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# The world of 2- to 5-year-olds

## The themes of preschool-age children in 3 symbolic images

**Children aged 2 to 5 years deal with 3 important developmental tasks: expanding their action scope, developing a consciousness for future tasks, and becoming aware of their own identity. This article approaches these topics from the children's perspective, by interpreting both the symbols and the self-expression children use.**

There are different ways to approach the realm of experience of 2- to 5-year-olds. In addition to the developmental psychology perspective – which is based upon Piaget's theory and interprets social, emotional, and especially cognitive capabilities of preschool children – there are also psychoanalytical, socialisation-oriented, phenomenological-anthropological, and educational theory-based approaches. Each approach contributes specific knowledge. In this article, I combine a phenomenological-anthropological approach with one focussing on development, additionally basing them with an actor-oriented outlook. Actor-oriented approaches in child research endeavour to understand epistemologically as well as in research-practical ways, the modes in which children experience, express themselves, and act. It thus represents a contrast to the structure-oriented childhood research which, for instance, understands being a "child" as a social position and a cultural pattern subjected to historic transformation (cf. Honig/Leu/Nissen 1996).

Pedagogically and empirically oriented anthropology is employed as a helpful concomitant theory because it is concerned with understanding children's idiosyncratic mode of self and world appropriation as a specific human *modus essendi*. Thus, the research objective is to obtain a closer understanding, as difficult it may be, of "children's perspectives" (cf. Neuß 1999). This is why children's daily activities become the focus of attention. What are their interests? What moves them? How do they deal with their experiences?<sup>1</sup> One approach to the perspective of children is provided by the description and analysis of children's self-expression (Holodynski 1993, p. 76) in terms of forms and contents of child-specific aesthetic products. These aesthetic products are capable of giving instructive insights into children's individual modes of appropriation, mental sensitivities, and psychological self-regulation. Records of everyday observations can also be instrumental in the description of the children's thematic interests, main activities, emotional needs, or (re-)structuring procedures. These kinds of everyday life accounts can provide information about themes, activities, and processes of self-formation (Neuß 2007, pp. 124-157). The fact that accounts of day-to-day episodes are anything but unequivocal is illustrated by the following observation:

My daughter Antonia (almost 4 years old) speaks in a high-pitched voice while

pointing to several flowerpots on our patio. A different plant is growing in every pot. "You are Zeloli, you are Max, you are Zanti, and you Sandra." She then asks: "Who's the smallest?" And she responds: "Zanti is the smallest." She points to them: "You are the smallest, and you are the tallest: Rundi and Zeloli." Antonia hums a melody, while fetching something: "Now, I'll show you my food box." Antonia takes glass beads from a wooden box and places one glass bead in each flowerpot. But there are not enough beads for every pot: "I'm sorry, that's all I've got." Antonia talks to the flowers in a quasi-dialogue. "I don't have one for you. I'm sorry." She gathers some of the beads and redistributes them. She addresses the flowers: "Thank you." – she says, as though she is receiving, not distributing the beads. Antonia continues humming. "You haven't had one yet." Another flower is given a bead ...

Such an episode contains a great variety of symbolic elements: play, fantasy and imagination, imitation and transformation, action and gesticulation, speaking and humming. At the same time, these concepts somehow fail to describe properly the mood and themes that are also inherent to the episode. As an external spectator, I sense my daughter's exceedingly harmonious mood of immersion and "being-at-one with herself". In this process, the size of the flowers and "personal relationship" to them seem as significant as their loving treatment and the accompanying polite explanations. This isolated sequence serves to attune us to the interlacing of modes of expression and activity, themes and self-formation processes. To avoid

exclusive reliance on individual cases and everyday observations, I have also included in the identification of children's themes the findings of my study on the symbolic appropriation of television experiences that has accentuated the deeper psychological motivations of such themes (cf. Neuß 1999). Furthermore, anthropological axioms are also incorporated. These assist with the interpretation of children's modes of assimilation and expression in their everyday experience, because the aforementioned episode also challenges us to understand the specific modes of learning in early childhood in connection to life history- or development-related themes. In preschool children's self-formation processes aesthetic, motor, associative, sensuous-bodily, fantasy-related, and emotional aspects play important roles. These aspects interact in appropriation processes that are fast-moving, unpredictable, egocentric, unstructured, magical, spontaneous, and experimental. Below, I want to provide a symbolic interpretation of "just" three images, clarifying their relations to some typical themes for preschool children.

### Snails – Symbol of decentration

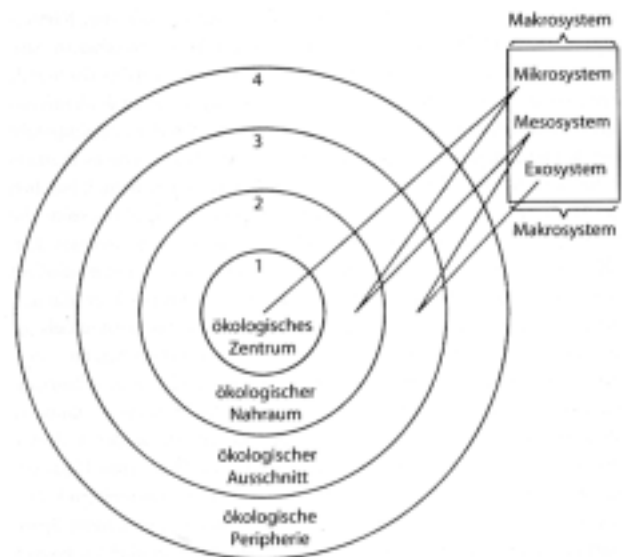
First of all, I would like to point out that the pictures shown must not be misconstrued as representations, but rather they should be understood as symbolic illustrations. What does this mean? In the first photograph (see ill. 1), we can see a child who appears to stand on a sandy beach in the centre of a large, wide-ranging stone snail. As the footprints in the sand indicate, many people have previously walked around the winding path from the centre to the outermost edge. The symbolism becomes apparent when we interpret this path figuratively as a path of life, which leads ever further from the centre, facilitating novel experiences, circle by circle.

Some readers may find that this sounds a little too spiritual. This is why I would like to add to this image a model (see ill. 2), which was originally introduced and developed by Uri Bronfenbrenner (1980). It depicts the social ecology of child development and integrates the social, physical, and action-related aspects of growing up. One of the central assumptions is that the child's environment is experienced by way of layered, social contexts. "The activities of infants, such as language use and the capacity to interpret situations in the child's environment, are embedded in social contexts" (transl., Baacke 1999, p. 230). Children's

lives begin within their families (ecological centre). Their linguistic and physical experiences take place predominantly within the context of that family. Thus, the family is their immediate domain of action and experience. Their bodily and motor development gradually allows them to explore, at first in the company of others, then independently, their immediate ecological neighbourhood (the house, the garden, the street, the nearby playground, etc.). The child will need supervision when visiting a relevant social context (e. g. kindergarten, sport or leisure centre or the like). These partial institutions (ecological sections) are characterised by



Ill. 1: A child in the centre of a stone snail on the beach



Ill. 2: Schematic assignment of the four social ecological zones. Taken from: Baacke (2004), p. 113. Verlagsgruppe Beltz, Weinheim und Basel

restricted spatial and functional features. While the families of preschool-age children believe in their offspring's gradually improving independence and autonomy, institutions such as the kindergarten or the children's peers demand of them the ability to integrate and abide by the rules. The cultural and social framework is part of the ecological periphery, which is determined, among others, by the living conditions, worldviews, as well as other institutions. The individual social spheres interact with one another in countless ways. However, a central factor is that the process of spatial capacity for expanding experiences coincides with

the gradually emerging mental separation process. Thus, on the one hand, the spiral is understood as a symbol for an individual's life course, but on the other hand, it is also a symbol for the increasing spatial as well as emotional "distance" from the ecological centre, i. e. the family or the most important caregivers. Various themes relevant to children aged from 2 to 5 years are associated with this "image".

### *Themes "Being alone" and "Separation"*

Abandonment or being left behind is a theme children deal with in a variety of ways. Sabine Jörg also describes abandonment as the primal emotion, the primal anxiety of the child. "Infantile fears of abandonment are a legacy that haunts some people throughout their lives. Exaggerated need for security, depression, and co-dependency are results of the lack of fear-free opportunities for development" (transl., Jörg 1994, p. 190). Media stories and fairy tales such as *The Lion King* or *Hansel and Gretel* provide the symbolic material to deal with the primal fears. With regard to the photo and model introduced here, "decentration" is the central theme. The child gradually moves away from the ecological centre, and makes "its way" independently into the wide world. In dealing with these themes, preschool children often use "cuddly pets". Whether it is a bunny, a bear, a duck, or a mouse – every toddler has a beloved companion. This phenomenon can be observed very early on. Parents realise at some stage that one specific cuddly pet is of particular significance for their child, because it is somewhat "animate". It helps the child fall asleep, and it appears to have the ability to offer comfort. The meaning of cuddly toys, teddy bears, and comfort pillows was investigated by the psychoanalytical scholar Donald W. Winnicott (1971). Winnicott understands those items as transitional objects with a reality of their

own that resides in the transition period between a child's external and internal world. In other words: since transitional objects are not fantasised, but real, they cannot be attributed to the child's inner world alone. What is characteristic for these items is their physical, objective nature as well as the invisible meaning attributed to them. Their function is to help the child in gradually separating from the mother or the family. "The object represents the infant's transition from a state of being merged with the mother to a state of being in relation to the mother as something outside and separate" (Winnicott 1971, p. 14). These processes are facilitated with the help of cuddly toys or the like, and they enable the child to gain more autonomy and action space.

### *Theme "Feeling certainty, safety, and comfort"*

In this sense, cuddly toys are more than a mere plaything. They can be connected with family shelter, comfort, affection, and safety. Children might confide their secrets to them or use them as their silent companion. This "close friend" establishes the symbolic bond to home, reassures the children of their family's reliability when outside of their family's terrain (e. g. in kindergarten). This certainty enables children step by step to discover and expand their own independence. The central theme here is "feeling certainty, safety, and comfort", while being able to simultaneously embark on extra-familial experiences and establish secondary relationships.

### *Theme "Detachment of the child from the parents"*

Children at preschool age feel the tension that comes from the gradual detachment from their parents and the formation of their own identity, thus increasingly overcoming the symbiotic closeness to their parents. Every step towards autonomy is a step away from the parents. Finding their own

position means for children, to have faith in their own abilities on the one hand, and, on the other hand, not to lose faith in the comfort and love they receive. Erich Fromm described this process quite vividly: In order to experience "freedom as the growth of the self", every child needs to distinguish itself as a "me" from the "not-me" (the parents). "This process brings along a number of denials and bans so that the mother's role is changing. She becomes a person who demands things from her child which are opposed to its wishes, and thus she often appears as a hostile and dangerous person. This antagonism, which is one part of the educational process – although not education as a whole –, plays an important part in that the child learns to differentiate more clearly between the 'me' and the 'not-me'" (transl., Fromm 1985, p. 155). During this process of individuation the child strives for freedom and independence. In order to achieve both, it needs to dissociate itself from its primary ties<sup>2</sup> and find orientations and securities of its own. Growing distance from primary ties is the prerequisite for attaining one's own freedom. Individuality is possible only in disunity with the parents. According to Fromm, the process of individualisation is a dialectical one, since while separation lays the foundations for personal growth, it also starts off a process of increasing isolation. Disobedience is an inevitable stage of development towards independence and the formation of personal identity. The process towards freedom, however, is accompanied by feelings of guilt, because the formation of the self takes place always in opposition to the needs, norms, and well-intended guidance of the "loving" parents. This creates the following basic identity conflict: having a form (this is me – self-image), getting formed (this ought to be me or become me – others' expectation of me) and forming (what do I want? – desires). Long before puberty, this

process gives rise to external quarrels and internal conflicts, which require parents' utmost understanding, empathy, and especially patience.

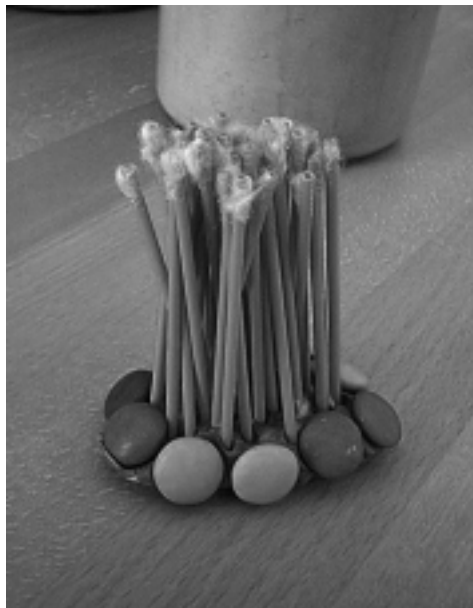
### Theme "Being small and growing up"

Horst Petri described the topic of "being small and growing up" with the term "Gulliver experience" (Petri 1989, p. 66). In the children's view the world is composed of small people and tall people, dwarfs and giants, powerful and powerless people. This perspective, which can be more or less well-developed depending on educational styles and the type of engagement with the child, is associated with feelings of anxiousness and threat. Thus, the desire emerges to overcome one's own smallness and to grow up fast in order to enjoy the assumed privileges (to be allowed more and to be capable of more). Fantasies of being omnipotent are related to the experience of smallness, in which the gradual process of growing up is overcome in a fantastical manner. By the same token, the experience of "smallness", which is perceived as painful, can evoke fears of growing up. The image of the "snail" on the one hand sensitises us to the developmental themes of early childhood and on the other hand bears references to children's everyday activities. Many children at preschool age develop a tremendous passion for collecting, supplying, and examining of living snails or other animals.

### Candles – Symbols of lifetime and future tasks

Which tasks will confront me at school? Am I going to manage the expectations and tasks about to face me? This theme concerns the awareness of one's future, because "growing up" involves an increasing array of demands from the world around

us (e. g. more self-reliance, rationality, and emotional self-control, etc.) (Schorb/Theunert 1993, p. 140). To illustrate this, I would like to draw on the interpretation of another photograph. Ill. 3 shows a creative cake made out of clay, coloured chocolate beans, and cotton pads, which my son made on the occasion of my birthday. This is a ritual he has learnt from the family or maybe at kindergarten. Thus, we are dealing with a realisa-



Ill. 3: A birthday cake

tion of a "conventional symbol", which was appropriated and remodelled in an original way. Put another way, the process of enculturation becomes evident in this example. This concept describes the process whereby an adolescent learns and internalises the traditions of a culture or a social group (here the family). The acquisition of language and other conventional symbols is of particular importance.

Now, the striking number of candles on the cake is interesting. While so far a maximum of 4 candles were lit on my son's birthday cake, the large number of candles points to his vague idea of how old his father is. Only one thing is for sure: that daddy must be much older. Moreover, his appre-

ciation of life's continuity over many more years that lie ahead for him becomes apparent. As the awareness of his own growth increases, so does the awareness of forthcoming tasks and challenges. These development-related tasks were labelled by Robert J. Havighurst "developmental tasks". These are tasks posed that require mastery at certain stages of life. The developmental tasks concept thus combines the individual and environment by relating cultural expectations to individual facilities. At the same time it gives the individual an active role in the shaping of his/her own development. In contrast to most concepts of development it conceives of development not only as the result of preceding events, but as that of anticipated future occurrences. Another central idea to the developmental tasks model is the understanding of development as a learning process, which extends over the entire lifespan, leading to the acquisition of skills and competencies that are necessary for the satisfactory management of life within society. The term "developmental task" refers to a self-activated constructive achievement of the self-forming subject. Developmental tasks are age-dependent, with each age group encompassing specific themes and tasks.

Early childhood is ascribed the following developmental tasks.<sup>3</sup>

- **From birth to 2 years:** social attachment, object permanence, sensory-motor intelligence, simple causality, motor functions, establishment of emotional relationships, curiosity and control of impulsive actions/emotions, self-regulation.
- **2 to 4 years:** self-control (particularly with regard to motor activity), linguistic development, fantasy and play, refinement of motor functions, increasing self-control of physical and psychological

needs, temporary separation from primary caretaker.

- **5 to 7 years:** identification of gender roles, making simple moral distinctions, concrete operations, play in groups, acts of thinking dependent on concrete operations and in accordance with social rules.

The processing of developmental tasks is evident in the multitude of children's symbolic modes of expression and appropriation. Of course, various learning requirements can be added to these tasks, such as, for instance, increasing self-reliance (preschool-age children often want to take care of things they are really too young to master) or moral development.

#### *Theme "Justice and moral behaviour"*

Children grow into a culture, in which they need to deal with existing values and norms. In dealing with their environment, they learn and develop a sense of justice and injustice. "The more exclusive and simple children's attachment to their caretakers, the closer their moral values will follow those of the caretakers. Along with an increasing differentiation of the array of reference persons, groups, and systems (religion, philosophy, politics, literature, media), the moral orientations expand and the opportunity is reinforced for an independent personal morality."<sup>4</sup>

#### *Theme "Death and dying"*

The fact that life entails the subject "death and dying" is understood and expressed by preschool-age children in their own idiosyncratic fashion. Often without realising the emotional depth of the issue, they pose the "theoretical question" about parents' or grandparents' death. Moreover, it is not so much the awareness of their own finiteness, but rather the sense of astonishment and the search for explanations that preoccupies them.

In everyday life, too, children are suddenly faced with these themes without being prepared. They see a dead bird, fallen out of its nest, a run-over hedgehog, or a dead insect, and ask for reasons or explanations. Myths and fairy tales that symbolically refer to these recurrent mental tension-patterns can be helpful in processing such experiences (cf. Bettelheim 1980).

#### **Mirrors – Symbol of the recognition of one's identity**

The mirror and the gaze into it inevitably imply reflection and awareness of one's identity. The first step in this direction is the so-called self-identification in the mirror and takes place between the ages of 6 and 18 months.

Because of this function the mirror image is often used as a metaphor for the individual gaining self-awareness. In his much acclaimed article "The mirror stage as formative of the function of the *I* as revealed in psychoanalytic experience" (cf. Lacan 1991) Jacques Lacan for instance emphasised the concept of the mirror as the subject's self-reflective action. In Lacan's theory the mirror stage is initially merely a psychological developmental stage in which the development of the "I" is located temporally. Self-identification in the mirror is regarded as the first expression of a separate and clearly delineated categorical self. However, this competence is also associated with other faculties, such as for instance the development of empathy. The developing self-awareness also facilitates the identity-related developmental task to form an autobiographical memory (Keller 2004, p. 21). Self-

identification, ability to remember, and formation of a self-concept accompany one another and, at this stage of life, most clearly show the interconnection between learning and biographical experiences. One such identity-related topic is the issue of one's sexuality.

#### *Theme "Gender identity"*

Children at the age of 2 to 3 years develop an idea of their own, and increasingly also, other's gender identity. Associated with the recognition of one's sexuality are questions regarding the respective role expectations, the emergence of a sense of shame, and interest in the opposite gender. The associated expectations, behaviours, relationships, and externalities increasingly become the focus of social situations and games.



To illustrate this, let me conclude with a short playground episode:

Two girls, both 7 years old, approach a couple of boys sitting on a bench. One of the girls keeps a folded up note in her hand and asks the boy to do something. The visible part of the note says "press". The boy presses one finger on the note. The girls giggle. Now the piece of paper is unfolded and the upper half says "boy" and written underneath is "girl". The lower half says "kissing", "disco", "date", and "seks". Now the boy has to choose: "boy" or "girl". He goes for "boy". The girl is outraged: "Boys can only go for girl." The boy says "girl". Now he has to take his pick out of 4 choices. He re-

sponds: “kissing”. Now the piece of paper is turned over with numbers between 1 and 5 written on the other side. There is a coloured dot beneath each number. He is asked to choose a combination of colour and number. His selection is for “2” and “blue”. The girl checks the other side and announces at the top of her voice: “Rico wants to kiss Daniele.” The others laugh. So does the boy, but he also taps his forehead at her. Now the game continues with another boy.

In this game children actively deal with a subject that embarrasses them and that, due to their inexperience, has a certain explosive potential. To be friends with someone, to have a girlfriend or a boyfriend, to kiss someone, to fall in love with or date them are exciting subjects, which at this age are handled by various forms of play. In connection to this, Gerd E. Schäfer emphasises the fact that gender role acquisition is more than a mere process of adopting models: “Identity formation, just as education per se, has features of play” (transl., Schäfer 1995, p. 195). This independent processing of one’s gender role identity, of one’s own body, and the increasing awareness of one’s emotions already starts at preschool age. The folded up piece of paper as well as the progression of the game can be interpreted as a “look in the mirror”, which inevitably confronts the boy with peer- and age-related topics that ask an inner and external reaction of him. ■

## NOTES

- 1 The theory model I am referring to here is that of interactionism, such as pursued by Hurrelmann (1983) when he talks about the productive reality-processing subject
- 2 On the meaning of social attachment in early childhood cf. Hüther 2003.
- 3 Cf. Oerter 1998, p. 124 and *Digitale Bibliothek*, vol. 65: *dtv-Wörterbuch Pädagogik*, p. 719 (cf. *Wörterbuch Pädagogik*, p. 182).
- 4 Cf. dictionary entry for “morality”. *Digitale Bibliothek*, vol. 65: *dtv-Wörterbuch Pädagogik*, p. 1525.

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