason, interpersonal relationships become difficult, painful and conflictual. It is distressing to be in the company of a person who often exudes anxiety (*an anxiogenic person)*, as anxiety is transmitted to those closest to you.

The pathologically anxious subject misjudges the events in which he is involved. He is therefore affected more by internal resonances than by the actual dimensions of the stimulus (Bressa, 1991, p. 4). For this reason, he perceives most situations as too big and relevant for his possibilities, so he tends to avoid stimuli more and more for the often unjustified fear of not being able to cope with them. Or, on the contrary, he deals with them in a hurried, convulsive manner, without thinking things through sufficiently, so that errors in evaluation and choices are numerous and frequent.

To try to get rid of anxiety, there are basically two strategies: the first is immobility, whereby one tries to ward off this unpleasant emotion by trying to stretch one's body as much as possible, in the hope that one's soul will also relax;

the second is exactly the opposite of the first: getting very active at work, in daily commitments or in intense motor activities, such as walking, strolling, playing sports. All in the hope of driving it away through commitments, activity and movement.

In summary, the consequences are remarkably disturbing in that:

- the person lives many moments of his or her life with apprehension and anxiety and always on the alert, as he or she thinks that dangers can be in everything and in everyone;

- the subject has difficulty seeing reality with calm, objective eyes and events in the right proportion;

- his state of continuous tension makes it difficult for him to communicate or even more so to listen to others, as the subject is too busy governing something that is difficult to manage;

- Since the subject in the grip of anxiety creates a climate of unjustified alarm around him and others, he risks accentuating the malaise of those around him. Therefore, social communication, depending on the severity of the anxiety experience, is more or less impaired;

- the actions of the anxious person are dictated more by the impulse of the moment than by an objective and rational analysis of reality, so the mistakes he makes are frequent and the decisions he implements are often not consistent and effective;

- This living for a long time in an emergency situation puts the anxious person in a condition of easy irritability, fatigue but also, at times, increased reactivity and aggressiveness;

- because at times when anxiety is greatest and most gripping, the anxious subject has difficulty in making effective responses, his performance is inconstant and non-harmonic: greater at some times and in some disciplines, less or very less at other times and in other disciplines.

Manifestations of anxiety

Anxiety can manifest itself in the form of generalised anxiety, panic attacks, and anxious somatisations.

Generalised anxiety

Generalised anxiety lasts over time and is not focused on a particular object or situation. It is therefore non-specific and fluctuating. People with this disorder feel an inner tension that is not related to a particular fear. This type of anxiety mainly affects the female gender, so much so that it affects two women for every man and can lead to considerable impairment. This tension is evidenced by a continuous succession of physical, psychological and psychosomatic discomforts, which prevent the subject from living well both at work and in relationships with others. Due to the persistent inner tension, these people may suffer from migraines, palpitations, dizziness and insomnia. At the same time, it is very difficult for them to cope with normal

daily activities, especially those that require more discernment, control and attention.

This type of anxiety may be associated with depressive elements with recurring sad and distressing thoughts and feelings. It is often felt more in the morning than in the evening. Perhaps this is because in the evening the organism, after hours of continuous tension, needs rest and therefore makes more effort to bring this unnecessary state of alarm to an end, or perhaps because in the evening commitments and work cease, so the anxiogenic stimuli also decrease.

In some individuals, however, anxiety continues even during sleep, so what should be the period of greatest rest is altered in both quality and quantity. When anxiety occurs continuously and chronically, it produces, in the long run, not only various psychosomatic disorders, but also a real decrease in resistance to infectious diseases, due to a drop in immune defences.

Panic attacks

Anxiety can present itself in a brutal and acute manner with panic attacks. Although these sometimes seem to come out of nowhere, they are usually experienced after traumatic experiences or prolonged stress. Panic attacks have an abrupt onset so that they are very intense in the first ten minutes or less. Often sufferers are forced to go to the emergency room because they suddenly feel, under certain circumstances, like a blizzard raging over their mind and body: 'I was fine, then suddenly I couldn't keep control of the situation, I felt faint, it was as if I was going crazy, all my organs were running wild' (Bressa, 1991, p. 4). They expe-

rience intense apprehension combined with trembling, shaking, dizziness and difficulty breathing.

Even if all tests come back normal, people suffering from panic attacks continue to worry because of the physical manifestations of anxiety that reinforce the fear that there is some serious illness in their body. Sometimes there is the '*fear of being afraid*'. An intense fear of having an anxiety crisis is triggered. For example, the normal changes in heart rate that one feels when climbing a flight of stairs can make these people think that there is something wrong with their heart or that they are about to have a panic attack. Therefore, they freeze and avoid moving forward.

This type of anxiety leaves the affected individual with a residual malaise, a great fear of the emotion suffered and a state of great prostration. After having had this type of experience, from that moment on, the individual tries in every way to avoid those places where this crisis occurred.

This type of anxiety crisis is triggered by the concomitance of four concomitant causes:

1. perception of impending danger;

2. unreliable or contradictory information on the nature and extent of the risk;

3. sense of being unable to take adequate protective and defensive countermeasures;

4. feeling that there was little time left to save themselves.

That damn motorway

A patient of ours in his sixties had his first panic attack in a motorway tunnel that he had driven through a thousand times without any problems. After that first crisis, he had stopped going through the motorway for months, forcing himself to take a long tortuous and slow route to the neighbouring village where he worked. One day, urged on by his friends and his wife, he decided to take courage to face his fears. Getting into his car, with great satisfaction and appreciation for the courage he was showing himself and others, he boldly faced what had become his enemy: the motorway. At the tollgate he got his good ticket, and as he proceeded on his way he felt stronger, more determined, and more confident. Everything seemed to be going well. Next to him flowed the hills and beautiful views that he knew so well and that gave him comfort and confidence. Then, suddenly, the tunnel where he had had his first crisis appeared in front of him. At that moment, in his body and mind, there was a whirlwind of sensations and emotions that drove him to stop the car and pull into the emergency lane, a few metres from the tunnel entrance. For a while he remained as if stunned. His heart was beating wildly, while he felt a grip tighten in his stomach. After a few minutes of regaining a modicum of lucidity and self-control, he reached for his mobile phone and dialled the easiest number he could remember: the emergency number 113. To the operator who answered him, in a voice broken with emotion, he simply said: 'I'm on the motorway, come and get me'. Then he ended the call, switched off his mobile phone and abandoned himself on the seat, exhausted. In that position, huddled on the seat, he was completely indifferent to the cars and trucks that roared past just inches from his car. It was only after a long time, seeing

that no police cruisers came to his rescue, remembering the convulsive distress call, that he realised that no one would come to get him off the motorway without him reporting his whereabouts.

Somatised anxiety

When anxiety manifests itself mainly with body-related symptoms, we are in the presence of a *Somatisation Disorder* according to DSM IV.

Anxiety sufferers manifest and describe their many ailments in striking and exaggerated terms: 'I have a headache like crazy. "My back hurts so much that I can't move from my chair". "My head is so dizzy that I can't balance myself". "I feel like I'm seeing double". "I have a burning sensation on the left side of my head". Despite the fact that the objective and laboratory examinations they undergo do not justify the seriousness of their complaints, these people often obtain medical therapies and even surgical interventions from the doctors they consult, which, in retrospect, turn out to be absolutely useless.

Influence of the anxious environment on child development

We have already talked about maternal anxiety during childbearing. For anxious parents, the end of pregnancy does not mean the end of anxiety but the beginning of new, heavier worries. For an anxious mother, it takes little to lose control and mental clarity.

For anxious parents, the birth weight is already a big cause for concern: too little or too much.

"Clearly, and particularly for the mother, this birth weight enters immediately into the realm of conscious, but also preconscious and unconscious concerns, since it refers directly to her ability or inability to give birth to a beautiful child. Having a baby that weighs little constitutes in a certain sense a narcissistic wound that can lead to exaggerated worries about the baby's ability to eat, and thus to reach a weight that is considered more satisfactory" (Debray and Belot, 2009, p. 44).

When the mother notices even the slightest alteration or variation in her child that deviates from everything she considers 'normal', she is assailed by doubts, perplexity and inner tension. "How can one not worry if the child has not eaten enough today?" Or on the contrary: "What should be done to limit his uncontrollable hunger, which causes him indigestion, so that he then cries because his tummy hurts?" "How can you not worry if the baby has vomited the milk that he had just sucked fervently before?" "Can you watch helplessly when the scales inexorably indicate that the baby is not growing as he should, or is growing too much compared to the average?" "How can you remain calm when the baby often wakes up at night?"

Every small variation noted in the child's body or attitude, or worse, the presence of symptoms that may lead one to suspect a pathology, prompts the mother to take action in which her husband, parents, relatives, friends and, of course, medical specialists and others are involved. Everyone is mobilised to listen to her doubts and perplexities. In the same way, everyone is stimulated to propose the medication or the solving intervention. In such cases, if the people involved manage in some way to control the mother's anxiety and direct it correctly, the negative impact on the child will

be modest; on the contrary, if they too, either because they are involved in the mother's worries or because they themselves are anxious, allow themselves to be overwhelmed by panic, the burden of anxiety will multiply and heavily affect the child with more or less serious repercussions on his or her inner well-being.

In these situations, the first symptoms of distress manifest themselves in the baby, ranging from crying 'like a desperate man', to motor restlessness, to refusal to latch on to the breast, to alterations in the intestinal flora so that he evacuates abnormal stools in terms of consistency and colour. These symptoms may also be associated with sleep disorders, both in a quantitative and qualitative sense. The baby is unable to fall asleep, cries, becomes agitated and then, when, after crying for a long time, he finally seems to have fallen asleep, it is not uncommon for him to present sudden awakenings, followed by new outbursts of crying that are difficult to console.

If anxious parents already sleep poorly and badly, having to wake up to feed, console, rock and massage their child accentuates their tension, so that in the morning the look they give their child is very similar to the look with which the early Christians looked at the beasts in the Coliseum as they emerged from their cages: "What have I done wrong to deserve this?" "Where and how can I escape these constant anxieties?"

It is easy at this point for the mother, and sometimes both parents, to begin to experience their relationship with their child badly, perceived as a source not of joy and gratification but of constant worries, commitments and suffering. If, initially, the child was the defenceless being to whom unpleasant experiences happened, he or she later

runs the risk of becoming the cause of negative experiences towards the parents. All this often causes the child to accentuate his disorders and behaviour, which risks worsening the already precarious relationship with mum and dad.

These dynamics tend to worsen when both parents are engaged in work. Reconciling parental commitments and concerns with workloads, in a situation of physical prostration and psychological stress also due to the lack of a good night's sleep, makes them even more nervous, tired, distrustful and, in some cases, even easily irritable, if not clearly aggressive.

This aggressiveness is often directed towards the other spouse, who is accused of not understanding or of not being adequately committed, so that due to the mutual accusations on how to handle the child, the relationship may also suffer. On the other hand, the child will find it difficult to live well in relationships with other human beings and the world around him, as he will increasingly feel an atmosphere full of tension and irritation around him.

Since a small child is not able to activate itself to calm or serenade an anxious parent, the only way one can decrease a child's anxiety is to be less anxious with the help of good psychotherapy or by using psychotropic drugs.

Problems related to nutrition, illness and sleep

In the anxious environment, when the child has been weaned, some problems, such as feeding and sleep, remain, while others may be added. As far as feeding is concerned, after breast-feeding the most frequent problems relate to the baby's poor appetite or incorrect nutrition resulting in a slight increase in weight and/or height. Tension and related

clashes arise when the child does not eat what the parents or paediatrician believe should be a correct diet. "My child never eats meat, fruit and vegetables". "My son only eats snacks and crisps". "I can't stand the fact that John doesn't eat at the table at the set times but eats junk food outside of meals". Often, a no-holds-barred fight begins between parents and child. The most frequent word in dialogues at lunchtime is: "Eat!". The most frequent phrases are: 'If you don't eat you don't grow, you don't become big'; 'If you don't eat you die'; 'It is not possible that you eat so little'. These phrases and incitements often have the opposite effect in that, if the child already suffering from conflicts or psychological problems does not like to grow up, but wants to remain in the child stage, the parents give him the solution: "He must not eat." If the child wants to hurt, punish and at the same time impose its will on tyrannical parents it does not like, it simply refuses food. Some parents, in order to get what they want, between one bite and another, allow him anything: playing, running around the house, watching TV.

Anxieties about his health also persist. Often a vicious circle is set in motion: being stressed, he is thinner and fatter, which makes him fall ill more frequently. But the more he falls ill, the more his parents become alarmed for his well-being, so he will be subjected to new doctor's visits, examinations and even painful treatments, with considerable added stress for him and the whole family.

Alongside the problem of food and illness, the problem of sleep can persist. This disorder forces parents to spend exhausting hours trying to get their child to fall asleep. Often, it is not enough to read him storybooks for Morpheus to do his duty, but it is necessary to hold the child's hand and

leave the light or even the television set on all night. But if the restlessness and fears are many, even these stratagems will not suffice; it will be necessary to have him sleep in the big bed, sharing: dad on the sofa, mum and child in the big bed or vice versa.

Anxious parents and children's liveliness

When the child begins to crawl or walk, contrasts with anxious people increase, as they, in order to feel calm, try in every way to restrict the freedom of movement, movement and exploration of the children in their care.

The anxious person is already alarmed when the little one starts crawling, going from one part of the house to another. It is therefore almost impossible to control him in his desire to discover and experiment with new objects and materials. The anxious parent, family member or educator will constantly ask: "What will he do?" "What will he touch?" "What will he put in his mouth?" "What will he destroy?" "What will he hurt himself with?" "Who will he hurt?"

In the phase of discovering the world around him, as the child launches himself around the house opening all the drawers, throwing their contents into the air or on the floor with cold and swift determination, then putting everything in his mouth to learn more about everything around him, the little one is seen as a 'Terminator' ready to destroy everything in the house or to look for something to hurt himself. It is enough for him to approach, interested, the precious vase given to him by his aunt Anna on their wedding day, for the mind of the anxious parent to see the vase already smashed to smithereens, or worse, the same vase, he

imagines it falling on the little head of his darling, so as to seriously injure him.

If there is a younger sister around the house, it is easy for the anxious person to see the little one being tortured by the jealous and aggressive little brother. If little Attila then approaches a tap, it is a foregone conclusion for the anxious parent that he will open it, thus flooding the whole house and causing damage to the precious carpets and the flat of the gentlemen on the floor below. If he plays in a corner with some little companion, the forecast is that soon the little guitar he got as a Christmas present will come down on his head like a club.

The child is not always seen as an executioner. On other occasions he assumes the role of a sacrificial victim, while it is the other children who are his torturers, ready to make him tumble on the ground, steal what belongs to him, drive him out of their company or use all the means at their disposal to make him weep and despair.

Such fears force these parents to follow the child, or rather to chase him, on every move, forcing him to leave behind, 'by hook or crook', things or tools considered dangerous or valuable.

This very limiting behaviour will accentuate the anger and instability of the child, who will feel like a prisoner in the home, with the consequence that his feelings of resentment, if not hatred towards his parents, will increase, while at the same time his self-esteem will decrease, as he will see himself as 'a naughty, naughty child who constantly makes mummy and daddy despair'.

If anxious parents then implement the strategy of removing from the child's reach anything that might break or any objects with which he might injure himself and hurt

himself, the house will resemble the Libyan desert more than a place in which to live together with pleasure and joy. Only 'safe' toys will remain in the home. In reality, only toys made of a single material will remain: the boring, banal plastic, which the child knows very well, which he is tired of handling and hates, precisely because of its characteristics of inalterability.

Anxious parents' relationships with other adults

Anxious parents reserve unflattering judgements for other adults and educators. The other one, the husband or wife, is surely incapable of adequately controlling the movements of the 'rambunctious' grandchild, so as not to let him run any danger or break precious objects. Little trust is placed above all in the grandparents who, 'because of their age, are certainly not able to look after their grandchild'. Also scarcely appreciated if not greatly blamed are teachers and doctors, often judged as people who do not know how to understand, help, support, judge and so on.

Anxious parents and three- to four-year-old children

Around the age of three to four, at an age when the child could and should be playing, running and running around freely outside the home with his or her peers, the worries become more acute.

Already getting him or her out of the home becomes a difficult problem to solve, as many elements are required. He or she who is supposed to accompany him or her must

feel well, so there must be no trace of 'that horrible heada-che' that often oppresses him or her. The child must also be well and therefore must not have had a cough for at least a week. While his little nose must be dry and free and his little eyes must be as bright and shiny as ever.

Other conditions concern the weather. It must not be too hot, to prevent the child from sweating or worse, risking sunstroke. It must not be too cold, nor must there be a breath of wind, as this could bring with it pollen, dust and 'other filth' dangerous to the baby's lungs. Of course it must not rain or snow: "Only a fool would take his child out in such weather conditions!"

But finding places for him to play is also difficult. The courtyard under the house is 'dangerous', as cars can enter and children 'unknown and whose children' have free ac-cess. In the streets, the little one risks being hit by a car or a motorbike. The only acceptable places, if there is absolutely no danger that they will be frequented by drug addicts and paedophiles, are the cottages or small gardens in the neighbourhood; which are then the only places where, in times of low birth rate, it is possible to find other people of the same age with whom to let the little one play and socia-lise. But to go to these places one has to overcome several problems: first of all, one has to have a car, and then one has to ensure that the child is properly dressed. If he is hea-vily clothed he will certainly "sweat and then get sick". If you dress him lightly 'there is a risk that he will catch pneumonia'.

It is necessary, then, to try on a thousand outfits before choosing a suitable one. This operation, felt by the children as a long, exhausting, pointless torture, will inevitably pro-voke conflicts and clashes with their son. When he is finally

there playing in the communal playground with peers, as soon as one imagines that he may have been sweating, the anxious mother is already ready to take off some clothes and replace them with lighter, drier ones, or is quick to chase him to put some talcum powder on his sweaty shoulders. There is no shortage of reprimands and suggestions: 'Don't play with the dirt, it's dirty'; 'Don't get on the swing, you might fall'; 'Don't play with those little sticks, you might hurt yourself'; 'Don't pick up and throw stones, you might hit the other children'; 'Don't run, you'll sweat' and so on. Often, these parents, exhausted by their anxiety, have alternating and ambivalent attitudes and behaviours that make the child entrusted to them insecure.

In our age, in which there are more than one TV set, and even in some homes they are distributed in all the rooms as if they were paintings, anxious parents, as a solution to their problems, find that of enriching their child's room with all the best entertainment products: video games, computers and big screen TVs, in the hope that he or she will stay there for as long as possible without taking any risks.

During the school period, anxiety is mainly focused on school and homework. Talks with teachers are almost daily to find out how his little man is getting on and whether he is learning regularly and quickly. It only takes one more word of criticism from the teachers, whether with regard to profit or behaviour, to prompt the anxious person to increase the hours of study but also the reprimands and punishments towards their child.

Alongside anxious parents, there may also be grandparents, other family members or even teachers who are anxiety carriers. In this case too, the behaviour, words and at-

titudes that all these people assume in their relationship with the child may be the cause of excessive stress. Stress that certainly has a harmful effect, albeit minor, compared to the anxious attitude manifested by the parents.

When family members complain of *panic attacks*, the suffering is transmitted to the child because of the distress directly experienced and expressed by the parent, but also because of the limitations to which the parent forces himself and also the children.

In *anxiety somatisation*, the whole family, but especially the little ones, suffer, as they feel around them the sadness and pain experienced by the parent. This sadness also radiates to them, either directly or indirectly, as a fear of a possible serious illness that would deprive them of their father or mother.

A 'wild' child

Despite the fact that we have directly met thousands of anxious mothers during our professional activity, the most serious one seemed to us to be Francesca.

This mother had accompanied her daughter, together with her grandmother, for the usual psychotherapy session. For an entire hour Luisa, a child diagnosed with severe autism, had been serene, relaxed and even, in her own way, cooperative and close to the therapist. Free to move around the room, free to choose the game or games she preferred, free to seek or not seek contact with the therapist, free to interrupt it at any time, she had accepted me in a game she herself had invented, manifesting a partial, initial, but precious contact and bond. At the end of the session, satisfied with how the session had gone, with the trust the

child had shown in me and thus in the world I represented at that moment, I handed her back to her mother and grandmother, saying that we had played quietly and that the child had been serene for the whole hour. The mother, a young, cultured woman, looked at her, as if searching in her daughter for something she expected her daughter to manifest, and then, taking her in her arms, with a facial expression, a tone of voice, and a body from which she sprouted anguish, she began to say in a shrill, excited voice: 'What are you saying, doctor? Look at her! Does this look like a serene child to you? Don't you see how she looks at me? Don't you see how much tension is in her eyes? And then this face all red, what does that mean? And her arms and legs, don't you see how she wants to run away from me?" As the mother ended up shouting louder and louder, the little girl, on the other hand, also changed her attitude: she became more tense and frightened, she looked away from her mother as she pushed her with her arms and kicked her with her legs and feet, until, in order to free herself from her, she threw her head and body backwards as if trying to escape from those arms. And the mother again: 'See how he is, doctor? Do you see how he does it? It's terrible. It's terrible, this child. I can't take it any more. While a furious fight was going on between mother and daughter, the grandmother also started shouting: "Stop, stop, Luisa, we have to go away, stop!" In the meantime she was trying to force her coat on her, but to no avail, taking now one and now the other arm, which the little girl, in the midst of a nervous breakdown, was wrenching and shaking. And still the grandmother, redder and redder in the face, shouted: "This is a devil! This is not a child!"
I have not seen Luisa since that day. I found out about her

after about two months, when a pedagogist from the centre phoned me and told me that she had been invited to an exorcism session on a little girl. The child in question was her, it was little Luisa.

How else to comment on this case but that anxiety prevents peaceful communion with others. Anxiety is self-feeding. Anxiety transmits itself to others. Uncontrolled anxiety distorts reality. Anxiety prevents one from pursuing the most useful and appropriate paths and forces one to choose interventions that are not only totally inadequate but seriously counterproductive.

Final greetings

Another anxious, as well as intrusive, mother was the protagonist of a tragicomic situation told to me by her husband, despite his wife's nudges and dirty looks.

This was one of the first incidents in which they, as a couple, had to suffer the 'persecution' of their mother-in-law.

"We were married in the morning and you can imagine the tiredness and fatigue one feels in these circumstances, after all the things to prepare: the ceremony, the very long wedding lunch with a hundred and twenty guests to greet, kiss, entertain, finding for everyone, who knows with what energy, a kind and affectionate word. Finally everything seemed to be over. My mother-in-law and her son had wanted to accompany us to the station to catch the train and thus begin our short but, we dreamed, wonderful honeymoon. Getting out of the car we had tried to say a quick goodbye to our affectionate escorts, but it was a fruitless attempt. With a 'But we'll walk you to the train', they were already behind us. After waiting a good half hour in the

waiting room and thus listening for the tenth time to all the mummy's recommendations, the announcer broadcast, in her usual anonymous voice, the next arrival of the train. This announcement was perceived by both me and my young wife as the warning of an imminent release. Holding hands and running, with the excuse of getting into the right compartment in time, we thought we had lost all the relatives and especially the mother-in-law who, plump as she was, would never be able to join us. To understand our state of mind, doctor, you have to think that it was the first time we had ever taken a sleeping car, but it was also the first time we could be together alone, since, for all the years of the engagement, despite my mother-in-law saying she trusted me completely, who knows how, she was always and everywhere present when the daughter and I were together. So except for a few fleeting kisses there was nothing, but really nothing, you understand me, doctor! Climbing the steps of the compartment in the first-class sleeping car, we almost felt like hugging the conductor who was asking for our papers and shouting, "Alone at last!" But we weren't. We had just started to pack our bags when we heard my name and my wife's name being shouted. It was my brother-in-law who, in his baritone voice, was looking for us, as if it were the last thing he had to do before he passed away, while his mother, despite her size, was trudging along, red in the face from breathlessness and anxiety at not finding us in time to bid us farewell. I don't know for what reason, but that blessed train that had arrived rattling fast at the station seemed to be stuck there on those tracks, as if it wanted to spend the night in the station. Every now and then it blew, every now and then it had like a tremor, but it did not move a single millimetre. It seemed to me like those horses that

finally arrive in the stable in the evening and start eating in the trough enjoying every blade of grass, oblivious to everything and everyone. After a while of waiting looking out the window, it seemed right to get off for the last goodbyes, and then get back on quickly, just in case the train had to leave! But that pile of iron didn't want to move, so after a while they too felt obliged to get on for the last kisses. And so several times. Either they were getting on or we were getting off: to get the envelope with the money for the presents... 'which can come in handy if you have to do some extra shopping' or because the mother had realised that a button was dangling on her daughter's new dress and to avoid the risk of losing it, it was better to fasten it immediately, with the emergency needle she always carried with her, while the train was standing there, so still that it seemed welded to the tracks. At last I see the stationmaster's red cap, with the magic paddle. Finally the prolonged whistle of the train moving. Needless to say how we felt: exhausted from all that convulsive day and then from that endless wait before departure. We sat next to each other, she in her flaming red dress, elegant but travelling; me in the same jacket and tie from the wedding, because it had seemed pointless to waste time changing. It was nice to watch our set of brand-new suitcases emerge from the luggage rack. But it was even nicer to see my very young bride who had reached out a hand to shake mine. In the meantime, night had fallen and it seemed right to us at this point to put on our pyjamas and take advantage of the small comforts offered by the sleeping car. We had barely got our hands on our brand new muslin pyjamas, bought especially for this occasion, when we heard our names being shouted outside the aisle and then banging furiously at the door of our compartment. All we

could do was open it to see what had happened. Behind the door, in the narrow corridor, there were the other travellers, telling us to look outside the train, which had stopped again, but at another station. Outside, as if by magic, there were still mother-in-law and son, eager and happy to greet us once more! We had forgotten that we were in Messina and that between the central station, where we had boarded, and the maritime station, there are only a few hundred metres, and this distance was certainly not an obstacle for a mother anxious about her daughter starting a new life with the man she loved!

Scary environment

Fear, or rather fears, because there are usually more than one, accompany human beings from the cradle to the grave, so they are also common in adults.

Galimberti (2006, vol. 3, p. 19) defines it as follows:

"Primary defensive emotion, provoked by a dangerous situation that may be real, anticipated by prediction, evoked by memory or produced by fantasy. Fear is often accompanied by an organic reaction, for which the autonomic nervous system is responsible, that prepares the organism for the emergency situation, disposing it, even if in a non-specific way, to the preparation of defences that usually translate into fight and flight attitudes'.

While in anxiety there is no specific fear but many situations can provoke a state of alarm, in fears and phobias one fears a particular object or situation (*phobic object*). People with fears know that the emotion they feel is excessive and irrational, yet they cannot help but feel the accompanying anxiety. Statistics accurately inform us about the

frequency of fatal accidents due to various means of transport, and from these they show that aeroplanes are one of the safest means of transport. But knowing this does nothing to diminish the anxiety felt by people who are afraid of aeroplanes. Small spiders, often found in country houses, are absolutely harmless, except for the insects they eat, but knowing this does not at all console those who are afraid of them

Thus in the emotion fear there is the perception, no matter whether real or imaginary, of a threat to the existence or biological integrity of one's own or another's organism. It is, therefore, an emotion projected into the future, even though it determines effects in the present: one is afraid of what will or might happen. Fear is proportional to the risk to which one thinks one is exposed: that is, fear is a function of the perceived danger and also of one's vulnerability. When the magnitude of the risk is unknown, fear is greatest and if it is loaded with presentiments of death, it is called *terror.*

Fear provokes responses ranging from the desire to eliminate or destroy the circumstances or persons provoking it (*aggressive behaviour*), to flight (*avoidance* behaviour) from the situation, place or person deemed threatening (*flight from the phobogenic object or event).*

Fears and anxieties are passed on to their children, creating in them as many fears and anxieties.

Phobias

One speaks of a *phobia* when anxiety when faced with an object or event of which one is afraid, is considerable, overwhelming and cannot be contained with rational argu-

ments. One also speaks of a phobia when there is something beyond voluntary control, so that it is uncontrollable and invincible and causes an emotional activation out of proportion to the situation the subject is experiencing. The phobia leads to avoidance behaviour that, in the long run, dramatically limits the normal continuation of the child's life.

Phobias also differ from fears in that they do not disappear in the face of a reality check. In phobias, the physiological reactions to defence or escape, which are also present in fear, are much more intense, so that avoidance of the feared situation, for example, by fleeing, is quickly activated. For this reason, the subject suffering from phobias accurately anticipates all situations that may make him anxious and systematically avoids them. This leads to a limitation of one's social life, more or less severe depending on the phobic object. For example, the adult who has aeroplane phobia risks losing all the work and leisure possibilities that this means of transport allows. The child who has school phobia risks losing the cultural and socialising opportunities of this institution.

Phobic objects can be numerous and can change over the years. All objects, animals, people and strange or otherwise potentially dangerous situations can trigger one or more phobias. Fear of aeroplanes *(aero-phobia)* worries airlines, which try to get their potential customers to overcome it by setting up specific courses. Fear of enclosed places *(claustrophobia),* such as the lift, on the other hand, is well liked by apartment blocks as it reduces electricity costs. But there is also the fear of uncovered places *(agoraphobia),* the fear of the opposite sex *(androphobia and gynophobia),* or in general of everything related to sexual life.

Popular with detergent manufacturers is the widespread fear

of dirt *(acathartophobia*), which boosts their sales. But also widespread in times of globalisation and illegal migration is the fear of the foreigner. Also not to be forgotten is the fear of suffering a serious illness *(hypochondria),* fear of animals *(zoophobia),* of insects (*entomophobia)* and so on.

Sometimes phobias and fears arise from a bad relationship one has had in the past with the phobic object, as a result of which one has been traumatised by that first encounter or clash; many times, on the other hand, the phobic object is invested by ancestral fears unrelated to any specific traumatic experience. For example, inherent in the human species is the fear of insects and mice as carriers of disease; of open places as there is a risk of being attacked; of closed places from which it is difficult to escape, and so on. In some cases, however, there is no rational connection except with the person's deepest experiences in which we find important elements of suffering and conflict.

Types of phobias

Simple or monosymptomatic phobias are generally triggered by very specific and circumscribed places, objects, people, animals or situations: for example, an intense or irrational fear of snakes, knives, high places, dust, water, flying, heights and so on.

In complex or multisymptomatic phobias, there is a feeling of fear of everything and everyone, so these types of phobias are very disabling. Complex phobias, over time, can invade larger and larger areas of a person's life and create a permanent state of alertness.

Consequences for minors

The consequences for children of an environment in which fears and phobias dominate depend very much on the intensity with which these emotions are experienced, but also on the type of fears or phobias. If these are limited to a particular object, animal or thing that a parent or family member tries not to encounter, the negative influence on the child's social life may not be considerable. For example, if the fear only concerns the use of the lift, the problem is not particularly serious: it is enough to have good legs and trained muscles to avoid using it. But if the fear, or worse, the phobia, concerns motorways or all means of transport in general, the limitations to which children will be forced will be very heavy and numerous. Not only that, but the possibility of them witnessing an anxiety crisis and thus being traumatised by seeing their mother or father in a significantly altered psychic situation becomes much more frequent. Equally affected are children who live with people who are afraid of dirt or disorder. In these cases, children will be continually scolded, reprimanded or punished for not washing themselves sufficiently or for leaving their things or toys in a mess. In addition, these children will be forced to witness several fights between the spouse suffering from these pathologies and the other who, being immune, rebels against the constraints imposed by the disturbed spouse.

Fussy and perfectionist environment

As far as disorder is concerned, there are some people who live quietly in the midst of the confusion and chaos,

which they refer to as 'scattered order', without making a fuss, almost without noticing the disarray around them. Their room resembles a flea market. There is not an inch of space on their desk where they can put down a pencil, while books, notebooks, squares, but also handkerchiefs, more or less used, mobile phones, photos, cigarette butts and much more, are piled up in a haphazard manner and slip or peep out from everywhere.

On the other hand, there are other people who cannot tolerate the slightest disorder. These, defined as *fussy or perfectionists*, pay the utmost attention to details, rules, lists, order, the perfect organisation of their lives. If they look at a desk, nothing escapes their attentive eyes: not a speck of dust, let alone a misplaced book or papers. When they visit their friends' homes, they are able, while sitting at the table to eat, to get up, asking the head of the family's permission of course, to arrange the picture in front of them, as they have noticed, and it pains them, that it is slightly shifted to the right or left from vertical. Their pencils are always perfectly sharpened. On the furniture at home there are few knick-knacks and all of them have a doily underneath. When these ornaments have been assigned a certain position, that position they must maintain for years. They get into trouble if they dare move them a few centimetres or change their orientation.

These personalities are thus characterised by an excessive preoccupation with and need for order, perfection, mental and interpersonal control, resulting in a lack of flexibility and openness.

Needless to say, mistakes are not allowed in their work. Everything they apply themselves to must be perfect. This is why they can also be good and careful workers even if

the excess of perfection is at the expense of good overall performance. These people neglect leisure and friendships and are rigid in their behaviour, stubbornly pursuing their ideas and projects, never satisfied with themselves and others. And so if they are often self-critical, so that they cannot avoid thinking about the mistakes they have made, at the same time they cannot avoid continually criticising and correcting their children, their spouse or, if teachers, their pupils, their parents and colleagues, for everything they do not do or do not do as well as they should.

Perfectionists persist in the same activity long after others have stopped. Because they have the aptitude to excel, they plan everything in such a way that they are not subject to criticism, but they end up performing worse than others because being the 'best enemy of the good', they spend much more time than necessary on the activities they undertake, so they are forced to postpone deadlines. In the end, their productivity is lower than that of their colleagues. Moreover, because they cannot do everything well, they are easily demoralised and risk a drop in self-esteem and dangerous mood swings.

The encounters of these people with children, especially young children, when they have the role of parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, but also teachers or educators in general, are not the happiest and this, despite the fact that children, by nature, are traditionalists. They only feel secure if there are not too many new things in the day; they always want to go to bed with the same ritual. When they get up, they want the same person to do the cleaning. When it is mealtime they want to eat with the same person and the same objects. Many children have a bottle or their favourite milk cup, which they do not want to change even if it is old

and chipped. Therefore, they like things to be repeated in the same way. However, the same babies, at other times of the day, want to enjoy maximum freedom. They love and enjoy making everything messy and therefore scatter toys on the ground like the farmer scatters seeds on freshly ploughed earth. Often, when they eat, to the delight of the house dog and cat, the food is piled up on the floor, under the table or on their chair. Some pieces of apple or pasta are not uncommonly found on the opposite side of the table, if not on the walls or in their and the other diners' hair. Not to mention the hours. Children live the hours of the day as cavemen lived them, when time was roughly marked by the motion of the sun, the moon and certain fundamental functions: getting up, hunting, working, eating, sleeping.

If the quest for perfection is not excessive, so that these people also benevolently accept a certain number of mistakes and imperfections, their lives and the lives of others flow quite well. Indeed, both they and the children entrusted to them achieve good results. If, on the other hand, the quest for perfection is excessive, and thus pathological, their children and/or the minors they come into contact with are subjected to continuous, heavy stress as a result of the numerous reprimands, the countless accusations and complaints, the excessive, exasperating distancing.

There is no doubt that the impact of an overly precise, orderly, fussy personality type on education, care and relationships brings a lot of suffering to children. Since, for example, appointments for regular check-ups are sacred, it is impossible to imagine that the children will not take or do not take the prescribed medication at the time decided by the doctor. Their weight should be in line with the dictates of the most advanced and up-to-date science. When the

child is small, the use of the scale is continuous. To avoid anxiety, this instrument must give, at least weekly, the response prescribed by the paediatrician. The same applies to the bathing ritual, which must always take place at a certain time, while the water temperature must be exactly the ideal temperature. When the child is older, the contrasts between the child, who is by nature a bit of a bungler and lazy at many times of the day, and a perfectionist father, mother or grandparents, cannot help but result in constant, stressful suggestions: 'Remember, you have to sort all your toys. "It's fifteen minutes until the time we have to leave the house to get in the car and go to school", and then... "It's ten minutes to go, eight minutes to go..." and so on in a *can down* as precise as it is obsessive and exasperating. If the paediatrician has recommended fifty grams of pastina for lunch as part of the diet, it is almost a crime to think that he can eat one gram less or more. The same happens with cleaning: "Have you brushed your teeth?" If the child does not respond or does not run to brush his teeth, this phrase will be repeated to the point of boredom and exasperation. Let us not even mention the performance of physiological functions. If the baby delays in giving his solid, unscented potty every day, these parents or relatives will go into crisis and immediately look for a mild laxative to remedy the bowel inattention!

These children entrusted to their care suffer because both the physical and psychological space in which they can move is excessively limiting. Low self-esteem and the fear of making mistakes grips these children, while personal autonomy is discouraged due to the lack of trust these parents and family members have in others, seen as those who never get things done in the right way and at the right time.

The other spouse and the children feel that they live forced into a binary from which they cannot escape in order to go down different paths, at least in part. These parents often impose on the children and the other spouse their perfectionist style whereby they want the child to do everything and well, as his or her value is determined by the success he or she achieves in school, as in sport. By not accepting mistakes every mistake becomes a tragedy!

The suffering caused by their behaviour to their spouse and children, has difficulty reaching the consciousness of the perfectionist parent, since the discomfort they feel if they do not intervene is greater and more acute than the discomfort they imagine they might cause others. Fortunately, when some of these perfectionist adults are constantly monitored, while suffering inwardly, they are able to accept the fact that at least in some situations, it is necessary to live with the children's style and not that of their parents.

In some cases, children can have an aggressive and severely disturbing reaction, initially towards the outside world and then also towards their parents and families. The case we report is an example of this.

The son of the sorceress

Our child neuropsychiatry team had been called in urgently by the headmistress of a small primary school in our neighbourhood, for the case of Tommy, a child described as 'terrible', because for days he had been ransacking the whole school, preventing lessons. To this first-aid call, we could only respond quickly by going to the disrupted school. In this one, as there was no medical clinic, we were forced to gather the necessary information by sitting in front of a table placed at the end of a long corridor, onto which the various classrooms led. As soon as we arrived,

we were surrounded by teachers and caretakers who were eager to inform us of little Tommy's latest mischief: a six-year-old boy with restless, unstable and destructive behaviour. This behaviour manifested itself by running away from his classroom, chased, first by his teacher, who was soon joined by other teachers and ATA staff to support her. The child enjoyed entering all the classrooms in order to throw chairs, books, and his classmates' folders to the ground as he passed. Another favourite pastime of his was to take all the pencils he could grab from other pupils' tables in his raids and then break them and throw them at his pursuers. We had not even finished listening to a small part of little Tommy's misdeeds, when the scene that teachers and caretakers were used to witnessing on a daily basis, appeared before our eyes. As a confirmation of what we had heard, a handsome, blond, blue-eyed child, taller than his peers, came out of his classroom, laughing with gusto, while behind him a procession of pursuers immediately began to form, trying to catch him. This child, as he left the various classes, held aloft as a trophy, the loot he had just grabbed, which he then threw at the teachers and caretakers, who found themselves showered with pens, notebooks, books and, above all, pieces of pencils.

Since we needed to talk to his parents to complete the medical history, all the staff, transfixed by so much running around, were happy to point us to the house where little Tommy lived. A house that was right next to the school. They warned us, however, that his mother was the local magician, herself the daughter of a famous magician, and therefore not to be surprised, given their son's character, at what we would eventually see and encounter in his house. Having already seen enough of Tommy's feats, we were

eager to meet his parents, but also the house where this novice 'Ivan the Terrible' lived and trained in his destructive exploits. At the door, we were greeted by a kind, young lady who immediately made us sit down in the living room. The surprise was great. Not only did the lady who had welcomed us not look like a witch, but also her house bore no resemblance to the hovel full of owls, stuffed snakes and fluttering bats that was present in our imagination. What is more, there was no sign or trace on the walls or on the floor, of the results of the destruction wrought by his terrible son. The house was furnished well and with modern taste. There were numerous fragile crystal trinkets on the shelves and inside the glass cabinets. Ornate vases rested on delicate alabaster columns which, in turn, rested on a mirror-polished marble floor. No! It was not exactly the home one might expect from a sorceress, and moreover the mother of a scion of the kind we had just left at school. We could not, at this point, refrain from asking if she really was Tommy's mother and if that was _really_ the house he lived in every day. The young woman looked at us in amazement at this request: 'Of course I am his mother and this is his house. "Of course he lives here and does his homework here," she replied.

At this point, we must confess that the image that flashed before our eyes was that of a child reclining in his little room, perhaps even tightly bound or chained to some ring embedded in the wall, in order to avoid destroying his beautiful and tidy abode! We then asked to see his room. But even there, incredibly, perfect order and sovereign cleanliness reigned. The toy trains, toy cars and puppets were all neatly lined up on the shelves. On the thick orange carpet, in the middle of the room, only a smiling teddy bear

was looking at us; there was not a single piece of paper, nor a pencil inadvertently forgotten on the floor. Everything was perfectly neat and tidy. I couldn't remember ever having seen a room like that. Above all, I did not remember ever having seen my children's room like that!

The mother, noticing our astonishment, confirmed that she was a very tidy person and cared that her only son was tidy as well, so if Tommy behaved like that at school, the only ones to blame were the teachers who let the children off the hook and did not know how to educate them.

It cannot be ruled out that the diagnosis made by the mother, in principle, could be correct but, putting together other elements, we were more inclined to think that little Tommy was the victim of an excess of order on the part of an *overly perfect* mother and that, if this overly restrictive environment in some minors and in some environments results in excessive control of a child's exuberance, in other cases or in other environments, especially when conditions permit, it can stimulate the opposite behaviour, made up inter alia of instability, destructiveness and lack of adherence to common norms and rules.

Obsessions and compulsions

We have spoken of an environment that is influenced by a personality that is too fond of perfection. Of a different tenor, and much more disabling, is the environment influenced by individuals suffering from a real pathology represented by the *obsessive-compulsive syndrome*. The lifetime prevalence of this disorder is 2-2.4 per cent (Kaplan - Sadock, 1993, p. 452).

Obsessions are distressing, repetitive thoughts and images

that the individual often realises are meaningless but cannot banish from the mind. *Compulsions* are repetitive behaviours that the person feels compelled to perform to relieve the anxiety caused by obsessive thoughts.

Obsessive behaviour often manifests itself in a thousand little 'obsessions', for example, washing one's hands several times, the need to repeatedly check whether the front door or the gas tap is open or closed, whether the car's handbrake has been firmly engaged, etc. These 'obsessions' make those affected suffer and at the same time make life difficult, if not impossible, for the people living with them.

People with such problems feel compelled to repeatedly perform one or more physical or mental actions, *'obsessive rituals'*, sometimes to the point of exhaustion, in order to diminish their anxiety. Fear of dirt can lead them, for example, to wash their hands continuously and to sterilise the house with a myriad of detergents. Fear of misfortune may lead them to repeat certain mental formulas or superstitious gestures.

The lives of these individuals are considerably limited by the tasks they have to perform, as these rituals, over time, become increasingly complex, elaborate and lengthy. The stresses and frustrations that these people put children and pupils through are considerable and difficult for the child's ego to handle. In these cases, advice is certainly not enough; immediate and appropriate therapeutic interventions are needed for these adults.

Sad and depressed environment

One of the conditions that most adversely affect children's well-being is a sad or severely depressed environ-

ment. "Unipolar depression is among the most common psychiatric disorders in adults. The lifetime prevalence is about 6 per cent. The lifetime prevalence of bipolar disorder is approximately 1%'. (Kaplan, Sadock, 1993, p. 408) Maternal depression in women aged 25 to 44 years ranges from 10 to 20 per cent.

Sometimes this disorder affects the mother immediately after childbirth. Spiegel (1970, p. 2136) describes the experiences of a depressed person as follows: 'Imagination comes to a standstill, the flow of ideas slows down, emotions flatten. There is limited transmission and reception of communication. The impulse to communicate seems to be lost'. For Wright, Strawderman et al. (1996, p. 175): 'Depression is more than a sad state of mind; it affects the person's entire organism by affecting his or her psychic life, emotions, thoughts. Moreover, a depressive disorder also interferes with a person's normal functioning and his or her relationships with family and friends'.

Just as the light of the sun's rays is essential for plants, the smile and joy of those who live with them or whom they frequently meet in their lives are essential for children.

Human beings, at birth, genetically possess great positive potential, consisting of innate vitality, optimism, joy and dynamism. These potentials enable the child to cope successfully and brilliantly with many of life's vicissitudes. However, when the environment around him or her is frequently, if not constantly, saturated with melancholy, sadness and discouragement, even this genetic, potential optimism and this innate inner light and joy gradually fade and risk being extinguished.

It is not at all easy to live with parents who find it difficult to enjoy life's little pleasures. Likewise, it is difficult

for a child to live with a mother or father who feel inwardly dull, empty, closed and alone in their melancholies. It is painful to live next to people who have lost the light of hope, who cannot enjoy the present, while they have few prospects and a thousand unknowns for the future. It is distressing, for human beings in formation, to detect a constant sadness and melancholy in their living environment, or to perceive in the adults who care for them, the signs of a constant sense of frustration and mistrust in others and in the world, provoked even by trivial things.

Since children need a great deal of care, stimulation for dialogue and positive encouragement, these are difficult to provide when apathy and apparent detachment from the needs and requirements of both the children themselves and the family prevails in the parents' minds. Moreover, children, especially young ones, need to play, discover, run, jump, together with their parents. This is impossible when the latter are in the grip of apathy, detachment or constant melancholic feelings prevail in their souls. These parents who have no desire to take part in their children's solicitations and games, just as they have no desire for outings, small pleasures or amusements also extinguish in their children the enthusiasm for life, the joy for their small or great achievements.

While communication decreases in quantity, the objects of communication are also peculiar in these parents: they have no desire to communicate other than their sorrows and pains. In the most severe cases, since every activity requires immense effort on the part of the depressed, due to the reduced inner stimuli and the considerable state of indecision, even the simple task of feeding and cleaning the infant or child becomes a daunting, if not impossible task.

The reason for this is not only apathy and asthenia but also the fact that they derive no pleasure and gratification from their every act.

Mothers suffering from severe depression, if they manage to get out of bed, wander around the house in a desperate mood due to feelings of guilt, as they do not know what to do and how to provide even the basic needs of their children. Fathers with the same pathology find themselves sinking into a couch with a beer or a glass full of hard liquor in one hand and the remote control in the other, not wanting to do anything, but also blaming themselves for this inactivity and unwillingness to do anything for their family and children. Feelings of self-evaluation and blaming are therefore frequent in the depressed, accentuating their already severe distress.

These negative feelings, in extreme cases, can provoke such despair in them that they are driven to make unconscionable gestures, such as getting rid of the children and/or attempting suicide. On the other hand, a child who experiences parents with these kinds of problems finds it difficult to open up for comfort and security. On the one hand, he finds it impossible for this type of parent to meet his needs, but on the other hand, he knows that his requests for help and support could worsen his father's or mother's psychic status.

It has been shown - for example - that children of women suffering from depression are more likely to exhibit difficulties in emotion regulation, inadequate interactions with caregivers, insecure attachment, and delays in the acquisition of key developmental skills. The parenting of depressed mothers has been widely described as insensitive, incompetent, apathetic, anaffective, emotionally flat, disen-

gaged, intrusive and angry. Cognitive distortions, less positive emotions, more negative emotions, "Compared with non-depressed mothers, mothers with high depressive symptoms exhibit less positive emotions and more negative emotions, tend to look less at the child's face, and their responses to their children tend to be delayed and uncontingent. In some studies it has been observed that depressed mothers perceive more difficulties in their parenting role than non-depressed mothers'. It is clear that on this occasion the child is at great risk if there is not a father beside him, but also attentive and affectionate family members who can replace maternal care.

In order to better understand the experiences of these minors, we report two stories of Maria, a six-year-old girl who presented integration difficulties and discomfort at school, fears, excessive and pathological attachment to the mother figure, frequent and excessive conflict with her brother. Maria's mother had suffered from nervousness and anxiety for years, with long periods of melancholic or clearly depressed moods.

The Rain Child

"Once upon a time there was a little girl who went to a house in the woods to get some flowers. When the owner of the house saw that the little girl had taken her flowers, he became very angry and threw her out.

The little girl had her umbrella with her, and as soon as it started to rain, the little girl named Serena opened the umbrella. The owner was no longer angry and invited her to his house. The little girl accepted the invitation, but could not get through the flowers. The owner told the little girl to pick all the flowers so that she could pass, but there was also a tree blocking the way. The man then took a knife and gave it to the little girl to cut down the tree. Having cut down the tree, the little girl decided, at first, to enter the house, but then, as the rain had stopped, she went back to her house, singing a little song. When she returned home, her mother asked her where she had been all that time, to which she replied that she was at someone's house. After

that, the little girl Serena packed her bag and went to school".

From this story we can glean some very interesting elements to better understand the experiences of children living with depressed parents. First of all, the child's name, Serena, immediately evokes her greatest desire: serenity inside and outside herself. Moreover, as she feels the sadness around her represented by the rain, to escape this and to seek a minimum of warmth and joy she tries to take something beautiful from life (*she went to a house in the woods to get flowers*). Unfortunately, she is not allowed any joy (*When the owner of the house saw that the girl had taken her flowers, he became very angry and threw her out*).

But even when others are kind to her, the difficulties do not cease, and so something as pleasant as flowers or trees become obstacles, almost insurmountable, that need to be cut off, torn away and cut down, in order to make their way to the goal. But at this point that desire to open up to others and socialise vanishes and the child has no choice but to return to her home, where a particularly distressed mother awaits her. A mother who, presenting the psychological characteristics described above, fails to give the listening and, above all, the indispensable help and support (*Back home, the mother asked her where she had been all that time, and she replied that she was at someone's house*). Impossible to tell this kind of mother everything. Impossible to tell them their difficulties, desires and needs because they would not be able to give the help needed to overcome them. Better to communicate only the essential and superficial elements of one's existence, and that's it.

The same child told another story:

The ruined rainbow

"There was a rainbow and it shone a lot. Once there were children who went to see it, and at sunset they went home. They went because it shone and they played under it.

The other morning it started raining and the children were worried because the rainbow had disappeared. They went to see it one more time and said, "Where is the rainbow?" And they realised that the rain had ruined it. These children were sad because they could no longer play in the light of the rainbow. So they went to their mother and said, "Mother, why is the rainbow ruined?" And Mummy replied, "Because the rain washed it away". The children were worried, but the next morning the rainbow had reappeared and the children were happy that it had returned: the rain had not washed it away, it just hadn't shown up.

They were so happy that they called their mother and played, and they realised that you don't have to cry about something, because it comes right away'.

In this second story carried out six months later, when the child was already in therapy and showing signs of improvement, that vital drive towards joy, present in the DNA of every child, is once again highlighted. It is wonderful to live and play in the bright light of this inner joy, and then return full of positive energy to life as usual. But also present in this tale is the pessimistic and destructive attitude of the mother suffering from depression ("*Mama why is the rainbow ruined?" And the mother replied: "Because the rain has washed it away").* Fortunately, after the initial worries, the rainbow returns, meaning that the positive and joyful elements of life come knocking at the child's door again, thus enabling her to give the tale a conclusion full of light and optimism ('*They were so happy that they called Mummy and played, and realised that one should not cry over a thing (*that one imagines lost*), because it comes right away').* It should be noted, finally, that in participating in the moments of joy that she now manages to experience (*the rainbow*), the child goes out of her way to involve her mother as well. The roles are reversed: it is not the parents who chase away the black shadows from the children's souls, but in this, as in many other similar cases, the opposite can also happen.

Irritable and choleric environment

How can one describe irritable and choleric parents, family members or educators, if not by comparing them to an ever-active volcano like our own Mount Etna?

When this imposing volcano is in its quiet period, it appears as a gentle giant, willing to accept everything and everyone. You can approach it quietly. On its slopes you can ski and take beautiful walks and, in the forests that surround it, you can organise succulent picnics. Even, transported by gipponi, one can push oneself to the edge of the active craters, to take evocative, if gruesome, photos of the fumes and bubbling lava in the chasms below. In these periods of apparent calm, it seems that nothing bad can ever happen. As is often the case with volcanoes that are always active, sometimes for days, sometimes for weeks or months, these are limited to a weary muttering, akin to the snoring of a gentle giant, while only a few graceful puffs of white smoke emerge from the crater. At such times, while tourist coaches climb its peaks and the farmers are busy tending the tasty fruit trees and the lush vineyards, ready to yield excellent, rich wine, only if you look closely at the bottom of the crater can you see the black lava bubbling up as it opens into dark red fringes. But this, when it is visible, is just one more attraction for the tourists who simply point it out to each other or photograph it to experience a little thrill to tell their incredulous friends later, back in their villages and homes, as a demonstration of great courage.

But then, one fine day, for no apparent reason, at least to us laymen, suddenly the lava boils harder and becomes incandescent. Here is the mountain shaking in frightful roars and rumbles. Here are vermilion-red fountains of lava spurting up hundreds of metres high, then pouring out of the volcano's mouth and invading paths, roads, houses, vi-

neyards and streets below, all destroying, all, covering, all, burning. Along with the lava, it is not uncommon to see flaming stones and lapilli as small as a fist or boulders as big as a car thrown hundreds of metres away, as if by a gigantic hand. But that is not enough. For some volcanoes, the nastier ones, there is the risk that those little puffs of white smoke will turn into a cloud of incandescent gas that reaches the sky in a matter of minutes and then pours down into the valley kilometres away, poisoning and burning everything in its path.

It is difficult to live next to or at the foot of a volcano, just as it is difficult to live next to people, especially one's parents, who are easily angered. It takes little to make them go into a rage. It takes little to make them explode in furious shouts and invectives. It takes little to feel that they are being attacked, insulted and sometimes beaten. It is difficult to talk to these adults because, while at times they are willing to accept even the heaviest criticism, at other times, any sentence, any word, even the most innocent, can set off their irritation, anger and aggression. On these occasions, which may be more or less frequent, one is forced to endure the excessive reproaches, insults or worse, unjust punishments. It is not only the external elements that provoke outbursts of anger but these arise from the deep, never healed wounds in their hearts. Therefore, external stimuli are only the occasion through which the aggression accumulated in the soul has the opportunity to manifest itself openly.

Already the newborn child is forced to endure the fluctuating behaviour of such parents. Sometimes his mum or dad is serene, calm, capable of a thousand moans and tenderness. The next moment they can behave harshly, unfriendly and rough. .

When a child grows up in such a difficult and traumatic environment, he will find it difficult to make fruitful connections with others, as he will lack the indispensable parameters to set limits and boundaries to his actions. There are no right behaviours from which to expect praise and wrong behaviours from which to expect a resounding and harsh rebuke, but moments. Moments of apparent calm in which everything can be done and said without anything happening and others in which there is nothing good or worthwhile that can be said or done to prevent unmotivated anger from arising. This type of relationship is sometimes marked by fear, sometimes by anxiety, or by closure and silence, lest any word or action should trigger a furious reaction. Again, if next to an irritable parent there is another one who is balanced and calm, there will be, within the family, like a refuge in which the child can find shelter. The situation will be much more serious if the child can only rely on one parent or if the other element of the couple has the same negative characteristics.

The story we report is of a little girl who lived in a family in which the father, who was unemployed, avoided getting involved in family problems as much as possible but, when he realised that his wife and children were in conflict and shouting, he would explode, attacking both spouse and children. The mother, on the other hand, described herself as a very anxious and irritable woman who had established a very bad relationship with her children, especially with Francesca, with whom she often quarrelled.

Francesca and self-mutilation

"Once upon a time there was a lady called Nicoletta. She liked to go into the garden where there were many flo-

wers. She would pick them and put them in vases. One day she went to a market and bought some shiny shoes with beads, a T-shirt and trousers and then returned home to prepare food. One day her son went to a butcher's shop, got the knife, went into the bathroom and cut off his ass. His mother told him to go and buy another kilo of meat and he cut off another piece of his ass and then cut off his arm too'.

This grim tale highlights the serious conflict and the constantly aggressive atmosphere existing in the family environment. Towards the mother, the child indirectly manifests a very severe, almost ferocious judgement. In the child's account there is a woman who lives her life peacefully and quietly, picking flowers and going on pleasure shopping *(This* (lady) *liked to go into the garden where there were many flowers. She would pick them and put them in vases. One day she went to a market and bought shiny shoes with beads, a T-shirt and trousers).* This lady, however, seems to be completely oblivious to what is happening in her family and to her children *(One day her son went to a butcher's shop, got a knife, went into the bathroom and cut his ass. His mother told him to go and buy another kilo of meat and he cut off another piece of his ass and then cut off his arm as well).*

A great desire

Eight-year-old Roberta, who had a mother who tended to accuse her easily of every wrongdoing and therefore scolded her frequently and vivaciously, entrusts her wishes to a drawing in which, behind the roses full of thorns: her current mother, beautiful of course but irritable and aggressive, stand out the mountains in the shape of a soft breast, representing her dream and her greatest wish: to be able to relate to a welcoming, sweet and affectionate mother.

Aggressive and violent environment

It is not difficult to have the mental image of aggression. It is made of bloodshot eyes followed by the need to hit and hurt someone, as it can be a person or an animal, but also something, as it can be an object to be broken or destroyed. It is made of words that burn and scorch more than fire, while they manage to shock and appall the listener, more than actions. It is made of gestures that bring suffering and pain or mimic the suffering and pain one would like to inflict on another.

They are eyes and gestures capable of wounding, tearing, breaking, destroying. Aggression is made up, therefore, of behaviour, which on the one hand tends to increase fear, anxiety, frustration and disgust in the other, and on the

other hand serves to discharge an inner need that one some-times feels ashamed of and regrets, while at other times one enjoys the acts performed. It is made up of destructive thoughts and desires that can go as far as to yearn for the death of the hated person.

Aggression is part of the human constituent and ac-companies animals and humans from their birth. We must, then, distinguish between physiological aggression**,** such as that present in anger used only to defend one's body, one's life, one's rights, one's needs and loved ones, and *patholo-gical aggression, which is* set in motion on occasions and in situations in which there is no direct or indirect threat to the person or the objects loved by that person.

It is not difficult for an irritable and choleric environ-ment to also become an aggressive and violent environment in which a child can be abused in all kinds of ways.

There are basically two types of mistreatment:

In the meantime, there is *psychological ill-treatment* made up of repeated verbal violence or excessive psycholo-gical pressure on the child by means of a high level of criti-cism and reproach for his every gesture and behaviour (*hy-percritical style*). In these cases the psychologically abused child is often devalued, mocked, humiliated and terrorised with excessive, prolonged and unjust threats and punish-ments. These parents and adults hardly notice the child's positive and appropriate behaviour, while they are always ready to emphasise and highlight every mistake or defect. The child feels that he/she is affectively rejected by parents and family members who use behaviour and relational mo-dels that lead the victim to think that he/she is worth little, or that he/she is not loved and desired.

In *physical abuse*, which is often associated with psychological abuse, the victim presents the consequences of the beating in the form of bruises, haematomas, skin lesions, fractures and burns, in various parts of the body. These *injuries* can be physically *mild*, when they do not require hospitalisation; *medium*, when hospitalisation is necessary but there is no danger to the child's life; and *severe* when the child is in serious danger of death or complains of major consequences in terms of physical integrity.

More frequently abused are disabled children who are 1.7 times more at risk than normal children. And among them, males are more abused.

The psychological consequences of maltreatment are numerous and often severe, as it is a serious frustration and trauma not to be loved and accepted. For these reasons there can be a block in the child's psycho-affective development, with altered self-organisation. Frequent is the presence of constant crying, mistrust in oneself but also difficulty in trusting others and, consequently, refusal of physical contact or relational approaches. There is no shortage of fears and therefore excessive attention to the dangers of the surrounding environment. Abused children are as if they are always on guard against others. Panic attacks, learning, intellectual development and language disorders are also present. In these children, a greater vulnerability to illness and the presence of insecure attachment bonds can be evidenced. For a time, abused children may appear shy and submissive, but later, especially in the adolescent phase, there is a risk that they will become aggressive and arrogant towards younger and weaker children: 'Adolescents who were abused as children are more than 50 per cent more likely to commit violent offences than their peers, which also de-

pends on their attendance in degraded environments'. Oliverio (2008, p. 69) Furthermore, abused children who become adults are likely to abuse their children in turn, so that maltreatment is a repetitive phenomenon that is passed on from one generation to the next. According to the same author, one could think of an epigenetic effect.

"Until now, the consequences of abuse were likened to those associated with other forms of severe stress, which involve activation of the hypothalamus and adrenals that produce cortisol, the hormone that characterises, along with other molecules, the reaction to stressful factors, in large quantities. Now, however, the results of recent research indicate that the effects of childhood physical and sexual abuse can be far more serious than other forms of trauma or stress and leave a real 'gene imprint' that can alter the functioning of the brain, particularly the frontal cortex, through 'epigenetic' dynamics. The term 'epigenesis' indicates that environmental factors can cause genes to behave (or rather express themselves) differently, without the genes themselves being modified' (Oliverio, 2008, p.70).

The causes of physical violence by adults towards children can be diverse. There are:
1. Educational causes
2. Social causes
3. Personal causes

1. ***Educational causes***

These arise from an excessive and disproportionate educational response by adults to situations that may be present in all families and in all places where there are minors who, precisely because of their age and poor motor

and emotional control, may be annoying, messy, noisy, etc. Mistreatment of children can therefore occur both in families and in so-called 'educational' and 'family care and support' institutions, especially when, as in nurseries and centres for disabled children, the guests of these institutions are unable to report the violence they have suffered, due to their age or the handicaps present.

In some of these environments, physical and psychological ill-treatment may be used systematically with the aim of adapting or correcting the behaviour of children deemed dangerous or inappropriate for social living. Fortunately, whereas in the past the use of physical ill-treatment was frequent and systematic, nowadays such behaviour has clearly decreased, as it is understood that physical violence stimulates emotional reactions that prevent the child from *internalising norms*. Ultimately, the child does what is required not because he is convinced but only to avoid punishment and physical pain. Therefore, the moment he thinks he can avoid punishment, he reverts to primitive behaviour.

2. *Social causes*

Often physical and psychological abuse is carried out for other reasons that have nothing to do with educational needs. Aggressive and violent behaviour can be provoked by stress and excessive nervous tension caused by conflictual marital or family relationships; by excessive work commitments; by economic difficulties; by isolation and marginalisation from the social context; by inadequate housing conditions; by the presence of single-parent families (single mothers, single parents, divorced, widowed). Moreover, today that sentimental relationships are often exten-

ded to lovers and 'special friends', inner tension and excessive stress can be caused by the difficulties and frustrations in managing these alternative ties, which present considerable characteristics of variability and fluidity, but which, on an emotional level, can be just as involving as lasting and stable ties.

3. *Personal causes*

In some cases, aggression against children can be provoked by adults with psychological, existential and social problems. These adults handle the normal care activities necessary for a child with considerable difficulty. These difficulties are greatly increased when the child presents problems, such as neonatal pathologies, chronic illnesses, physical and mental disabilities, severe learning problems, constant crying, eating disorders, excessive restlessness, destructive and violent behaviour. There is no doubt that the difficult management of these and other problems leads to a state of stress in the parents or in the most immature and psychologically fragile persons caring for the child, which easily oversteps their capacity for self-control and turns into aggressive and angry attitudes or behaviour. These attitudes, it must be said, are often neither wanted nor desired, so much so that they leave these adults with considerable feelings of guilt that aggravate their precarious and unstable psychic condition.

Adults who in their educational relationship are more likely to perpetrate violence on minors, as they are unable to manage their own emotions and aggressive and destructive impulses, often present psychological and social problems of various kinds: affective and relational deficiencies,

significant personality disorders, drug addiction, neurotic or psychotic illnesses, social maladjustment. In their personal history we frequently find marital conflicts and crises, separations, poor socio-economic conditions, emigration, judicial involvement, lack of reference values.

The same difficulty in controlling aggressive impulses was evidenced in parents or family members who were too young or, on the contrary, too old and in single-parent families.

Marcello's stories

The stories of Marcello, a six-year-old boy, are a vivid portrait of the family and school environment in which he lived and with which he had to relate on a daily basis.

First story

Once upon a time there was a moron called Gianmarco. One day his mother told him: 'Don't throw that plant away or I'll kill you', and he, being a moron, went to the balcony and threw the plant underneath, thinking: 'Now my mother will kill me'. There was an aeroplane and he said: 'Even worse because the plant can break the aeroplane'. The plane crashed into the building and two thousand people died. The mother said, "Was the house on fire?" and the child said yes. The mother threw him out of the window.

Second story

Once upon a time there was my comrade Stello. He had once done a stupid - stupid thing. We have a balcony at school. He made the teacher come out, took the plants and threw them out. And the teacher scolded him and sent him to the headmaster. Once he acted stupid and the teacher called his mother who was 'misciting' (beating) *him. He came in like a little dog. The headmaster called his mother, who raised her hands to him and he died. They buried him*

at the school and at the funeral they also called the US authorities.

Third story

*Once upon a time there was a Christian Beast. One day he wanted to go to the teacher and asked, "Can I go to the bathroom?" And the teacher tells him: "No! Forget it!" And then Cristiano pees his pants. They had to call the fire service and they gave him a fireman's underwear. He was writing a maths assignment and he had to do 1+1, he thinks how much he does and writes 1000. So the maths teacher threw him out and broke his head. The teacher called his mum and said, "Write it in another school!" His mum is big and she gave Cristiano a blow by throwing him (*out*) of the window. Below was an ambulance, they put him there and admitted him to the emergency room. Everything was broken except his heart. They discharged him in a wheelchair. He went back to school and asked the teacher again if he could leave and the teacher slapped him again and they hospitalised him again. He came back to school again in the wheelchair, asked again to go out, they slammed him against the wall and eventually he died.*

Fourth story

*Once upon a time Stello and his mother went to the beach and then Stello asked his mother if he could go swimming and he drowned, because he could not swim. His mother called him: "Come here you idiot!" And she gave him a timpulata (*a slap*), and so he died in the sea. There was his ghost, his mum got scared and kicked him. He died again and it was repeated many times.*

Fifth story

There was a one-year-old boy named Giacomo. Mum goes out shopping and the boy lights the cooker and sets the

whole house on fire. Then he climbs onto the balcony and jumps off, hurting his brain. The fireman arrives and says: "What the hell are you doing?" He dies. They take him to church and the cemetery. Then his ghost retells the same story two hundred times and then dies forever.

Sixth story: Desire for adoption

"Once upon a time there was a little boy called Marco who was lost. One day he found a house and thought about going inside. There were lots of old things and he went out to play. Then he got bored and went into the woods. In the woods there was a big boy and a big girl. They found this child and thought of adopting him. They returned home and the child was no longer alone".

Marcello's stories do not need much commentary, as the everyday reality of a certain type of school and family comes out vividly and realistically: the beatings, slaps, physical and verbal aggression describe an environment and educational behaviour that is certainly not appropriate for the development of a six-year-old child. As can be seen from the stories, the adults: the mother, the teacher, the director, are never under indictment. Under indictment are the children themselves, that is, the victims. As Giancarlo Tirendi says: 'The hatred felt for the abusive parent will be shifted to other objects, thus allowing a good relationship with the father (or mother) to be maintained on a conscious level[5]

The last story, however, is very different from the others. In this one, the protagonist, Marco, feels an overwhelming need to get away from his family in which there

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[5]   Tirendi Giancarlo, 'Child maltreatment: simple violence or pathology?", Solidarietà, Year IX No. 24, p. 96.

was a violent atmosphere. So much so that he is initially content to remain alone. It is only later that a desire emerges to look for a pair of parents other than his own who can adopt him.

Wolves in sheep's clothing

"Once upon a time there was a wolf walking around and there was a little lamb. This wolf hid and said to the little lamb: "You are nice and handsome and good to eat!" The frightened little lamb went to his parents who then went to ask the wolf for an explanation: he replied that it was not true that he wanted to eat him.

The wolf comes out of the den, goes to the little lamb and says: "Did you tell your parents that I want to eat you?" "Yes says the little lamb". Then the wolf pup comes and tells his father that he cannot eat the little lamb because otherwise the little lamb's parents will come looking for him. So the big wolf does not eat it. So the little wolf says to him: 'The little lamb is my friend, if I want I will let you eat it'. One evening the wolf shows up, the little lamb was with its parents. The wolf greets the parents and they greet him back. The parents wanted to know why he had not eaten the little lamb, because the parents were also wolves disguised as lambs. In the end, they all took off their disguises and ate the little lamb.

Notice meanwhile in this tale of another child, Tonino, how the most frequent words are 'wolves, eating and lamb'. These three words colour the whole tale with remarkable, incredible violence and anguish. The second thing to highlight is that the characters continually have ambivalent attitudes: at times they seem to want to protect the small, fragile victim, while at other times they betray her or are anxious to attack her or have her mauled. Therefore, along

with the fear of extreme violence in the child: being eaten, despite being good, small and docile as a lamb, there is the absence of all hope and trust in others, even in so-called 'friends' who are ready at any moment to betray you. The *wolf cub* who at first seems to protect the little lamb (*Then the wolf cub arrives and tells its father that he cannot eat the little lamb because otherwise the lamb's parents will come looking for it)* a moment later is ready to feed it to his jaws (*The little lamb is my friend, if I want I'll make you eat it).* This distrust spreads, in a terrible crescendo, even to one's own parents! *(Because the parents were also wolves disguised as lambs. Eventually they took off their disguises and all ate the lamb).*

All this reflects the inner realities of these children who, as a result of their parents' and aggressive adults' behaviour, lose all affective reference points and all security in their surroundings. What certainties to have, on whom and what to rely and trust, when the people who frequently beat him in moments of irritation and intolerance are the same ones who at other times have embraced, kissed and consoled him?

A heart tired of being beaten.

The violence Daniela suffered before her adoption is reflected in this story:

"Once upon a time there was a heart who was tired of being beaten by his parents. They beat him for causing trouble. The heart went away and got married and had children: one was called Emanuela and the other was called Marco. After that he had such a nice family because they got along well and never beat their children, (I don't like it when they beat their children!) And they all lived happily ever after."

First of all, it is noteworthy how the child emphasises not the pain of the body that suffers the beatings of her parents but the heart *(there was once a heart that was tired of being beaten by its parents)*, as if to emphasise that the thing that suffers most as a result of the violence suffered is above all the child's soul. This child, too, at least partly justifies this violence *(they beat him for causing trouble)*. The child tries to escape this violent environment, dreaming of getting married and having children and thus having a family of her own in which children are not beaten and parents get along well. A family that mirrors, in reality, the

adoptive family where the little girl now lived (*Afterwards she had such a nice family because they got along well and never beat their children*)

Possible consequences for minors

1. Any form of violence can have short, medium and long-term psychological and relational consequences on the developing personality and, consequently, psychopathological disorders or deviance in adulthood. Children subjected to frequent episodes of aggression and/or violence often show fears, sadness, restlessness, poor school performance, attention disorders, loss of self-confidence but also of confidence in others, a sense of helplessness, despair, a tendency to isolation, and difficulties in intimate relationships. More severe symptoms may take the form of amnesia, altered state of consciousness, dysphoria, self-harm, explosive rage or inhibition.

2. As far as the severity of the damage caused by a violent environment is concerned, this is all the greater the younger the child and the longer the exposure to the traumatic environment. Experience shows us, however, that if the conditions in which the child lives can be changed by means of appropriate interventions, the disorders presented by the child quickly, though not completely, recede.

3. With regard to the dynamics that take place as a result of aggressive behaviour on the part of parents or other educators and adults with whom the child is in contact, various situations can be configured:

- Meanwhile, *there may be an acceptance of the negative judgement given by adults:* 'If my parents, my teacher or my grandparents punish me so frequently and so severely, I must really be very bad'. There may therefore be a considerable loss of self-esteem on the part of the child and an acceptance of the negative image that comes from his or her altered living environment.

- In some cases, vice versa*, the child may think that he or she is the 'good one', while instead having 'bad' parents or family members and other educators.* In these situations, a problem of loss may arise. A parent, father or mother is by definition good. A bad parent is a false parent, a fake parent who does not exist or who, if he or she does exist, had better have something bad happen to him or her, had better die so that he or she can no longer do harm. But since it is difficult for such punitive and destructive desires to be accepted by the child's super-ego, it is easy for the child's ego, in order to avoid severe feelings of guilt, to try in every way to remove these thoughts and desires in the unconscious. Therefore,

the anxiety consequential to these negative thoughts will continue to persist and may manifest itself through behaviour and symptoms that are exactly opposite to the initial desire. For example, the child may show an intense fear that his father, who has been aggressive with him, will die or hurt himself. This fear may lead him to have excessive and pathological attention towards this parent.

- In other cases, these *negative and destructive desires can lead to severe disesteem but also to self-punishing behaviour:* 'If I have such thoughts, I am a bad child and therefore it is right that I suffer and that others punish me'.

- Another mode used by children when they feel that one parent is 'bad' is to *partner with the other parent*. "If dad is bad, mum, who is good, needs a loving and understanding man beside her: I want to be this good man who loves mum without ever making her suffer or abandoning her". In these cases, the bond with the mother is strengthened and risks perpetuating into adulthood, when it should be replaced by loving and affectionate bonds experienced outside the family unit.

- There is then a further way of experiencing parental aggression, which is that of *adopting the educatio-*

nal behaviour of parents and adults, thinking, erroneously, that being parents and adults means making the children and the children entrusted to them suffer. In this case, the child's future role as a parent and educator is compromised. Therefore, the harm received will be transferred over time to other human beings.

- Moreover, as in the tale of the wolf and the little lamb, the child, by observing remarkably contrasting behaviour in parents and adults, runs the risk of *losing all affective reference points and all security with regard to his surroundings*.

Violence by other minors: bullying

Violence against children can be caused by adults but also by other children.

Physical violence by other children may be caused by personal physical confrontations; by clashes between groups and gangs; or by bullying.

This latter type of violence has always been present in every community: school, boarding school or boarding school, where many children are forced to live. In these environments it is easy for another boy, or more often a group of boys, to target a peer or a younger, immature and weak child or one with physical and/or mental problems, through a series of bullying and aggressive attacks, both physical and verbal. Characterising, therefore, this type of violence, the intentionality in doing harm and the persistence over

time of these offensive actions by one or more minors of the same age or older, on one or more minors.

Violence is exercised by means of jokes, mockery, exclusion from the friendship group, appropriation and destruction of the objects of the child or children victimised by the companions, but also by pushing, threats, insults, blackmail and sometimes sexual violence. The poor victim is forced to suffer all this in silence, for fear of even heavier and more painful reprisals. There is no doubt that this behaviour is hateful but, unfortunately, it is very common in schools and in all communities where children, youths and young people constantly get together.

These behaviours are sometimes considered innocent pranks, but they are not at all, as they can cause the child or young person who suffers them considerable suffering in the form of frustration, a sense of loneliness and exclusion, psychosomatic disorders, sleep disorders, generalised anxiety, panic attacks, difficulty in concentrating on school subjects with a consequent drop in school performance, and sometimes such intense fear of having to face the harassers day after day that the victim refuses to go to school. These hateful persecutions can lead to a low level of self-esteem, concomitant with a negative view of oneself and one's abilities, depression, insecurity, self-destructive behaviour, withdrawal into oneself, and even, fortunately in rare cases, suicide.

Those who are subjected to bullying may, in turn, react aggressively towards other peers either to discharge repressed aggression due to the bullying they have suffered or to regain prestige within the group. These persecutory attitudes may already be implemented in the first classes of pri-

mary school at the age of seven to eight, but may be present throughout the school cycle.

Bullying is the prerogative of both sexes, although males tend to harass their victims using mainly physical attacks: punches, shoves, slaps, pinches, while females, more frequently, tend to use mainly verbal weapons and exclusionary behaviour.

Unfortunately, this phenomenon is not linked to particular social classes and is particularly frequent in Italy. As Fonzi (1877-1998, pp. 4-5) notes:

"What first emerges is that bullying is much higher in Italy than elsewhere, both as regards the percentage of bullies and the percentage of victims [...,] In short, the high incidence of bullying in Italy, when compared with other countries, seems to be a real fact, which at least in part can be traced back to cultural differences. We believe that in our culture manifestations of conflict are more tolerated and less frequently lead to the breaking of relationships'.

There are different types of bullies, just as there are different types of victims.

Oliverio Ferraris and Olweus (2005, p. 57) distinguish:

- *the aggressive bully*. He is the most common. He presents himself as a physically strong, impulsive, self-confident child with a strong desire to dominate others. He appears as insensitive to the feelings of others and sees violence as a good thing. This type of bully enjoys great popularity among peers and is often accompanied by wingmen who give him a helping hand, as, at least initially, he arouses fear and admiration among other peers;

- *the passive or gregarious bully* . The latter does not take the initiative to harm the victim, but supports and joins in with the bullies. He partially participates and sometimes merely assists. He is not particularly aggressive, is sensitive to the feelings of others and feels guilty after acting out, so that he is willing to confess to the deplorable behaviour of the aggressive bully group;

- *the anxious bully.* He is the least secure and the most problematic. He may attack children and boys who are stronger than him, getting help from wingmen, in order to express his aggressiveness in any way.

The authors themselves distinguish two types of victims:

- *passive victims.* These are represented by reserved, easy-to-cry, friendless, insecure, anxious, physically weak children. In the case of girls, these are less able to defend themselves with words against the insults, gossip and disparaging vociferousness of their companions. So there is always asymmetry in prestige and power between the bully and the victim.

- *provocative victims*. These victims consist of anxious children who behave in an irritating and provocative manner. These children appear weaker than the bullies, are impulsive and are also capable of at-

tacking, but react in ineffective ways, becoming victims of their more bullying and more determined peers.

Minors who tend to prevaricate are described by the various authors who have studied this phenomenon as extremely anxious and insecure children, who display indifference, little empathy and a lack of emotional involvement with their victims. Children lacking self-fulfilment and self-esteem, frustrated by negative school experiences, with cognitive disorders and socially incompetent. They are also described as children seeking compensatory reinforcement due to inadequate satisfaction of one or more inner needs. These minors have parents who, although using and abusing in imposing the discipline of physical punishment, fail in any way to contain their children's aggressive behaviour. Antonietta Censi (2010, p. 225) notes that in bullying 'the lack of socially valued goals and a strong goal system can lead to forms of emotional apathy. An illiteracy of feelings that can lead to actions deprived of principles: planned indifference, unmotivated violence, senseless bullying'.

Victims are described by Giorgi et al. as 'cautious', rather 'sensitive' and generally 'quiet'. When pupil-victims are male, they tend to be less physically fit and weaker, in terms of physical strength, than their aggressors (Giorgi et al., p.174).

Interventions

We know that interventions by teachers and school authorities are difficult, as bullied children, not having much faith in the help of adults, are not always willing to report

the abuse they have suffered. But even when this happens, teachers find themselves in difficulty as they achieve little or nothing by punishing the aggressors more severely, while they fail to involve their parents, to define an agreed educational action, as they often tend to defend and protect their children's behaviour in any case and by all means, to avoid feeling guilty themselves.

The measures to be put in place to address this issue must necessarily take certain elements into account:

1. Aggressive manifestations almost always have a substratum made up of errors in educational style but also and above all arise from family environments that are poorly suited to the development of a child. The pleasure of hurting a weaker person, the apparent insensitivity to his or her suffering therefore very often presuppose the presence of psycho-affective disorders capable of undermining the child's normal sensitivity. It is therefore first necessary to address, with the help of expert neuropsychiatrists and psychologists, the pathology underlying this type of behaviour.

2. When these aggressive children feel that others do not see them as 'bad' children, but as children who for various reasons manifest their suffering in this way, their attitude changes substantially as they feel that someone is finally interested in their discomfort and not only in what they cause others with their behaviour.

3. The relationship with the bully's family should not consist in telling their parents about their child's misdeeds, as this would contribute to putting them even more in crisis, worsening their already difficult relationship with their child. Instead, it would be important to help them better understand and help their child through supportive and helpful talks.

Sexual violence

Violence against children must include sexual violence.

Sexuality, like all other human functions, can be experienced with pleasure and joy, so that it can contribute to a child's development, or it can be experienced with frustration, pain, shame and disappointment, so much so that it makes a person's existence bleak and sad.

The human being is sexualised from his origin. He already carries in his genes, in his hormones, in the anatomical structure of his body, in his brain, the specific characteristics of one sex. Moreover, the child, from birth, lives in a world in which his and others' sexuality is always active and present. Therefore, from birth he constantly relates to his own sexuality or that of others. From birth he uses it to experience pleasure, to give pleasure, to meet, dialogue and relate to the people he meets as a boy or as a girl. Sexuality, therefore, greatly conditions the relationship the child has with himself and the set of relationships he has with his fellow man. The task of parents and adults, therefore, is not to prevent or allow the child to approach sexuality, but to allow the child to develop and use in the most appropriate way, the potential inherent in this precious function.

For these objectives to be achieved, it is necessary to respect its normal physiological development, without excessive controls and limits, but also without excessive stimuli or simplistic and falsely liberal attitudes, which would divert its purposes and functions. The healthy development of sexuality is respected when the child is allowed to get to know it, live it and express it in the ways and at the times appropriate and characteristic for its age.

Sexual abuse occurs when the victim, who lacks awareness of his or her actions and the ability to choose, is involved in sexual activities or witnesses sexual acts performed by others. Sexual abuse of children can be carried out by parents or other adults, but also by siblings. This abuse is not always overt; sometimes it is masked by genital practices such as excessive cleaning, visitation, etc. We should, therefore, be aware that a lack of respect for the child's possibilities and capacities to handle the sexual stimuli around him can cause serious damage to his affective-relational and social life. Moreover, precisely because the use or abuse of sexuality can condition a human being's emotional and social life, the task of all responsible adults, and not just parents, should be to help the child to live it out as authentically and richly as possible, avoiding the unravelling and trivialisation of such an important and basic function.

Sexual abuse leads to problems related to sexuality, post-traumatic symptoms, reduced sociability, tendency to isolation, poor peer relationships, lack of trust in adults, perception of self as different and so on.

The abusers are not 'monsters' as they are often described, but normal human beings who, due to situations of moral and spiritual misery, social disadvantage, frustrations or

inhibitions, lack or absence of ethical codes, or due to particularly disadvantaged economic situations that force promiscuity in restricted spaces, are unable to control their sexual impulses. In other cases, these are people who mistakenly believe that it is not harmful to perform sexual acts and gestures towards minors.

On the other hand, just as precocious sexual relations with peers and adults are to be condemned, no matter whether paedophiles or not, one should likewise condemn contact with images, words, subjects and scenes in which the child is confronted with realities, towards which he or she does not yet have the necessary maturity for proper emotional and social understanding and management. Among other things, this constant influx of obscene or clearly sexually oriented scenes, images and content from the mass media prevents the establishment of the latency period described by Freud, in which the child should be more absorbed in the developmental tasks associated with learning and discovering the world.

With regard to the legal aspects of sexual abuse, one should never be too cautious in accusing someone of these crimes, as the damage that can be done to individual alleged perpetrators and their families is considerable, while on the other hand, the testimony of minors is not always probative as children's memories can easily be polluted by unconscious conflicts, by previous experiences, fantasies, and by the interventions of the adults who question him/her, as children easily accept that the adult's point of view is more truthful than their own and on the other hand prefer not to contradict adults, especially if these are attachment figures. (Oliverio 2007, p. 16). As De Ajuriaguerra and Marcelli (1986, p. 203) say: "...there is nothing more difficult in this

field than to distinguish between aggression and the phantom of aggression".

The first case we had to deal with of alleged sexual abuse is an example of this:

When our team was called in urgently by the headmistress of a primary school, we thought it was one of the usual difficult problems concerning some particularly aggressive and turbulent child. As soon as the restless headmistress told us the problem: a second-grade girl was accusing her teacher of intimate caresses, we were dismayed for a few moments. These caresses were practised, according to the girl, when the teacher, in order to project slides, darkened the classroom by pulling down the blinds.

We had our first doubts about what the girl told us when we learned the name of the teacher. He had been with our team for some time as a volunteer and we were therefore well aware of his seriousness and reliability. The second and more important doubt arose from the psychological characteristics of the child, whom we had previously followed for relational and behavioural problems. We also knew her mother, who was being treated by our mental health service. A mother who had a turbulent life, so much so that she often went with generous friends for money. However, we were only able to definitively exonerate the teacher when we were able to ascertain that the teacher had never shown slides to his class, while, on the other hand, the shutters had not been able to be lowered for years because, being defective, they were locked at the top.

The master had been particularly lucky in this case because there was a whole series of elements that exonerated him immediately and completely. But how many legal problems would he have had and for how long if this had not

happened? In this case, the reasons that had led the child to accuse the teacher were also easy to understand. How could a daughter view men in a serene and positive manner when every day she saw with her own eyes how they used her mother only for their own pleasure?

Incest

Incestuous relationships may involve father with daughter, mother with son, brother with sister, but there are also, though rarer, incestuous homosexual relationships.

While incestuous relationships can cause genetic damage in the species, since the greater the consanguinity between the parents, the greater the likelihood of rare and recessive hereditary diseases, incestuous relationships also give rise to psychological problems in minors, which frequently manifest themselves in the development of a neurotic personality, while at the same time limiting their affective, sexual and social autonomy.

Distrustful and suspicious environment

The distrustful and suspicious adult usually has a difficult relationship with the other because he fears that the other will exploit, harm or deceive him. He doubts the loyalty or trustworthiness of both friends and colleagues and family members. He finds it difficult to confide in those close to him because of an unjustified fear that what he confides may turn against him. He perceives hidden or threatening meanings even in small reproaches or remarks. He bears resentment because he has difficulty forgiving the evil done to him by others. He reacts with anger and frustration

to attacks on his own role. Suspicious, fears the fidelity of a spouse or sexual partner (DSM - IV - TR., p. 738).

The impact that a distrustful and suspicious parent can have on their children is easy to understand. A family environment is made up of adults who trust each other and see in each other a companion, a friend, a support, another person capable of listening, understanding and helping. Suspicious behaviour and attitudes easily lead parents to clash on various issues. On jealousy: 'You don't tell me everything about what you do during the day, how you spend your time outside the home, so I am afraid you are cheating on me'. On the economic aspects of family life: 'I don't understand what you do with my and our money. Maybe you squander it? Maybe you keep it in a secret account of your own? Maybe you use it to give gifts to your mistresses?" On your relations with your children: "I think the words you say, the behaviour you keep, the concessions you make, have as their end a privileged relationship with our son, to my detriment. I think you want to steal all his affection to tie him more closely to you'.

Equally problematic will be relations with the other spouse's relatives who are often viewed with suspicion: 'Why did your mother come today? What is she up to? I can't stand that when I'm not at home your mother comes to spy on us. Besides, what do you talk about together?" Suspiciousness leads to a lack of trust that often results in occasional clashes, which can become habitual, when the other, rather than accepting an increasingly invasive control, rebels. A climate of confrontation and reciprocal aggression is then created within the family, which seriously impedes the normal psycho-affective development of the children. Even with regard to these, the right attention to the

places, peers and adults frequented can turn into an excessively inquisitorial control that leaves no room for adequate autonomy and responsibility.

Of course, the situation worsens when suspicion turns to delusions: of reference, persecution, jealousy, etc. In these cases, minors are forced to deal with adults who, rather than working to make reality and life concrete and clear, present it in an altered and deformed way with their words and behaviour. And this, inevitably, leads to anxiety, confusion and distress in minors.

Chaotic environment

When we speak of a chaotic environment, we are not referring to the chaos that can be found in a family with little love of order, in which objects are distributed haphazardly around the house, but to the behaviour of those parents and other family members who are close to the child, who experience their relationship with themselves, with the child and with each other in a disorderly, confused, unstable manner. In chaotic families there are also timetables and rules, but these timetables and rules are constantly changing or, like the cries of Manzoni, are sometimes proposed and strictly adhered to for a few days, only to be soon abandoned.

Often, these parents, despite the fact that they propose to have such goodwill and availability towards their children, alternate moments in which they are close to them and know how to listen and direct them effectively with others, in which, in the grip of anxiety, in having to deal with even small commitments that have arisen, they neglect them completely or assume unpredictable and conflicting attitu-

des and behaviour. Thus, in the chaotic environment, praise, kisses and hugs are wasted at certain times of the day and in certain periods, while at others reproaches, indifference, denials and verbal or physical aggression clearly prevail.

In these families, the relationships between the spouses are also fluctuating, confused and discontinuous. On certain occasions, father and mother show that they love each other madly, give each other a thousand presents and cuddles, are tender and close, while at other times, they attack each other like bitter enemies. The same happens with teachers and school: on some days, these parents patiently and willingly follow their children so that they learn their lessons well and do all their homework correctly, while on others, either because they are too busy or because they are nervous and anxious, they totally neglect them. At times they show considerable gratitude towards teachers, at others they speak ill of them even in front of their children.

It is not difficult, then, to imagine the difficulties and suffering that can be experienced by young children who, by their nature, need well-defined, stable and consistent reference points. How will a child be able to experience the father figure with clarity when the parent at times is capable of filling him with sweet words, caresses, hugs and kisses, while at others is ready to push him away, when he comes close, as if he were a harasser and a troublemaker? How do we judge and mature a solid bond with a mother who, on some days is happy to prepare excellent lunches for him, while on others does not even feel like putting the leftovers from the day before on the table? The same behaviour occurs on the occasions when these parents make promises to their children. On 'yes' days every promise will be kept to

the letter, while on 'no' days every commitment will be quietly denied or refused.

Generally, a child is born and grows up within a family, as human societies have found nothing better than this institution to allow and guarantee a healthy and harmonious growth for their young.

For this reason, the most important pathway for the development of a child's inner world is closely linked to his or her relationship with his or her parents and family, and in particular, to his or her relationship with his or her mother. It is fully justified, therefore, the interest that psychology has always had in parental figures in relation to the well-being or malaise of children. For Bowlby, (1982, p. 21) the family represents the strategic point for breaking the vicious circle whereby disturbed children end up becoming disturbed parents, who, in turn, will act on their children, so that the next generation will develop the same or similar disorders.

As for the world outside the family, it too has always had an influence on the new generations since, for better or for worse, everything that happened outside the home: wars, conflicts, famine, slavery, lack of work, emigration or, on the contrary, peace, abundance of food, freedom, job opportunities, etc., had an influence on the various family units and thus also on children. The duty of the family has always been to filter from the social environment everything that could be useful to it, pouring it in and distributing it among its members. At the same time, its duty has always been to keep out or limit the negative influences that pressed in on it from outside. At the same time, the family, while offering its services to society, sought to change it through direct

or indirect management of politics and social engagement, so that the external environment would be more suited to its needs. Likewise, society sought to control, protect and help the family so that its product would be satisfactory. Thus the family-society relationship was always a dialectical confrontation and never passive on either side, but remarkably active and critical.

This does not mean, however, that the family ever managed to change society so that it was fully able to satisfy all its needs or, on the contrary, that society enslaved the family by putting it at its service. This balancing act between *the private sphere* (family) and the *public sphere* (society) has globally enabled the development of humanity over the centuries.

In our current Western society, something in this pair has changed and altered considerably. On the part of the social and political environment, the influence on families has sharpened considerably, in terms of opposition and seduction. In other words, society, and within society especially the more aggressive economic-financial component, using the most refined weapons of communication has managed to influence families so that they bend to its service. As if this were not enough, it has managed, with the help of politics, to do something more: sensing as its own limitation that an efficient family could stand in opposition to it, it has seen fit to break up this institution and break it up or even prevent it from forming, so that it is free to dialogue and contact with individuals, rather than with the institution of the family. In this way, taking advantage of its full freedom of manoeuvre, the small but greedy business world made big profits on the skin of the many, without realising that, at the same time, it was working towards its own destruction, since every child, and then every young person and adult with psychological disorders, entails considerable costs for society and thus for the community:

- the many visits and examinations, including complex and expensive ones, that are necessary;

- the need for long cycles of habilitative, rehabilitative or psychopharmacological therapies;

- the need for specialised teachers and operators, indispensable throughout the school period;

- individual, couple and family psychotherapy;

- hospital or home care;

- the various subsidies needed;

- lack of production due to partial or low capacity to work;

- the need to protect the social environment from the unconscious acts of disturbed individuals.

The seductions put in place by the economic-financial world to achieve its goals have been and still are of this tenor:

"The more you work, the more you can earn. "Always remember that your fulfilment, happiness, pleasure and joy and your well-being depend on how much you earn, as the more money you have, the more items you can buy and the more services you can use for yourself and your family."

"Since all work is not equal, it is paid work that is the most rewarding. It is paid work that is the most socially useful, that gives dignity to both man and woman. Work and effort that is not

remunerated, such as that of the housewife, is the work of slaves and derelicts and therefore has no dignity". "The purpose of school and study is to prepare you for your future professional work". "To achieve this everything has to be sacrificed, everything has to be put in second place: relationships, children, family, elderly parents".

In order to distract parents from the real problems and needs of their children, and thus from the daily violence to which they are subjected without realising it, the economic and financial world has found nothing better than to focus the mass media's attention always and only 'on sexually abused children, sadistically mistreated, deeply torn by family conflicts over their possession, first abandoned without any scruples and then sought after, years later and in front of the television cameras, to satisfy the curiosity of television viewers with an easy emotion' (Moro, 1998, p. 9). 9). The same author continues: 'I strongly fear that the current emphasisations of physical and sexual violence against minors end up hiding and justifying, a collective removal of the more corpulent phenomenon of the many non-physical violences that befall subjects in training' (Moro, 1998, p. 10).

From what we have said, one can easily deduce that interventions aimed at promoting the well-being of couples and families are the best prevention of psycho-affective disorders but also the best cure for the state coffers.

Extended families and reduced families

It has been noted that the physical and psychological well-being of minors is directly proportional to the number and quality of persons linked to them by stable bonds of affection and kinship. When alongside a human puppy there are present, in its material needs, in its affective-relational

needs, but also in its games and discoveries, human beings who are numerous, qualitatively valid, and linked to it by stable affective bonds, the attention, quantity and quality of dialogue, contacts capable of positive contributions increase considerably.

Per Lidz (1977, p. 30):

"*When the nuclear family, consisting of parents and children, is not clearly separated from the broad context of relatives (grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, etc.), the various functions of the family are divided among the relatives. Parents are helped in the rearing of children who, in turn, have many 'substitute' parents. The effects of the anomalies and deficiencies of the parents, and thus the influence of their personality, are greatly diminished'.*

For Zattoni and Gillini (2003, p.12): when the child entered into an extended family context made up of a farmstead, courtyard or even a village "...the little ones were a common good, without this being proclaimed in words; if the child got into some kind of trouble, he was reprimanded by the adults present; just as, if he showed off some skills, he had a natural adult 'audience' clapping his hands". This is not the case when the social and parental network is very small or, as is often the case in the Western world in recent decades, almost absent. In this condition, it is easy for man's little ones to suffer deficiencies at many moments of their growth and development. They suffer at the time of expectation and birth, since their parents' anxieties will not be addressed and thus appeased or reduced by more mature and experienced people who can advise, reassure and accommodate the fears of both mother and father. They suffer in the first months of life, since their parents will lack an authoritative and serene guide to guide them on the

many issues to be faced during this period, which is also the most delicate and decisive time for the establishment of a healthy and happy parent-child relationship and bond. They suffer when these parents are forced to cope alone with their children's numerous ailments or mental and somatic disorders. In these cases, the intervention of the paediatrician or specialist is not always sufficient to quell dad and mum's anxieties. And finally, children suffer when they need to start socialising with siblings or cousins, with whom there is a long-standing and prolonged frequency, and instead are forced to confront, in crowded environments, groups of unfamiliar, vociferous and often irritated and irritable peers, because they are frustrated by the distance from their parents and the reassuring walls of home. For these reasons, all human babies, like those of many animals, should be lucky enough to grow up in family environments that are rich in human capabilities but also extended.

The only son

There are certainly advantages in being an only child. It is not necessary to share the parents' love with other siblings. The latter, if they want, can easily devote all the affection and time they have to this child. Moreover, if one is younger, and there are several siblings, it is easy to have to put up with the anguish of the older sibling. But the latter will also have to put up with his younger brother's bullying when the latter, taking advantage of the greater parental protection granted to him, can take possession of his toys or comics, running away immediately afterwards, to hide behind his mother's skirt and thus be protected. This mother, on the other hand, defending him, will not fail to say the hateful, abhorred phrase: 'You are big, please your brother who is little'. It will also be easier for parents to accommodate the only

child in his or her expensive needs and desires, as the household finances do not have to be divided between two or many elements.

Alongside these positive aspects there are, however, many more negative ones. Being an only child means:

❖ renouncing many competitive stimuli, in winning and then maintaining the affection of parents through the most appropriate, affectionate, communicative and cooperative behaviour;

❖ early loss of the pleasure and experiences gained through childhood games as, by playing and talking often with adults, only children are stimulated to become early adults in their attitudes and behaviour;

❖ being forced to confront the adult world at a very early age without having first experienced the protected relationship with other minors with whom they have already established an emotional and blood bond;

❖ not having the opportunity to compare experiences, ideas, reflections and thoughts with other children, different in age and gender but living the same family values;

❖ not having the possibility of finding in older siblings fundamental role models, to be imitated and introjected;

❖ not being able to play with children who live in and participate in the same family climate, who have a

similar style of behaviour and who share the same values;

❖ not being able to use and enjoy a warm and reassuring reality and presence, when parents are absent for work, when one of them passes away or in times of family crisis. Crisis that may arise due to serious marital conflicts or, worse, due to the fracture of the parental couple;

❖ having to face parenthood without having had valuable educational and care experiences with young children. For Winnicott (1973, p.146): '...any child who has not gone through this experience and who has never seen his mother nurse, wash and care for a small child, is less rich than the child who has witnessed these events' (Winnicott, 1973, 146);

❖ frequently confront permissive or anxious parents. Parents of only children experience their role with more apprehension and fear. They are afraid that something serious will happen to their only heir, and since they also have anxiety and fear of losing his affection, they find it difficult to behave authoritatively, as they fear that he will react negatively and destructively when faced with harsh educational attitudes;

❖ not be strengthened, through the birth of the baby brother, by the idea that the parents still love each other enough to bet on the future, enriching the family with a new element;

❖ experience different roles, so as to prepare themselves to live in larger groups, and eventually, in the world (Winnicott, 1973, 148);

❖ have difficulty leaving the family because they are crushed and tied down by the responsibility of having to leave parents who, in the absence of other children, would be left alone.

Death of spouse or cohabitee

Alongside single-nuclear families that do not enjoy a rich, efficient and warm family network, locked in flat blocks, overburdened with work and various commitments, there are even worse realities such as those in which the child only has to relate to one parent. Fortunately, given the enormous progress in preventive and curative medicine, the death from incurable illness of one of the parents, so frequent until the middle of the last century, has become increasingly rare, while, unfortunately, deaths from road accidents are on the increase.

It is known that bereavement can contribute to abnormal personality development. However, the detrimental effects on children can vary greatly depending on certain parameters such as:

1. the characteristics and duration of the spouse's illness;

2. the age of orphaned children;

3. the psychological characteristics and, therefore, the emotional reactions of the parent and surviving relatives;

4. the sex of the spouse;

5. the richness and efficiency of the affective, family and friendship network.

1. *The characteristics and duration of a spouse's illness*

The type of illness of the spouse, as well as the duration of the illness itself, is important in causing more or less severe emotional stress in the surviving parent and the family unit. Undoubtedly, a long-term illness, requiring considerable care, causes greater anxiety and stress within the family, with consequent psychological, financial and care difficulties, than a short-term illness.

If the care commitment is considerable and is carried out over a long period of time, and if, above all, it absorbs too much of the surviving spouse's attention, the children, especially the young ones, may suffer not only from the lack of necessary attention and care, but also from the absence or lack of a serene and joyful dialogue. In these cases, on the part of the healthy spouse, there may be a refusal of cuddling and affection for the children, either as a depressive symptom, or as a need to experience the relationship with the seriously ill person in an intense and exclusive manner. But also the opposite situation, i.e. the scarcity of care and attention towards the sick parent, may bring out in the children a certain resentment towards the parent who did not put as much effort as he or she should have done.

When an illness with a long course is present, those involved often alternate moments of intense emotional involvement with others of apparent 'normality'. And so, while in

moments of crisis tensions and clashes are accentuated, and thus children suffer from excessive reproaches, unjust accusations or worse, punishments given because of the physical and mental fatigue of the parents, at other times, when the illness is experienced with more resignation the family members feel more united and closer than before, and the children are also given more caresses and kisses, more signs of affection and closeness, as there is a strong need for all of them to huddle together to overcome sadness and difficulties.

The painful and anxious atmosphere created by the serious illness, and then by death, hovers, like a black shroud, over the emotional reactions of the family group, making emotional relationships difficult, suffocating, sad and melancholic. Despite this, there is sometimes a considerable effort on the part of adults to try to deny or camouflage the mournful event, avoiding in every way to transmit to minors the sense of death, even physically distancing them from all those tasks and situations that might remind them of it. In any case, the sense of mourning and the pain of loss remain. In Wolff's professional experiences (1970, p. 114). most mothers had considered keeping the rituals that accompany death from their children, and many children had not seen their father's grave. Some mothers had even avoided telling their child that the father had died.

But sudden deaths, or the presence of illnesses that quickly lead to death, can also cause psychological problems within the family unit. For loved ones, the path to death needs a certain amount of time to be well processed: time to accept the inevitable; time to calmly close the contrasts and resentments in the soul; time to mend the rifts in the relationship; time to extinguish old grudges.

2. *The age of orphaned children*

With regard to the immediate reaction to the death of the parent for Wolff (1970, p. 105-108), children under the age of four to five either ignore the phenomenon or react with an embarrassed and somewhat detached type of interest. Between the ages of five and eight they begin to be fascinated by death, associate it with feelings of aggression and fear, see it as a punishment for misdeeds, but also as a reversible event. Only around the age of nine do they reach a rational conception of death, and they begin to manifest sadness at the death of a loved one. Nevertheless, since the core of our personality, which will accompany us throughout our lives, is largely built around early childhood experiences, the earlier the loss the more severe the psychological damage will be. Therefore, when during the critical childhood years, a parent is absent, personality development may be damaged, so that the task of identity formation is likely to be difficult in adolescence. The child will lack the characteristic masculine or feminine contributions, and in addition, will be forced to suffer all the social consequences of the loss. Often, after the death of a parent, other persons such as uncles or schoolteachers serve as models of identification for the orphaned child, but these persons are never known as intimately as their own father and mother and, in this respect, are less satisfying (Wolff, 1970, p. 119).

3. *The psychological characteristics of the surviving spouse and the relationship with the deceased*

The duration of the bereavement, its characteristics, and the consequences for the children, are also linked to the psychological qualities of the surviving spouse and the relationship he or she had with the deceased. Neurotic personality traits, combined with a difficult or conflictual bond, certainly aggravate the condition of suffering in the children. Children are more likely to be disturbed if there was conflict between the parents, since feelings of guilt arise both in the surviving parent and in them. These feelings have more difficulty being dealt with and processed in modern societies, as the moments of illness and then death are taken away from family members and entrusted, almost exclusively, to healthcare facilities: doctors, nurses, and auxiliary staff.

After the death of the spouse there may be a difficult return to the pre-existing affective-relational conditions, or a morbid and excessive attachment may be evidenced towards the children, as a compensation for the loss, as a fear of new losses, or as a way of averting them through continuous presence. All this entails, on an individual and family level, greater psychological fragility.

4. *The sex of the deceased spouse*

As is well known, the death of a mother generally produces greater family disintegration than the death of a father (Wolff, 1970, p. 111). Few men manage to take on the double commitment to the economic world and the emotional world. This is why affective care is usually entrusted to grandmothers or aunts, so that the wealth and efficiency of the family network is of vital importance, even on these occasions. Widows, however, also present difficulties in co-

ping with bereavement. Some of them, believing that they can no longer open themselves to love with another man, isolate themselves and close themselves off in their memories. According to Wolff (1970, p. 111), few of them, even after fourteen months, recovered completely and, in half of them, their physical health had weakened as a result of the misfortune with the consequent presence of both mental disorders and physical problems. The same author notes in these women manifestations of apathy, resentment and hostility even towards those who help them, as well as rejection of social relationships. These women feel abandoned, but if someone offers their help, they feel disturbed in their pain. Others, on the other hand, look for a replacement as soon as possible, without the necessary prudence and reflection that, in such cases, is indispensable for a good choice, but also for allowing their children to accept a new father figure.

Due to the increased commitment to work, it is not uncommon to highlight a disruption of family life, resulting in increased use of day care centres, schools and social care services. In addition, the surviving spouse, seeking to take on a double role, with the intention of replacing the missing parent, may be forced to alter and modify his or her primitive image in the eyes of the children. Widows, for example, after the death of their husbands, risk distancing themselves emotionally from their offspring, because of their grief, because of their double work commitments, and because they feel compelled to engage in male-dominated behaviour. They are therefore forced to blur and not manifest typically maternal attitudes. In such cases the children lose not only their father but also a part of their mother!

Sometimes there may be a fostering or shifting to the son or eldest daughter of the role of the sick or deceased spouse, with an early empowerment of the son, especially if male, who is stimulated to take on a role that is not his own and not appropriate for his age.

On the part of the child or children, the death of the parent may be experienced in various ways: some may experience it with a sense of guilt, remembering all that was not said, all that was not done, the clashes that occurred, the difficulties in the relationship. Others may experience it with a sense of liberation, both for the end of the family upheaval, caused by the illness, and for the possibility of regaining the attention of the surviving parent. Unlike separation and divorce, however, the image of a beloved parent who has died is kept alive by the surviving spouse and is presented to the children with pride and affection (Wolff, 1970, p. 137). Therefore, the deceased father or mother continues to be alive in the minds and hearts of the children in a positive way and thus, even if partially, continues to fulfil their function and role.

Removal for reasons of justice with restriction to a prison regime

On the other hand, with regard to the parent who is far away in prison for reasons of justice, the image that children experience in these situations varies greatly and differs from the image when a parent dies. Sometimes children see the imprisoned parent as a victim of society, as they consider the sentence unjust. In this case, it is society that is at fault and not the parent. At other times, if the children's personal convictions and the environment around and near them stimulate them to make a harsher judgement, the imprisoned parent is perceived with considerable embarrassment if not shame. To these feelings can also be added the emotion of anger towards the father or mother serving his or her sentence in prison, because by his or her antisocial or incongruous behaviour

he or she has 'thrown mud' at his or her family and children and also left them in a difficult economic situation.

An unpaid photo

Anna, a nine-year-old girl, comes to our observation as, after her father was confined in prison, she showed depressive symptoms, with sadness, melancholy, eating disorders, emotional fragility. As a comment to a drawing she makes this story.

"Once upon a time there was a family: the mother was called Teresa, the father Roberto, the daughter Anna and the brother Mario. They had gone out to go to the mountains but got burnt because the sun was too strong. So they went to get ice cream. They met a photographer and asked him to take a photo of the whole family. They asked the photographer how much they had to pay for the photo. The photographer asked for a lot, so they took the photo anyway but did not pay for it. The photographer then broke the camera. The family went home and the little boy felt sick and got chicken pox. Everyone started crying. But magically the chickenpox passed and they all lived happily ever after.

This narrative, in which the child enters the real names of all the family members, certainly reveals the environment in which the child lived: an environment with little respect for the rights of others (*The photographer asked for a lot and so they took the picture but did not pay for it. The photographer then broke the camera).* What interests us most is the final part of the story in which the little girl perceives in her little brother's illness almost divine punishment for their antisocial behaviour (*The family came home and the little one felt sick and got chicken pox. Everyone started crying).* However, Anna tried to hide the guilt and thus the just divine punishment for her father's behaviour (*but magically the chicken pox passed and they all lived happily* ever after).

Often in the children of individuals with antisocial behaviour, we find the inner conflict between the need to condemn and the need to justify their parents (*The photographer asked a lot)*, but also the fear that the socially and criminally unlawful behaviour they engage in must entail for them and for the whole family a just punishment from which they cannot escape. The depressive symptoms that often occur in children of prisoners are also due to these feelings of guilt and conflicts that are difficult to overcome.

Adoptive children

The increase in the age of marriage and the age at which children are sought, the excessively free sex lifestyle, hormonal pollution, as well as many other organic factors that affect the fertilising capacities of both men and women, have led to a significant increase in infertile couples. This, together with the desire to help orphaned or abandoned children in institutions, contributes to the promotion of both national and international adoptions. [6]

The reasons for adoption

The needs that prompt a couple to adopt a child are varied.
There can be a desire *for fecundity*, i.e. a desire for a part of us to be transferred and continue in another small human being: 'I would like something of me to be passed on to this child who, even if he or she does not carry my genes, will have in him or her some of my educational models, my memories, my values, my experiences, my culture'.
There can be *pleasure in enjoying motherhood and*

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[6]   In 2010, 4130 children from abroad were adopted. In 2006, 3188 foreign children were granted permission to enter Italy.

fatherhood. It is certainly nice to think of looking after a child, supporting him in difficulties, nurturing all his human potential, to experience with him, alongside difficult situations, also many moments of tenderness and mutual joy. A child in one's arms, therefore, to enjoy affection, joy and understanding with a small human being, who could enrich one's personal and couple's life. A child to strengthen the family union.

Alongside this can be *the need and desire for the gift:* "I am rich. Rich in joy, affection and love. I am rich in material goods, in spiritual goods, in culture, well, I want to share these riches of mine with those who are poor, those who are lonely, those who are sad, those who are abandoned, those who have no affection, no family, no home, no love. I would like to give my support to those who have no one to protect them'.

And yet it is possible to desire and strive for an adopted child despite already having one or more biological children *to give more richness and substance to one's family*: "I already have one child but if I adopt two more, my family will be richer and fuller". "I have a disabled child, there is a risk that the other natural children may also have disabilities, so I prefer to adopt a healthy one".

Other times the motivations are much more trivial and open to criticism, such as wanting to adopt a male child because one already has four females, or adopting a child to be helped with the running of the business, or even adopting a small child when one's other children are already grown up, to experience again the pleasure of the educational relationship.

Often in the field of adoption there is a tendency to distinguish *positive motivations*, which are then those

considered useful and correct, from *negative* ones considered dangerous and wrong, and therefore harmful to the future adoptive relationship. It is our opinion that in the choices we make every day, the value of initial motivation is modest, so modest as to be outweighed by the events that occur along the path of life: especially if it is a life to be spent together with a child. There is no doubt that some futile or objectionable initial motivations are also present in biological parenthood, without often altering or compromising the future parent-child relationship, since many of the initial stimuli have the possibility of being modified over time by the relationship that is established, so that some motivations are abandoned while new ones are added.

The excessive illusions

Excessive illusions, on the other hand, seem to us to be more influential in the causes of the failure of the adoptive relationship. One of these, the most frequent, consists in imagining that the adopted child, having spent months or years in particularly difficult situations of emotional deprivation and/or violence, both physical and psychological, when offered the chance to live in a beautiful, rich home and in a real family, willing to love, respect, care for and educate him or her, craves to place himself or herself happily and gratefully in the arms of the adoptive parents. In such cases, it is underestimated that the deprivation and wounds inflicted on these children are difficult to heal, so that they continue to manifest themselves for a longer or shorter period of time, through symptoms such as aggression, sad-

ness, irritability, instability, which leave even the most solid and mature parent in distress.

If we could read deep into the hearts of these children, we would discover that what is stirring in their souls, what stimulates their thoughts and dreams, is very different from what is consciously and unconsciously present in the adoptive parents' souls. Their inner reality depends very much on their personal history and thus on their age, experiences, memories and frustrations experienced. Ultimately, their inner reality is made of hopes but also of suspicions. It is made of love for others but also hatred towards others. It is made of joys but also of sufferings. It is made of certainties but also of fears.

On the other hand, just as the inner reality stirring in children's hearts can be problematic, so too are the aspirations of parents who want to adopt. Therefore, another of the illusions experienced by adoptive parents is to dream of a family atmosphere in which these children, with their presence, with their smiles, their affection, their caresses, their hugs, will be able to quickly and completely erase any frustration caused by years of failed fertilisation attempts, betrayed hopes and useless, painful interventions carried out by the couple.

The child's relationship with the adoptive parents

At the moment of encounter, the quality of the relationship can be the most varied. *The happiest situation*, but also the least probable, is when a very young child passes, almost without realising it, from the arms of a mother who loved him, cared for him and was able to have a warm and empathetic relationship with him, to a mature, serene family

that is ready and happy to take him in. *The most difficult* is the circumstance in which a child, for different reasons, at the moment of adoption still bears in his or her soul the many painful scars caused by a long stay in one or more institutions or in a family environment marked by sadness, loneliness, degradation and violence. Between these two extremes there are infinite possible relationships.

In some cases, the child carries a deep emptiness in his or her soul as he or she does not know the story of his or her origins. In other cases, the adoptive child still carries in his or her soul the momentary suffering caused by rejection and abandonment. Sometimes adoptive parents are forced to deal with the pain and anger of a child who still needs to cry out his or her anger at the humiliation and physical and psychological trauma suffered. Often these parents are forced to deal with the child's need to find his or her biological parents. It is not uncommon, then, for adoptive parents to be called upon to the difficult task of soothing the disappointment and suffering of minors who have not had the loving mother they are entitled to, together with a serious, mature, responsible and protective father beside them. Worse still, the adoptive family may find itself forced to curb feelings such as anger and distrust towards the entire human race. These feelings are present in children who have lived with irresponsible mothers incapable of love, with selfish, absent or worse violent fathers and/or with adults unworthy of their trust, incapable of dialogue, understanding and love.

However, the situation of adoptive parents is equally varied. These, despite having obtained the decree of adoption, do not always have those qualities a little above the norm that can enable them to cope with new and often

complex situations. They do not always have the flexibility, the balance, the serenity, the ability to listen, dialogue and give. They have not always resolved their inner issues. They are not always supported by a family and social network that can help and support them.

There are then: *easy adoption and difficult or impossible adoption*

Adoption is easier:

❖ when the adoptive parents have other children of their own. These parents, already having good care experiences behind them, have more capabilities and fewer illusions. Moreover, as they do not come to parenthood from stressful and traumatic realities like those who have tried, hoped and struggled for years to have a child without succeeding, they are more willing, serene and accepting;

❖ when the child is very young. In this case, the attachment between the parents and the adopted child is quicker and easier, as the mutual adaptation, a prerequisite for a good understanding, occurs almost spontaneously;

❖ when the child has had in the first years of its life a mother sufficiently capable of entering into a relationship with it. Having had motherly care from the mother or some family member implemented in a physiological and healthy way, constitutes a solid basis for the child to face future difficulties and traumas with more strength and security;

❖ when the feelings of each of the adopting family members are sincere and forthright;

❖ if the adoptive parents do not create too many illusions and their feelings and expectations have been addressed and inwardly clarified;

❖ if there are no ambivalent desires;

❖ when the child to be adopted does not come from sad and frustrating institutional paths;

❖ whether the adoptive parents have good maturity and inner serenity. Serenity that will enable them to live life's joyful moments with joy and with tranquillity, calm, and realistic optimism in the difficult situations that will certainly not be lacking;

❖ if the adoptive parents are able to accept the child for what he or she is and not for what they would like him or her to be. Hence, if adoptive parents, rather than seeing themselves as manipulators of their children's destiny, see themselves as wayfarers who accept, along the road of life, the company of a person who is unknown but whom they want to discover, accepting their potential but also their limitations, aware that every child, adopted or not, is particular and original;

❖ if the adoptive parents are helped and supported by a warm, welcoming and helpful family network and by adequate social and health services in accompanying these special relationships and, at the same time, rea-

dy to face and quickly resolve any possible difficulties that may arise along the way.

Adoption is difficult or impossible:

❖ if the child comes from particularly painful and frustrating emotional paths, and therefore has significant psychological disorders or physical handicaps that are difficult for the adopting couple to manage;

❖ whether adoption is considered by the adopting couple as a last resort to satisfy the pleasure of motherhood and fatherhood;

❖ if deep and persistent motivations linked to an unconscious need to compensate for an experience of impairment of one's femininity or masculinity persist in the adopting couple;

❖ if the child finds himself with particularly anxious or emotionally fragile parents; or on the contrary, is forced to relate to people who are too hard, rigid and cold;

❖ when the family and environmental environment is suspicious and not at all accepting of a child who is different, by skin colour, nation, social class, religious belief; or when this family and environmental environment presents deep fears, linked to the concept of negative moral inheritance;

❖ if the adoptive parents are not fully and deeply convinced that they can become full parents of a child

not procreated directly by them. If they therefore lack confidence in their own possibilities and in those of the child;

❖ when adoptive parents do not have at their disposal social and health services capable of supporting and helping the establishment of an effective relationship.

The experiences of adoptive parents

Some adoptive parents consciously or unconsciously blame themselves unfairly for not having the necessary qualifications to be a good mother or father, as they are unable to solve the psychological problems presented by the child quickly enough, especially if the child manifests his or her suffering through accusations and constant complaining. Hence the self-evaluation but also the depressive feelings.

In other cases, on the contrary, the adoptive parents seem to be aware only of the good they have done to the child by taking him in, and they decisively deny and do not accept that, by their way of behaving towards him, they may do him or have done him harm and thus be partly responsible for his bad behaviour. Hence the accusation that the child is not right, that he is not like others, that he does not have those qualities and abilities that he should have. These parents, therefore, unload their frustration on him through constant reprimands, punishments, and threats such as taking him back to the institution. At the same time, they accuse the institution that helped them with the adoption of having 'cheated and swindled' them by giving them a child who was not perfectly healthy, as described in the report

they were given. On these occasions, they often blame themselves for making wrong choices concerning the agency to which they entrusted themselves, the country of adoption, the child's age, his or her sex, the period in which they decided to start the paperwork to have him or her, and so on.

Other adoptive parents, on the other hand, fear that they have overestimated the joy of having a child compared to the problems involved. They are also convinced that the child will never be able to reciprocate all the love and commitment given to him or her and all the expenses incurred: both for the paperwork and for his or her care and upbringing.

Then there are parents who like to link their son's disturbing behaviour, his 'naughty' attitudes or phrases, his restlessness, his unwillingness to deal with them, to the genes of his parents: 'immoral, characteropathic, mentally ill, delinquent'. "How could the son of a prostitute be any different?" "What to expect from the child of a drunkard father and a mother so reckless as to give birth to a child and then abandon it on the street?"

Other parents attribute their educational difficulties and difficult understanding with their child to the indisputable reality that there is no blood relationship between them. This lack of biological affinity makes them uncertain in their behaviour and attitudes. Faced with the child's demands, they do not know how to adjust. They are afraid of causing frustration to an already tried being, but at the same time, they are also afraid that he might take advantage of their concessions. Therefore, they fear that their child's behaviour may worsen over time.

These and other experiences can also be the cause of conflicts between spouses: "You wanted this child by force and you forced me to adopt. It is your fault that we are in these great difficulties". Or: "You were superficial because you let yourself be convinced to adopt a Ukrainian child when my father had told you several times that a Mexican child was better".

Finally, there are many difficulties in getting the adopted child accepted when one already has other children. Many times it is not enough to talk to them first. Information is not enough, just as their assent is not enough. When we think about starting the adoption procedure, it is essential to pay attention to and evaluate, sincerely, thoroughly, seriously and without prejudice of any kind, the possible psychological impact that the insertion of a new brother or sister will have on the soul and life of the other children. If we assess that this impact will be positive, their contribution and support for the success of the adoption will be true, real and substantial.

The experiences of adopted children

Since educational activity involves the need to give limits, rules but also, when indispensable, punishments, when adopted children feel anger or show aggressive reactions, there is often a fear in them of being ungrateful towards those who are doing them good. This fear can lead to feelings of guilt that are difficult to manage because, although they strive to be good children, they can hardly avoid contrasts, reproaches, but also feelings and confrontational situations. These contrasts can give rise to fears: of not being fully accepted by their new parents, relatives and

family members, schoolmates, because of their origins; of being put off and rejected just as their birth parents or other adoptive families before them have done; of not being able to fit into a world that is very, very different from their own in terms of language, religion, skin colour, customs, culture, etc.; of not being able to accept their new parents, relatives and family members; of not being able to accept their new parents, relatives and schoolmates because of their new origins; of not being able to accept their new parents, relatives and schoolmates.

Other children, on the other hand, remain as if entangled in the emotional ties of the past, whether these ties were real and true or only imagined and dreamt of. Often, in their souls, the face of a good father or mother remains stable and unchanged, whom they cannot and do not want to betray by putting another father and mother in their place, so they deny in their souls that they have been abandoned by these parents. Other times, it is a younger sister or brother for whom they feel somehow responsible. In other cases, the strong bond that remains in their hearts is not with their biological parents but with one or more people in their family or in the institution where they spent some time of their lives, so that, for example, they fear betraying the childminder who cared for them in the institution where they were hospitalised. It is as if the sweet and affectionate eyes of that educator who had cared for them as children, or the arms of the older companion who, in a moment of sadness, had consoled them, or the promises of the older aunt, brother or sister who had solemnly pledged to take care of them, remained in their hearts, acquiring an ever greater significance with time.

These past emotional realities make them feel like momentary guests in their new home. Even though these realities are sometimes objectively vague as ghosts, they make it difficult to establish a true and solid bond with their new parents and family, so much so that they are unable to overcome and drive away the other negative elements caused by the institution. For this reason, these children consciously or unconsciously reject removal and adoption so that, unable to bond with their new parents, they remain as if waiting for a fortuitous event that will bring them back to their previous condition or worse, with their disturbing and restless behaviour, sometimes unconsciously seeking and doing everything they can to be brought back to the bonds and reality of the past.

These and other inner dynamics present in both adoptive parents and adopted children call for the help of expert psychologists or child neuropsychiatrists, whose task is to identify and then resolve the various personal and family problems that are present and active, not only at the time of adoption but also, sometimes for years, throughout the child's life.

Happy and problematic adoption

Happy adoption

A positively and satisfactorily established adoption bears fruit fairly quickly. The child gradually but also quickly learns the local language. After some time, sometimes just a few days, sometimes a few months, he or she already bonds with one or both parents: he or she seeks them out in play, questions them when he or she has doubts, expresses his or her wishes, dreams, worries and aspirations to them clearly. If a girl imitates her mother in

some of her behaviours and occupations. The same happens for boys with regard to their fathers. If big he already makes plans for the future. It also communicates affection and has interest in other relatives and family members. When symptoms of distress are present at the time of adoption, they gradually diminish, although they may reappear at certain moments of crisis.

Similarly, positive signals are immediately noticed on the part of the adoptive family. One or both parents take pleasure in spending time with their child in games, going out, talking or simply cuddling up in front of the TV. In conversations with other relatives and friends, these parents, satisfied with the relationship, tend to emphasise the child's achievements and the positive aspects of his or her character and attitudes, rather than the problems he or she causes or has caused in the couple and family. These parents also, when some difficulty arises, act quickly to solve it without complaining about it to friends and relatives. They think they have been lucky in their choice. Sometimes they fear that, for some bureaucratic reason, their adopted child may be taken away from them and are ready to rebel against this eventuality.

It is easy to see from both the drawing and the story that Iulia's adoption is a happy one.

A good gentleman who knows how to forgive

"One day there was a beautiful day when there was a beautiful sun shining, with clouds all together in the sky. Then there was a tree that bore much fruit, grass that grew fast, and there was grass that grew all at once. There were many swallows that were very big, flowers grew and were of many colours.

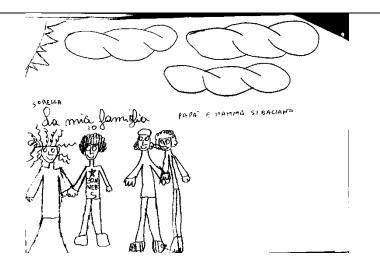*There was a gentleman who gave a lot of water and all the grasses and trees grew.*

Many oranges grew in the tree. Then there was the dog who started stepping on all the grass, he had done his business and ruined all the things. But the man did not reproach him because he was good but the dog was not his. The dog belonged to a little girl who had beaten him up. The master asked her "why?" and she said that she had beaten him because he had ruined the garden. The gentleman scolded the little girl, telling her that the dog

could do that. From that day on, the child kept the dog in the house with her".

The drawing executed by Iulia, an adopted child, is as if divided in two by a blue line. In the upper part, the oversized black birds, the excessively sanguine sun, the many clouds, suggest the tensions and sadness of her past. While the lower part with the tree rising majestically towards the sky, the large flower, the grass and the disproportionate mushroom, hint at his present, which appears substantially better than the past. It is easy to see from the story that the child has found in her present adoptive family someone capable of giving affection. Affection that makes one grow well. (*There was a gentleman who gave lots of water and all the grasses and trees grew).* This gentleman is described as good and capable of understanding destructive behaviour (*Then there was the dog who stepped on all the grass, did his business and ruined all the things. But the lord did not rebuke him because he was good).* A gentleman who was also able to understand the little girl's aggressiveness and her easy irritability (*A little girl had beaten up the dog).* And it is because of this understanding that the little girl, being more serene and secure, is able to change her relationships and is able to contain her aggression *(From that day on the little girl kept the dog at home with her).*

Problematic adoption

An adoption is problematic when it frequently entails considerable suffering for both the parents and the child. In the latter, the symptoms presented at the time of adoption, rather than diminishing, are accentuated. Instability, irritability, withdrawal, distrust in others, and the painful feeling of feeling abandoned grow. These children have difficulty falling asleep; the quantity but also the intensity of fears, or worse, phobias, does not tend to diminish over time but rather becomes accentuated; lacking confidence in their surroundings but also in themselves, they refuse

to learn the language of the country they are in; they do not want to go to school; they have oppositional, irritating, disrespectful and sometimes aggressive and violent behaviour with objects but also with animals, people and the parents themselves. If two siblings have been adopted, they tend to close themselves off in pairs rather than seeking, even with manifestations of jealousy, the love or exclusive attention of one or both parents. The latter, on the other hand, do not fail on many occasions to express their displeasure at the many behaviours judged to be improper, abnormal or simply disturbing, and they complain about it among themselves, with relatives and friends. When adoptive parents consult a neuropsychiatrist, paediatrician or psychologist, all they can find during the interview are disabilities, limitations and problems in the adopted child's characteristics. Since these limitations and problems are judged difficult to overcome or manage, they feel that they are not protagonists in a relationship, however difficult, but unaware and unwitting victims of it. Therefore, rather than advice on the best ways to relate with their child, they ask the specialists for decisive psychological or pharmacological therapies that can quickly resolve the many problems they complain of.

The poor bond that exists between them and their child is also manifested in the behaviour by which the adoptive parents try to diminish their relationship with their child as much as possible: they immediately enrol him or her in school, try to find him or her a 'good home' for the afternoon hours with the help of an after-school teacher, a speech therapist or a psychologist. Or, more simply, they enrol him in a sports club or a music or dance school. In some cases, the rejection becomes clear, so they feel compelled to ask the organisation that assisted them in the adoption for a better, healthier child.

These dynamics presented themselves in Sara, a child adopted together with her sister. In this case the father, but above all the adoptive mother, had failed to establish a good relationship and a solid bond with the two little sisters who, as can be clearly seen in Sara's drawing, were a couple, while they saw their adoptive parents also united in a good relationship (in the drawing they kiss) but distant and deta-ched from them.

Conflicted family environment

"Children are very sensitive to the kind of relationship that exists between the parents: when everything goes well between them, the child is the first to realise it and shows it: in fact he is clearly more at ease and happy; it is also easier to look after him" (Win-nicott, 1973, 113). What happens, however, in a child's soul when the people who should, more than others, give him security and serenity, begin a dispute between them, the results of which are unknown, but the damage inflicted can certainly be felt?

In children, after an initial instinctive state of alarm, comes the need to understand and, if possible, seek solutions to the unpleasant situation into which their family has plunged. However, although children, even at a very young age, are perfectly capable of immediately perceiving the positive or negative characteristics of the environment around them, they have difficulty, on the other hand, in understanding exactly the problems underlying the emotional expressions that surround them and in which they feel involved.

All conflicts, even the most distant ones, awaken in us adults emotions of suffering but also of perplexity and pressing questions: "Who are the contenders?" "Why do they war with each other?" "Who is right?" Who is wrong?" "What can I do to end this strife that causes so much suffering and destruction?" "What tools can I use?" If these are the questions we adults ask ourselves when we hear on the news about a war far away from our country, our land, our home, how much more serious and involving must be the questions, but also the suffering if the war is very close, indeed the conflict is right inside our own home and between our parents, who represent, for the small child, his whole world!

The first question a child might ask is: "Who are the contenders?" It is not as easy as one would think to answer this very simple question. These two people are not strangers who collided in the street with their cars in an unfortunate accident, so, with nerves shaken by the fear of being involved even physically and by the damage done to their cars, they began to quarrel. These two people sought each other out. These two people chose each other out of love. The child has seen their photos many times in their big wedding album. He has seen their faces beaming with joy, he has seen their hands and bodies joined by affectionate gestures. These two people swore mutual help and support. Therefore, the child's misgivings are numerous and serious: 'These two

people swore to love each other always, they swore that they would do everything so that I would be well, not suffer, not be haunted by doubts, uncertainties, fears, anxieties. This is their job, this is their daily commitment. I have heard my father shouting and accusing my mother of being a bad person and my mother accusing my father of being a despot. But can a mother be a no-good and my father, her man, be that violent despot described by my mother?" And again: "They threaten to break up. But what does it mean to break up? They say it is better for each one to go to his own home and on his own way. But this is our home. I have seen how and with what sacrifices they have paid for it. I have seen how and with what love they have furnished it. Isn't their big bed in the room next to mine? And are not that room and that bed my refuge when the ghosts of the night oppress my heart and frighten it? Aren't that room and that bed our favourite playground on Sunday mornings and holidays when, while they lie under the covers cuddled together, my sister and I jump on the mattress and laugh and throw ourselves on top of them and they moan, happy that we crush them?"

Only later do alliances arise. Thus Giancarlo Tirendi[7] sees four stages in the child's behaviour.

1. In the first, the child appears as a mere spectator in front of something that amazes and frightens him, but he cannot yet understand it or know how to behave.

2. In the second stage, the child takes sides and establishes an alliance with the parent who appears to be the victim of the partner. Usually this parent is the mother, as the woman, with more emotionality, through crying and

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[7]   Tirendi Giancarlo, 'Child maltreatment: simple violence or pathology?", Solidarietà, Year IX No. 24, p. 98-99.

moaning manifests her suffering and accusations better and more impetuously.

3. In the third stage, the parent, seen as the victim, obtains the active coalition of the child.

4. In the fourth stage, the child's responses are exploited to the maximum so that the parent seen as the victim has permissive behaviour towards the child in order to make this alliance stable and definitive. On the other hand, the other parent becomes excessively authoritarian as he also perceives the child as an enemy to be fought against. "What is in fact created is what in systemic terms is called triangulation, i.e. a coalition between members belonging to two different generations, against a third "Giancarlo Tirendi"[8] .

Moments of confrontation and conflict within couples, fortunately alternating with moments of understanding, fruitful dialogue, and affectionate exchanges, have always existed. What is astonishing in couples in this historical period is not the presence of conflicts in married life, but the considerable increase in these conflicts, their greater seriousness and the tragic consequences to which they often lead. It is as if in the lives of couples, moments of quiet and calm have become increasingly rare, while those of confrontation, more or less violent, are more and more frequent, almost the norm. These clashes are made up of phrases in which

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[8]   Tirendi Giancarlo, 'Child maltreatment: simple violence or pathology?", Solidarietà, Year IX No. 24, p. 99.

insults, swear words, accusations, reproaches and reprimands dominate.

The causes of marital conflicts

Conflict within the couple, in the Western world, has multiple causes:

1. The increased frequency of adultery.

2. The presence of a consumerist mentality.

3. Excessive differences within the couple.

4. The non-acceptance of gender differences.

5. The choice of partners with personalities unsuitable for family and married life.

6. Living the emotional and love life with excessive and fragile illusions

7. The different social climate

8. The little influence of religions.

9. The deterioration of male and female images.

1. *The increased frequency of adultery*

The mutual fidelity of the couple is largely undervalued in the political and social environment as well as in the family and personal environment. It is played with feelings. It is played with sexuality. It is played with behaviours that imply risks of betra-

yal, without taking into account that this pleasant initial game has deleterious consequences both on the personal level of the spouses, and on the entire family, but above all, it has considerable consequences on the lives of the children. The increased frequency of adultery is also due to the overall deterioration of dialogue within the couple, which has become increasingly rare and difficult, but also increasingly bitter, as it often lacks the indispensable mutual understanding, acceptance and comprehension. Dialogue in which the instinct of predominance of one over the other prevails, rather than acceptance. Dialogue in which one seeks to excel and subjugate the other, rather than valorise them. The notion prevails that within the couple everything can be done and everything can be said because he/she, if he/she loves me, will understand and accept. And this without taking into account the partner's sensitivity.

2. *The presence of a consumerist mentality*

Influenced by the prevailing consumerism that stimulates us to replace and change what does not correspond to our desires of the moment, we are driven to change partners whenever we notice flaws in the other, whenever we feel a clear decrease in the feeling of love, or when we have the feeling that it is possible to have a better one. We are always looking for the 'perfect' relationship and the equally 'perfect' man and woman who will make us live in a state of perpetual love and joy, if not happiness.

3. *Excessive differences within the couple*

Another cause of conflict lies in the presence, within the couple, of very, very different and distant personality characteristics, educational styles, values, sometimes even religion and culture. Without taking into account that the excessive differences in the

way of living and feeling are an obstacle in the thousands of decisions one is forced to make daily in family life.

This kind of choice also stems from the romantic illusion that love overcomes everything, that love makes everything understood and accepted, that love erases differences and diversities. Unfortunately, this is only true if the differences are not numerous and not excessively deep.

4. *The non-acceptance of gender differences*

While one is inclined to accept different culture, character, language in the other, one is not willing to accept gender differences, since 'men and women are the same' and therefore one expects the other to behave and experience the realities of life in the same way as us. One does not accept the different emotionality. One does not accept different ways of living and feeling sexuality, different contents and styles in communication, different ways of expressing interest and love. Differences in living and handling events, different historical perspectives, different ways of approaching educational and work activities are rejected. This pursuit of equality at all costs overshadows the fact that when gender differences are understood and accepted, they are of great help in relationships, child-rearing and family life. If, on the other hand, an attempt is made to deny them, unnecessarily, but also erroneously, seeking uniformity in behaviour and experience, gender differences are the cause of considerable conflict, while the children lose the richness due precisely to their different educational and training contributions.

5. *Choosing partners with personalities not suited to family and couple life*

The personalities and family backgrounds of the bride and groom are crucial to the success of a wedding.

When the personality is altered by psychological problems such as anxiety, depression, easy irritability and aggressiveness, obsessions, distrust, emotional poverty, and difficulties in communication, a considerable increase in marital conflicts is to be expected, along with considerable damage to the children to be born.

6. *Living the emotional and conjugal life with excessive and fragile illusions*

In the area of love relationships, the illusions created by film, TV and novels are many. For example:

- believe that the perfect woman or man exists;

- believe that emotional relationships will remain unchanged over the years;

- believe that the ideal partner exists;

- believing that love is able to make people understand and accept everything;

- believe that the other is always ready to fulfil our every wish and satisfy our every need;

- to believe that out of love for us, the other can distort their character to the point of adapting themselves entirely to us;

- believe that the other has a duty to make us happy;

- believe that sexuality and love are always connected to each other;

- believing that with the beloved one we will always be two persons in one soul;

- believe that the couple is sufficient for itself.

7. *The different social climate*

The different values and social climate in Western societies have a considerable influence on marital conflict. Meanwhile, *the reversibility of choices is* valued positively, and thus as a social value, i.e. the freedom to retrace one's steps when a decision proves to be too binding for a subject who one wants and thinks of as absolutely free in his relations. Therefore, when a situation is not very agreeable, rather than confronting and trying to resolve the causes that determined it, one is more inclined to retrace one's steps by trying to eliminate and cancel it. On the other hand, for today's western societies, all individual, couple and family choices are at the same level (*privatisation of choices).* On the part of the state, therefore, there is no intervention of any kind in individual choices, even when these prove to be considerably deleterious to the individual himself, to minors and to society, as long as they do not involve criminally punishable offences.

8. *The limited influence of religions*

Religion, in all ages and among all peoples, has always had a considerable influence on behaviour and attitudes concerning the family, spousal union, and the use of sexuality. Unfortunately, in this historical period, its influence on the behaviour of indivi-

duals has diminished considerably as States, increasingly secularised, have marginalised religion in the field of emotions and feelings, so that it is no longer able to influence people's lives and individual and collective choices except marginally.

9. *The deterioration of male and female images*

The image of men in the eyes of women and the image of women in the eyes of men has deteriorated considerably in recent decades. Therefore, the value and respect one should have for each other has also greatly deteriorated in recent decades. Ever since so-called 'women's liberation' began, ever since the cultural climate began to legislate and fight for 'gender equality', the image of the male has been systematically deteriorated and debased. Men are portrayed as 'immature', 'bamboozled', 'mama's boys', 'unreliable' in caring for their women, as well as their children; increasingly frustrated and incapable in terms of work, culture, intellect and sexuality. Slaves for millennia to the women they have relegated to the home, tying them to the cooker, the children to care for and the laundry to wash. Violent, rapist men who assault defenceless women who rebel against their domination. Males ready to take on the guise of paedophile ogres ready to abuse innocent little beings.

On the other hand, the accusations against women, although made mostly in silence, are just as violent and disparaging: women with an absolutely unkempt appearance or with excessively sexy and provocative clothes and outfits; women who indulge too easily and then cry in despair and thus women of easy virtue but also stupid; women incapable of managing not just their home but also themselves and thus women ready to enslave the husband or partner who falls into their evil clutches; women ready to sacrifice their dignity, their husbands and children for career advancement; women never satisfied with their men, ready

to complain and whine about everyone and everything; women ready to take advantage of the marriage bond to 'leave the poor man they have snared in their underwear', taking everything from him: money, house, furniture, children, but also his very dignity.

Manifestations of conflict

In situations of conflict between spouses, the emotional tension within the family and the couple is made of frost and fire. Just as the frost of winter strikes the young buds of the tree and freezes them, causing them to wither and rot, preventing the leaves and flowers from opening, in the same way the cold attitude between the parents prevents that sweet warmth within the family that nourishes and makes life blossom, and with life, joy. This state of tension, however, is also fire, similar to that which in the fields burns and turns everything it encounters into ashes: insects and animals, large trees but also young seedlings that have just sprouted from the earth: everything dies in the heat of the flames, everything is exterminated, destroyed and reduced to ashes, without mercy.

The aggressiveness, intolerance and conflict of the couple expand into the environment where they live. For the children it is living in a condition of severe, continuous, unbearable stress. This cannot but have serious repercussions on their well-being and on their emotional and relational life. For Paradis et al. (2009, 290-298), quarrels between parents can damage the mental balance of children, who as adults are more likely to have depressive disorders, excessive use of alcohol and drugs, antisocial behaviour, and difficulties in finding and keeping a job.

How can these little human beings, now grown up, still believe in love, when after only a few years they have seen their parents' union crumble and melt like snow in the sun? How will they be able to believe in the institution of marriage, when it is precisely

within this institution that the tragedy of conflict has been and is being consummated?

The clash and discomfort of spouses then almost always spreads to their families of origin. Despite the fact that many of these make immense efforts to help their children achieve a stable and lasting emotional settlement, they find themselves witnessing, and then inevitably becoming involved in duels of insults and aggressions. Duels in which each tries to hurt and injure the other.

The anxiety and fear that arise from these constant conflicts cannot but be reflected in the souls of the children, who will have considerable difficulty in loving and respecting their parents. Sometimes the children's resentment will spill over to both of them, other times to only one of them. In other cases or at other times, hatred will alternate with love.

On the other hand, not having had a serene family at their side will drive them to seek it, futilely, elsewhere. Unnecessarily, because any relationship established afterwards will never be able to fill the void left by a conflictual family, nor will it be able to extinguish the pain and resentment caused by this condition.

Unfortunately, the same judgement, imbued with hate and love, may also be aimed at oneself, commonly wrongly considered to be the cause of the conflict itself. It is not uncommon to see how many reasons for clashes between parents concern the decisions to be made and the line to be taken in bringing up their children. Therefore, they blame themselves with phrases like these: 'If I had been better, if I had been better, my parents would not have quarrelled with each other'. Other feelings of guilt arise from judgments made on one and the other parent during one's childhood: "Is it fair that on that occasion I misjudged my mother by siding with my father?" And vice versa: "Is it fair that for so ma-

ny years I have defended my mother when, objectively, she has a very bad character, so that she easily upsets and exasperates my father?" Guilt can also arise from being unable to keep mum and dad together by not intervening in their disputes.

Children's fears often concern their own future parenthood: 'Will I be a good father? Will I be a good mother? How can I be sure that with my behaviour and anxiety problems I will not make my children suffer?"

Taking sides

When there is a conflict in a couple, the other people around the two tend to take sides. The choice is sometimes instinctive: 'I, as the young man's mother, certainly cannot take the side of the woman who left him'. At other times it is the litigants themselves who ask, indeed demand, full support against the adversary, so much so that it is viewed with suspicion, almost as if it were another enemy, whoever does not feel like making a biased judgement.

The need to take sides in favour of one or other element of the couple triggers dynamics involving children, other family members and friends. These dynamics often result in the breaking of the ties that sustained the family and affective network, with cascading repercussions on every node of the network. Where there used to be trust, doubt is likely to arise. The person or persons from whom one expected help and comfort risk becoming a source of malaise and insecurity. No one escapes this logic. Neither the children of the conflict couple, nor other family members and friends.

But what does it mean to stand up for a child? It often amounts to branding one of the two parents as iniquitous, accepting all or part of the other's accusations. It means distancing oneself, both

physically and psychologically, from the mother or father deemed guilty. It means forcing a child to also take up arms to defend the parent believed to have been assaulted and, at the same time, trying to punish the alleged aggressor. Only in some cases, with maturity, are some children able to serenely judge what has happened or is happening in their home, before their eyes and within their hearts, avoiding taking sides. On the contrary, especially with maturity, it is easy for both parents to be accused of not having fulfilled a fundamental, precise duty: that of making the family climate serene and peaceful.

Families of origin and friends are not exempt from these alliances. As is natural, these too generally tend, out of solidarity, to see the other and also the other's family as culprits. However, cases are not rare in which the mother or father clearly but also courageously blames their son or daughter for the existing conflict. In any case, as the family unit breaks down, a pathological network of alliances is formed in favour of one or the other. These alliances frequently turn out to be destructive for one and the other.

There can be, especially in the initial phase of the conflict, peacemaking interventions, since, quite rightly, each of the family members, in some way, suffers losses as a result of the ongoing dispute. Unfortunately, however, marital quarrels frequently cause latent or hidden resentments, animosities and jealousies to resurface in family members and relatives, which will tend to manifest themselves, accentuating the fight between the spouses: 'I never liked that man, I was sure he was not right for you. I suspected that he was not a sincere, balanced and principled person, ever since you introduced him to me". "That woman behaved badly from the first day of marriage. I never liked her haughtiness and shamelessness".

Even children, unfortunately, sometimes not only do not commit themselves to peacemaking interventions but tend to accentuate, with their behaviour, the contrasts between the parents, either to punish the parent who with his 'no', with his more rigid decisions has sometimes made them suffer, or with the vain hope that, by eliminating the 'bad' element from their family and life, only the 'good' part will remain. Fortunately, in the family, friendship and children, there are sometimes wiser and more enlightened elements who set in motion the appropriate and useful interventions to reconcile the couple. These are difficult interventions, but when they are implemented, they are often a panacea for the disputants, who are thus forced to regain their parental responsibility.

Eleven-year-old Marco is brought to our observation due to the presence of nightmares, fears, phobias, partial and momentary estrangement from reality, and excessive dependence on the mother figure.

The environment in which this boy lived was strongly influenced, on the one hand, by the characteristics of his parents: the father was described by his wife as nervous, touchy, aggressive, while the mother was described as an insecure, nervous, very emotional, anxious, apprehensive woman, but above all pathologically jealous of her husband. The couple had been in perpetual conflict since the beginning of the marriage precisely because of the woman's jealousy.

We report on two of his stories.

Arguments between parents

Once upon a time there was a family in which they had not yet decided to have a child. When they did, they decided not to fight

any more. But one day they quarrelled and decided to send their son to friends. Later they realised that their son was sick if they quarrelled and decided to talk to him and after they realised this they decided not to quarrel any more and lived happily ever after.

Behind the sentence *'Once upon a time there was a family where they had not yet decided to have a child. When they had, they decided not to quarrel any more'*, Mark's harsh judgement, which is then the same as that shown by all children, towards all parents who quarrel despite having a child, is evident. His disappointment with his parents is evident *(When they had him, they decided not to quarrel any more, but one day they quarrelled and decided to send their son to friends).* As if to say that they had promised themselves not to quarrel out of respect for their son, and also not to make their son experience the consequences of the conflict and instead...His distress (*they realised that their son would be sick if they quarrelled)*; and finally his greatest desire *(they decided not to quarrel any more and lived happily ever after)* are also clearly manifest.

The forest destroyed by fire and then rebuilt

"Once upon a time there was a very beautiful forest, there were many trees and a lake. One day, no one knows why, the forest caught fire. People took refuge in a hut. Thanks to the intervention of the fire brigade, some trees were saved and others were cut down and new trees were planted in their place and, within a year, the forest became beautiful again'.

The boy describes his inner reality, which is closely linked to that of his family, one year and six months after the start of therapy, following which the relationship between his parents had clearly improved. He represents the conflict he suffered as a fire that

burns and destroys everything it encounters (*the forest caught fire*). The boy does not know the reason for what had happened between his parents, but he notices both the destruction and, later, the reconstruction that took place (*thanks to the intervention of the fire brigade, some trees were saved and others were cut down and new trees were planted in their place and within a year the forest became beautiful again*).

The House of the Sun

The comment on the drawing made by seven-year-old Cettina, whose parents often quarrelled, is very explanatory both of her needs that were not being met in her family and of the need to escape from the distressing reality in which she was living.

"Once upon a time there was a sun that spoke to the flowers. He told them beautiful things:
- What are you doing?

- We were playing with the sea and we saw a little boat thrown out of the sea, then we picked it up and took it home to repair it. When it was fine, we all played together: the sun, the flowers, the sea and the little boat.
One day the little boat ran away to the sun's house and then the sun told all his friends. The little boat ran away to the house of the sun because it did not feel well at home. His friends then also went to the house of the sun, locked the door, had a party and they all slept at the house of the sun'.

Our interpretation of this story is again very touching and reveals very deep feelings and thoughts for a child of only seven years old.

"In the vast sea of life there are some people who sail at ease, while others, for various reasons: in this case the conflict between their parents and their mother's personality traits, are severely damaged by the storms to the extent that they are estranged from life (*we have seen a small boat tossed from the sea*). Fortunately, sometimes, some good person (*the flowers*), heals their wounds. The flowers, in fact, tell the sun: *we saw a little boat thrown from the sea, then we picked it up and took it home to repair it.* But the person, despite being better off after what he has suffered in his family and thus in real life, rather than return to confront the serious difficulties in which he has found himself, prefers to flee and take refuge in a warm, bright but unreal world (*One day the little boat ran away to the sun's house and then the sun told all his friends. The little boat ran away to the house of the sun because it was not comfortable at home*).

Naturally, in this unreal world, the child does not want to be alone and takes with her, not her parents, but only those closest to

her (*even her friends then went to the house of the sun),* but from this ideal place she excludes all the rest of the world *(... they locked the door).*

This tale is certainly much more tragic than it appears at first sight. In reality, this child, although she has improved with the help of therapy, does not trust herself at all to relate to a family that is so traumatic for her. Rather, she prefers to voluntarily shut herself away in her own imaginary world.

Disrupted family environment

Reading through the various states' divorce laws, one notices how legislators have been at pains to emphasise that the separation or divorce of parents should in no way adversely affect the children. That is why the judgments handed down by the various courts dealing with divorce cases should, in any case, put the material, social and psychological well-being of the children first. The children's well-being should take precedence over that of the individual spouses. Moreover, in the Italian legislation, in order to prevent the non-cohabiting parent from being for the child a ghost to be seen only for Sunday lunch and then to watch the match together, the new law on separation and divorce tries to focus on bi-parenting, whereby Article 155 of the new text reads: "Even in the event of the personal separation of the parents, the minor child shall have the right to maintain a balanced and continuous relationship with each of them, to receive care, upbringing and education from both of them, and to maintain significant relations with ascendants and relatives of each parental branch."

Since the child desires, demands and needs the affection, presence and education of both natural parents,

through bi-parenting the legislator would like father and mother, even if separated, to harmoniously provide for the upbringing of their children, thereby satisfying their affective and material needs. This is because, as we said before, the welfare of the children should prevail over the needs of the parents involved in the separation.

We do not doubt the sincerity of legislators in enacting laws and of judges in enforcing them. We doubt very much, however, the real consequences that this institution, even using the new law on bi-parenting, has on children and thus on the new generations.

Examining the dynamics present in this sad reality, which is steadily increasing,[9] one immediately realises that the legislator's wishes are more in the realm of wishful thinking than of stark, everyday reality.

The causes of suffering

The reasons for the distress of the children of separated or divorced persons may concern:

1. Conflict between parents.

2. Use of children in conflict.

3. The crisis of previous emotional ties.

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[9] In Italy in 1995, there were 158 separations and 80 divorces per thousand marriages; in 2008, there were 286 separations and 179 divorces per thousand marriages (Istat data).

4. The difficult and complex relationship with new parents, half-siblings and new relatives.

5. The difficult educational relationship.

1. *Conflict between parents*

Separation and divorce often do not diminish the causes of disputes nor do they put an end to the existing conflict between spouses.

For Scaparro and Bernardini (1987, p. 65):

"Separation and divorce procedures in our system today seem to us, regardless of the will of individuals, to be inhuman. Indeed, in many cases, far from reducing conflict between separating or separated parents, they increase it by exposing children to serious forms of abuse and the parents themselves to unbearable anxieties'.

In many cases other reasons for conflict are added to the old ones and the new Italian law on shared custody does not seem to have solved this long-standing problem at all. [10]

❖ The economic conflict

Meanwhile, with separation and divorce comes the economic conflict front. Each of the spouses, backed by their lawyers, will try in every way to obtain from the separation, for their client, the maximum profit with the minimum damage. Not least because there are few families who

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[10] For AMI president Gian Ettore Gassani (Association of Italian Matrimonial Lawyers), 70 per cent of couples even after separation and divorce continue to be in conflict and delegitimise each other.

can afford to maintain the same standard of living as they had previously, when separated.

The conflict over economic conditions may last several decades as, even after the final divorce decree, if the situation has changed, and it is not at all difficult for time to change things, one of the two disputants may request new and different economic measures from the court. This keeps the former spouses in a continuous, exasperating situation of tension that fuels the motives and conditions for mutual aggression.

The other is seen as a leech ready to use all possible expedients to get more and more: 'In order to demand more money he invents a thousand needs and expenses for his children and family'. Or, on the contrary, the other is seen as the miser and the bully who does not concede what he can and what is due to his children and spouse, forcing them into a difficult and miserable life: 'He does not even want to pay the expenses for the braces his son needs! He is just miserable'. "He refuses to participate in the expenses for the rehabilitation gymnastics course to solve Laura's scoliosis problem. In these economically based conflicts, children are also involved, who are often forced to lie about how much they really spend or how much they earn: 'You can do some work but don't tell dad if you don't want him to take away your maintenance. "Tell dad that the guitar course is indispensable to you and that it costs us a lot".

❖ Child custody litigation

With separation and divorce comes child custody litigation. For Vico (1987, p. 29) 'The child often becomes a disputed, divided reality, now an object of exchange, now a

factor of compensation, now a precious loss in the vicious juridical-psychological circle of the game of the parts in which the family system finds itself'. There are a thousand affective and economic reasons for wanting children for oneself as long as possible or, on the contrary, for not wanting them. "If the children stay with me, I am left with at least something from this disastrous marriage: their affection, their presence as well as the maintenance that my ex will have to give me". "If the children stay with me, I can easily manage their financial needs to my advantage".

But opposite desires or needs are also present: "If the child is not with me, I am free to have other friendships, other loves and undertake new and more profitable activities without him/her knowing anything". Even in this case, the disagreement may not end at all with the judge's ruling on who the children are entrusted to and what possibilities the other has to see them and stay with them. It may happen that the parent who has fought hard and made "iron and fire" to have custody of the children for as long as possible, a few months later, because of changed sentimental or work needs or because of a subsequent difficult dialogue and management of the children, demands exactly the opposite: "If when I was alone I was fine with the children being with me every day except Saturdays and Sundays, after meeting Luisa, these conditions are no longer fine with me as they do not allow me to spend the weekends with my new girlfriend".

❖ **The new love relationships**

The other very hot, indeed burning, front that opens up concerns new love relationships. A part of separated or di-

vorced men and women would like to create, after the failure of the first marriage, a new family. A family that has all the merits of the abandoned one without having its faults. The project is certainly desirable and desirable, but it comes up against a thousand difficulties.

It is, meanwhile, laborious to choose a new partner. Given the ease with which the two sexes can meet at numerous parties, discos or through the use of electronic means: Internet, mobile phones, telephone, matrimonial agencies, but also with the frequency of singles' dating venues, the project of getting to know and dating a new partner is not objectively difficult. It is as easy to organise first encounters as it is to conduct sentimental and sexual affairs during the first weeks of the new relationship. The fires of passion, illusions and falling in love are likely to create an enchanting relationship climate. Problems arise later. Problems arise when one wants to transform a romantic and loving relationship into something resembling a family.

As soon as the man and woman start talking and planning something more important than the pleasant moments experienced and enjoyed together, mutual problems jump out, as if from a magician's top hat. "Yes we love each other, but what to do with this love? I am still not divorced." "I still have young children staying with me and I would not want to traumatise them by inserting another foreign presence between us." "I am currently not ready for another union". Or worse: 'Do you still believe in marriage or cohabitation? I no longer believe in it, after what I have had to endure'.

This makes the parents of separated or divorced children remarkably restless, unstable and inconstant. They go from the enthusiasm of the falling in love phase, when new and more exhilarating emotions knock at their heart and body, to deeper sadness and pessimism, often accompanied by irritability and grumpiness

when, for whatever reason, the new love bond becomes difficult, falls apart or fades away.

The personal problems of divorcees, and thus the negative repercussions on children, are also accentuated by the difficulty or impossibility of making the other spouse accept the new love feeling and the new emotional reality. There are few so-called 'open-minded' men and women who manage to be insensitive or unresponsive when they feel that a new person is next to their ex-spouse. Many who a few days before swore that they no longer felt anything for the other person, when they realise that he or she has started a new relationship, feel an intense, irrepressible jealousy, mixed with disappointment and aggression, arise in their souls. These feelings are difficult to manage. It is not psychologically easy to accept that one's ex-spouse will welcome another man or woman into one's marital thalamus. It is not at all easy to think serenely that the latter eats at the same table where, for dozens of years, the family ate its meals, suspecting, among other things, that he/she tastes food bought with money he/she gave to the ex-spouse for his/her maintenance. One does not have to be Sicilian to feel the fierce pangs of jealousy when one suspects or is certain that something like this is happening. This drives those who feel this feeling to particularly irritating, if not clearly aggressive, acts and behaviour, both towards their ex-spouse and towards their new love. An obvious demonstration of this are the vitriolic broadsides against the other boyfriend or girlfriend accompanying the husband or wife.

Even more difficult to accept are the affectionate relations of the ex-spouse when the other is in the guise of one's best friend or friend, immediately available to console the divorced or separated young person.

Given the intense jealousy, the resulting manifestations of anger and aggression are therefore frequent. The way of

manifesting them, however, is different. If the woman tries to slyly hit her ex-husband on the assets he cares most about: on the love of her children, on financial assets, on friendships, the man who tends to turn his hatred, his suffering and his anger into immediate aggressive actions, risks becoming, and more and more often becomes, a vicious murderer: of his own spouse, of the mother-in-law who supports him, and of his ex's new love! The woman, too, sometimes kills her husband, but more often she does so not directly but through other people: her father, her brother, her new lover, just as in a fit of despair or aggression she may kill or injure her children and herself.

❖ Day-to-day management of children

With separation comes the problem of day-to-day management of the children. If these children, for instance, are entrusted to the wife, it is very easy for her to complain that she is not helped at all by her husband. Therefore, she will try in every way to put him at a disadvantage by asking for his help at the most inconvenient times, in order to create havoc, whether at work schedules or romantic encounters. If, on the other hand, the husband tries to involve himself in the management of the child, it is very easy for the wife to see this as an unbearable intrusion and will therefore do everything to prevent too frequent contact between father and son, even accusing the ex-husband of the most infamous behaviour such as violence, abuse or sexual harassment.

2. *Use of children in conflict*

It is not difficult to feel a child's suffering when one or both parents use the child as an improper weapon against the other. And yet this is what frequently happens in separated couples, not least because of the 'progressive inclusion in the course of legal proceedings of a whole series of figures such as lawyers, experts, magistrates and so on, which objectively can lead to the parents literally losing sight of each other and communicating exclusively by means of paperwork' (Scaparro, Bernardini, 1987, p. 66).

Often the child is used as a spy to find out what he or she does, who he or she goes out with, what bad habits he or she has and how much the other person earns, so as to provide his or her lawyer with new legal weapons against the ex-spouse. All it takes is a little information about, for example, alcohol or drug abuse, bad company or the possibility of new income, to start proceedings to change the judge's ruling in one's favour. Even worse can happen: as when children, especially young ones, are used to accuse the other of physical violence or sexual abuse. So as to knock the opponent out completely and definitively.

In other cases the son is used to blackmail the other: 'If you don't send me the maintenance cheque on time I won't let you see your son'. "If you continue to see that nasty woman I will ask the judge not to let you see Francesco any more". The children are also used directly to punish the other: 'She left me and I take her son away from her and go abroad'. "He behaved badly and I turn the child against him, so when he comes to pick him up at weekends, the child will refuse to go and this refusal will humiliate and sadden him". Or even worse: "She has misbehaved I will kill her children before killing me too".

3. *The crisis of previous emotional ties*

Often, with separation or divorce, many of the previous emotional ties that had supported the psychological and maturational development of children go into crisis.

The crisis of the parent-child bond

The bond with one, but sometimes also with both parents is in crisis because, already during the separation or even before, separated parents consciously or unconsciously try to tear or make the children's relationship with the other spouse as evanescent and conflictual as possible. And this for various reasons:

- "He/she must pay in some way for the damage caused by his/her behaviour, infidelity, aggressive or insulting words while we were together".

- "He/she has to pay for what he/she obtained by separation through a good lawyer or a compliant judge".

- "He/she has to pay for the pleasant encounters or new loves he/she indulges in with another woman or man".

This turning against each other results in highly detrimental messages to the children: 'If you love me, if you want to be a good child, try to judge your mother/your father as badly as possible, for what her temper is, for what she did when we were together, but also for how she behaves now'. Even if he/she, following the advice and exhortations of psychologists, family counsellors or people close to them who try to insert a minimum of common sense into the relationship between the two exes, strives to ensure that the image of the father or mother does not fall in the eyes of the children, this type of communication still passes through the

clearly aggressive and livid behaviour and attitudes towards the other spouse.

This gives rise to the internal laceration from which the children of divorce suffer. They are effectively denied the possibility of loving and respecting both parents. They are de facto denied the possibility of a peaceful and constructive dialogue with their mother, but also with their natural father. They are de facto denied the possibility of having from both parents those values, those counsels, those educational attitudes that differ in quality and content, that can only come from a female and maternal figure and from a male and therefore paternal figure.

Children, whatever their behaviour, risk hurting or offending one or the other of their parents. If they choose to love more the person with whom they live more, they feel they are doing a disservice to the other, who is forced to have their company and affection only for a few days or hours of the week and misses it. If, on the contrary, they are more attached to the parent with whom they live less, they feel that they are being unfair to the one who works daily for them, who sacrifices many hours of his or her day for them, who follows them, helps and supports them in times of difficulty, cares for them in times of illness, who is close to them in times of discouragement, pain and disappointment.

The crisis between parents and children is accentuated when the latter have little or no affectionate behaviour or attitudes towards mum and dad. While when the family is united, the parent who at that moment complains about the children's distance or lack of tenderness experiences these episodes with serenity, since they are part of the physiological dynamics within the family group, the separated parent suffers the same attitudes with anguish and feelings of guilt. Feelings of guilt for failing to keep the family unit intact, for all that he could have done for them and did not do, for all that he could have said to them and did not say, for all

the wasted or missed opportunities, for all the time not given to them. Other times guilt is replaced by reactive and aggressive feelings and behaviour. In these cases, the separated parent, with his behaviour, his attitude, his words, reproaches and manifests to the children all his resentment, for not having been understood and helped enough or because they have supported the other parent, whom he considers guilty of the family crisis. This open or hidden hostility often risks alienating the children even more, both psychologically and physically. The latter, when they are old enough to decide for themselves, may refuse all visits and contact, creating a sometimes unbridgeable chasm. A definite negative judgement on parents who have separated is common: 'The greatest violence I suffered was from my parents when they broke up'. So said a young woman in a meeting where violence was discussed. A child often does not care whose fault it is: both parents are accused of not having behaved with the necessary maturity and wisdom, preventing them from living and enjoying, day by day, the serenity and security of a normally united family.

The parent-child relationship often deteriorates when separated or divorced people seek or establish new love ties. These new ties are often experienced by the children with bewilderment and irritation, when they do not bring out clear anger. Children instinctively feel the pathology of a second love and marriage bond because they know, more or less consciously, that there is something in these subsequent relationships that risks bringing them further suffering. "Hasn't Dad, who used to spend so much time with me, become more absent since he met this friend?" "Isn't mum more nervous, irritable and aggressive since she found out that dad has a new girlfriend?" "Didn't dad go berserk and threaten carnage when I told him that mum was going out with a guy whom he even invited to dinner?" Incidentally, in the children's imagination, the sexual relationships of parents are already accepted with great difficulty only with their mother or father;

those with strangers are seen and judged as uncool, if not clearly impudent and dirty.

It is frequently recommended in books dealing with this subject to talk calmly to one's children about this awkward topic, so that they can better accept the new sentimental and sexual situation of mum and dad. There is no doubt that the advice is valid, even if, unfortunately, its practical consequences are minimal since it attempts to rationally modify something that eludes logical reasoning, as children's reactions to such events are linked more to the instinctive motions of the soul than to reason.

The crisis of bonding with other family members

Dialogue and emotional relations with the ex-spouse's family members become much more complicated. Towards these a good friendly or even affectionate bond can only persist if they openly manifest a clear condemnation of their spouse. Otherwise, the feelings towards the ex-spouse's parents and relatives are neither affectionate nor friendly at all. In this respect, the most frequently heard phrases are: 'Are they not the ones who brought him/her up so badly that he/she could not behave well in married life? And then: "Are we sure that his parents and relatives went to great lengths to prevent their son/daughter from behaving in that detrimental way or following a bad path?" And finally: 'Aren't his or her parents the same ones who in the first period of the engagement, but also afterwards, did not agree at all with the choice made by their son or daughter and put me in a bad light in his or her eyes? Therefore, they will certainly have negatively influenced his subsequent behaviour and now rejoice in the separation'. Here again, consciously or unconsciously, the message to the children of

divorce is: 'Try to misjudge these people as well and therefore behave towards them with coldness and animosity'. Or: 'Get away from these relatives because they are part of a world that is hostile to us and is no longer our own'.

4. *The difficult and conflictual confrontation with new parents, half-siblings and relatives*

Conflicts with new parents

Very often the conflicts of children of divorce with their new parents become apparent even before a new bond is formed. Some, if they can, prefer to extricate themselves from the new situation by living alone, rather than with their stepfather or stepmother and stepbrothers. The newcomer, and his or her relatives, are seen as threatening figures, ready to take the real parent away from them, or as thieves eager to steal their affection. In any case, the new boyfriend or girlfriend and their children and relatives are experienced as people who will certainly wreak havoc on a pre-existing balance. Other children of separation or divorce, while apparently remaining in the new family unit, look outside: in the pack, in friends, in peers or in some other adult, for that serenity, continuity and stability that every child yearns for, and this entails the risk of being plagiarised or instrumentalised.

It is even more difficult to accept, without particular trauma, the inclusion of new figures who should replace or add to those the children know and have deeply rooted in their souls. Many times, if the grandparents are willing to take them in, some children ask and obtain to stay with them in order to ensure a minimum of stability, living with people they know and love, rather than face new and difficult relationships.

The reasons or explanations given by parents when they start a new 'story' are often not enough to appease the children's negative feelings, as they understand very well that the world around them is not as it should be. On the one hand, the son would like his father and mother to be united when they are not. He would like there to at least be tolerance and mutual respect but even these attitudes are not present. He would expect that after the suffering and trauma due to the quarrels before and during the separation and divorce, there would be a break of stable serenity, but even this remains an impossible dream. In these situations, children feel pulled into a merry-go-round of negative emotions and feelings that they cannot manage without suffering lacerating wounds. Wounds that, in turn, leave indelible scars on their psyche.

Once again, children are asked to understand and accept something that is difficult for them to understand and accept, as it contrasts strongly with their deepest and truest desires and needs. How can one accept and, if possible, love a woman or a man who until then were perfect strangers, replacing or in addition to their real father or their real mother? If then they are not strangers, it is even worse. How does one accept and love those people who have caused, even if unintentionally, disruption in one's life and existence?

By the way, before the final choice, which often happens very late, these men and women who have dated have, for their children, unclear and defined characteristics. "This person standing next to my father or mother, whom I should respect and with whom I should be nice because he says he loves me, who is he? Is he a friend? A lover? A boyfriend/girlfriend? A new parent? In short, who is he? And what does he want from us and from me in particular?"

It can then happen, and it often does, that even this new 'friend', 'love' or, worse, 'boyfriend', disappears after a short time as if vanished, leaving the children bewildered and perplexed and, in the parent who had deluded themselves, angry, resentful or depressed. These feelings will inevitably spill over into the children's souls. Not to mention the upheaval when new grandparents, uncles and cousins, after suddenly appearing in their lives, just as quickly disappear into thin air.

When the situation then stabilises with a cohabitation or, better still, a new marriage, how can one accept this new companion? It is not easy to perceive, without bitterness or deep rejection, someone who enters a pre-existing family relationship from the outside. Instinctively, but also instigated by the mother or the natural father, children feel and judge those persons as intruders who try to annex a role that is not theirs. Therefore, children tend to exasperate both reproaches and any educational intervention coming from them. The negative feelings of the stepchildren also risk provoking such reactions in those who suffer them that they prevent the new father or mother from assuming the authority and responsibility that are indispensable for managing a true parental role. There follows the bitterness, in these new parents, of doing everything to make themselves loved and being, instead, reciprocated with coldness or worse with outright hostility. Some minors, in order to live next to two stable parental figures who have good emotional relationships, accept and even desire these new ties, but are forced to suffer considerable feelings of guilt towards the other natural parent, as they fear being judged co-responsible for the intrusion of another foreign person into the natural family.

Conflicts and harsh judgements also arise towards the parent who made this choice: "Even if my mother hates Dad, why does she need another man? Was my love for her not enough?" On the other hand, especially stepmothers, if they fail in both roles: of

good mother to their husband's child and good wife, it is easy for them to have negative feelings towards both the child and his father.

Conflicts with half-brothers

If the new bond, whether marriage or cohabitation, is joined by other children from previous unions, the relationship dynamics become even more complicated.

The encounter of minors with different family origins, educational experiences, genetic heritage and surnames, is often remarkably difficult to live with and to manage for minors already suffering from psychological distress, as they come from a family life in which conflicts, misunderstandings and aggressions have deeply marked them. Suddenly finding themselves with unwanted, unwanted half-siblings can only accentuate the normal envy, jealousy and rivalry so common in siblings.

How a son sees his separated family

The mother of Salvatore, a 12-year-old boy, had asked for our intervention because her son had medium-severe psycho-affective disorders manifested as partial and momentary detachment from reality, a tendency to closure, excessive distractibility, poor self-care, emotional lability, and considerable difficulties at school. When we asked Salvatore to tell us about his family he described it in these terms:

'Dad is normal, quiet a bit impulsive: when we have to watch the game he doesn't warn mum but only me. He doesn't phone to make arrangements. Sometimes he gets angry because mum isn't on time. I often stay with Mum's grandparents, they're nice. Mum is a bit of a liar, she tells a lot of lies and Dad gets angry.

I remember little of when mum and dad were together.

With my sister Francesca I quarrel, she teases me and I beat him up. She sings: "Salvatore is dumb!!!"Mum then scolds both of us.

I fight with mum about homework, about school, because we help her little. But I set the table and my sister does nothing.

With the comrades it goes very well, we organise games, they don't tease me.

My father's common-law wife is a bit of a nuisance to me, she always quarrels with Dad, gets angry with me and defends my sister. I almost always go to her. Francesca almost never. Dad gets angry because Francesca almost never goes there'.

In this account of one's own family with separated parents, there is an effective summary of what we have described:

The parents continue to quarrel even when separated *(Dad is normal, quiet, a bit impulsive. Sometimes he gets angry because mum is not punctual. Mum is a bit of a liar, she tells a lot of lies and dad gets angry).*

Children make negative judgements about both parents. In this case especially on the mother *(He does not phone to agree) (Mum is a bit of a liar, she tells a lot of lies and dad gets angry).*

The children only find an oasis of serenity at their grandparents' and in games with their mates. *(I often stay with mum's grandparents, they are nice). (With classmates it's great, we organise games, they don't tease me).*

The suffering experienced turns into aggression between siblings *(With my sister I fight, he teases me and I beat him up. She sings "Salvatore is dumb!!!).*

The child then highlights the difficult relationship with the foster parent *(I fight with mum for homework, for school, because we help her little).*

He does not neglect to note his father's difficult relationship with his new partner *(he always quarrels with Dad).*

Finally, the lack of love and attachment towards the cohabitant on the part of both children is evident *(My father's cohabitant is a bit obnoxious to me. She gets angry with me and defends my sister. I almost always go to her. Francesca almost never. Dad gets angry because Francesca almost never goes).*

5. *The difficult educational relationship*

One of the main consequences is the emergence or worsening of educational problems. For a pedagogical relationship to be effective, certain essential qualities *are* required: *stability, serenity, authority, effective dialogue, clear roles,* and finally *teamwork* between all the adults and children involved. Not only the adults participate in the successful outcome of the educational process, but also the pupil, who must collaborate with equal willingness and commitment.

In the case of separated or worse divorced parents, there is often none of these conditions.

There is no *stability,* because previous relationships are disrupted by court decisions and parental agreements, but also because each of the parents is often busy searching for

and experiencing other friendships, other loves, other passions.

There is no *peace of mind* as the parents, and often also other relatives and friends, are involved in how, when and with what weapons they can harm the other party or how, with what means and instruments they can deprive the other of something he or she cares about, rather than how well to bring up the child. Often, moreover, the increased economic difficulties due to the increased expenses necessary to support two families, as well as the outlays for legal fees, engage the parents in the search for new and more substantial incomes that will allow them to live decently or at least survive.

There is no *authority,* because with their often incongruous and contradictory behaviour, the parental image falls in the eyes of their children.

There is no cooperation on the part of the pupil, since the latter, invested by deep and conflicting relational dynamics, hardly has the serenity necessary to adhere to an educational process proposed by a parent whom he judges selfish, evanescent, contradictory, but also guilty of his own personal discomfort.

There is no teamwork, because if the children have anxious, unstable, aggressive behaviour, they do not find in the restless parents a shore capable of understanding, correcting and directing them appropriately. Often the two spouses compete for the children's affection and attention respectively. If there is any psychological problem this is either denied, to avoid being emotionally involved, or it is aggravated, so as to give the ex-spouse the responsibility for what happens: "Necessarily Luigi behaves like this, as he has a father who satisfies him in everything he asks

when he is with him. Then when I, his mother, have to deny him something, he judges me bad and rebels'. "Francis is capricious because his mother is bringing him up in cotton wool, as she was also brought up by her parents". And again: 'My son has these serious psychological problems because my husband does not restrain himself and makes him witness the effusions he has with his new friend'. "This boy has the capricious, stubborn, selfish character of his father". Since these educational difficulties are accentuated in the adolescent period, it is in this period that the contrasts between the custodial parent and the children explode most virulently, especially if this parent is the mother, since it is more difficult and complex for the woman to manage the education of her adolescent son.

Moreover, *effective dialogue* is often lacking in these situations. This should be calm and constructive. This is difficult for it to happen since, if the child leaves the foster mother at weekends to go to the father's house, the father, rather than engaging in a healthy and respectful dialogue, often forced by the interminable war with the ex-spouse, will try to find out from the child elements that may put the mother in a bad light: 'What is she doing? Who does she go out with? Does she drive you to school?

The mother does the same when the child, having spent Saturday and Sunday with his father, returns to her. "Where have you been? With whom have you been? What was your father doing with that woman who is with him?" The motives of suspicion, mistrust and the search for guilty behaviour or attitudes on the part of the other prevail in the dialogue. Therefore, the parent-child relationship deteriorates rapidly, and very often even permanently.

In the upbringing of children of separated or divorced parents, the lack of linearity and of a *clear educational role* weigh heavi-

ly. The custodial parent, or at any rate the parent with whom the child stays throughout the week, which is usually the mother, has difficulty taking on the dual role of father and mother, male and female, at the same time. In turn, the father, who only sees the child at weekends, is unable to have an authoritative paternal role with him, lest the child become irritated and reject the minimum relationship that has been established between them. For this reason, he puts aside his fundamental task to assume a more comfortable role of 'father - friend and accomplice with whom to go to the stadium or watch the games on TV'.

Moreover, in order to win the love of the disputed child, there is a frequent tendency for both ex-spouses to be more permissive than one would have wished and should be. As a consequence of this, there is a frequent occurrence of capricious and childish behaviour in the children of divorcees.

Psychological consequences on minors

The consequences on minors caused by a broken environment are all the more serious the younger the child is at the time of separation, the greater the degree of conflict and the more irregular and unpredictable the visits of the other parent (De Ajuriaguerra, Marcelli, 1986, p. 374). Among the many consequences are recorded in minors:

1. Psycho-affective disorders.

2. The loss of stability, security and clarity.

3. Lack of trust and greater difficulties in future emotional and love ties.

4. Problems of identity and identification

5. The assumption of early and excessive responsibility.

6. The loss of esteem for his parents.

7. The risk of promiscuity, sexual violence and incest.

1. *Psycho-affective disorders*

Children from separated or divorced families are often affected by anxieties, fears, guilt, depression and other psycho-affective disorders, due to the loss of one or both parents if they are immersed in conflict, offence or defence, rather than in their relationship with the child. The suffering experienced may lead children to incongruous behaviour such as that carried out through the use of drugs or asocial or antisocial attitudes. Moreover, since it is the family that is the privileged place for emotional formation, when the family breaks down, this type of formation is interrupted or altered.

The comparison between children who grow up with a widowed mother compared to those who grow up with a divorced mother is clearly unfavourable for the latter, in whom there is a greater degree of cognitive, emotional and social impairment.

The feelings of guilt that the children of the separated and divorced may suffer from may arise from the knowledge that they have not been able to keep dad and mum together, or worse, that they have been the cause of their quarrels with their incorrect behaviour. Other feelings of guilt may arise from the negative judgments they have formulated in their hearts towards one or both parents: 'Mummy is a no-good, as Daddy says. He, in turn, is lazy and incapable, as Mum says'. The child, furthermore, may experience feelings of guilt that are difficult to overcome due to the reawakening of Oedipal problems because 'seeing the parents

oppose, quarrel, separate, may constitute the realisation of a phantasmatic incestuous desire: to get rid of one of the parents in order to possess the other' (De Ajuriaguerra, Marcelli, 1986, p. 373).

2. *Loss of stability, security and clarity*

If there are elements that children cannot do without, these are *stability, clarity and security.* When these three cornerstones are missing in the environment in which children live, their development, if not regressed, certainly comes to a halt or is impaired. Unfortunately, these three components are often missing in the families of separated and divorced people.

There is a lack of stability because from one moment to the next the children's conditions can change. One can stay with one's mother every day except Saturdays and Sundays, but if the judge changes the separation or divorce decree, the situation can, at any moment, be reversed. Continuous stressful attempts to adapt are then necessary: to a new home, to new siblings, to new friends and family, to a new school, to a different parent, but also to coping with a different boyfriend/girlfriend or cohabiting partner of mum and dad. If this new union then fails, and it is not uncommon for this to happen, there is the risk of once again having to change one's emotional relationships and points of reference.

There is a lack of clarity and security in that, sometimes for years, natural parents, in their search for a person who is right for them and their children, establish more or less long, more or less deep 'stories' with different people presented to their child: sometimes as friends, sometimes as boyfriends, sometimes again as

cohabitees or as someone 'who will be like a new daddy or a new mummy for you'. Friends, boyfriends, cohabitants or new dad and mum, who, however, can at any moment become again hated strangers not even to be greeted, depending on how the love relationship evolves.

The same applies to the children of these, with whom the child is invited to socialise. These may be presented as 'Mario's children to play with' or as 'new little friends or new brothers and sisters', who, however, may at any moment become strangers again, depending on how the relationship with their mother or father develops. The same applies to other family members: grandparents, uncles, cousins, etc. Thus, in reconstructed families, emotional reference points for children often become vague, insecure, imprecise and fluctuating.

3. *Lack of trust and greater difficulties in future emotional and love ties*

If, on the one hand, conflict within couples inevitably results in more separations and divorces, on the other hand, separations and divorces produce in offspring attitudes of suspicion and rejection towards all kinds of stable union. Not only that, but even when this suspicion and rejection have been overcome, when the children of divorced persons decide to enter into a stable union through marriage or cohabitation, it is easy for more marital conflict to arise. The reason is easy to understand: increased suffering in children results in more fragile, immature adults, or adults with clear psychological disorders. These, in turn, will find it more difficult to relate effectively and stably when they decide to form a family.

4. Identity and identification problems

Identity unmistakably characterises each of us as an individual. *Objective identity* is given by what others see in us: not only our face, our character, our way of dressing, but also our family and social position. *Subjective* identity is the totality of our characteristics as we see and describe them. For a correct and constant subjective and objective identity, it is necessary that the points of reference are constant and solid; any alteration or change, whether of the inner or outer world can, therefore, call it into question or alter it.

As far as *identification is concerned,* the scarce presence, disappearance or modification, in a negative sense, of the image of one or both parents can alter or prevent identification with the same-sex parent. For the boy: "Why should I want to be like dad if mum describes him as a despicable and unreliable person, as all men are?" For sissies: "Why should I wish to be a woman like my mother and thus take on her characteristics, if she made the daddy I loved so much suffer and drove him away from me and the family?"

5. *Taking early and excessive responsibility*

The children of separated and divorced people are often forced to take on early responsibilities, as the lone parent frequently has neither the time nor the energy to take care of the family and children. Moreover, this lone parent often finds himself in a precarious economic situation and in constant conflict with his ex-spouse and his family. This parent, deprived of the affective and material support of the friendship and parental network, is forced to juggle between work, lawyers, judges and social workers. When he is also entangled in new demanding love relationships, he cannot fully, effectively and serenely manage his relationship

with his children, so he feels the need to rely on their affection and advice to cope with an uncertain and dark future. This need to involve the children in the responsibilities of the family, pushes him to treat them as if they had maturity and capabilities beyond their age, but also as if they were substitutes for the ex-spouse. This pushes children to assume roles that are not their own and not appropriate to their age and maturity (Lombardo, 1994, pp.94-95).

This behaviour does not stimulate the growth and development of children at all, as is often claimed, because, as he says (Lidz, 1977, p.71):

"Parents can, indeed must, depend on each other, but not on the child - still immature - who needs the security that comes from his or her state of dependence in order to devote all energy to his or her own development. This development can come to a halt if the child has to support its parents emotionally, when it is precisely from them that it must receive security'.

6. *Loss of esteem towards their parents*

We have said that children are often used by their parents as instruments of offence, spying, exchange and blackmail. These behaviours cause children to diminish or totally lose their esteem for their parents, who are no longer perceived as responsible, strong, balanced adults, a source of security, serenity and love, but, on the contrary, as irresponsible, weak, unstable individuals from whom only anxieties, problems and frustrations can be expected. The image that the child has of its parents is the one that the latter transmit to them directly or indirectly. When a mother speaks badly of her husband, she inevitably conveys a negative image of the father to her children. If her remarks then concern men in general, she also conveys a negative image of the male

sex. In turn, however, the child will find it difficult to esteem himself because, as Wolff (1970, p. 137) puts it: '...we ourselves are our parents, esteem and self-confidence depend on our ability to think well of our parents in childhood'.

7. *The risk of promiscuity, sexual violence and incest*

One of the most serious, but fortunately not frequent, risks is the risk of promiscuous behaviour and sexual violence or incest within reconstructed families. These risks are due to the cohabitation of persons not related by blood, who may, among other things, easily already present symptoms of distress or clear psychological disorders.

The prevention of family conflict

1. If the state of conflict and the disintegration of the family unit are considered among the most important and frequent scourges of modern Western societies, as they bring considerable suffering to both adults and minors, the individual, family and social commitment to combat them should be considerable and should concern the behaviour of individuals, families and social institutions.

2. *Commitments of individuals:*

a) As far as individuals are concerned, the choice of a partner should follow predominantly objective canons and not only subjective criteria, mainly linked to the enthusiasm of the falling in love phase. This is because, for a good relational life, certain charac-

teristics such as maturity, wisdom, inner serenity, and psychic equilibrium are important; good dialogue, listening, and reception skills are essential; furthermore, notable capacity and willingness to give love, warmth, and affection to the other must not be lacking. Not to mention the importance of qualities such as seriousness, fidelity, generosity, caring and self-sacrifice. These qualities are indispensable in a stable and long-lasting relationship.

b) During marriage, the spouses' commitment should be aimed at enthusiastically and generously giving the other their love, using the specific contributions linked to their personal and sexual characteristics, rather than always asking for more!

c) It would also be important to consider the family as the best place in which, with joy, care and mutual responsibility, it is possible to educate the new citizens of tomorrow, helping them to develop the best qualities, which are the specific prerogative of the human being, and not just as an institution from which to ask, at all times, pleasure, joy, well-being and happiness.

d) When the inevitable first rifts and conflicts appear, these should be welcomed as a challenge and an opportunity, to better understand not only the limits but also the needs of the other, so as to be able to

accept the former and satisfy the latter, and not as precise signs of the end of a relationship.

e) Since adultery is one of the most frequent causes of conflict within the couple, a conflict that then extends destructively to the families concerned, the task of spouses, their families, and institutions should be the promotion, protection, and enhancement of conjugal union and fidelity as a couple.

f) Lastly, since gender differences and different sexual contributions, if well accepted and exploited, are valuable for full human development, as well as for relationships, these differences should be greatly promoted in the education of children and young people and never, as is the case today, stifled or belittled.

3. *Commitments of families of origin:*

a) The task of families of origin should be to prepare children from childhood onwards, through specific education, to take on particularly complex, delicate and difficult roles, such as those of husband and wife, father and mother. This preparation should have as its objectives the good psychological balance of the children, combined with sufficient maturity and responsibility. For this reason, every family should develop in its children certain fundamental values such as the joy of giving, the pleasure of caring and availability to

others, and the utmost respect for those who, in the future, will be close to them in a common life project. Respect, therefore, for ideas, for diversity, for beliefs, for individual roles, for the needs and requirements of the partner. Education should also develop the empathic attitudes that are indispensable for understanding and listening to the deepest messages and feelings, just as it should develop in the souls of minors the capacity to forgive and apologise when appropriate and to keep commitments made, so as to avoid betraying promises made.

b) Families of origin should also be able to give young people starting a life together not only their material help and time, but also advice and support full of experience, wisdom and maturity.

4. *Commitments of social institutions*

a) These should provide for the formation of stable couples and families that are functional to their affective, educational, care and assistance tasks, though without superimposing themselves on them.

b) Social institutions should protect both minors and adults from the psychological and moral pollution resulting from communication tools that, by widely disseminating highly diseduca-

tive, vulgar and violent ideas, situations and images, succeed in undermining the normal development of the human personality, limiting and rendering futile the educational and training efforts of parents and other educational agencies.

c) It should also be the task of social institutions to protect the marriage contract by all means, and when disharmonies and contrasts within the couple are evident, it should be in the pre-eminent interest of the whole of society, as well as of individuals, to mobilise to address and resolve these negative events as quickly and correctly as possible, using the most appropriate means: individual, couple or family therapy. Rebuilding harmony where there are contrasts, restoring joy where there is pain, reviving peace where war has broken out, should be one of the primary commitments of all parts of society. It does not make sense, as is the case today, for the state and the civil community to watch helplessly as the most important and fundamental human institution - the family - disintegrates, when we know full well, and the daily news dramatically reminds us, that separation and divorce are only pseudo-solutions that not only do not resolve con-

flicts, but exasperate and accentuate them, causing considerable damage to minors and the social fabric. Damage that can reach, as the daily news reminds us, the terrible tragedies of so-called 'feminicide', whereby the death of the woman killed at the hands of the man is followed by the latter's physical death by suicide or his social death due to criminal and moral condemnation. It is also not uncommon in conflictual, broken or dysfunctional families for infanticide to be committed mainly by the woman, who, with this extreme gesture, seeks revenge for abandonment or betrayal, or who thinks she can wipe out all signs of the unfortunate union.

Limitation of damages in separation and divorce cases

Let us now list some measures that should be implemented in separation or divorce situations in order to limit and mitigate psychological damage to children:

- ❖ minimise the grounds for litigation, including through the use of a family mediator;

- ❖ putting their own and their children's well-being first, rather than seeking, by a thousand legal and psychological expedients, the acrid and poisonous pleasure of revenge;

- ❖ reflect on the physical law whereby 'every action is followed by an equal and opposite reaction of equal intensity', so that any harm done to the other spouse, however great or small, will sooner or later cause harm to oneself. In the same way, any attitude of respect, friendship and civilised helpfulness towards another, is likely to be reciprocated sooner or later with equally respectful and friendly behaviour;

- ❖ avoid clearly or insidiously provocative attitudes and behaviour. The aim is not, or should not be, to make the other suffer, but to coexist peacefully, respecting each other, even if one does not live in the same house;

- ❖ not to speak ill of the other spouse in the presence of the children, but, on the contrary, to emphasise in front of them all the positive aspects of the ex-spouse, so that they do not feel hatred, resentment, desire for revenge or revenge in their words and actions;

- ❖ Never seek the child's love at the expense of the child's affection for the other spouse. Therefore, avoid sending your children messages like this: 'If you love me, if you want to be a good son, you should judge your mother/your father as badly as possible';

❖ Since the child is not an object to be possessed because one has the right to it or not to be given away for the same reasons, but a person to be helped to grow up with delicacy, love, tenderness and fair judgement, it is good to favour and not hinder in any way the relationship of the latter with the other spouse. This is because, for a good emotional growth, every child needs both parents. To achieve this, it is important for the mother, or at any rate the custodial parent, to prepare the meetings with the other parent, by means of joyful attitudes, emphasising, as we said before, the positive aspects of the ex-spouse. The latter, in turn, should be able to gently and serenely enter into an educational dialogue with the child, so that authority is combined with games, smiles and affectionate demonstrations of affection;

❖ if parents manage not to be overtly hostile towards each other, it would also be very important to allow the child to experience many festive occasions with both parents: such as birthdays, name days, Christmas, Easter and other important occasions;

❖ Since children are not spies in the service of their parents, they should never be used to find out what he or she does, who he or she goes out with, what bad habits he or she has and how much the other

person earns, so as to provide his or her lawyer with new and more effective legal weapons against the ex-spouse;

❖ Since new love ties are often experienced by children with bewilderment and irritation, if not anger and rage, they should be brought to their knowledge with considerable gradualness, responsibility and delicacy. Therefore, until a second marriage or stable cohabitation is planned, these new friendships or new loves should be experienced by the separated parents in a very discreet and personal way, avoiding early involvement of the offspring;

❖ with regard to dating new half-siblings, this too should only take place when the new marriage or new stable cohabitation is around the corner and not before. This is to avoid early, unnecessary and harmful involvement;

❖ since towards the family members of the ex-spouse: grandparents, uncles, cousins, the child may have established deep and intense emotional ties, it is important that even after the separation these ties continue to be protected and valued.

7 - CHILDREN AND ORGANIC DISEASES

All illnesses are unbearable for both adults and children. For the latter, who love running, jumping, running around the house or the gardens, inventing a thousand games and activities, it is certainly not pleasant to be bedridden from morning to night, just as it is not pleasant to swallow horrible medicines, or to offer one's little bottom to painful, though indispensable, stings. Moreover, there are so many illnesses that not only debilitate children but also cause them a series of remarkably unpleasant symptoms: such as increased temperature, pain, vomiting, diarrhoea and so on. To this must be added that, more and more frequently, due to the fear and anxiety reactions of the reference figures, but also of the doctors, the little ones are forced to be hospitalised in particular places, such as hospitals, which have very different and contrasting characteristics to their homes and families. Places where one is touched and handled by foreign people and hands, where one is forced to eat unusual food. Places where one is in daily contact with the suffering and pain of wounded humanity. Even worse, hospitalisations and post-traumatic illnesses, such as fractures or sprains, which force them into absolute immobility, are badly endured by children. The limits to their autonomy and the unmet need for movement make them nervous and irritable. All this can also lead to regressive symptoms, especially when parents and friends are not close to them and do not provide games and pastimes, also because

'...the younger the child, the less he will be able to understand and rationalise the therapeutic interventions he undergoes. He will always have the tendency to interpret them in an aggressive and primitive sense, and thus they will be a cause of anxiety (Osterrieth, 1965, p. 127).

The psychological consequences of illness are linked to multiple factors that should be taken into account:

- ❖ the severity and characteristics of the general clinical picture;

- ❖ the type of therapies to which the child is subjected;

- ❖ the age of the child;

- ❖ his personality characteristics and thus his greater or lesser emotionality;

- ❖ the emotional responses of family members;

- ❖ the interpersonal and communication skills of medical and nursing staff;

Fortunately, even illness, if well experienced and managed, can be an opportunity for encounters: with parents, relatives and friends. Meetings to begin or continue a dialogue full of warmth and mutual affection. Meetings to experience and live, more intensely and quietly, moments of cuddles and tender effusions. Encounters in which, if well exploited, the sweetness left by the greater physical and emotional closeness with the parents could remain in the child's soul longer than the suffering caused by the illnesses

themselves. Staying in bed and being cared for can, for some children, be a pleasant time, as it is possible to enjoy greater freedom from school and homework, but also to have the possibility of experiencing a greater affectionate dialogue with their family members who, when their child is ill, often tend to be more present, affectionate, close, tender and understanding.

Even when the child is admitted to a clinic or hospital, those days may or may not cause trauma in the child's soul, depending on how the facility and the staff know how to welcome the little patient and his or her parents. The length of hospitalisation is certainly important, and should be as short as possible. There can also be a hospitalisation in a sad and gloomy environment, as many paediatric wards still are, or, as is fortunately the case today in the best hospitals, it is possible to go through this painful experience in an environment rich in human warmth and full of positive stimuli. Since a child's psyche is very sensitive, it takes only a little to bring pain, fear and disquiet to human beings, but it takes just as little to positively change an undoubtedly difficult and painful experience.

The staff, both doctors and nurses who treat the young guests, should keep a few essential rules in mind:

>   1. *There is always some extra therapy or examination that can be avoided* without the child suffering any physical harm. Often in hospitals, but also in general paediatricians' surgeries, there is an exaggeration in the prescription of examinations that appear indispensable in order to fully understand the child's pathology, or to protect

oneself from possible complaints, but which are absolutely useless in terms of the potential interventions to be carried out. Reducing the examinations, but also the therapies to the indispensable minimum, could considerably reduce the child's suffering and the consequences that may result from it. Consequences that, like indelible scars, are likely to remain in the child's psyche, establishing anxieties, fears and other symptoms of suffering that may negatively affect their future life.

2. *Moreover, not all examinations and therapies need to be carried out at the time one decides to perform them.* It is often possible to postpone traumatic interventions to a more adult age when the child's ego is more solid, mature and full of defences. Then, when it is essential to intervene, sometimes all it takes is a few more minutes in the mother's arms, a toy to hold in her arms or a few words of explanation and reassurance, to transform the child's inner experience from negative and frustrating to positive and pleasant. *"It is always astonishing to observe the degree of cooperation that can be obtained from the child during medical treatment when care has been taken to give him the explanations that his age allows and to help him "get his head around*

it", insisting on the nature of the intervention he is to undergo and the benefits that will result from it" (Osterrieth, 1965, p. 127). Many children accompanied well psychologically, remember the gratification of having coped well with the clinical examination, treatment or even intervention, forgetting the discomfort and physical pain associated with these. Unfortunately, it is precisely the most psychologically disturbed and fragile children who are most frequently visited, hospitalised and treated. This is not only because the psychological disturbance causes, in the long run, a decrease in the immune defences and therefore a greater likelihood that the child will fall ill, but also because, since these children have parents and relatives beside them who live with anxiety and fear every reality, even the most trivial, they are forced by them to undergo visits, examinations, therapies and interventions, most often useless or superfluous. In these cases, the doctor's precise duty should be to quell the parents' anxieties, so as to limit their requests for improper interventions as much as possible.

3. *Do not add to the child's anxiety with our own anxiety.* Children live and breathe the atmosphere around them. When this atmosphere is filled with anxiety and worry, every medical and sur-

gical act, even the least traumatic, is dealt with in a painful, stressful and difficult manner. When, on the other hand, the atmosphere that is in the soul of the persons caring for the little patient is serene and confident, the same type of examination, therapy or intervention is much better faced and experienced.

4. *Never make visits, interventions and examinations a surprise.* To prevent the child from crying or protesting about the visit, examination, therapy or intervention to be performed, some parents, with the complicity of the doctors, prefer to intervene without any warning. This frightens the child, but above all causes trust to collapse, both towards the father and mother, who are rightly considered liars, and towards the doctors who will be seen, from then on, as people from whom one can expect anything. In this way distrust is born towards these people and there is the risk that distrust may also be born in life, which is perceived not as a sequence of substantially positive events, in which negative parentheses are inserted, but on the contrary, as an expectation of sudden, inexplicable and unexpected negative events, immersed in a continuum of anxious waiting.

5. *Performing preparatory anaesthesia in the child's room* When it is necessary to perform an operation, it is important to perform the preparatory anaesthesia in the child's room and not in the operating theatre. The child's room with its toys, parents and close loved ones is quite different from the anonymous and sterile operating or pre-operative room. This, too, seems to us to be attention to the child that costs nothing, but which can avoid unnecessary psychological suffering.

6. *Do not deceive the child.* Sometimes our team has received strange proposals and equally strange requests for visits and interventions. These proposals and requests are usually preceded by phone calls of this kind: 'Good morning, doctor, we would like you to help us solve a serious problem we have with our son', and on to explain the problem(s) of the child, '...but please don't let him know anything. We told him that you are a friend of ours whom we would like to visit. You observe him without saying anything, neither to him nor to us, then we will be in touch to know the result of the visit'. Of course we refuse to make such 'visits'. Not only because there are so many tests, trials and observations that we carry out with the cooperation of the child that it

is impossible not to realise that these are not courtesy visits but, above all, because we know how much lies irritate children. These, even if told for good reasons, accentuate their fears and cloak even the simplest and clearest realities in black mystery and doubt. On the other hand, how is it possible to help a child overcome his or her problems without his or her intervention and cooperation and, above all, in an atmosphere of falsehood? Parents who make such proposals often have their own difficulties in facing reality and with this type of behaviour they risk transferring their anxieties and fears to the child.

7. *Avoid the cumulative effect of stress and trauma.* Before adding other possible stresses and traumas, such as an estrangement of the parents, the presence of a new baby brother or sister, or the insertion in the nursery or kindergarten, it is necessary to be certain that the child has well overcome the stresses and traumas due to illnesses and possible interventions that he or she has had to undergo. Otherwise, precisely because of a summative effect, the psychological consequences could be very serious.

Antonio's case is an example of this.

Antonio came to our observation at the age of five, due to major psychological problems, which had been preceded and accompanied by a series of organic illnesses. At two and a half months of age, the child had suffered a convulsion due to hyperthermia that required hospitalisation to ascertain its nature; at nine months of age, he had been forced to undergo surgery for a frenulum of the penis and a hydrocele; the child also suffered from constipation, anal fissures and diffuse hyperemia, for which he had been undergoing various topical and systemic therapies for years. To these numerous problems, after an early and traumatic insertion in a nursery school, were added: socialisation disorders, notable psychomotor instability, regressive symptoms with infantile attitudes, excessive reactivity with aggressive and destructive behaviour if upset, nightmares and a considerable amount of fears: of noise, the sea, ugly people, fireworks, going out alone, confusion at parties with his companions, lively and noisy games, and of leaving his mother.

In this, as in similar cases, the child's greater psychological fragility due to the organic disorders, hospitalisation and therapies that Antonio was forced to undergo, in all likelihood had turned into a much greater psychological distress by the time the parents had decided to place the little one in the nursery.

When we think of services for children, it is natural to imagine something that requires a not inconsiderable social cost to be borne by the state or private individuals, but which will certainly be useful for the child's physical and/or

psychic development. In short, a children's service should help the child in his or her growth: affective, intellectual, motor and social, it should prevent problems in the child, it should cure them, when they arise or when the disease has left after-effects or disabilities. These services should be able to help children regain all or part of their lost or impaired abilities. Fortunately, this happens in many cases and for many services dedicated to children.

Unfortunately, however, this is not always the case. Sometimes, for various reasons, good intentions are not followed by equally good results.

There are several causes:

❖ often a service is proposed to cover the needs of only part of society. For example, a service is proposed to cover the economic needs of the country, or worse the economic or financial needs of a company, without any concern for what is going on in the souls of the people working in that company and the lives of their children. For example, a service is proposed that allows parents to be free to both work or have fun together, but, either when the service is proposed or at a later stage, it is not checked whether that service was useful, useless or worse harmful to children but also to society as a whole;

❖ at other times, services have a very narrow view of people's needs and, therefore, have very limited aims, so they fail to address human reality in

its complexity and globality. For instance, they dwell on studying, exploring and recovering or treating only one or a few aspects of the child's reality, neglecting all the rest. In doing so, they risk offering partial and, therefore, poorly adapted answers. For this reason, it may happen that in trying to resolve a damage or a deficiency, they complicate or worsen the global situation of the child in their care;

❖ in other cases, services, when recruiting staff, pay little attention to the affective-relational qualities of the operators recruited, which can be detrimental to users;

❖ Moreover, since the operators working in these facilities have inalienable rights: the right to holidays; the right to work a certain number of hours; the right to a day off; the right to be absent due to illness and other extraordinary events; the right to change jobs; the services, all services, are not and will never be able to offer the characteristics present in a normal family, such as continuity, stability, constant responsibility, as well as a deep emotional bond. When services claim to do this, they only offer promises that cannot be kept, and thus very often wor-

sen the inner reality of the child entrusted to them;

❖ Moreover, it cannot be denied that many services do all they can to self-sustain their existence, as they are a source of revenue, employment and power. For this reason, driven by motives that are not always noble and altruistic, they tend to enlarge and multiply, or try in every way to occupy spaces that are not their own, regardless of the real needs of their users.

The crèche

One of the services offered to families and children is the crèche. This institution, which is supposed to replace for the child who cannot yet attend nursery school, the walls of his or her home and the physical and psycho-affective care of his or her mother, father or other family members, is increasingly used by single parents, by families where both parents work, but also by those fathers and mothers of young children with mental retardation, autism and other disabling pathologies. These see in the crèche a place richer in cultural, linguistic and educational stimuli than a normal family and, therefore, a greater opportunity offered by public and private institutions for their little ones. [11]

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[11] Forty per cent of the little ones attend day care for 40 - 49 hours per week, 31.2 per cent for 30 - 39 hours and 21.4 per cent for 20 - 29 hours per week.

In recent years, families in which the woman does not work and who do not have problem children are also knocking on the door of these facilities, as they are convinced that the crèche can give more than a normal family.

This is why, on the part of many components of society: families and associations, trade unions and politicians, doctors and administrators, there is a growing demand for more crèches, so as to satisfy the 'need' of every municipality, every neighbourhood, every family and every woman who intends or is forced to 'realise' her work. And it does not matter that these services cost a lot of money. "If they are useful to children, to parents, especially mothers, to the world of work and ultimately to society, these costs must be met. If the money needed is well used, it must be found."

However, we must ask ourselves: How useful is day care for the normal child? How suitable is it for the disabled person? How good and necessary is it for the parents, the working world and society?

If we look at these facilities with superficial eyes, we notice, at least in the best of them, the cleanliness that often reigns supreme, but also the beauty and richness of the walls and rooms in which sometimes the warm, vivid colours of spring, such as yellow and orange, predominate, while in other cases the more soothing and serene tones, such as the blue of the sea or the blue of the sky, are more evident. At the same time, the walls are full of drawings inspired by nature: with bunches of flowers, lush plants or colourful animals and fish. At other times, themes from classic children's fairy tales or favourite TV characters are depicted on the walls, while numerous educational toys are on the floor. All this is intended to send parents a reassuring message about the quality of the service. With regard to

personnel, while the more down-to-earth private crèches, which try in every way to make money and save money, employ staff who are picky and ineffective in caring for minors because they are poorly paid, poorly motivated and inadequately managed, the structures that are more attentive to the well-being of the child are committed to selecting operators who are prepared in the pedagogical, psychological and educational fields. In spite of this, in spite of the richness and pomp, in spite of the preparation of the staff, what calls itself and would like to be a 'nursery', for the child who attends it, is not a nursery.

It is not a nest in which a man cub calls and there is no real mother to answer his call. The good teachers, the well-prepared psychologists present, do not have his mother's eyes, they do not have her body odour, they do not have the same features as her face, they do not have the tenderness of her embrace, they do not have the caressing tone of her voice.

Before entering the nest between him and those professionals, no particular emotional bond with stable characteristics was created. This bond creates and maintains mutual trust. That woman who rushes to his call is not the same one from whom he took milk on the first day of his birth. She is not the same one who was able to banish fears only with her presence, only with her smile, only with her breath, only with the tone of her voice. She is not the same, and she does not know the little secrets that have been structured from the moment he was welcomed into her arms: the secret to make him smile, when his face has become sad and bewildered; the secret to make him calm and reassure, when the storm of anxiety shakes his soul; the secret to make him feed with joy and satisfaction, when

nothing seems to be to his taste; the secret to make him fall asleep happily, when he is afraid to let himself go into the arms of Morpheus. This woman, this girl full of certificates, degrees, specialisations, courses, masters and apprenticeships was not there when, after the first fall in which he hurt himself, his mother took him into her arms and found in a kiss the most suitable medicine to overcome pain and humiliation. That woman, that girl, was not there when his mommy discovered the correct way to hold his body, and the most suitable words to reassure him when he expressed his fear of water. These new women taking care of him do not know that at a certain hour he likes to sleep and woe betide waking him up and woe betide making the slightest noise. They do not know how much serenity he finds in his little room when the light enters through the shutters that have just been raised and kisses him and his cot, nor do they know the trauma of being woken up by the high-pitched and frightened shrieks of other children who, like him, call loudly, incessantly but uselessly for their mother. They do not know that he had learnt one fundamental thing, that when his mother disappears through the door, a louder shriek is enough to make her reappear, as if by magic, to satisfy his hunger, his thirst, his need for cuddles. This woman, or rather these women who exchange with one another, without taking into account the bonds of friendship and love between them and the little ones they care for, all these things, have yet to learn; to her cost.

Above all, his mother does not disappear for days or weeks at a time when she is ill or on holiday. On the contrary, she is even more present to him in these cases, so it is nice to be together in the same bed, as when he was cradled by her breath as a baby. She, his mum, does not disappear

forever from one moment to the next, because she has decided to get married, because she has to prepare for her final exams, because she has found a better job: more rewarding, more convenient, closer to home. She, his mother, stays with him for as long as she wants, no one scolds her for using her time with one child while the others wait for her care. No one calls her out if she lingers to cuddle her little darling rather than do the cleaning. But then what kind of place is this in which his little companions, unlike his older brother, disappear forever or reappear from one moment to the next without him understanding why?

Ultimately, the crèche is not a real crèche because:

1. *The child needs a mother figure.* But this instinctive and basic inner reality, which goes beyond professional training, has not always matured in the minds of the young female nursery staff. Let us bear in mind that any physical care given to the child also has psychological implications for him or her to which one must respond appropriately (Winnicott, 1973, p.14).

2. *The child needs its mother.* Her serenity and inner security are tied to a very specific figure who has her own face, her own smell, her own specific individual characteristic that distinguishes her from all other women.

3. *The child needs a person with whom a bond of mutual love has been established.* For Winnicott (1973, p. 15)

"The way to treat a very young child is beyond conscious thought and intention. It is something that only becomes possible through love. We sometimes say that the small child needs love, but what we mean is that only someone who loves him or her is capable of satisfying his or her needs and graduating the lack of satisfaction according to the development of the child's ability to use it positively'.

This bond of love between the child and the nursery staff is very difficult to establish because the necessary preconditions are lacking, given not only by the blood bond but also by the different responsibilities and roles that exist. The child needs this bond to be stable and never betrayed by long periods of physical distance. The child's past experiences play a vital role in his development and continue to influence him, so it should be ensured, as far as possible, that each child always receives regular care from the same person. Otherwise, anger and rage as well as anxiety and anguish manifest themselves in him. And this is impossible to guarantee for the personal needs and union rights of every worker.

4. *The child needs a mother who has made a journey and a path with him.* A mother with whom he has gained mutual experience and understanding. A mother who grows and learns together with her child. And this is very difficult to achieve with the staff of an institution.

5. *The child needs a main reference figure.* If this figure changes over time, a deep bond cannot be

established. But even when the most favourable factors materialise, whereby this bond and this understanding becomes a reality, they will be bonds and understandings destined to be broken after a few years or a few months, resulting in frustration and grief at such losses. Whereas, while attending this institution, there will be guilt and conflict arising from the difficulty of clearly experiencing different and contrasting roles and realities. If the child attaches himself with a strong and special bond to the 'aunt' in the daycare centre, he betrays his previous bond with his mother. If, on the contrary, the bond with his own mother persists in him, despite the frustration of being removed every day, sometimes for years, from his family environment to be taken to an unknown place, in the company of peers and unknown adults, he will feel that he is doing a disservice to the person in the nursery who looks after him with love and affection, as if she were a real mother.

For Winnicott, (1986, p. 242): 'We recognise that the appropriate group for the young child is his or her family; and we know that it would be a disaster for the young child if an interruption in the continuity of family life were necessary'.

And again the same author:

"For my part, I am convinced that the technical part of caring for the child can be taught and even learned through books, but that the ability to behave like a mother towards her child is entirely personal and that no one is able to take

on this task and perform it as well as the mother herself"
(Winnicott, 1973, p. 144).

Per Wolff (1970, p. 34):

"All these studies indicate that during the very first years of life, children need more than just a stimulating environment and opportunities to discover things and play: they also need a continuous relationship with a person who cares for them like a mother, who knows how to respond to their individual needs and who is able to act as a source of continuity in the experience that children are having.

And again Wolff (1970, p. 36):

"In summary, we can say that between the ages of six months and three years, the child's future emotional and intellectual development depends on the stimulation and affectionate care of people who are familiar with him and who know his specific individual traits and needs (...)the loss of the mother, especially if it is followed by entrustment to an impersonal institution, tends to have long-lasting and perhaps permanent harmful consequences.

Per Osterrieth, (1965, pp. 136-137):

"It must be remembered, however, that the core of childhood life at this age is of the affective family order, and that while the child benefits greatly from regulated activities, in contact with others, his developing personality equally needs solitude, tranquillity, and autonomous activity: 'messing about' in his own little corner with his personal treasures, he makes important discoveries and learns to act without always being motivated or guided by others' (Osterrieth, 1965, p. 28).

For Spiegel (In Aries, 1970, p. 2117):

"We have seen how the emergence of language is integrally linked to the maternal function. The reciprocal rela-

tionship between mother and child is essential not only for learning, but also for the structuring of the latter's personality, which depends to a very large extent on interpersonal communication'.

For Pellegrino and Sentiello (1998, p. 541):

"The current picture is one of a severely atrophied family network, whose younger members spend little time with their parents, are raised by figures outside the family circle, or spend their younger years in more than one family, as divorces lead to the formation of couples in which only one of the adults is the parent of the child with whom he or she lives. This is contrary to traditional theories of developmental and learning psychology, which consider the input provided by parents and their role within the family to be fundamental to children's development'.

In conclusion, we think that this institution, which by its very nature cannot adequately meet the needs of a small child, should only be used for short emergency periods when, for serious contingent reasons, it is not possible for a mother to be permanently close to her child and other options are absolutely not viable: grandparents, other family members, or the stable presence of a reliable nanny with good motherly characteristics.

The crèche and children with physical disabilities

We also see absolutely no point in placing disabled children with organic diseases such as infantile cerebral palsy, mental retardation, epilepsy, speech disorders and so on in a day care centre, as these children with organic problems need three types of needs to be met.

1. The first is to receive more habilitative or rehabilitative stimuli than those offered to normal children.

2. The second is that these children are offered qualitatively better stimuli: more incisive, more graduated, more varied and more interesting than those offered to normal children.

3. The third necessity requires that these stimuli, quantitatively and qualitatively better, be proposed respecting the child's affective-relational needs And therefore wants them to be proposed at the right time, in the right way, in a climate of pleasant play, mutual understanding, intimate dialogue and listening to the child's affective needs. Otherwise, not only will this type of stimulation - no matter whether of an intellectual, cognitive or motor nature - be scarcely effective, but there is also the risk of adding to the organic disability a psychic disability, which would greatly aggravate the child's inner reality and his future possibilities of socialisation and integration both within his family and in his relations with other peers.

These three needs can hardly be met in a facility, such as a day care centre, as not only is there no staff particularly trained in this type of stimulation or rehabilitation activities,

but, above all, there is no suitable environment from an affective-relational point of view.

The crèche and children with psycho-affective problems

With regard to children suffering from psycho-affective problems, which manifest themselves with symptoms such as fears, attention disorders, hyperactivity, aggressiveness, conduct disorders, etc., these children, already tried and affectively traumatised, risk aggravating their condition since the difficult, pathological, poor or absent bond with their parents may worsen due to the additional suffering and frustration caused by being placed in a day care centre. In fact, to the previous negative experiences of not being well understood, accepted, or cared for by his parents or family, one risks adding a new and traumatising experience. For a child who is already tormented by anxieties, fears, conflicts and sadness, being removed from his natural environment, his home, his room and the objects that provide him with a minimum of serenity, in order to be placed, with absolutely no regard for his needs, in an unknown place, with other children and other adults who are just as unknown and who are unable to alleviate his problems, anxieties and fears, takes on a very specific negative meaning. In his eyes and heart, this parental behaviour confirms his feeling that he is not a good, good, desired and worthy of love child. Therefore, the need to remove him from his family may have in his eyes the value of a punishment for his negative thoughts or behaviour as a 'bad' child. Even more problematic is the placement of a child with severe disorders, such as a child with autism or psy-

chotic regression, in a day care centre. For these children in whom anxieties and fears are considerable, while suspicion, mistrust and rejection of the outside world are intense, placement in an unknown place, full of tension, because of the shouting or crying of so many other children, is even more painful and traumatic.

Good early childhood management would have it that, up to the age of three or four, young children without any particular problems should remain with their mothers or fathers, in their own family environment and, therefore, in their own home, with their own toys, surrounded by familiar people, objects and spaces. Only if this were not absolutely possible, as a subordinate to this ideal social and family organisation, could young children be entrusted to grandparents or aunts and uncles. In any case, fostering an affectionate, stable nanny, capable of relating well with the little ones, is certainly a better solution than day care. As we have said, this institution, in our opinion, should remain as a last resort and for a very limited time.

These choices are even more valid with regard to children with organic problems. In these cases, parents, made well aware of their child's problems by a specialist and well trained in the best ways to deal with them, are the most valuable support the child can have. With regard to children with psychological problems, such problems should be diagnosed and clarified by appropriate specialists who, if appropriate, will advise the parents to have a well-qualified figure in their home, for a certain period of time, on relational and psychological problems, who will have the task of helping the parents to better understand and better deal with their child's pathology using the most appropriate approaches and techniques.

The School

Few institutions, like the school, have served to change the course of humanity.

The school is recognised as having four main functions:

1. a cultural function;

2. an educational function;

3. a socialising function;

4. a job preparation function.

1. *Cultural function*

The institution of the school has enabled various societies to have a specific place in which cultural content can be disseminated to a vast number of human beings of all ages, sexes, places, races and social classes, while at the same time research, discovery and appreciation of all kinds of knowledge from the most varied sources are stimulated. In this way, through this well-deserving institution, mass literacy has been achieved, among other things, but also the dissemination of a common language for a large number of new generations and entire populations. This has enabled greater dialogue between peoples with different cultures, languages, customs and habits. By attending school, all citizens: children, young people and the elderly have the opportunity, through textbooks, to meet and engage with the most diverse and varied experiences and knowledge from outstanding scholars, thinkers, poets, writers, musicians and

mathematicians from all parts of the world, every language and every culture.

2. *Educational function*

Alongside this function, the educational dimension should not be underestimated. In the school, children are given the opportunity to meet daily, outside the family environment, other adults capable of listening, dialogue, acceptance, attention and care. The teacher is the culturally rich and welcoming adult with whom the child can exchange ideas and concepts that gradually mature in him or her. For many minors, some teachers who are particularly close and capable of dialogue are also ideal models to be introjected together with the parental figures or in their place, when the latter appear weak, absent or have established poor, conflictual, difficult or painful relationships with the child.

3. *Socialising function*

When the child's centre of interest gradually shifts from the family environment to the peer group, the school allows him or her to live a few hours of the day in a different environment from the family, but one that is sufficiently protected and rich in stimuli for socialisation. At school, minors are given the opportunity to meet a large number of other peers with whom they can exchange thoughts, opinions and with whom they can establish relationships of simple acquaintance, but also, if they wish, of deep friendship. The school group can also represent an educational and pedagogical tool of primary importance, as can the spontaneous group in which the child fits in his or her neighbourhood if, on the part of the school, friendship and deep and stable

bonds between pupils are rightly valued. Unfortunately, the socialising potential of the school is sometimes wasted or compromised when some teachers, in order to always have attentive and collaborative children, 'who do not chatter amongst themselves', tend to break up the groups that spontaneously form rather than encourage them. At other times there is almost a fear that strong bonds of friendship and intense dialogue will be established between two or more pupils, as one would prefer to achieve the ambitious but often impossible goal of everyone being friends with everyone. In order to achieve this goal, there is a continuous rotation among deskmates that prevents or greatly limits the possibility of establishing true and deep friendships, while it only stimulates the habit of superficial casual and trivial relationships. Such relationships have very little impact on the pupil's maturation.

4. ***Job placement preparation***

Through the school it is possible to impart knowledge and experience of a professional nature that is useful, if not indispensable, for future employment.

Possible negative effects of the school

After briefly mentioning the beneficial contributions of the school, we cannot, however, fail to also describe the possible negative consequences on the affective life of minors that occur when this very useful institution lacks the indispensable requisites to fulfil its social function or is not used and managed correctly.

Possible negative consequences in the school environment can occur in various situations.

1. When the recruitment and selection of teaching staff is not optimal.
2. When teaching staff are under undue stress.
3. When this service is abnormally used.
4. When school inclusion occurs early or inadequately.
5. When the time spent in classrooms is excessive.
6. When the physiological rhythms of engagement, leisure and rest are not respected.
7. Whenever the goal of developing a correct gender identity and role is underestimated.
8. When school and educational activities intrude intrusively and as a priority into children's lives.
9. When the class group is faced with problems that are more serious and burdensome than its possibilities.
10. When excessive competition is present.
11. When the school fails to implement an individualised relationship and teaching.

1. ***When the recruitment and selection of personnel is not optimal.***

The requirements of a school should concern not only sufficiently large and bright spaces, functional furniture and adequate teaching aids available to teachers and pupils but, above all, these requirements should concern the characteristics of the teaching and non-teaching staff. Teachers should possess peculiarities very close to those required of a good parent. Therefore, they should be carefully selected, so that only adults who possess good qualities of maturity, emotional stability, kindness, patience, understanding, good

humour and capacity for affection towards the pupils are placed next to the children. Children also expect teachers to have a good psychological preparation, which is indispensable in educational action aimed at preventing and eliminating certain disorders in pupils but also fundamental in normal teaching activity (Bassi, 1969, p. 17). For Bassi (1969, p. 51) "The teacher's aptitude does not therefore only affect the child's scholastic performance, his discipline in the classroom, but also the formation of individual and social modes of behaviour, and therefore the development of his personality".

Teachers with the characteristics described above have the ability to positively influence the psyche of pupils, as they are able to harmoniously balance dialogue and acceptance, respect and tolerance, order and discipline. Many fears and rejections of school and learning activities are often linked to the atmosphere in classrooms. An atmosphere pervaded by anxiety, fear, emotional maladjustment, harsh and severe judgments, and an excessive presence of limits, rules, punishments and restrictions that make life between school desks unlivable is harmful to the child. Equally harmful, however, is a school polluted by excessive permissiveness that creates, within the classroom, disorder, uncontrolled aggressiveness, and little respect for individual needs. This climate nullifies any possibility of learning and makes the hours spent between desks chaotic.

When, as is the case today, selection is made, at best, on cultural qualities alone, as well as on seniority, there is a risk of placing minors, still immature and psychologically fragile, in contact with people whose attitudes and behaviour are not congruous on a relational and educational level, not only will they fail to make adequate educational

contributions, but there is a real risk that they may damage, to a greater or lesser degree, the forming personalities of minors. Teachers, in their educational relationship, are able to convey to learners feelings of joy, courage, serenity, self-confidence, determination, pleasure in relationships, in life and in the world, or, on the contrary, anxiety, restlessness, sadness, melancholy, pessimism, coldness, instability and insecurity. This is not only according to their willingness to choose, but in relation to their personality characteristics.

2. *When teaching staff are under undue stress.*

Teachers, like all workers, can be subjected to excessive stress situations that are difficult to manage. Given the delicacy, complexity and constant psychological commitment required in teaching, these situations can alter the teachers' inner balance for the worse, with consequences on a personal level, on teaching activity but, above all, on the teacher-pupil relationship. The causes of stress may be consequential to the difficult management of a disproportionate number of pupils or to the presence in the classroom of many minors presenting disturbing behaviour and/or clear intellectual or psychic disabilities. Stress can also be caused by delicate relationships with the parents of pupils, relationships that have worsened considerably in recent decades, as have relationships with school leaders. The latter feel caught between two fires: on the one hand they feel the need for discipline and the optimal conduct of teaching activities, on the other they perceive the constant threats from parents, backed by the judiciary and the press, for any intervention that could be interpreted, even if it is not, as repressive or authoritarian.

As a consequence of this continuous tension, in teachers there is an increase in anxiety, depressive stages, headaches, psychosomatic disorders, while there is a deterioration in listening skills, understanding and dialogue. All this cannot but fall on the pupils themselves who may find themselves dealing, day after day, with tired, depressed, unmotivated, irritable and unhelpful teachers.

3. *When this service is abnormally used.*

As far as utilisation is concerned, more and more often in recent decades, this service has been entrusted with tasks that are not within its remit. As a result, the specific educational and training roles have often been confused. For example, it should not be the school's task to entertain minors while their parents are busy at work or in other occupations, just as it is not the school's task to offer minors those primary affective and educational relationships that are the specific prerogative of fathers and mothers. In short, it is not the school's job to take the place of the family or of parents who are not present, distracted or unable to relate adequately with their children.

When this happens, when the school proposes to give society and parents services that are not within its competence and that it is not able to perform, it betrays its purposes, either because it distracts its attention and energy from institutional tasks, or because it offers promises that it cannot keep, since it does not have the characteristics, nor the capabilities of a parent or a normal family. The relationship that is established between teachers and pupils cannot have those specific qualities and those stable emotional bonds of special responsibility that should be present in the relation-

ship with parents and family members. This does not mean that teachers should not take action when they notice educational shortcomings on the part of their pupils' parents or families, but in dealing with families and society as a whole, it must be clear that this commitment is only of partial, momentary support and never has or can have a stable and continuous vicarious function.

4. ***When school inclusion occurs early or inadequately.***

Early inclusion can concern pre-school but also primary and secondary school. Similarly, early inclusion can concern normal and disabled children.

One of the most frequent conditions from which considerable suffering can be caused to children is early or inadequate schooling. For many parents, and unfortunately also for some teachers, there is the mistaken and widespread belief that it is useful to entrust children who are still psychologically young or immature to the socialising function of teachers and classmates. Both parents and teachers underestimate a fundamental component of children's reality that concerns their affective-relational growth. Integration in the school environment requires, as an indispensable prerequisite, that the minor has overcome, in the absence of a mother figure or other family member to act as a support, his or her fear of an unknown environment and of strangers. Overcoming these fears cannot take place in the classrooms of the school, nor can it be entrusted primarily to teachers, but it can and must take place at family level.

For Bassi (1969, p.175):

"Without this socialising action of the family, the development of the child's personality would not be possible and, consequently, so would the experience of the group, which is the new social entity that replaces, not without conflict, the family, in order to further socialise the child. It is, in fact, experimentally proven that the normal child who is well adapted in the family also becomes so in the group. The child who does not manage to integrate into the peer group, who does not fit in at nursery school, is usually a 'difficult' child in the family as well'.

Thus, socialisation outside the family nest is not properly initiated whenever the child's needs for security are forced prematurely. Needs that are only met by the presence and protection of family figures and the home environment.

When these forcings are implemented, not only do we not achieve what is desired but, since the child's inner world is more or less severely disturbed, a whole series of symptoms can manifest themselves: such as fear of school, anxiety, somatisations, sadness, closure. These symptoms make the child's suffering and discomfort evident.

In reality, socialisation occurs in stages, which are closely linked to the nature of human beings. These phases, it should be emphasised, cannot be changed or anticipated, otherwise more or less serious discomfort will appear.

There *is the age of the mother's arms and breast*, when the child only feels secure, serene and protected when it is in constant intimate contact with the body of the mother and then also of the father. This phase is followed by *the age of maternal readiness*, when the child feels reassuring and warm sensations even if the mother, father or caregiver with distinctly maternal and paternal characteristics moves away within the home, but remains available and ready for her

call. Then there is *the nursery age*, when the child accepts in his psychological space with serenity, joy and trust not only his mother and father, but also other family members: grandparents and aunts, whom he knows well and who are very close to his heart.

Finally, around the age of three or four, there is the age *of opening up to the stranger*. At this stage, if the child's evolution has taken place in a physiological manner, he will accept, without trauma, insertion in an environment, such as the nursery school, where he will find himself with children with whom there is no brotherhood and kinship and with adults with whom a solid and individual emotional relationship has not been established. The teacher, or rather often the teachers, each with their own personality, even if they have a motherly attitude, are at the disposal of the whole class group and cannot be exclusively close to each individual pupil.

In kindergarten, as Russo (2007, p. 79) puts it:

"The child is confronted with several difficulties: the stimulating and limiting presence of peers, the new environment, the social functioning model, the acceptance of the plurality and variability of educators, the partial renunciation of established habits, the absence of the affection and protection of family figures. He also finds himself confronted with customs and habits that are different from the familiar ones he was used to and with models that are sometimes conflicting, leading to confusion in the child as to which model to follow or to reject.

There is no doubt that it is only at this age and at this stage that nursery school is useful, as it allows the child to open up to people, such as teachers and other children not bound to him by family and emotional ties, who stimulate

him to bring into play his abilities to establish new and different relationships.

Kindergarten is therefore useful:

❖ When this experience does not occur early;

❖ When a gradual insertion has been arranged;

❖ When good, welcoming teachers are present;

❖ When parents are ready to leave this school if they notice obvious signs of distress in their child such as crying, sadness, difficulty in moving away from the mother's arms; or somatic symptoms such as headache, diarrhoea, abdominal pain and others.

The various stages we have indicated have, however, only an indicative value. Psycho-affective development does not always correspond to chronological age. A child may therefore reach one of the stages we have described earlier or later, depending on the characteristics of his psychological development, which may be more or less delayed or accelerated. The more serene and satisfying the child's early childhood with his mother, father and the parental figures closest to him, the easier it is for him to live serenely with people outside his family environment. Therefore, it is the goodness of this relationship, it is the serenity of the living environment in which the child lived, that will make it possible for him to open his soul, his interest and his constructive attention, even to strangers. On the contrary, the more the child has been neglected, the more the child has been subjected to an insufficiently rich and

gratifying relationship, the more difficulty he will have in gaining higher levels of autonomy, since fears and apprehensions will still linger in his soul whenever he has to or will be forced to leave his home, his parents or even the physical presence of his mother.

In order to make an informed choice, it is therefore not enough to take into account only the child's age and mental age, but we must pay attention to those indicators which, if read correctly, without the influence of our personal, family or work-related desires or needs, make explicit the child's greater or lesser maturity with respect to the possibility or otherwise of putting him or her in nursery school.

Although there are many reasons to believe that early inclusion in school can be harmful to the child, to the extent that it worsens his or her psychological well-being, certain factors tend to provoke parents to make this decision.

The first of these relates to *the misinterpretation of chronological age*: 'If my child is of an age to be accepted in kindergarten, he must be placed in this school. Therefore, if he shows difficulties or outright refusal during this placement, the possible causes will surely be the presence of deficiencies in the class teachers or a capricious behaviour of the child'.

The environmental influence is also decisive: 'If my best friend's or cousin's child who lives across the street started his school career at two to three years old, my child cannot be any less'. "If my first-born child was placed in kindergarten early, so must my second-born child".

Sometimes the environmental influence uses the child's own deficits and difficulties: 'If your child behaves like this: he cries over nothing, he is capricious, he still wants to sleep in your bed, he has feeding difficulties, it is because

he has not yet gone to kindergarten. Send him there and all his tantrums will end, as the teachers will not be as lax as you are'. When things don't go well, so that the child's symptoms of discomfort, rather than lessening, become more acute, the same people, without at all reconsidering the erroneous advice given, are ready to accentuate the child's problems with phrases like this: 'If even the kindergarten hasn't managed to get him over these whims, there's really nothing to be done'. As if to say that the child is so badly made that there is no remedy at all, except for a few more scoldings!

The social environment can also influence parents by pointing out economic reasons: 'You cannot afford to stay at home. To be able to work in peace you have to put your child in the nursery, cry or don't cry, be good or be bad, he will get used to it'.

This concept of habituation, i.e. adaptation, is also expounded by teachers: 'A lot of children cry during the first days of school but then they get used to it and don't cry any more'. In this case, only one of the symptoms of malaise is extrapolated: crying, without taking into account that psychological suffering has a thousand other ways through which it can manifest itself and crying is only one of them.

The most immediate and therefore easiest signals to pick up on, which indicate affective and relational maturity and, therefore, give us a useful indication of a possible successful entry into pre-school, are basically three:

1. a serene, joyful and confident attitude of the child in relationships with himself and with others: parents, grandparents, cousins and classmates;

2. sufficient and ample conquest of both the physical and psychological space around him. We realise this when we notice that the child is not afraid of the dark, that he is not afraid to leave his mother's or father's hand to move from one room to another in the house, that he is able to stay for a few hours, without any particular problems, not only in the home of his grandparents and aunts and uncles, but also accepts, albeit with some hesitation, to remain in the care of the mother of some companion he knows well and with whom he is particularly attached. Moreover, a child is mature enough to enter nursery school when he prefers to stay in his own cot rather than sleep in his parents' bed;

3. the child has conquered and overcome the exclusive relationship with certain objects to which he was particularly attached: for example, his cup, his teddy bear, his jar. Whereas before he could not do without these objects and sought them out almost obsessively, he now also accepts with pleasure those that are offered to him in place of his own.

Early inclusion in primary school

Equally serious and important, we believe, is the problem of integration into primary school. In this one, the child is not only forced to deal with a series of educational activities that require certain prerequisites, but will also ha-

ve to cope with considerably constraining rules and behaviour.

Meanwhile, mental age does not always correspond to chronological age even in perfectly 'normal' children. Therefore, in the same class, there can be 'normal' pupils but with very different intellectual and learning abilities. If we then also consider normal pupils with an I.Q., at the limits of the norm, who under current Italian laws are not entitled to a support teacher, the gap between the same pupils increases considerably.

When this happens, when the child is placed at an early age in an environment that is unsuitable for him and is forced to deal not only with a discipline that is markedly more coercive than the one present in kindergarten, but also with activities such as reading, writing and mathematics that require certain logical-perceptual and visual-motor prerequisites, spatial and visuo-motor prerequisites, he either does not learn what is proposed, suffering day after day the humiliation of not understanding, not knowing, not knowing, or he may even learn to read and write, but the result will not compensate for the effort he will have to make and the humiliation he will have to endure in being considered the outcast of the class.

For (Oliverio Ferraris, 2003, p. 24):

"A child who is committed and animated by the desire to give his best, who would like to count within the class group and have the right recognition feels, in fact, frustrated when faced with his own modest results. And since the child does not know that the advantage of others depends on his age, he may think he is worth less, convince himself that he is not liked by the teachers because of some short-

coming of his, or, even worse, feel marginal to his classmates who hold him in low esteem'.

His psychic distress will manifest itself in attention disorders, restlessness, impatience with school and educational activities, insomnia, psychosomatic disorders, and so on. Therefore, if, as is the case in Italy today, parents are encouraged to enrol their children at five years and six months, the above-mentioned difficulties and problems can only increase considerably.

With regard to the need for order and discipline, children are often forced to remain 'nice and quiet' in their classrooms, sitting in their desks, often for hours, at an age when, especially boys, they need to alternate moments of commitment and attention with others in which play and free motor activity prevail, in the open air as far as possible. These non-physiological conditions can lead, in some of them, to forms of psychic distress, which risk worsening precisely because of interventions aimed at suppressing these symptoms. Indeed, if the child moves too much in his desk or is not careful, he will be scolded, called back or punished. These frustrations will accentuate his malaise that will manifest itself in increased instability, restlessness, poor attention and memorisation. These behaviours, in turn, will lead to an accentuation of reprimands and repressive attitudes on the part of the teachers, but also of the parents, resulting in a worsening of psycho-affective disorders, with a consequent worsening of his behaviour and a marked decrease in his learning abilities.

The inclusion of disabled children

When it comes to the inclusion of *disabled children*, or as we now prefer to call them *differently abled*, in school, the problems become considerably more complicated. Physiology and common sense would like, for example, children with mental retardation to attend the class closest to their mental age and cultural development. This would have the advantage of allowing these children to take an active part in all class activities, so that they would have a considerably greater chance of learning than if the disabled child were only given the few hours of support offered by the support teacher. Moreover, this strategy would allow him or her not to always feel like the last one in the class. On the other hand, this choice would prevent children with mental retardation from remaining affectively close to their classmates of the same age. Therefore, socialisation processes would be compromised. We see the only solution to reconcile the two needs in the use of *open classes*. With this methodology, the child, while remaining inserted in the class to which he belongs, and therefore close to his peers, at certain times of the day would actively and fruitfully participate in activities appropriate to his cultural and intellectual level, which take place in a class within the same institute.

With regard to severely disturbed children, such as children with autism or other generalised developmental disorders, there is no doubt that positive management of these is remarkably difficult if not impossible if one does not agree to break and disrupt normal school practice.

These children have needs diametrically opposed to those that normal school rules would like to impose on them. Because they have very lacerating inner experiences, due to phobias, anxieties, insecurities, tension, extreme sensitivity to any excessive stimulus, restlessness, confusion,

considerable mistrust of others, they are emotionally very fragile, so they can go into crisis even when faced with the slightest frustration: they do not accept making mistakes, they cannot stand being reprimanded, or being told what to do, what not to do and how to behave. Moreover, even the slightest changes easily trigger or accentuate their fears and anxieties.

For these reasons, they require objectives, methodologies and an environment that is significantly different from that found in a normal classroom. As far as goals are concerned, the school, as well as the family, must put in first place for these children not the teaching activities but the improvement of their inner serenity combined with greater confidence in themselves, in others and in the world. The educational objective can only be planned at a later stage, when this particular pupil has overcome his anxieties, his fears, his considerable difficulties in communication and relationships.

In order to achieve greater inner serenity, the school should succeed in creating a particularly muffled, quiet, serene environment around the child with Autistic Disorder, since, for these children who are very sensitive to noise and movement, even a normal classroom environment can be irritating and frightening. For this reason, inclusion in a group of peers can only take place when the child presents a good inner serenity, excellent socialisation and understanding between two and when the child explicitly requests it. Therefore the ideal, at least initially, is to place the child with such problems in a large, bright but quiet and peaceful room, with a single adult caregiver who is particularly available and able to listen. Only later, when the child's inner

serenity has improved, can other adults and peers be gradually placed next to him.

As far as activities are concerned, it will be he himself who will choose from the large number of toys that we will provide him with the one that he wants at that moment and that he considers suitable for his needs. While he will let him, from time to time, choose, invent and lead the favourite game or activity, *(Self-Managed Free Play)*, the teacher's task will be to establish and realise a special relationship: one of trust, esteem and mutual affection. In short, the teacher will be a friendly person capable of listening, committed to giving serenity where there is anxiety, certainty where there is insecurity, trust where there is mistrust, hope where there is disappointment (Tribulato, 2013, pp. 161-164).

"The learning of curricular subjects and the more strictly educational aspect will come later: when he is more serene, when he is more optimistic, when he has more confidence in himself, in others and in the world around him" (Tribulato, 2013, p.164).

5. *When the time spent in classrooms is excessive.*

After the 1960s, the amount of time spent in classrooms increased more and more with the introduction of full time, extended time, the short week, but also because of the various projects organised by the school. At the same time, there were more and more occasions when the school began to take over from the family with the intention of helping them with the homework they could no longer do. First it was lunchtime: "How can a working mother who

has only two hours off come home, prepare lunch for her children and go back to work? To help these families, it is more useful for the child to stay at school and eat together with his or her peers. This will also serve as nutrition education and will help them overcome many tantrums". To this was almost immediately added 'help' with schoolwork: 'Who is there at home in the afternoon, if not an old grandmother, completely ignorant of the didactic subjects that modern pedagogy proposes to its students today? How can this old lady assist and help her grandchildren? It is much better if this support is offered by some teachers during full-time or extended time'. And again for other play activities: 'Now that playgrounds and play areas for children have disappeared, there is a real risk that they will stay at home all afternoon in front of the TV and video games. It is better, much better to activate them with recreational and cultural experiences during full time at school'. Unfortunately, these offers of help to families are in danger of resulting in a de-responsibilisation of the latter and an ever greater distancing of children from their parents and their environment. Just as the possibility of dialogue and exchange during lunchtime is lost, so is the opportunity in the afternoon hours to play, work together or discuss topics of common interest with siblings, friends and family members.

School buses

The municipality, urged on by parents, manages to do even better. "Why force parents to drive their children to school when it is possible to use an excellent school bus service?" In a society, such as ours, in which parent-child relationships are increasingly reduced and limited by work,

play and social needs, a child, especially a small child, would like, and has every right, to be accompanied to school by at least one of his or her parents or by a person affectively attached to him or her, such as a grandparent or grandmother. This function has considerable affective and educational value. In those minutes spent together, while the child struggles with the fear of leaving a familiar and safe environment such as his room, his home, his family, to face a different, difficult and problematic context such as the school environment, he has the opportunity, through contact and the warm and reassuring presence of the parent, to first perceive and then make his own the security and serenity of the latter. Moreover, through dialogue, he has the possibility of communicating to his loved one his new experiences, his new joys and satisfactions, but he can also confide his fears and the difficulties that this new experience brings him. In these cases, the offer and acceptance of a service such as the school bus service, especially for a young child or one at his first school experience, can entail considerable discomfort and suffering, as he finds himself having to face his fears, doubts and difficulties alone, while he is deprived of the precious advice, suggestions, encouragement and clarification of his parents, but also of the physical contact offered by their hand or the kiss given at the moment of separation.

In reality, these 'services' offered to families result in impoverishment for children, for parents, but also for future citizens.

6. *When the physiological rhythms of engagement, leisure and rest are not respected.*

Possible negative effects can occur when school and related educational activities do not respect children's needs for rest, play and leisure. In recent decades, schools have been subjected by society to continuous educational demands, both for increased knowledge and for skills, considered indispensable for future generations to embrace and master the various occupations. This leads to a load of lessons and tasks that are often unsustainable for a child's possibilities. Lesson hours tend to increase, but so do the study hours needed to prepare for daily questions or to pass the various exams. In addition, the need to make maximum use of the time spent by the child at school, but also the fear of accidents that may occur outside the classroom, has led to both a decrease in rest breaks for children and the need to eat a hurried snack in the same desk. This way of dealing with pupils, which is absolutely not physiological for children of a developmental age who have needs for movement, recreation and play, implies not only an increase in instability, irritability and a decrease in attention spans, but also provokes aggressive and dysphoric attitudes, which are not appropriate and useful in a community of minors. Ultimately, rather than releasing repressed tensions through free play, during appropriate breaks in the school activity, it is easy to see an increasing number of children, especially boys, who throughout the lesson time, but especially in the last few hours, often get up from their desks and wander around the classroom or, on the contrary, to avoid reprimands and punishments, they remain dazed, apathetic and as if asleep in their desks. It is evident how this unphysiological way of managing study time and rest time leads not only to a decline in scholastic commitment but also to negative consequences in terms of psychological well-being.

7. ***Whenever the goal of developing a correct gender identity and gender role is underestimated.***

Gender identity is given by the person's experience of himself or herself as male and as female.

When the individual feels a constant, clear-cut awareness of belonging to a specific sexual gender, whereby he can say to himself and to others: 'I am male' or 'I am female', his gender identity is clearly defined. Conversely, when the person, whatever his sexual choices, whatever his anatomical features, cannot place himself in a specific sex, he does not have a clear gender identity. A good, clear gender identity brings security and serenity to the child and then to the adult. On the contrary, an uncertain gender identity can be a cause of malaise and serious discomfort.

Sexual identity is to be distinguished from *sexual role*, which is given by the behaviour that the individual carries out by expressing his characteristics: "I am male and therefore I live and behave as a male in my choices, in my work, in the way I dress, in my love and sexual choices, etc.".

Unfortunately, the commitment to the proper development of gender identity and gender role seems to have disappeared in the curriculum but especially in the classrooms. Since gender identity and gender role are only partly determined by genetic elements and therefore need the fundamental educational contribution of the family and society, both parents and schools, as the place that welcomes new generations at an early age and sets out to educate them, would have a duty to work constantly to help the correct sexual development of minors. Unfortunately, this con-

tribution, at least at present, appears very scarce for various reasons:

- ❖ In the meantime, mixed classes deprived pupils of the opportunity for a prevalent exchange of ideas and experiences within the same genre;

- ❖ Added to this is the presence of equal educational programmes for both boys and girls;

- ❖ The clear predominance of female teachers, not only in pre-school, but also in primary school, is not un-related to this issue.

Under these conditions both sexes are mortified, al-though the greatest damage is felt by male pupils. These are forced to live in an educational environment that is structu-red and run predominantly with feminine modes, characte-ristics and values.

8. ***When school and educational activities intrude intrusively and as a priority into children's li-ves***

The daily life of a child, but also that of a child and young person, should be as varied as possible. During the vigil, moments of study should be interspersed with mo-ments of free play, periods of reflection with periods of en-gagement, moments of reading with moments of listening, occasions of rest alternating with sports or motor activity, and moments dedicated to dialogue, which should be follo-wed by periods of inner silence. When school and related

educational activities become preponderant in children's lives, many of these possible options are greatly reduced or not even discovered. In such cases, the school commitment swallows up every minute, but also every energy of the child, making not only his or her day, but also his or her life and human development monotonous, with a serious loss of his or her global potential.

The notion that school should only be a part of a child's life, for some parents and for many teachers it seems unknown or outright rejected, so much so that dialogue between parents and children, but also between peers, often boils down to almost exclusively school-related topics: 'Did you get quizzed? How much did you get on the last test? Why has your school performance declined over this period? Do you like maths?" And so on.

For some parents, school and learning activities become a cause of anxiety for them and a source of torment for their children. A passing grade is not enough: a good grade is necessary. A good grade is not enough; excellent school performance is necessary. Everything else in the child's life seems to revolve solely around these terms of comparison. In order to prevent the child from being distracted, in quiet times some parents are happy if their child watches TV, "...so he learns something else and stays focused on the homework." Homework that often goes on until late in the evening. The child's relationship with peers is reduced. His options are reduced. His soul and his life atrophy and become sclerotic.

These parents often resent their child 'doing nothing'. They get anxious if they see him lying on the bed thinking and fantasising while looking at the ceiling. When they notice that, at least apparently, he is inactive, they apostrophi-

se him heavily. As if it were a crime to think, fantasise, reflect! The consequences are considerable. The child's personality has difficulty expanding. Not only that, but he begins to believe, as do his parents and teachers, that a person's worth is measured by his success at school; he will think that being good and good means getting good grades; that the greatest misfortunes in life are when a task goes wrong, and so on. Often, performance anxiety, depression, sadness, blaming and devaluation of self grow in these children when something went wrong at school. All the good they can ask of themselves and the world focuses on these issues alone.

Although this is a very common thought today, it remains grossly incorrect. Life rewards those who are richer overall, not those who are better at school. It rewards those who are able to rejoice, think, reflect, discover, try, dialogue, not those who get all nines and tens. It rewards those who are ready and willing to commit themselves to others; those who enjoy reading or music; those who enjoy and defend nature and seek rest and vigour in it. Ultimately, life rewards those who are better able to deal with themselves, with others and with the world around them and not those who answer questions better.

As for the children whose lives revolve solely around school and study, we have seen very little variety in their drawings and stories. Sometimes all their dreams and attention are focused on technological objects, other times on video-games or football games. It is as if the range of their lives has been enormously narrowed, limited and ultimately impoverished.

Vincenzo's case is significant.

A child all study and TV

This nine-year old child with normal intellectual abilities and good school performance came to our observation with numerous psycho-affective disorders: fear of the dark, of the killer doll, of thieves, of the death of his parents and of being alone without protection. He also presented easy susceptibility, low self-esteem and considerable inner tension. His parents engaged and committed him to doing his homework from fifteen to nineteen o'clock. After homework the only other activity he was allowed was to watch some TV. No social life. No friends. No playing with peers.

As a comment on the drawing depicting a child playing football, he said:

"Once upon a time there was a little boy called Luigi who played football. He could play football well. He went to five-a-side football, ate, slept, etc. One day a mouse punctured his ball and he started crying. Later he bought a new one and played football again. Mum had curly black hair and dad had curly black hair. Father was a doctor and mother was a doctor. They were good. Dad would get mad if he shouted and Mum would get mad if he didn't study. He was alone and played alone!"

Although the drawing and its commentary are, at least in part, a projection of his unfulfilled desires since, in reality, the child was not enrolled in five-a-side football and had neither the time nor the opportunity to play football, a whole series of dull, monochrome elements of people and days that are always the same are striking in this tale (*One day a mouse punctured his ball and he started crying. Later he bought a new one and played football again*) (*His mother had curly black hair and his dad had curly black hair*). *(Dad was a doctor and Mom was a doctor).*

Evident is the sense of loneliness in his final sentence (*He was alone and playing alone!*).

9. ***When the class group is faced with problems that are more serious and burdensome than its possibilities.***

The ability of a class to respond appropriately depends on many factors: the psychic balance and ability of the teachers, the number of pupils, the quantity of problems to be addressed. Ultimately, a higher quality and capacity of teachers makes it possible to deal positively with a greater number of pupils, even if there are problematic children among them. Conversely, less capacity and quality in teachers inevitably means less chance of dealing with a greater number of pupils, especially if there are disabled pupils or pupils with psychological problems among them.

10. ***When excessive competition is present.***

Fair competition stimulates interest and motivation and helps to achieve planned learning objectives. When, on the other hand, competition is excessive, a climate of anxiety, tension and confrontation is created among pupils, whereby less able and good pupils risk suffering from feelings of failure and insufficiency.

11. ***When the school fails to implement an individualised relationship and teaching.***

Every child has, by its very nature, particular potentialities and needs as a bearer of different personalities, intellectual abilities, attention, memory and so on. Even if it is

illusory to think that a teacher can make each pupil in the class, which is often large, follow his or her own individualised learning path, a good school and good teachers should be able to give each pupil the necessary attention so that they do not feel and are not treated anonymously. Bruno's account is eloquent in this regard.

A child with a fear of questions

*Once upon a time, there was a little boy named Carlo, who, before being interrogated, was very frightened because he feared that the teacher would put two and two on him if he did not do well. In the morning, Carlo tried hard not to go to school, pretending to feel sick, but he failed! He just had to face the professor. When he (*the professor*) called him to the blackboard, no one understood why he was writing shakily. As soon as the professor told him to draw a parallelogram he managed to do it perfectly. This professor, whom everyone was afraid of, became a friend, because as soon as the lesson was over he took him outside with him and told him to continue like this with good will. The child went on to higher classes and made everyone notice that he was a great little genius.*

Bruno's story highlights very well the 'miracle' that a good teacher can perform with a small, simple gesture.

In this story, a child is greatly frightened of being questioned and is therefore afraid of school (There *was once a little boy who, before being questioned, was very frightened because he feared that the teacher would put two on him if he did not do well*). (*When he called him to the blackboard, nobody understood why he was writing shakily*). This little boy does everything, pretending to be sick, not to go (*In the morning Charles tried hard not to go to school, pretending*

to feel sick). However, despite his terror, it took little for this professor to greatly diminish his fears (*This professor of whom everyone was afraid had become a friend, because as soon as the lesson was over, he took him out with him and told him to carry on with his good will).*

How to escape from school

For some children, school is seen as a situation of torment, from which it is difficult to escape even by going to the North Pole!

Joseph's account is an example of this.

Once upon a time there was a little boy called Francis, he had a sister and a brother. Once he went to school, started doing his homework and got bored. So he hid and never went to school again. So Mum and Dad dragged him to school while he was sleeping. But Francis found an escape route to the North Pole. Santa brought him back to his parents and so back to school. Francis then thinks: this is what life is like. But then he thinks: "Wait, I can catch a disease!". (This ruse did not work either, so...) *One day Francesco took his computer to school so the teachers sent him to kindergarten as a punishment,* (a place this) *where you play, not study. So Francesco is happy.*

Nannies and baby sitters

Often these two terms are used synonymously. But it would be good to distinguish the nanny, who is often a not-so-young woman who lives constantly full-time with the family and in the long run is an integral part of it and follows the progress of all the children in the home, from the hourly nanny, who is often a very young girl who only looks after the children for a few hours of the day in the ab-

sence of the parents. The relationship that is usually established between the child and these two figures is, therefore, different, in that the nanny is more likely to be perceived as a second or vice-mother, who is able to satisfy the requests and needs, not only material but also affective, of the children in a constant and full manner, so the bond that is established with the child is certainly much more intense and involving than with hourly babysitters.

In any case, in order to be able to well select and choose a baby sitter, and even more so for the nanny, it is necessary to have an excellent knowledge of her psychological characteristics, as well as her reliability and her relational and educational skills. Therefore, a single cognitive interview is not enough, but an in-depth investigation carried out in the families where the woman has provided her service is necessary. What is also needed is a direct acquaintance, at least for a few days, with the mother or father of the child, so as to observe on several occasions the way in which this woman manages to relate to her child.

The use of nannies or baby sitters is not without its problems. The most important of these is the emotional bond that is inevitably established between the child and the female figure looking after him or her. A bond that can be very intense if the parents' presence is not sufficiently rich, warm, constant and stable. When it becomes necessary to move away from the nanny or baby sitter, which should in any case be very gradual, this removal risks breaking a relationship perceived by the child as very important, if not unique, and therefore indispensable. This could trigger resentment and anger in the child's soul, both towards this person, by whom he or she may feel abandoned, and towards the parents who have been so 'bad' as to sack him or

her. In order to avoid this, it is indispensable that the dialoguing, warm, serene and helpful presence of the parents is in any case constant and stable, so that the possible presence of nannies or babysitters is in addition to that of the parental figures and never replaces them.

9 - THE ENVIRONMENT OF THE DISABLED CHILD

It is hard to deny that diversity, any kind of diversity, from skin colour to different height or intelligence, to different culture or religion, leads to greater difficulties in the social sphere but also in personal experience. These difficulties increase when a disability is present. Not hearing in a world of the hearing; not walking while others are able to run; not seeing when our houses, streets and cities were built for the sighted; not understanding and not learning while others understand and know; these are all difficult and often distressing conditions. However, the real degree of suffering that a child is forced to undergo in these situations depends very much on the family and social environment in which he or she lives.

The environment of a child with organic disorders: mental retardation, infantile cerebral palsy, neuromuscular diseases, epilepsy, deafness, blindness, is not substantially different, at least in the initial phase, from the environment in which normal children live. Therefore, from a psychological point of view, in his environment there may be mature or immature, calm or anxious, joyful or sad parents. Since there is considerable variability in the personalities of these parents, their behaviour will also vary greatly when they have to cope with the management of a child with a disability of some kind.

Some will be able to face life and events with optimism, others with pessimism. Some will have good skills in controlling their emotions, guilt, doubts and anxieties, so they will be able to make good choices, while others, in the grip of anxiety, indecision or confusion, will find it difficult to choose the most appropriate people and then to follow

the directions given.

When a disabled child has the good fortune to have parents and a well-balanced family by his side, full of serenity, open to optimism, able to realise the problems without exacerbating their consequences, a family willing to commit itself, without being overwhelmed by the emotions that disability suggests such as anxiety, anguish, disappointment, even the most serious handicap will be experienced by the disabled child with few negative psychological repercussions. This is because this child's soul will tend to mirror the environment full of light, warmth, togetherness and hope that he or she finds beside and around them. Likewise, other normal children will not suffer excessively from the presence of a 'different' sibling, since they will be able to enjoy the active and serene presence of their parents. From this difficult experience, this family type will easily succeed in acquiring a better tolerance and sensitivity to diversity, a greater tendency to solidarise with people on the margins of society, less consumerism, an appreciation of the essential gifts that life offers, a greater bond between spouses, a more intense religious faith, a greater capacity to listen (Croce, 2002, pp. 100-101).

When, on the other hand, parents fail to live this difficult experience well, there is a risk that the whole family suffers. In cases where an attitude of flight from reality and denial of the disability is present, not realising the limitations of the disabled child leads these parents to neglect and fail to understand the child's real problems, so that his or her problems and limitations are not recognised and properly addressed. In the opposite case, when the disabled child's problems are accentuated and exacerbated, the whole family becomes wracked with anxiety, despondency and signs

of sadness, if not depression. Some parents, because of their personal problems, experience their disabled child as shame, embarrassment, a sense of dishonour or as mourning, since they dreamt and fantasised about a healthy and beautiful child. Others experience the disabled child as an offence to their feelings and personal worth, whereby their own procreative capacity is put at stake: 'I was not capable of procreating a healthy child'. Still others blame themselves for what they did or did not do in terms of care, attention or prevention of the problem: "Just as I am a failure at work I am also a failure as a father. I was not able to protect my son sufficiently so that he did not fall ill'. "I deserve this disgrace since I have been too superficial and butterfly-like in my life". "If I had not only thought about work, I would not have had this serious problem. I will never forgive myself. "I should not have taken that trip and left my wife alone with the child. If I had been there, what happened would not have happened". "We should have done those tests that were recommended to us and instead we were superficial". The feelings of guilt, although only in some cases they are justified, while in many others they are not justified at all, stimulate them to have overprotective attitudes.

It is also not uncommon for a disabled child to bring or exacerbate conflicts between parents or within the family network: 'It's your fault. You shouldn't have scrambled like that". "You were reckless to continue working". Again, the accusations may or may not be unfair and gratuitous, but in any case it is much more helpful for the child to see his parents united and supportive in dealing with his problem than to live with and suffer not only from his disability but also from conflicts within his family.

When children suffer from psychological problems, it is often the child who is unfairly blamed. He is the one who is not good and good enough to make parents, grandparents and even teachers despair. He is the one who makes mum and dad squabble. He is the one who forces his parents to undergo expensive and useless examinations and therapies, because it is inside his capricious and bad heart that the problems lodge and therefore no one: neither his parents nor the doctors can do anything. In these cases 'the evil' is not something that has attacked the child but 'the evil is the child'. Other times the other children are blamed, who 'do not realise the difficult family situation, do not understand, do not help, continue to throw tantrums as before'.

Frequently the family environment is shaken by anger, rage and invective against facilities and doctors or therapists accused of neglect, cynicism, superficiality. With regard to the relationship with the other children, there is a risk that the attention and suffering focused on the disabled child does not make the parents aware of the needs and requirements of the other family members.

Ultimately, when any disability or psychological problem is highlighted or diagnosed, if the parents and family members fall prey to anxiety, guilt, depression, or start that game of massacre that leads them to accuse each other, or worse, accuse the child and take out on him or her the aggressiveness, pain, and anguish that grips them, the whole family structure is in danger of faltering and suffering. On the contrary, if the child's problem, whatever it may be, is dealt with calmly and in a balanced manner, the chances of overcoming it are considerably greater.

The characteristics of the family network

Equally important are the characteristics of the family network. When this is well present, active, extensive, vital and available, it will certainly be able to give parents the material and emotional help and support they need to cope in the best way possible with even the most difficult and painful problems. On the contrary, if this network is very reduced or absent, as unfortunately often happens today, or if it is present, but selfishly closes itself off from the problems of the family in which there is a disabled child, or is too busy and distracted by a thousand other occupations, both the child and his or her family will lack precious support. In this case, the parents will be forced to rely only on their own strengths and on the help of outside helpers; help that will not always be adequate to the child's needs, since it is difficult to establish between these helpers and the child the affective and loving bond that the family network could have offered.

The typology of services in the area

The presence or absence of a socio-medical, psychological and educational system capable of offering qualified help and adequate support to the parents and family members of a disabled child is fundamental. Sometimes, however, these services are lacking or are not well distributed throughout the territory, because they are concentrated in large cities, while they are absent in small towns. At other times, the services are present, but their effectiveness is minimal because their management and staffing is inadequate. However, there is also another problem common to many services, which is worth mentioning.

We could call it *the problem of improper supply*. Often, the services are only intended to keep the service itself running, as well as making it necessary to employ a certain number of staff, but in reality, what is made available is either not useful or could very well be performed much better by the family of the disabled child.

One would say that 'giving something more is always better than giving something less'. In reality, this is not the case. Especially in the psychological field, deluding parents that what they do not give or give badly can be given by others, not only does not solve the problem but accentuates it, as the child clearly feels that he is being abandoned by his family, to be entrusted to other people he does not need and does not love. In such cases, his suffering increases, as does his aggression and resentment towards his father and mother who continue to disregard him by entrusting him to foreign hands and hearts.

The characteristics of the operators encountered

When speaking of care and health workers, one cannot help but accept the indisputable fact that the personality characteristics and preparation of these workers vary considerably. While there are undoubtedly well-prepared operators who are also sensitive, attentive and helpful, and who know how to welcome and address the requests and needs of families and children with disabilities, it is not always possible to obtain the necessary and appropriate help for the needs of the child and his or her family. This is mainly due to the lack of the aptitude and professional selection that should enable the services to offer a good standard of quality. Frequently, very delicate and difficult professions are

entered by people who are not only poorly prepared professionally, but also have personality traits that are poorly suited to a job as complex and delicate as the one to which they are assigned.

It is not the number of staff employed, nor the qualifications, that guarantee good care! It can and does happen to meet operators who are not only unable to understand the needs of the child and his or her family but, in attempting to deal with it in a clumsy manner, risk aggravating the problem rather than solving or alleviating it, thus causing the parents and the child more distress.

Particular attention should be paid by the operators to the parents of children with psycho-affective disorders because, very often, these problematic children have equally problematic parents beside them. In these cases, even more so than in other types of disability, the operators' task will be to take charge of the whole family and not just the child who manifests problems, helping the whole family to reorganise itself, to better cope with the difficulties present in the family system, so as to offer the child a suitable environment for his or her development.

The presence of electronic instruments has become invasive in recent years. These tools can be found in almost every room of the house, including children's rooms. In these, along with the normal toys, it is not uncommon to see a plasma TV towering, with an Internet-connected computer, a tablet and one or more video-game consoles next to it. Other smaller, but high-performance electronic devices can be found in their backpacks and pockets. Many of these devices are bought by parents, grandparents or uncles as spontaneous and important gifts for their little ones. Others have been insistently requested by the children themselves, after noticing them in the hands or rooms of their companions. In these cases, parents, in order to please their children, and to prevent them from feeling handicapped in comparison with their peers, feel obliged to give them as gifts.

On the other hand, the multinationals that produce them, using a hammering advertising, make these instruments feel 'very useful' if not 'indispensable', both for adults and children, because of their numerous and extraordinary performances.

State authorities, for their part, in order to safeguard freedom of expression, but also due to pressure from lobbies, avoid any control over the content that these tools convey and disseminate. Therefore, in recent decades, the increase of information and communication tools available to minors appears more like an explosion than an invasion.

The merits

The merits of these electronic instruments are numerous: we have come to have, in a single object, and a portable one at that, very diverse and complex functions.

It is already possible today with a single tool:

- be contacted and contact others at any time and anywhere in the world by video, voice or in writing;

- you can expand your circle of friends and acquaintances with whom you can dialogue and exchange ideas, photos, music and experiences by subscribing to various social networks;

- there is the possibility to download and send music, pictures, films, newspapers, books;

- If desired, the same instrument can function as a computer, calculator, clock, portable TV, camera, video camera, recorder, satellite navigator, video game console, etc.

- one can connect to the Internet to navigate the computer network where one can find billions of images and information.

This possibility of having the most varied functions in a single, small object, which conceals high technology, ignites the imagination, but also the desire of both adults and children. Both feel overwhelmingly in their souls the

feeling of having something precious but also magical in their hands. They aspire to buy and then touch and caress their electronic object, as if it were an Aladdin's lamp, capable of satisfying and making any wish come true.

Today's technological tools can therefore meet many needs.

In the meantime, these tools are able to satisfy dad and mum's anxieties. Parents, but also anxious grandparents, can more easily quell their anxiety by having the possibility of contacting or being contacted by their children or grandchildren at any time. Therefore, when parental anxiety is intense and makes them imagine their child alone amidst the thousand dangers of the city jungle, the ringing of the mobile phone, its voice, but also its image, are a viaticum capable of soothing and calming, at least momentarily, from impending worries. For this reason, parents, but also anxious grandparents, feel the importance of these extraordinary technological tools as a source of serenity and security: 'If anything should happen to him, we can be informed immediately so that we can provide help for the little one'.

Parents also perceive that these electronic objects can be useful for their children to talk, exchange messages, make new friends; they can also stimulate minors in reading and writing. They can make it easier for them to do their schoolwork, since, above all, the use of the Internet can enable children to quickly do research on a variety of topics and subjects, thus improving their children's general culture, since there is a variety of educational content in them, in the form of films, documentaries, filming of theatrical and musical events, debates, interviews, etc.

As far as video games are concerned, these can be useful since they can allow: better logical and perceptive

development; more effective visual-motor coordination; better management of emotions; quicker handling of decisions and difficulties that may arise in life. Furthermore, when video games are incorporated into educational programmes, they can be invaluable for learning with pleasure, quickly and well, not only foreign languages but also many school subjects.

The risks

These tools, unfortunately, are not without risks, since the damage that the contents that are present or that are conveyed by these electronic devices can cause, and indeed do cause, both to adults and, above all, to minors, are, without a doubt, considerable. So remarkable, in fact, that we speak *of media education in* children in modern western societies, as it is thought and feared that a large part of children's education, in our modern societies, comes not from parents, not from family members, and not even from teachers or other educators, but from TV, video-games, the Internet and other communication platforms.

Many of the pitfalls of these modern electronic tools are related to their very merits: the many functions they have built-in, their portability, and their remarkable, extraordinary possibilities and capabilities.

The reasons for the damage are quite understandable if only one pauses for a moment to reflect on the fact that many of the companies that produce and disseminate this content do not pose any problems of an educational and training nature, nor do they feel the slightest sense of responsibility towards minors. Therefore, psychological pollution, the seriousness of which we know, is rife.

The greater or lesser psychological discomfort that these instruments can cause depends on a few elements:

❖ the type of content;

❖ the frequency with which this content is used;

❖ the age and maturity of the subject;

❖ its maturity. The greater or lesser capacity for criticism is crucial. Therefore, children who already present and suffer from psychological distress are much more susceptible to influence. In these cases, the incidence of possible negative stimuli is much greater, but also unpredictable;

❖ the way in which these instruments are used and, therefore, the presence or absence of parents and educators, who may have the opportunity to explain and criticise what they have seen and heard.

Risks in the field of developmental age may concern:

1. use for an excessive amount of time;

2. addiction;

3. the possibility of risky contacts;

4. the greater possibility of committing crimes;

5. contact with content that is useless or worse, dise-
ducational or harmful to the personality.

1. *Use for an excessive amount of time*

A child's life should be full of many options: study,
recreation, play, relationship and dialogue with peers and
adults, contact with nature, movement. Reflection, silence
and being alone with oneself for a few moments, so as to
deepen what has been experienced, are also important for
one's development (Maderna, 2010, p.35).

The time spent in the company of these instruments, added
to the considerable amount of time spent on school and
related educational activities, often risks monopolising a
large part of the child's day. He often finds himself
immersed, but also a prisoner, in a sea of voices, sounds,
images, unable to escape them in order to fully live his life
as a child. He also fails to deepen or reflect on what he has
read, seen or heard, just as he fails to enjoy free activities,
in the open air, in communion with his peers but also with
animals, plants and the other elements of nature; activities
that are indispensable for a rich, healthy and serene growth.

Since, moreover, it is not possible for him to metabolise the
excess of incoming information through long pauses for rest
and reflection, the child involved will suffer from increased
anxiety, restlessness, and diminished attention and
concentration skills. Among other things, the hypomobility
required to see, hear, read or send messages greatly
diminishes the possibility of movement games, resulting in
an altered mood that will tend towards greater irritability,
aggressiveness and depression, while at the same time

anxiety, inner tension, instability, insomnia, apathy and disinterest will increase.

2. *Addiction*

This condition may apply to one or more functions of the various electronic tools. There can then be an addiction to text messaging, TV, video games, chat lines, etc.

Video game addiction

The most serious and frequent symptoms of addiction are caused by video games, as these are structured in such a way as to foster precisely this condition of subjection. Inherent in this type of electronic game is the urge to repeat it in order to get a higher score, to move on to the next level, to beat the opponent, to obtain the promised prize. Since companions also play the same game, it becomes a challenge to see who can reach the highest level. Moreover, identification with the characters encountered during the game induces one not to neglect or leave them, but to continue to be close to them, as if they were friends with whom one can share one's experience and existence.

Some parents feel that their child lives as if drugged by the game, without being able to get rid of it and, above all, without being able to participate in other free and constructive activities. Moreover, the video games most commonly used and played by minors are essentially based on a continuous, repetitive fight, using various weapons and strategies, against imaginary aliens and enemies, monsters to be destroyed, before being destroyed, to be killed, before being killed. Since there is no pity, tenderness, understanding, justice, but above all no nuance in these games, overuse can

lead to reactive and aggressive attitudes towards others, towards life, towards the world.

The portability and spread of these games on various platforms (TV - Computer - Mobile - iPod, etc.), leads to overuse.

Therefore, the negative effects, even of those with acceptable content, are diverse and serious: stress, mental fatigue, considerable loss of time, tendency to detachment from real life. In the minds and souls of minors suffering from addiction, the imaginary characters and environments of video games predominate, rather than the people present in their normal living environment. Daily duties and occupations, such as studying and many other gaming experiences, are also neglected. Rare become moments of reflection, building games, social dialogue among peers, with parents and family members. Symptoms of psychological malaise such as insomnia or restless sleep, motor restlessness, vomiting, anxiety and apathy may appear in these cases. Symptoms of withdrawal and isolation are also often present. Meanwhile, problems in relationships with family members tend to intensify, with increased aggression, especially towards younger and weaker members of the family, such as younger siblings and the elderly. At the same time, school performance worsens with difficulties in understanding written texts.

TV addiction

TV addiction is not to be overlooked. There are many children who do not get up in the morning, do not eat, do not go to sleep, do not start studying, without the 'comfort of television'. And since it is possible to receive the televi-

sion signal not only from the many large-screen devices, distributed in every room of the house, but also from the small portable magic instruments, television, with all its programmes: some useful, some useless, many harmful to the development and education of minors, is present and conditions the life and mind of children at all hours and at all times of the day.

Uncontrolled, excessive or improper use of TV can lead to:

❖ Reduced ability to concentrate, memorise and conceptualise;

❖ Reduced capacity for reflection, reworking and integration of the content seen or heard, as a result of which the child becomes accustomed to seeing and hearing talk passively and not expressing its own ideas and concepts;

❖ difficulty in disposing of instinctive vivacity and the need for movement, at an age when the child should, instead, be spending a good part of his or her time in free play, self-discovery, relationships with peers and adults, and discovering the world around him or her.

❖ difficulty in making calm and elaborate critical judgements;

❖ diminished imaginative abilities;

❖ little individuality of thought with a tendency to homologation in words, gestures, desires and ideals;

- ❖ removal from contact with real life for an excessive amount of time;

- ❖ tendency to oversimplify concepts;

- ❖ increased instability, anxiety and irritability;

- ❖ limitation of play with peers and dialogue with parents;

- ❖ Decreased interest in school because, having the possibility of using a large amount of information and images in real time, children judge school lessons to be boring, archaic, useless;

- ❖ if the use of mass media is early, before the age of three, this can also lead to language learning difficulties. Since, in order to acquire this function, the child needs a long, continuous contact and dialogue with parental figures, especially with the mother, and not with instruments lacking in relational capacities;

- ❖ acquiring incorrect eating habits. The resulting obesity entails not only aesthetic damage but also physical damage, since excessive weight gain is the antechamber of various organic diseases, but also psychological, since positive self-image and relationships with peers are altered;

- ❖ distorted view of reality and estrangement from reality. The child and then the young person immersed for days in a fantasy world, full of heroes, fairies, magic, can be stimulated to engage in irrational and

risky behaviour, without foreseeing the harmful consequences;

❖ As with all addictions, there are consequences concerning the compulsion of inner freedom and thus social isolation, loss of true and healthy friendships, poor performance in studies;

❖ Lastly, contact with risky realities or with contents that are uneducational or detrimental to the personality may lead to the onset of fears, inner restlessness, and a tendency to imitate trivial words, gestures and attitudes that are not in keeping with civilised living;

Chat line addiction

Many minors leave their I-Pods or computers switched on during the day and at night in order to be able to chat with friends and anyone else who feels like chatting.[12] Often the I-Pod sits next to the plate at lunchtime, next to the book when one should be studying, under the desk at school, in the pocket when the child is playing with peers. There is no time or place when one does not receive a message to which one feels compelled to respond immediately, interrupting all other occupation. Often these messages are sent, as on *Facebook,* to more than one person. The risk is that one fails to enjoy the presence of people who are physically and affectively close, who would be entitled to a

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[12]   The annual meeting of the American Public Health Association in Denver found that 19.8 per cent of secondary school children in the Midwest exceed 120 text messages per day and that excessive use of social networks affects 11.5 per cent of teenagers.

deep and true dialogue, instead of giving superficial and stereotyped replies to distant or anonymous people. There is also a further risk of making available to everyone images and thoughts that should remain private.

In the use of the Internet, the people contacted through messages are indeed real, and therefore dialogue and confrontation are possible, but the screen allows, through anonymity, not only the true identity but above all the true intentions to be concealed. The Internet, moreover, encourages the expression of emotions and words without any censorship and thus encourages the use of vulgar, violent or perverse expressions. Friendships are then established without being able to assess either the risks or the future prospects.[13]

Some applications allow the intended victim to be stalked by aggressive words and offensive, compromising images. Cyber bullying, as it is called, can cause the most fragile minors to exacerbate their psychological or existential problems, resulting in depression, which can even lead to suicide.

It is constantly repeated that one should not demonise any kind of instrument, but help children, and minors in general, to know how to use them well. This is only partly true, as there are instruments that are in themselves very risky, especially if placed in the hands of minors, or worse, minors who already have psychological problems. For these reasons, we can only advise delaying this type of gift as much as possible, so as to allow the minor to reach a good maturity. Then, when we are certain that he will use it well,

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[13] In 2002, 581 persons were reported to the judicial authorities for offences against minors via the Internet, up from 290 in 2000 (+100.3%).

we choose a device that has only a few essential functions: such as making and receiving phone calls, and nothing else. At a later age, it will certainly be useful and necessary to check that the child to whom it has been given makes proper and appropriate use of it.

3. *The possibility of risky contacts*

If it is true that these electronic tools can allow the establishment of healthy and deep friendships with well-mannered, sincere and correct peers, it is also true that they also greatly facilitate encounters with rude, trivial, disturbed, lying minors and adults. The 'pranks' between peers in which one or a group of boys sends offensive phrases, pictures or obscene words to the unfortunate person on duty are well known. Just as well known are the unedifying stories of young boys and girls who film or photograph their own or other peers' private parts or first sexual relations and send them or, worse still, publish them on the Internet, either for fun or to mock and disqualify someone. Similarly, the news often informs us of the blackmailing behaviour of minors towards other peers or adults, carried out using these technological tools. While a constructive and serious relationship with adults known to the family who are mature, responsible, serene and trustworthy is a good thing, contact with strangers who may be disturbed or worse sick and perverse is certainly very risky. Here again, daily news reports inform us of the exchange carried out by unscrupulous adults who get young girls and boys to send them risqué photos in exchange for phone top-ups or other small gifts. Finally, the strategies used by paedophiles to contact minors, more or less consenting, are well known, as well as

the use that drug dealers make of these tools to approach easy prey. For Silvia Bonino, 'One has the impression that the euphoria for the great freedom granted by the network has prevented many from becoming aware of the risks inherent when there is a complete lack of rules and controls capable of guaranteeing responsibility and transparency (Bonino, 2010, p. 33)'.

4. *The increased possibility of committing crimes*

The use of these tools makes it much easier to incur criminal conduct: it only takes a click to download music files, films, photos or other material protected by copyright, or with child pornography content. It only takes a few clicks to place images or films on specialised sites that violate privacy or are offensive to adults or peers, which may lead to civil and criminal justice.

Alessio: a resourceful kid.
In this regard, I am reminded of Alessio, an eleven-year-old boy, who had the good idea of using the mobile phone given to him by his father for his birthday to take pictures of his teachers' legs when they walked past his desk with their skirts billowing, and then distribute them as spicy souvenirs to his classmates. Not content with this, he had devised a way to scrape together a few more euros than his mother gave him in her weekly pocket money: he sent blackmail messages to the teachers of the primary school he had just left. When the Carabinieri arrived at the father's house following the teachers' complaint, the father was shocked at the 'feats' of his precocious son.
What struck us on that occasion was the father's attitude in recounting what his son had done. An attitude that, while

on the one hand appeared scandalised, on the other was almost proud of the fact that he had such an enterprising son.

5. **Contact with content that is useless or worse, uneducational or harmful to the personality**

At a time when the mass media: periodical press, radio, television, have lost their educational and training function, as they have been put at the service of the market to advertise, and thus sell, products, while the quantity of programmes offered for free or for a fee has increased, there has been, at the same time, a considerable drop in the quality of the content offered. The main aim has become to secure more ratings, so as to increase the number of viewers with the least amount of money. Against this background, families and minors were invaded by programmes that were not only technically, aesthetically and culturally shoddy, but also unsuitable for the healthy development of minors and misleading for adults.

In this regard, we quote Galli Della Loggia's (2011, p 30) stark judgement:

"It is in the overflowing space of entertainment programmes that above all the destructive manipulation of Italian anthropology takes place. In those programmes where - even without reaching the post-ribular levels of things like The Island of the Famous or Big Brother - presenter-guitti, comedians, trivial sounds, half-naked bodies, cheap quizzical gimmicks and torrents of chatter about nothing are mixed together'.

Many programmes, without any concern for the possible harm they may cause, broadcast at all hours of the day

and night continuous scenes of violence, death, ostentation of nudity, vulgar or sexually explicit content and images. Ultimately, distinctly uneducational ideas, feelings and images are made available to children, pervaded by disvalues, often harmful to the human personality. If we add to this the considerable increase in the type of receiving devices (radios, TVs, computers, PDAs, I -Pods, etc.), as well as the scarce and occasional presence of adult and parental control over these media, the psychological, formative and educational damage resulting from this type of political and managerial choice can be very well understood. The contents of these technological tools, rich and sometimes saturated with vulgarity, cruelty, wickedness, terror, death, violence, overpowering, transgression and explicit sex, but also pornography, on the one hand tend to instil or aggravate psychological distress and suffering, especially in the youngest children, and on the other hand also have the capacity to instil in adults behaviour, lifestyles, languages, and modes of relations, which are poorly suited to interpersonal relationships and social living. The most serious thing is that all these high-risk realities enter every home but also every schoolbag of minors.

Possible negative consequences

The negative consequences of these tools can be partly direct, i.e. linked to the child's direct relationship with the mass media, and partly *indirect*, due to changes in adult attitudes and behaviour.

Meanwhile, on the *economic front,* there has been a considerable increase in adults' spending to buy the latest technical marvel, which makes the old television set, com-

puter, I-Pod obsolete. This leads to a reduction in savings and thus to greater fragility on the part of families in the face of economic insecurity, but also to fewer opportunities for children to access their parents' savings in times of need.

As for *the time spent by family members* with minors, dedicated to educational and formative commitment, time already cut short by work, travel, social, political and recreational commitments, this time, with the massive invasion of those tools within families, is even more reduced, as a result of the use and abuse made of them by parents and other family members close to the child.

The 'distractions' in which adults are involved include video games aimed at an adult audience, broadcasts of television programmes, friendship encounters to be managed with a mobile phone or on Facebook, regular and irregular love affairs, and occasional sexual encounters greatly facilitated by the use of these tools, with serious consequences on the relational well-being of couples and families. Ultimately, whereas the real *agora* present in every small town allowed for exchange and dialogue only at certain times of the day, under vigilant social control, the virtual piazza, allowing the same encounters without any control, anonymously, at all hours of the day and night, has greatly increased the use and abuse of social exchanges, resulting in less attention being paid to the needs of children and other weaker family members.

Moreover, as a consequence of these increased 'distractions', love affairs and friendships, not always lawful, have increased, which inexorably, by creeping into pre-existing couples and families, provoke or accentuate conflicts, fractures and abandonments. These negative realities can only spill over and severely affect the minors involved.

A disappointed and angry grandmother

Marina had come to our centre, together with a friend of hers, to discuss her grandson's problems. When we advised her, as we had done with the mother, to limit the child's use of TV and video games as this abuse of electronic devices was increasing his psychological problems and not helping his balance, she looked at me as if to say: 'What are you thinking, doctor? What you are asking for this family is practically impossible to implement'. To give me a better understanding of how things were, she described the family environment in the following terms:

"You see, doctor, I, despite my age, have some friends with whom I meet to go to the cinema, to the theatre, to go for a walk and to have tea together. When I go home, since my son's family and I live in the same house, they on the ground floor and I on the first floor, even though I could go directly to my house, I often drop by to see them and say hello. But each time I am disappointed, bitter and also angry at what I see. There are four people in my son's house: he, his wife and the two children she knows, but there are six televisions and four computers. When I enter the living room, I find my daughter-in-law sitting at the dining table, typing on the computer; when I greet her, she only looks at me for a moment, nods at me with one hand and continues typing. Then I go into the study with the hope of spending some time with my son, but I find that he, too, is staring absorbedly at the computer screen thinking about the answer he has to give his interlocutor. When I greet him, he raises his eyes and at the same time lowers the laptop screen, perhaps out of fear that he might see what he is writing and to whom he is writing, and then he responds to the greeting awkwardly, without getting up from his chair, with a "Hello

Mummy, how are you?" "Everything's fine," I reply and hastily close the door to avoid further disturbance. Next to the study is my two grandchildren's room, which has a megagalactic desk in the shape of an 'S' so that it can be used by both of them. Above the desk are two televisions, two computers, two video game consoles, two video recorders. In short, there are few books on the desk, but plenty of electronic instruments, all in duplicate, to prevent the children from bickering with each other. One of the grandsons, the eldest, is busy making some kind of green monster jump around on the screen to get to I don't know what treasures, after having 'taken out' myriads of other red monsters and conquered many little stars. The other is lying on the sofa and watching his favourite cartoons on TV. I would like to get close to them, hold them in my arms like I did when they were little and tell them some fairy tale, some story from the past or talk to them about the day's events, but now they don't even take their eyes off the screen. To be kissed they only offer me their cheek with a 'Hello, Grandma' and that's it. At this point all I have to do is walk up the stairs and retire to my little flat upstairs. Each time I climb those steps, with so much bitterness in my mouth, but also with so much disappointment and anger. No, doctor. I understand what you are saying and I share it. I know it would do my little nephew good to play outdoors rather than sit on the couch and watch cartoons for hours on end, or make little monsters jump around like his brother does, but the way that family lives today, what you are asking for is impossible."

On the other hand, the stories told by grandson Fabrizio that his grandmother talked about were all of this tenor:

*"Once upon a time there was a ten-year-old boy, tall;
he stood in front of the computer, playing poker. Sometimes
he won, sometimes he lost. He would accept losing but then
he would win. He lived alone in a big, spacious house in the
city: a cottage, with animals in the house (four cats and a
dog), with whom he had a good relationship. He only gave
food and caresses* (to these animals). *He only devoted him-
self to the computer and one day he had a birthday and was
given a PC which, connected with his cousin's, was like ha-
ving two. He received a TV from his uncle. His parents, on
the other hand*, (gave him) *a poker table and a football field
where he played alone. At poker he played with friends.
Sometimes he won, sometimes he lost'.*

The same child once told one of the shortest and most
dramatic stories we have ever heard.

A computer named Fabrizio

*"Once upon a time there was a computer that played
alone and was always like this playing. He was a good
computer called Fabrizio'.*

A TV always on.

*Dario was a boy I had known as a child, but later con-
tact had ceased until I saw him again as an adult, with an
unkempt beard, very thin, with spirited eyes and a perpetual
nervous laugh.*

*The parents reported to me that their son had, in recent
years, deteriorated considerably. Among other things, he
had fears, such as that of being poisoned; therefore he
hardly ate any more. In addition, while watching films and
cartoons on TV, he would stay awake most of the night until
around three o'clock in the morning We immediately started
a therapy that had good results. The boy appeared calmer,*

he started eating regularly again. He slept more at night but still stayed up for many hours watching television until late at night on the way home from school. I advised his mother to prefer outdoor games for Dario rather than leaving him in front of the TV. "Let's see, let's hope," was her reply. Even at the following check-ups my suggestion and her reply were always the same, until she was fed up with my insistence and irritatedly blurted out: 'It is not possible, doctor, what you advise me to do, to only turn on the television for one hour a day. In my house there are four televisions and my husband wants at least one to be on all the time when he is at home. Even at night the TV has to stay on. It's as if he can't stand the house without this background noise. How do I turn it off? When we were newlyweds I tried to do it but it always ended up in big squabbles. Now I don't even try.

Certain notations can be drawn from these stories.

1. Addiction to electronic devices is not only of minors but often starts with adults and then spreads to minors.

2. For both adults and minors, such a relationship is often an escape from reality. In this sense it closely resembles one of many addictions.

3. The last consideration, which is perhaps the most important one, is that it is not entirely true, as is often repeated even by the well-meaning, that a tool, whatever it is, is just an object and therefore neither good nor bad, but everything depends on

its use, so one should not demonise it. The example is always given of the knife, which can be used to cut bread or vegetables in the kitchen but can also be used to kill a person. In our opinion, this is only one part of the truth that tends to cover the other part that we do not want to face. The other part, the part that we do not want to accept and face with courage and determination, is that if a high percentage of people, adults or children alike, through the use of one or more tools, frequently do or hurt themselves, we must seriously reconsider the supposed neutrality of this or these tools and take remedial action by preventing any risks, both at the family level and at the political and social level.

Some indications

Since information is useful, necessary, and fundamental for the individual as well as for society, it is necessary to have a positive, but also an active and critical relationship. Therefore, society's commitment should be no less than that of parents and educators in general.

As far as TV is concerned:

❖ *We avoid placing a child under the age of three in front of the television screen.* And this for several reasons:

- Before this age, the child is not yet able to distinguish reality from fiction. This can cause him to become upset, fearful and anxious;

- before the age of three, the child needs to engage in active language exercises with adults in order to acquire normal and adequate language skills, whereas TV shushes children and this may result in lower language skills in the child;

- Spending too much time in front of the television screen interferes with the development of sense-motor intelligence;

- there is also the risk that infants relate to the television set as if it were a transitional object, so that the bond with this instrument will tend to endure over time.

 For children over the age of three, we make sure that:

❖ *the time a child spends in front of a television screen is limited to* a maximum of half an hour in the case of children under the age of six, while it should not exceed one hour a day in the case of children under the age of twelve to thirteen and no more than one and a half hours in the case of adolescents. This is because excessive use of this medium adds nothing to culture and knowledge, since the time necessary for images and the ideas underlying them to be

normally absorbed, organised, criticised and ultimately 'metabolised' is lacking. The excessive use of television also takes away many possibilities for personal enrichment, such as playing freely, inventing, discovering, dialoguing with other peers and with parents, it prevents one from discovering the pleasure of reading, it takes time away from sport and from the emergence of new interests;

❖ *the television set should under no circumstances be present in a child's room.* Both because of the easy abuse and to prevent it being switched on during the night, which would lead to a greater emotional charge and easier involvement in the most dramatic scenes with consequent fears, anxieties and insomnia;

❖ in a family with minors, *the TV set should be unique for the whole family* and placed in a place: kitchen or living room, where the family normally lives and meets, so as to facilitate parental control;

❖ *It is a good idea to select the* most useful and suitable *type of programme in advance, based on the child's age and sensibilities*, helping them to choose programmes that are enjoyable but also instructive and constructive for their personality and culture. Always bearing in mind that what is enjoyable is not always the same as what is useful. Therefore, when

children are older, it is important to select together with them those programmes whose content is close to our sensibilities, values and guiding ideas in the educational field, discarding all programmes that are unsuitable or unhelpful. That is why the remote control should not be in the hands of the children, but in those of their parents.

❖ *The TV set should be kept switched off on several occasions*:

- when the family is gathered for meals;

- when there are social gatherings: for example, when there are guests in the house, or the family is gathered to celebrate something, such as a name day, birthday, etc;

- when doing homework or reading a book;

- when discussing together;

- when there is a chance to play in the company of a few friends. Bear in mind that opportunities to play with other peers have become rare, so it is a shame to waste them in front of a TV set;

- when nothing really interesting is broadcast.

❖ *We comment together on what we have seen on TV.* If possible, it would be nice if at least a few programmes were watched together with the children so that they could comment on them 'hot'; or take advantage of breakfast, lunch and dinner times, when the TV is systematically kept off, to discuss openly and calmly what they have seen, or what they intend to see, so that children become accustomed to developing a critical spirit that allows them to sift through the various contents, so that they become accustomed to selection and choice.

❖ *We insert a timer* directly into the TV set or into the plug of the electric current, to avoid continuous and exhausting discussions, as well as scolding and grumbling, because of the time we have to spend in front of the TV;

❖ *We try to keep the viewing of advertisements to a minimum*, including through the use of video recordings, and we also discuss with our children the function of advertising, the value of objects and how to make our own choices;

❖ *Let's make sure that at least one day a week is a TV-free day for everyone.* This would leave more time for other activities such as dialogue, playing games in which the whole family is involved, reading, storytelling, sports, etc.

On the part of society, it would be necessary to accept that the psychic environment is as much a reality as the physical one. Therefore, if one really wants to respect children, who are then the future of mankind, it is indispensable to impose all the rules and limitations that serve the purpose, remembering that rules and limitations not only do not mortify individual freedom of speech or artistic expression, but exalt it, direct it, give it consistency and value.

It would be enough to do in the psychological field what is done in the food field.

No one would dream of having rotten or polluted and therefore unhealthy food sold in grocery shops; just as no one would dream of bringing these clearly unhealthy foods into every home for both adults and minors and then asking the inhabitants of the home, in complete freedom, to regulate how much to eat and what to eat.

No one would dream of entrusting the inhabitants themselves with the ability to recognise different types of food, discard the poisoned, rotten, polluted ones, and then have the self-control necessary to take what they need for their age and condition.

Yet this is what is demanded of each and every one of us every day, inside every home, inside every family. Hundreds of programmes and thousands of advertising messages are allowed in: some are excellent, rich in content and values and therefore suitable for everyone, others can only be profitably used by adults but not by minors, others are mediocre, dull, useless, and finally others clearly harmful to everyone. In the meantime, the inhabitants of those homes are asked to understand, from some sequence, whether the content is positive and suitable for them or 'not'. They are then asked to have the ability to discriminate and the wil-

lingness to use only those programmes that are most useful and suitable for them. The same, of course, is demanded for every advertisement that suddenly appears, interrupting the programme being viewed, and for every Internet site that one comes into contact with, even unintentionally.

This is, of course, not possible for adults, and especially not possible for persons of developmental age.

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