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BOOK CHAPTER

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care beyond the ending of seeing each other, that there is a continuity of love, linking past and future. If endings can be dealt with in this way, there is an external loss but the past good experience can be internally retained, enabling the child to enter into a new phase of life with greater confidence.

CHAPTER SEVEN



Beginnings and endings in school

Beginning to go to junior school

Many children entering primary school will have been attending nursery and thus have some experience of leaving home for part of the day, being in a group, and relating to staff. All the same, beginning to go to school faces all children with a very new situation. In a good nursery, children will have been given some individual attention and learning will have been acquired through a mixture of work and play. At school, all learning takes place within groups; attention needs to be paid to the teacher, standing in front, presenting knowledge in a much more formal way. The group the child finds himself in is much larger than those he has been used to hitherto. At break-time and mealtimes he finds himself one amongst a crowd of children, most of them older and bigger than himself. Indeed, everything is on a much bigger scale: the building, the play area, the number of classrooms, corridors, toilets. Although most schools offer an introductory day where the newcomers are shown around, there is so much to take in that a lot of the information given will not be absorbed and the child is likely to feel confused and lost in these new surroundings for quite a while. While the child may be excited and impressed by the pictures and the writings of pupils

displayed on the walls, evidence of other children's achievements may arouse too great an expectation about what he should soon be able to do and may also cause worry at how much will be expected of him.

In Germany, where I started to go to school, it was the custom for parents to give the child a huge cone-shaped container full of sweets on the morning of his first day at school. Was this a present to celebrate this exciting event or a consolation prize to sweeten the frightening step into a more grown-up world? Probably both. Family and friends of the family tend to congratulate the child on being big enough now to go to school and while this might make him feel proud, the child may be worried that he is no longer permitted to have baby-like and young-child-like fears. On his first day at school five-year-old Luke announced: "I am a big, brave boy now, my little brother is just a silly little baby, he cries when mummy leaves him." Not only must he not cry but feelings of loss, confusion, fear were treated by him with contempt, as being silly, babyish, and he laughed at those who were anxious. His own presence at being so grown up soon broke down, leading to a refusal to go to school. He was only able to return after a number of psychotherapy sessions in which his fears could be admitted, worked at, and accepted as a part of himself.

Some schools make special arrangements to allow children to settle in. They accept only half the group in the first term and the rest three months later. Children who have been there longer are then encouraged to look after the newcomers. Children may at first be allowed to come for a few hours only, increasing to a full day's attendance once they are happy to do so. Such schools tend to employ teachers who are sensitive to the children's vulnerability and aware of how important it is that the teacher knows the child's name and thus his/her identity. Five-year-old Lily at first made sure every morning that mother had attached her name label to her blouse. After two weeks she announced that she did not need it any more: "My teacher calls me by name, she knows who I am and whom I belong to." To be remembered by the teacher makes the child feel that he/she is not lost in space. Crises centring on feeling lost and abandoned can, if handled with understanding, be very temporary, as in the following example. Cathy, who had been very confident at nursery, became very clingy shortly before she was due to start school. During the first weeks at school she would sometimes suddenly start crying, unable to be comforted. Her thoughtful teacher asked an assistant teacher to fetch Cathy's older sister from another class. Having her

sister next to her, just for a few minutes, was enough to make Cathy feel that she was not abandoned, that her sister was nearby and within call. After her sister left, the teacher kept Cathy sitting close to her. Soon she did not need this special attention and was given a star for "bravery". This she showed off proudly to family and friends, saying that she now liked school.

By no means all problems are that easily dealt with. The transition to school, like every new situation, presents a change which may bring to the fore deep-seated problems, less evident until then. David, for instance, had always found it difficult to separate from mother but within the very protected environment of a small nursery, away from home for only a few hours, his anxieties had been manageable. Being at junior school, one amongst a large group of children for many more hours, brought to light the weak foundations on which his sense of self was built. The teacher referred him for an assessment because of his extreme restlessness, his inability to listen and concentrate. When I saw David, it became clear that he hardly heard what the teacher was saying because his mind was totally occupied with thinking about home and wanting to be with his mother. He felt lost and frightened and his hyperactivity was a way of holding himself together. He was afraid of literally coming apart, his insides spilling out. He told me that he did not like writing because "I am afraid of all the pooh coming out." Such infantile fears showed an inability to symbolise (Segal, 1957); the ink was, in his mind, concretely felt to be the same as "pooh" in his bottom. He certainly needed psychotherapy.

Going to senior school

Parents and teachers are often surprised to find that the move from junior to senior school can be a very disturbing experience. Even choosing the school is a fraught issue, requiring a lot of thought before deciding what kind of school is suitable for a particular child. Some children, for instance, need a very structured setting while others flourish in a freer environment. The academic record of the school tends to be given paramount importance by many parents while the need for encouraging imagination, creativity, and development of individual strengths is often given little consideration. Whatever the parents' views, it is important that the child's preferences are listened to. The decision about which school to apply for is followed by a period of uncertainty about whether

the child will get a place at that school. There is great disappointment when the chosen school does not have a place for the child or when the child does not do as well as others in the exam and interview and is not accepted. To obtain a place in the preferred school is a great relief and a cause for joy. At the same time, it may also make the child anxious about whether he can live up to what he feels is expected of him at this "wonderful" school.

The move from junior to senior school involves quite a dramatic change. Buildings tend to be vast, the number of children maybe in the hundreds or even thousands. The child will find himself one of the little ones among pupils so much taller and stronger than he and this might be frightening.

The headmaster of a senior school who was attending the Tavistock Clinic's course for teachers, told me that he regularly puts aside some time during the first two weeks of the academic year for the eleven-year-old new boys to talk about how they feel about coming to his school. He was astounded to discover how free they felt to talk to him, once they were encouraged to do so. Most of them said they would not tell their mother or father—although some told the grandparents—how they felt about the new school; hardly any dared tell their older brothers or sisters for fear of being laughed at. Most chose pets; as one boy put it: "I whispered it all into my cat's ears." And what is the sort of thing you can only confide to pets? Matters like: "I was terrified of the teacher and especially of the headmaster. I thought I might be examined, cut open like in an operation and that all the mess inside would be seen"; "I was frightened of the other boys, I thought they might be bullies"; "In my dream last night, there was a whole crowd shooting at me"; "I am afraid I'll be failed, be found not to be good enough for this school" (Salzberger-Wittenberg, Williams & Osborne, 1983).

The change to senior school may bring to the fore a problem which has been more or less successfully defended against up to this point, as in the following case.

Six months after joining the senior school Freddy was one day so overcome by panic that he rushed out of the classroom and ran all the way home. Ever since, he had refused to go to school and a home tutor was eventually provided. He had no learning difficulties and after a while he managed to see his home tutor on the school premises, provided his mother accompanied him there and he did not have to join the other children. Some months later the school counsellor referred

Freddy to a child guidance clinic because the boy had threatened his mother with a golf club. Freddy told the therapist that he had been extremely furious with his mother because she had allowed his younger sister her own choice of a television programme while he had wanted to watch a football match. He was a keen and good football player but had dropped out of his team because he feared the other children's taunting of him. He told the therapist that he had enjoyed junior school and spoke of how much he wished he could go back to a place where he was the big one and could tell the younger ones what to do. What had frightened him at senior school were the big boys who bumped into him as they ran down the stairs while he was fighting to make his way upstairs to the next lesson. What emerged during his first meeting with his therapist was Freddy's inordinate rage with mother for giving in to his sister's wishes and ignoring what he wanted. He had previously enjoyed being the boss in relation to her and the younger children in junior school, keeping them from challenging his position. All this suggests that he had never come to terms with his anger with mother for giving birth to his sister, letting her have her turn at being nursed at the breast and getting more attention than he because he was older. He had taken on the role of a nasty older brother who dominated her and kept her in a lowly position. Being at senior school, therefore, not only faced him with being small in comparison to the big lads but left him feeling threatened by the older ones who were experienced as wanting to boss him, humiliate him, and prevent him from coming up to their level of development, strength, and achievement, perhaps even wanting to kill him. Such paranoid fears only lessened when he, with the help of his therapist, became able to begin to take responsibility for his own murderously jealous feelings instead of projecting them onto the older boys at school.

It is possible to provide a modicum of security for newcomers to the school by appointing older boys and girls as guides to the young entrants; also by keeping the newcomers together in the same group and place, thus providing a holding framework until there is some sense of familiarity with the new environment. Usually, the opposite is the case: it is common practice in senior schools (in the United Kingdom) for teachers to stay in their room, thus forcing pupils to take themselves and their belongings to another classroom at the end of each lesson. All this adds to feelings of being lost, confused, uncontained, in bits, lacking a sense of identity. Frequently pupils are assigned to different

groups according to their academic ability in different subjects. Grading of pupils may be useful in some respects but it may mean being with different boys and girls for different subjects, making it harder to make friends and feel part of a specific group. Break-times may be fun but also expose the child to being pushed around in a crowd, mixing with some children who are almost twice his size. The need to feel strong rather than afraid may make it tempting to join a gang. Other children who don't join may live in fear of bullies. Often, too little supervision is provided, especially in breaks and when the children arrive and leave the school grounds. And all this lack of containment and protection occurs at a time when boys and girls are undergoing great physical changes and all the emotional upheaval puberty brings with it, including confusion about their identity.

Competition about academic achievement and sport is often given far more emphasis than character development. There are other schools, however, which consider that the aim of education is to help the whole person. Such schools stress kindness and consideration for other people, respect for children from different backgrounds, different nationalities, different religions. They lay on exchanges between children from different countries. They may involve the children in taking care of the school gardens and teach them about climate change. Youngsters in the sixth form are also often expected to undertake some voluntary work, perhaps visiting or helping old or disabled people.

Endings at school

In many schools, children have a new form teacher each year. Depending on the relationship the child has with the teacher, having a different teacher may be met with disappointment or be welcomed. It is mainly the unexpected changes which evoke considerable anxiety: staff turnover, sickness, changes in the designation of tasks means that the class may temporarily or permanently lose the teacher it has come to know and rely upon. The powerful feelings which such changes arouse are usually disregarded. This is in large measure due to teachers underestimating the important role they fulfil for the children and the group. They are therefore usually unaware of the anxieties that can be stirred up by any change. A class that has had a number of different form teachers in quick succession may undergo serious disturbance. As members of one such group put it: "No one stays with us, they don't seem to like us and it's just not worth making the effort to work hard anymore."

That even a temporary transfer to another teacher can provoke powerful reactions was brought home to me when I asked a group of adult students to reflect on how they felt about my having asked a colleague to take over from me for the next three weeks (Salzberger-Wittenberg, Williams & Osborne, 1983). Here are some of the thoughts they expressed: "Oh dear, we'll have to start right from the beginning again and go back to all that chaos." "It will be strange for you not to be here, we've got used to you now and that feels safe." "You hold the memory of the group." "When you go away the link gets broken." These comments show that an important part of the teacher's function is to provide a safe framework within which learning can take place, for learning requires being open to something new, as yet unknown, and to all the anxieties this arouses. The teacher is felt to contain the group as well as the helpless, frightened aspects of some of the members within it. Without the teacher's containing presence the group and the individuals within it may be afraid of falling apart, losing the link to their more capable selves and past good experiences. Such anxieties evoke infantile anger with the person who causes this situation, as expressed in remarks like the following, expressed by my teachers' group: "You are deserting us." "You don't care about us, you just pick us up and put us down." Or more triumphant remarks, disparaging me for leaving them, like: "You made us work hard, it will be nice to have a rest." "I expect the new teacher will be better, more interesting." These comments were followed by the teachers giving voice to their phantasies regarding the reason for my absence: "You have been looking tired, perhaps you are not feeling well and need a rest." "Maybe you are fed up with us, can't stand us anymore." "Perhaps you prefer another group."

Teachers are usually not aware of the impact that their absence, even for a short time, may have on their pupils. It is not enough to casually mention that one is going to be away for a while. Space has to be given in which feelings of anger and worry can be vented before and after there has been a disruption. If a teacher leaves his job permanently, it needs months of preparation, yet most teachers wait until the last moment to tell the class, sometimes because they feel guilty at abandoning their group. Few teachers allow the pupils to express their feelings. They are often surprised and hurt when pupils become hostile or turn away from them. Enough time needs to be allowed so that it is seen that the teacher survives the onslaught of aggression and denigration she is receiving from her pupils. If this is understood by the teacher as being due to the children's feeling of loss, she will be more able to tolerate

such feelings and be able to continue to be interested and concerned about her pupils. This gives children the chance to compare phantasies of a weak, rejecting, or punitive teacher to the reality of a teacher who goes on being friendly and caring. In such circumstances, it becomes possible to part on good terms and retain a more realistic and often appreciative memory of the relationship.

School holidays

Holidays provide the opportunity for rest, relief from hard work, the chance to engage in activities not available at school, a time to be with one's family and friends. They may indeed be looked forward to with excitement, especially by those whose families offer positive alternatives to school life. But the end of term is also often fraught with anxiety, anger, and depression. It is significant that vacations are generally referred to as "breaks". What is it that is broken? Is it the link to the group and/or to the teacher and the function he fulfils for his class? By the nature of his role and/or personality, he may be experienced as being like a good parent, providing knowledge and care, holding each pupil in mind and carrying the hope for the child's development. The teacher's absence threatens to break this security, bringing with it the fear of being forgotten or dropped out of mind. On moving to another classroom at the end of the school year, children want to ensure that they leave their mark in the room they have been in, stick pictures they have painted onto the wall, scratch their names into desks or write them into books with indelible ink. Some, unable to bear being left, take ending into their own hands, finding some excuse to stay away from school during the last few weeks or days of the term. Others, resentful at feeling left, show their jealousy of whoever the teacher is felt to be with by literally breaking parts of the school's equipment, even smashing furniture or smearing the walls with graffiti. It is a way of saying: "If we can't have you, then we will not let anyone else have anything of value from you either."

Holidays from school involve the loss of being a member of a group. One is no longer part of a unit. Not only is there an actual separation from members of one's group but children's expectations of what the holiday promises may differ considerably. There are those who can look forward to being at home, visiting members of the extended family, having time with friends, going away to interesting places, having fun.

Other kids may not have many or any of these opportunities; they sit at home, lonely and bored. And there are those whose families are fragmented, unstable, financially and/or emotionally impoverished. These children cannot help but feel envious of those who are more fortunate. As a twelve-year-old who was in therapy with me said: "Everybody is asking me where I am going on holiday; well I'm not going anywhere; my mother is working all the time and we can't afford to go away. They ask what I am going to do with my dad but I haven't got one. They ask what presents I am getting for Christmas and I don't want to tell them it isn't going to be anything special. I feel like screaming and kicking those who are so lucky to have so much more than I have."

During a long break when the whole of the teaching staff and student-body go away it can feel as if the totality of the fabric of what one has relied upon has gone. The closed school building, empty and without life, may evoke fears of the place having been destroyed, being dead. Moreover, the absence of the firm structure of the school day, with its timetables, set tasks, and rules, has gone. Breaks throw children back onto their own resources. They give them the chance to use their imagination, to use the time creatively. On the other hand, some may feel at a loss. The freedom that holidays provide exposes them to experiencing an emptiness or chaos within their internal and their external world. Some children become so depressed that they wander around the streets aimlessly or, in order to enliven the dullness of the days, and envious of what others have, engage in delinquent acts. Some turn to drugs or alcohol.

Difficulties in settling back to work after the break are often related to resentment at having been left by the teacher. It is important for the teacher to show that she has kept the pupils in mind, for example, by showing that she remembers what occurred prior to the holiday. This can help to gather the group in and create an atmosphere of togetherness in which learning can again proceed.

Leaving school

Many adolescents yearn to leave school, to be free of the demands and restrictions it has imposed on them. They want to taste freedom from the structure of school life, to be part of the adult world, to be active rather than sit and study all day long. While this is part of a healthy wish to enter a new stage of life, it may also be used as an escape from inner

difficulties, indicating a belief that these can be left behind. Moreover, an over-emphasis on all the benefits of ending school tends to ignore the anxieties connected with ending a time of relative security and now having to take on new responsibilities. Worries about the future are often either denied or hidden from others. Teachers have an important role in helping students and their parents make realistic plans based on their knowledge of the students' abilities and shortcomings. I am reminded of the story a headmistress reported to me. When she told the mother of one of her rather poorly endowed pupils: "I am afraid he is not going to be a high-flyer" (a great achiever), his mother commented: "Oh, never mind, he doesn't like flying." Pupils who have done poorly may be anxious about exams or about the demands that will be made on them by an employer or by further education. They may absent themselves from school because they are depressed and tell themselves that if they have not yet learnt enough, it is too late to do so now that their school days are coming to an end. Others deal with their lack of progress by denying any difficulties in themselves, believing that it is the school that is holding them back from having a more satisfying life. Yet quite a few of these same adolescents tend to come back to their former teacher, seeking reassurance and comfort from him once they have had a taste of the much greater demands made on them in the world of work. Even those who are doing well at school and are given evidence of their achievements when they get the results of their exams, may still have doubts about how ready they are for what lies ahead. Those hoping to go to university may not only fear the competition they will have to face but also the responsibility they will have to take for their studies and an independent life. In as far as they have relied on the structure provided by the school, such as set homework and the attention of their teachers to maintain their interest in a subject, they will find it hard to continue learning when left without such supervision.

Endings of school life tend to be blurred. Pupils who leave before they have reached the final year tend to drift away without their leaving being acknowledged or any event taking place to mark the occasion. For those who complete their time at school, there is an emphasis on preparing the youngsters for the final exams rather than widening their horizons. In the last few months, much of the preparation for examinations takes place at home with only the occasional visit to school. Exam results come out after schooling has ended and therefore there is often no opportunity to discuss the results with teachers and be supported

by them, especially when the results are disappointing. It would seem that after all the hard work which has gone before, the school timetable is organised in a way which ensures that stressful feelings prior and post exam time, thoughts about what has and has not been achieved, and what it means to part after many years of being together, are all avoided. Often there is no leaving event, no rite of passage and no proper saying good-bye from the staff group. Pupils are simply left to say their good-byes to friends and walk away, feeling that their leaving is of no significance to the teachers and the headmaster/headmistress. One wonders what is being avoided. Is it too painful for the staff to say good-bye to their students? Are the students envied for being young and having exciting opportunities in the outside world while teachers stay to carry on with their demanding jobs? Is it too painful for staff to meet with pupils who have failed or not done as well as expected and face the pupils' and their own disappointment? Do teachers want to evade their students' anxiety, and their own, about whether they have been prepared well enough to go out into the big, wide world? Does saying good-bye to another group of youngsters make teachers aware of the passage of time, of getting older, feeling left behind, sad, bereft of the pupils they have come to like and are attached to? Do they therefore prefer to concentrate on the new intake of students they expect next year rather than paying attention to those who are leaving?

Most teachers care deeply about their groups, miss pupils they have become especially fond of and those whom they have helped through difficult times, witnessed their growth, taken pleasure in their achievements. And yet what teachers and students feel about each other is not given space to be expressed and worked through: neither the anger at failure nor the resentments are faced but remain as unfinished business. But neither are gratitude, acknowledgment of good experiences they shared, nor sadness at parting addressed. Seeing that the teachers do not speak about how they feel about the relationship coming to an end, students tend to assume that their teachers don't care that much about them. What a sad situation, what a missed opportunity to learn that it is possible to part in a good, appreciative way.