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SECTION 1

CHAPTER 2

Ordinary learning at different stages of development

In order to understand the learning difficulties children may face, it is important to understand the "ordinary" learning process at different ages. Awareness of the range of learning that happens in normal circumstances as children grow up provides a baseline against which to explore what traumatised children may not have been able to learn.

Early learning

Babies come into the world primed to learn, as they adjust to the world outside their mother's body. Disoriented from the shock of birth, they are faced with new sensations, sounds, smells, space, and experience bright light, air and gravity for the first time. There is a much-changed environment to encounter. In the womb, feeding was automatic, so unsurprisingly early learning is centered on forming a feeding relationship. Newborn babies' interest is

focused on finding their way to the breast or bottle, putting their sucking reflex to good use, looking at their mother's face and getting to know her in a new intimate closeness. Life on the lap is not only about feeding, it is also about playing and "chatting", and exploring within the confines of safe arms. The soothing of loving touch and close physical holding is key to babies forming close and secure attachments. Bodily discomfort and dissatisfaction are communicated in no uncertain terms by howling cries. Parents and carers absorb and interpret this distress and do what they can to find its source: hunger, wind, soiled nappy, need for company, and they act to remedy and restore calm as much as possible. Babies' early frustrations are fraught with fear and hard to bear, they have an urgency and intensity that demand immediate attention. Over time, the raw distress lessens and babies can manage a little more dissatisfaction for a little longer.

Learning away from the lap

When the foundation of loving connection with reliable parents or carers is in place, babies become more able to be on their own for a little while, and this opens up new learning opportunities. There is the world of objects to explore. Holding a rattle can produce sounds, reaching for and pushing a soft toy hanging on the cot results in its swinging movement. The discovery of agency is experienced, the delight of being able to make things happen: in essence, learning about cause and effect. Parental endorsement of these small developmental achievements instills confidence to continue exploration. Physical development – crawling away, learning to stand, recovering from falls, cruising around furniture and taking first steps – allows further new discovery. Buttons to press on noisy toys, boxes to upend and bang on, cupboards to explore and empty, are all available for research. Such experimentation is interspersed with retreat to a parent figure for reassurance and physical comfort before another foray away.

Learning to communicate

Babies have language and sound around them from the beginning. They are familiar with the voices of their mother and father or close others, and derive comfort and reassurance from hearing them. During their first year, babies move from babbling to playing with sounds and putting strings of different sounds together. This learning does not happen in a solitary way, but in the context of a relationship, a reciprocal exchange of long, babbling sociable chats with playful intonation and pitch. Early interaction is crucial for brain development and has long-lasting consequences, as Gerhardt (2004) explores in her book, *Why Love Matters*. A loving relationship from birth sets the baby on a path to optimal neurological development.

Parenting includes the important function of setting boundaries. The word "no" features in conversations and babies understand that limits are being placed on them, a recognition that is not without vocal protest on occasion. Learning to imitate utterances and gestures brings mutual enjoyment between babies and their parents or carers. Pointing at something as a way of indicating what is needed, and being understood with responsiveness, instills a sense of personal power and self-importance when the object of desire arrives, delivered by a person who understood the communication. In ordinary family life, first words spark a celebratory atmosphere, and babies enjoy being the centre of much praise and positive regard. It is a motivating push forward to learn more.

Introducing books

Reading books together in the early years, with a young child in the lap of a parent or carer, introduces a new experience of language: the written word with accompanying pictures. Looking at books together spurs on speech and language development and the beginnings of literacy. Parents and carers often naturally supply an additional narrative alongside the text in the picture

book, capturing the young child's interest and engagement. There is animated drama involved in story time. Simple tasks like finding the bear in a complex picture, for example, go alongside the main storyline. This is fun, but it also means searching through complex visual information to identify the bear. This kind of scanning involves attending to a particular task and marks the beginnings of learning to concentrate for a short spell of time. The brain is at work. Emotional development is also fostered as patience, perseverance and capacity to tolerate frustration are encouraged in micro-doses, when the quest for the bear is not immediately successful. And, of course, there is pleasure when the bear is finally pointed out and success is marked with applause.

Young children who have the experience of being read to in this way will be naturally introduced to "question and answer" sessions: 'Where's the doggy gone?' They begin to learn about object constancy. The dog has not disappeared, he is behind the flap on the page with the picture of the park, which can be opened and closed at will – bringing to mind yesterday's real-life visit to the park further connects up different elements of experience. The pleasure of reading a favourite book, again and again, establishes the sequence of the story, and builds up anticipation and memory. Often books for young children present visual images that can be counted and colour-coded. They give opportunities for categorisation: 'Let's find all the red flowers in the picture, let's see how many we can find'. What is at play here are the subtle roots of cognitive organisation. Literacy and numeracy skills are being slowly nurtured with adult oversight and mediation. The foundation of later learning is being established. In addition, the emotional tasks of the under-five period are being addressed.

The content of popular books for this age group so often tackles key challenges and conflicts, which serve to process emotional experience. For example, Max goes on a rampage of fury and rebellion, but manages to find his way back to a warm supper

in *Where the Wild Things Are* (Sendak, 1963). It conveys the positive message that "monstrousness" can be tamed and there is a recovery from rage. Another popular book, *We're Going on a Bear Hunt*, is a story of overcoming head-on fear-inducing obstacles on an adventurous journey (Rosen and Oxenbury, 1989). It encourages courage and forbearance in the face of new experiences, yet another helpful lesson. Many other stories tackle issues to do with getting lost and being found again, separation and reunion, which is fruitful psychological preparation for time to come spent outside the family context.

Learning in middle childhood

Middle childhood in primary school is a relatively calm period in comparison with the intensity of feelings associated with the early years. It comes before the revival of inner conflict and emotional upheaval with the start of adolescence. Middle childhood is a period sometimes known as "latency", as some of the passions associated with the early years have largely been laid to rest. Close family relationships remain crucial, but there is more orientation outward and away from the family.

Starting school

Children first encountering school are likely to have had some earlier experience of being in a nursery or other child-care setting, where managing periods outside their family home has already been established. Most will have had exposure to different skin colours, cultures, accents and religions, and will have some knowledge and appreciation of societal diversity. Although there is a huge variation of experience, by the time children start school they are normally enjoying some degree of independence and autonomy. For example, they are usually able to eat and dress without help, and they are used to going to the toilet by themselves. More dependency needs, or upset expressed by

tummy pains and perhaps occasional toileting accidents, may emerge at times of stress, but largely these are transitory.

All children now grow up in a digital environment, and so will have some familiarity with technology and are likely to be able to use a tablet or computer. They can probably count and know the alphabet. They may remember rhymes and sing songs. If looking at books is an enjoyable experience, they may recognise letters, some written words and perhaps their own name. Some children start school already able to read and write basic short sentences; others will be complete beginners, but can hold a pencil and make rudimentary drawings and copy simple shapes.

The pace of emotional and social development is never uniform. However, the chances are that sitting at a table, taking turns, waiting for a while without gratification, not always having needs met, and sharing with others are all familiar experiences. Latency-aged children are able to express themselves and communicate their wishes and needs clearly. They are sociable, interested in making friends, more usually, though not exclusively, same-sex friends at this stage. They often have a best friend and navigate their way in peer groups reasonably well, though with some adult refereeing of disputes. Following the instructions of authoritative adults is an ordinary part of daily life. Before going to "big school", their relationships with parents/carers, grandparents and other adults in caring roles will have been generally positive. This sets the scene for the expectation that teachers, similarly, will be helpful people, who will be interested in their welfare. They come to school, perhaps with some anxiety about the newness of it all. They may at first feel quite lost and bewildered, but they have been prepared by facilitating adults, or perhaps an older brother or sister, and so have some idea of what to expect. Optimism and excitement consequently dampen down some of the worry associated with this new chapter in life outside the home.

Helpfulness of school routines

School life provides structures and routines within which to learn. This makes the busyness and noise of the classroom more manageable. Timetables measure out the day. Teachers follow the curriculum. There are rules, regulations and clarity about boundaries, and what behaviour is expected and what incurs sanctions. Fairness and the application of rules in an equitable way are important, as latency-aged children often have a strong sense of right and wrong and can be vehement advocates of justice. Environmental issues like climate change and causes to do with animal welfare are among the many campaigns that can capture children's strong allegiance and advocacy in primary school. Some pursue such causes with passionate dedication, wanting to make a difference and do good in the world. Children at this stage often want the responsibility of looking after a pet.

Learning in primary school

The primary school years are so much about acquiring knowledge and new skills. Learning to ride a bike or scooter, racing, chasing and climbing, becoming adept at dance, football or other sports, all promote physical development and co-ordination. They are also years of industry, concentration, amassing lots of information, planning and problem-solving. Construction and craft projects and virtual games like *Minecraft* that provide simulated worlds away from adults are popular. Children become proficient at rote learning, reeling off times tables for instance, and accumulate masses of factual information. Work is geared to achieve the key stages expected at various points in primary school, and taking tests becomes routine. All learning involves tolerating making mistakes and coping with not understanding. There is inevitable frustration as well as excitement when the dawn of insight breaks through. Results in standard attainment tests (SATs) may not always be as hoped for. Accepting setbacks and patient persistence allows literacy and numeracy to slowly and progressively develop. It is not uncommon for children to get fed up and irritable on

occasion, and to resist their teacher's instructions. However, the major "meltdowns" of the early years are past; praise and positive reinforcement are usually effective, and generally moodiness and disobedience are weathered without significant eruptions.

Canham (2006) reminds us that not all aggression disappears during the latency years, but it is more likely to find expression in healthy competition. Winning games, being chosen for the best roles in the school play or concert, being on the winning side in a football match, or being the one selected by the teacher for some esteemed classroom task, all take on an importance. Collecting is a common activity during primary school years, whether it is Pokémon cards, football stickers, fidget spinners or the latest playground craze. Collections open up comparative discussions with friends, and having a rare item can elevate a child's popularity. Duplicate items are swapped and skills in bartering and negotiation are developed.

The beginning of puberty

A new consciousness of the body emerges with the onset of puberty and the associated swarm of physical changes. There is a wide variation in when this begins. Some girls have to contend with the start of menstruation at primary school, others not until secondary school. Similarly, boys will vary in age in terms of their physical development. Towards the end of the primary school years, the move towards adolescence becomes apparent.

Learning in adolescence

The dual difficulty of adapting to the challenges of secondary school and coping with the bodily preoccupations that puberty brings, while not necessarily concurrent for all young people, makes early adolescence a complex time. Physically, the body is going through a period of rapid change and hormonal fluctuation.

Boys are producing semen, experiencing wet dreams, coping with changes in voice and the emergence of facial hair. Girls' bodies are changing with the development of breasts and start of menstruation. Although, physiologically, pregnancy is possible, emotional readiness for becoming a parent lags far behind. Psychologically, there is a wish for greater independence, a more ambivalent relationship with parental figures, a questioning of personal identity, the establishment of a sexual identity, and a transition to life that is more apart from the family context.

The turbulence of adolescence

Adolescence is a time marked by internal turbulence, confusion and extremes of mood. Time passing and the loss of childhood are unavoidable. During adolescence, the security provided by a stable home life remains an important anchor, although there may be ostensible opposition to and expressed disdain for it from the young person. Parents and carers are often made to feel deficient, redundant and an embarrassing surplus, while their interest, involvement and consistent authority are covertly still very much required.

The impact of racism on young people

Young people from minority ethnic groups are likely to experience additional pressures in adolescence. Spending more time outside the family will bring new awareness of being potentially viewed through a racist lens, with the associated risks and threats. Black young people are over-represented in police "stop and search" statistics in the UK, and being prepared to submit to this intrusiveness by a person of power and authority is highly stressful, especially when evidence of suspicion is absent and it is felt to be grossly unfair. Anger at racial injustice often goes unexpressed, although the Black Lives Matter campaign has provided space to highlight and voice the prevalence of racism and its impact. Anger, when turned inward, takes its toll on young people. Experiences of casual racist abuse on the streets, in parks and at school persist,

and anxieties about injustice and attack are weathered at some emotional cost.

Finding a place at secondary school

Transfer to secondary school requires an adjustment to being the youngest again in an unfamiliar, often large institution. New students have to get used to a number of different teachers, and will probably have to move to different classrooms for different subjects along corridors with lots of noise and jostling, which can be daunting. It may be a frightening and anxiety-provoking adaptation. The task of finding a place in a friendship group is another challenge and may initially involve a period of instability, uncertainty and loneliness, especially if links with friends from primary school are severed. Group life is an immersive experience during the secondary school years, and a sense of belonging to a group with similar values and interests provides a safe place to explore identity and experiment with new ways of being. Groups converge around shared music, fashion, alternate fantasy worlds like animé or manga, social activism or political ideologies, and this may be all-consuming for the young person.

Waddell (2018) describes group membership as having a "holding function" for adolescents, a safe place for reworking and integrating aspects of self, including residual infantile fears and conflicts. Group life can also be a source of intense anxiety, with fluidity of group hierarchy and membership, shifting allegiances and rivalries, and feelings of betrayal and being left out all making for a complicated group existence. In this digital age, group life is conducted online as well as in person. Online contact with friends became especially important during the 2020/21 Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns, when meeting face-to-face was not possible. The age of 13 marks the point when young people are officially allowed membership of popular social media platforms such as Facebook, although many are digitally active long before. This confers quasi-adult status in a new way, but it may also feel like a

very pressurised public space in which to operate. The emphasis on approval of physical appearance and acceptance based on the number of "likes" for social media postings can make emotional well-being a rather precarious commodity.

Sexual identity

There may also be pressure on young people to become sexually active earlier than they feel ready, borne out of competitiveness or a perception about fitting in, rather than genuinely felt desire. The prevalence of online pornography, available at a young age, distorts the nature of ordinary sexual relationships. The beginnings of becoming sexual, whatever the orientation, can be fraught with uncertainty and anxiety, but adult sexuality represented in pornography can further complicate the path to sexual experimentation in a way that is respectful and consensual. It is important that this is countered by open discussion at home, and in sex and relationship education in school.

Preparing for exams

Adolescence marks a time of significant neurological development and rapid cognitive change. There is a shift to more sophisticated abstract thinking and creativity, analytic appraisal of ideas, evaluation of differing perspectives on a wide range of issues, and a capacity to take up a personal position with a reasoned argument, perhaps passionately made. Young people aged 14–16 in England and Wales are working at Key Stage 4 (S5 in Scotland) towards national qualifications, usually GCSEs in England and Wales (National 5 Qualifications in Scotland), and the approach of these exams can galvanise them to study and revise in preparation. However, there may also be a range of different responses to this hurdle. Some adolescents may feign a "don't care" attitude to mask a fear of failure. Others may feel pressure to deny the extent of their private study if it is out of alignment with the peer group's disaffected posturing about formal education. This first state exam can also pose an unconscious conflict: to want the same

thing as parents or carers, namely, to achieve good results, while simultaneously being emotionally invested in being different to and separate from them. Exam success may feel centrally important as a step towards assuming responsibility for direction in adult life. It marks a potential point of leaving school with some qualifications or a significant punctuation point en route to continuing education.