

A Child's Welcome to Society

«Our big Home»

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*Psychologists, Welcome Persons in "Our Big Home"



Abstract

The young child from the first day of his life needs to prepare along with his parents for his introduction to society. Early socialization and safe transition from the family setting to a peer environment protects the child from a traumatic separation, acting as a form of early prevention. The welcoming of children and parents in a place of communication and interaction aims at accommodating the questions raised by the young children and their parents. It focuses on the first years of life, when everything is still in flux and nothing, or almost nothing, has yet to be consolidated.

KeyWords: early prevention, socialization, welcoming, transitional space, parenthood, boundaries, listening, psychoanalysis

In 1979 psychoanalyst Françoise Dolto, after years of working with infants and children, decided along with a team of psychoanalysts, specialized pedagogues, and social workers to create a place in Paris that welcomes infants and children aged 0 to 4 years accompanied by an adult guardian. A place to live, interact and talk, as she used to say. The idea of this place, that was given the name "Maison Verte" / "The Green House", was to improve the quality of life for both children and their

families. She had observed through her practice that children who suffered from symptoms came late for treatment, often at the time when the child had to enter school-life. Coming into school-life revealed or exacerbated the difficulties that led parents to seek professional advice. She then considered that a place for welcoming parents and children of those particular ages could facilitate, already since infancy, the prevention of further difficulties in the development of the child, difficulties that often rise from tensions and anxiety created by the first years of the child's life and its early relations with its environment (Dumas, 1997).

By establishing the *Maison Verte*, Françoise Dolto proposed a novel way of psychoanalytical intervention in the service of the child, the family and the community. She envisioned a place where psychoanalysis and education could interact in a dialectic relation. A place that would allow one to express something of one's unconscious, mainly due to the receptivity of its people. A place, in other words, staffed by people alert to the mechanisms of the unconscious and a place where parents and children could interact during a game or a conversation and thus, utilizing a relaxing activity to accompany children and parents to discover together the terms of their mutual distancing, that is of the process of growing up (Cadiot, 2014).

Since then, similar places have been founded in France as well as in several other countries around the world, proposing a gathering place for your children within the urban setting and acting through socialization as places of mild early prevention. These are places open to anyone without any criteria and free of appointments and records. Children and their guardians may stay for as long as they prefer and visit the space as many times as they want. They are places where children can interact with one another as well as with the adults and discover social life, thus acting as a transitional space from home to school, from home to society – or, as put by F. Dolto herself, these places help the children to “form a positive view of society”.

From “Maison Verte” to “Our Big Home”

In Athens in 2013 a group of psychoanalysts, psychologists and special pedagogues, all believers in the contribution of psychoanalysis and convinced of the importance of early prevention, make plans for a reception structure inspired by the principles of the *Maison Verte*. Such a place could function in Greece as a place of real primary prevention, welcoming children from the beginning of their life till their school age, a time seen as very sensitive for the children as well as for the family as a whole. Especially during a time of crisis, where families are attacked on many levels,



access to an open place free of discrimination, a place that respects anonymity and the personal histories of the people it welcomes, could provide a way out.

It was named “Our Big Home” and opened its doors to the public in Christmas 2015. Since then Our Big Home has been welcoming children 0 to 4 years old with the mandatory presence of a familial adult. Visits to Our Big Home take place whenever the children and parents wish; they can come as many times as they like and stay for as long as they want within the Home's operating hours. “Our Big Home” is addressed to all families, not necessarily with any problems or concerns; after all, all families with children at this age are facing continuous changes that often generate tension and anxiety.

“Our Big Home” is first of all a social space. It can be the first place where the child may socialize outside the family setting. Children meet their peers, gain the experience of mutuality, of cooperation but also of competition, jealousy, negotiation. They are prepared for a social life without losing the certainty of their identity, which is still very tightly related to their parents. It is the presence of the others, little ones and adults, which helps the child to discover what they are, the daughter or the son of this mother or that particular father, but also a person entirely different from both of them. And this will be better realized when this experience-discovery, this reality, is shared with others (Canu, 2009). Here the child might see another child in the arms of his mother, this might draw his attention and suddenly the child realizes that the same holds for him and his mother. New bonds are created without losing the first fundamental bond in the child's live. In this sense the place doesn't prepare for separations; on the contrary, the little child learns that nobody ever loses his/her mother; she is always there within the child (Canu, 2009).

But mothers (parents/ guardians) as well as the children may discover their unique reality by spending time in a social place together with others at the same phase of life. The parents make acquaintances, meet with people different to them, with other interests, references, childraising methods. They may exchange ideas and discuss the experience of parenthood, express questions about issues that concern them. At the same time, the child may feel free from the weight of parental attention and this may promote his/her coexistence with others. Our Big Home offers itself as a “place”, a potential place for all those exchanges and interactions, a place where a climate is created between children, parents, staff and visitors (Malandrin, 2014). A mother commented once: *“the thing that I like most about this place is that it is so calm. Even though there are so many children here, we can converse in low voice, it's like you hear nothing but the rustle of leaves in a forest”*.

“Our Big Home” aspires to act as a transitional space, that does not divide but rather prepares the necessary transition within a safe emotional context. The compulsory

presence of an accompanying adult provides the necessary emotional safety that every person needs to develop their inherent nature, the desire to discover and explore the outside world. Children feel that their identity, which is rooted in their parents, in the family, remains unscathed, and this allows the interaction with others. The very small child understands that his identity has its roots in the parents, in the family, is not in danger and so they can interact with others undisturbed (Canu, 2009). This way the children feel safe and confident that on their own pace they can progressively separate themselves from the mother by internalizing the maternal object and finally prepare for future separations. It is therefore with the presence of the mother and the right conditions that the child may learn to move away from her. “The ability of being able to be on our own is gained with the presence of the mother” (Winicott, 1965). It is because of this basic principle of Our Big Home, the mandatory presence of the mother – parent, that the child is able to prepare properly. Through play, the separation anxiety of the child is managed when the child leaves the vicinity of the mother to go and play with other children, knowing however that the mother is close and that he may return at any time, see her, share something with her, feel soothed and go back to playing. Dolto said that in those ages the child is still in a stage she calls “Me – Mama” (Moi- Maman). In these stages, if a child is separated from his mother, it is like being cut off from himself (Canu, 2009). Of course, transitions concern the mother as well. They must also get prepared, be given the opportunity to share the potential anxiety that is created by the separation from their child, learning gradually to accept the need for the child’s independence.

A mother who is a regular now at the place notes that it is through “Our Big Home” that she can really visualize her daughter’s growth, the changes that she has gone through, in there, together with the other children, at a place that is a point of reference compared to her house where they spend most of the time being just the two of them.

Other parents, often with children around the age of three, even if they visit “Our Big Home” regularly, always position themselves further away, anxiously watching their children having trouble to interact, to share or claim a toy from other children of the same age. These children have difficulties in separating from their mothers and seem not to be enjoying their interaction with their peers. Mothers often talk about their worries and about the feeling of being trapped in an overly tight relationship. The Welcomer may help them to connect with other parents in the place, to socialize. They might sit together with the child next to other parents, talking and playing all together and thus forming a circle of kids and adults. This image works like a triggering event for the child, as it is for some time now ready to start exploring the place, to connect with other children. Ready to try to interact, to

share, to exchange. Then from visit to visit, both of them – mother and child – form contacts in the small community of “Our Big Home”. They start looking at society in a “positive view”.

Anonymity is also a basic principle in “Our Big Home”. No records are kept. When a child arrives escorted by an adult the Welcomers only ask his first name and write it on the white board, as well as in a spreadsheet that is filled in by the adult when the child leaves the place, for statistical reasons. The surname, on the other hand, relates to a social identity. The social status of the family is of no concern in this place, and this allows us to free ourselves from the fantasy through which we label certain professions, names or surnames. Anonymity helps the differentiation between this place of social prevention and a therapeutic setting. The presence of the child is important only at the moment it happens, and there is no record-keeping. The imprint on the inner world of the child and the parent is what “Our Big Home” wishes from each visit.

The Welcomers that receive the children and their relatives in “Our Big Home” are different every day of the week, a routine that strengthens the transition to the place and not to particular individuals. At the same time, it gives the opportunity for things to be phrased differently each time, while engaging with a different Welcomer, thus promoting multiple perspectives of things. Welcomers receive the families without any particular goal; they are there to listen. They are just there for the child and the escorting adult to facilitate their inter-relation, their meetings in the place and the communication between them. A discreet presence full of understanding, making space for the advent of the “unexpected”. They assist in transfusing to the children and the adults the pleasure of discussion and sharing the small or major difficulties. They show respect to their stories allowing the emanation of free speech. The children, on the other hand, are free to express their own questions in their own way, through their behavior, their play, their mood or through their first words and phrases. Their actions take a meaning, their words have a meaning, and they are heard. Their emotional reactions can be heard, recognized and eventually discussed with the help of Welcomers. However, listening is not enough; we must go where the child is, address the child's question of that particular moment, which may be unspoken. Young children, when somebody engages in conversation with them, tries to explore with them what goes on with them or tries to attenuate their tensions, are very receptive, even if they do not yet possess the ability of the spoken word. Hence the children realize that they can be a person, a person that has a say even before they start talking (Oliver, 2012).

That's why Welcomers talk straight to the child, whatever his age, communicating to the child the feeling that his identity is unspoiled. When a child arrives, escorted by an adult, the Welcomer asks for his name and the kind of



relationship they have with the accompanying adult, and they always address the child by name and via his name the child is connected to the escort person; “she is George’s mother” (Oliver, 2012). The name of the child is written on the board and is heard by everyone present. This way the collective welcomes the individual (Oliver, 2012). It is very important for a child to hear their name. It is also important to hear, without asking, the conscious and unconscious paths that determined the selection of the name. Every name entails, more or less, a certain value that “forms a sort of prediction” for the child. It reveals hopes, expectations, the plans a parent may have for his child. When the parents find themselves able to talk about their expectations and their fears then the genealogic continuum can be unburdened by the weight of a “correction” or a “gratitude” (Oliver, 2012). The importance of a child’s name may become a dynamic narrative for the family, one that leaves space for the child’s individuality to grow.

On a weekday afternoon two sisters visited our place, for the first time, escorted by their mother. Following the routine, one of the Welcomers received the visitors, asked the names of the children and put them on the board explaining that the names are written on the board along with those of all children that are present at the time in the place. The older of the siblings reacted saying that she does not wish her name to be put on the board and she erased it picking up a sponge that was at reachable distance at the bottom of the board. The Welcomer approached the child and talked a little bit about this. She explained that for the people there the names of all the children visiting the place are very important, and this is the reason why the names are put on the board. The girl then said that she does not like her name because it is shorter than her sisters (two syllables against three). It seemed like it was something of great importance to her. Soon the mother also joined the conversation; she revealed that the younger sister’s name came from the father’s side and hence was particularly invested by that side of the family... The conversation remained unfinished as the children started playing, also engaging the mother in their play. Later the Welcomer asked the girl again to allow her name to be written on the wall, since it was the only one missing among those of all the children present in Our Big Home. Her name was written high on the board, not next to her sister’s since more children had arrived in the meantime, and this seemed to relieve her. After a while it was time for them to leave. The family never appeared again on the same weekday. We do not know if they visited the place at another time, if that conversation that seemed to be so important for the child was continued maybe during another shift with another Welcomer or anywhere else. It was important that the child communicated something that was heard, even if the conversation remained open at that particular time.

Sometimes just the presence of a “third party” may help reveal something about the relationship of the child with the parents, which comes out in a very natural way in such places. Indeed, the place itself may act as the third party. **In this everyday context**, through play, a quarrel or a tension regarding the boundaries may spark a conversation that hides great wealth. One may provide the words that are missing from the children's vocabulary and thus help them understand what is going on with themselves. Gradually, through words they may find their own way to deal with difficult circumstances and/or challenges. Words are passed from one to the other and intervene in the relationship between mother and child if this is necessary, assuming a kind of paternal role. While addressing the other, at the same time one maybe addressing a third person who is there and is available to listen (Benvenuto, 2009). The Welcomer may act as the “third person” and help adults explain to the children something that creates anxiety within their relationship; help to ensure that something which might otherwise remain unsaid is actually spoken and heard. Moreover, they may intervene with words when they feel that the space between child and adult is too wide or too narrow (Vass, 1995).

A boy of about 2 used to visit with his mother on the same weekday afternoon afternoon, and always wanted to play at the water tanks, along with other childrens. His mother discouraged him every time, saying that he might catch a cold, and tried to shift his attention towards another game. He insisted till one day he approached a Welcomer asking to be fitted with the waterproof apron. The Welcomer told him that it would be better to discuss this with his mother; they went to the mother and opened a conversation regarding this issue. The mother, reluctant at first, started talking about her worries that had to do with the tremendous responsibility she felt since most of the time she was alone with the child, as well as the fatigue she felt. She was also stressed about her imminent return to work which meant finding a caretaker for the child. The son remained close and listened carefully. He seemed very interested in what his mother had to say, and looked as if something was becoming clearer for him as well. The Welcomer addressed the child and spoke to him for a while about what they were discussing about, she explained to him that his mother was somewhat anxious during this period, with all that she had to face, and that he, the child, was coping very well and was a very capable boy. This seemed to soothe both. The next time they came the child played with the water with his mother's consent, while the mother was able to interact more with the rest of the parents.

Two rules/ prohibitions apply in “Our Big Home”. One is about using wheeled toys only in the designated area, so the rest of the place remains safe for the younger children who may be playing on the floor. The other is about playing with water in the cisterns, where children must wear a waterproof cover to protect them from



getting wet. These “prohibitions” apply to all children and usually the children comply easily because they comprehend that everyone, regardless of age, respects such rules that facilitate the peaceful coexistence and interaction of all. When these rules are announced to the children, the point is not only to let them know what is allowed and what isn’t but also to explain the necessity of the prohibition. Hence, regardless of whether a child is raised under a strict or more relaxed regime at home, they start to realize that outside their homes other rules apply, social rules, and that one place may have different rules from another. Hence the child is gradually introduced to society, learns how to be content while observing certain boundaries that are not there to deprive him of something but to safeguard his relationship with the others.

These rules form the framework of “Our Big Home” and favor the advent of the “unexpected”. Very often, something may be troubling the child but has yet to be formulated, and in the meantime it will attach itself to those particular rules. For example, they may become a reason to start a conversation with the child that may help her in expressing some negative feelings. Some children might not like to wear the waterproof cover, but at the same time they want very much to play at the water cistern. They might struggle with this, they might get angry. But the rule will continue to exist, and it may be the opportunity for the child to express something else that makes him angry. Acceptance of the boundary finally favors the building of a diversified ego, since the child is encouraged to assume responsibility for what he wants as someone who makes his own decisions and not as someone whom other people rule (Canu, 2009). For example, the child may decide to play with something else first until he is ready to wear the waterproofed cover. On other occasions the existence of rule may spark a conversation among parent, child and Welcomer, and sometimes this seems to be enough for the child.

The very existence of these rules is the thing that allows freedom to exist. Boundaries are not meant to curb the children's imagination and creativity. On the contrary, children must follow those rules and at the same time play in any way they want, unfold their creativity, their uniqueness. The children are encouraged to internalize the concept of social rules/ prohibitions that they must follow in their social life forever. They are responsible for their desire as well as for their independence among others within their social context.

A mother proudly explains to the Welcomer the surprise of the nursery's teacher when she found out that her daughter attended kindergarten for the first time. Her daughter, a regular visitor at “Our Big Home”, had quickly adapted to the kindergarten, so smoothly that the teacher assumed it was her second year. The daughter, following the conversation whilst sitting on a tricycle, smiled at the

Welcomer as she crossed playfully with her tricycle by a few millimeters the yellow line that marks the wheeler area. It was as if she wanted in her own way to engage in the conversation, to corroborate what had been said. Smiling, the Welcomer said "Yes, you know very well that you can only go as far as the line". Then the little visitor took a turn and returned towards the area marked for the wheelers.

Although not a place for treatment, not a place with therapeutic aims, "Our Big Home" may have a therapeutic outcome, because it is a place where one is heard (Oliver, 2012). A place where the behavior, actions and words of children have meaning, whereas elsewhere the children's pre-verbal communication may often go unnoticed, be misinterpreted and remain unanswered so that it may end up generating symptoms. Early childhood is the time when the foundation of psyche takes place, the age during which the relationship between parents and child is built, and any distortions during this process are repairable. And since everything during this age is still in flux, a space like "Our Big Home" may act preventively.

In this sense "Our Big Home" may be defined as a space of mild prevention. Prevention not as the sole purpose, but more as the result of a specific condition. The condition created via the welcoming of everybody with everything that anyone brings along, the welcoming of what may arise through the interaction, over a game, a light conversation with the other which may unlock something that can potentially create tension in a relationship, something from the personal history of the child or the family. Prevention not in the sense of identifying or controlling a certain pathology, but by providing an optimal process via which psychological transitions, which are so important for the development of a child, may lead to a healthier introduction to society and social life. Prevention, as Dolto has said, may be accomplished simply by the presence of the child, along with an escorting adult, in a space where his identity is not threatened (Dolto, 2009). On this basis one can everybody gradually can find their place among others, along with the others.

It is the unique entry in the history of the family through contact with society, and subsequently one's entry as a unique individual in society: that is what prevention means for "Our Big House".

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