

THE DEVELOPMENTAL PERIOD



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e-Book 2016 International Psychotherapy Institute

From *Psychotherapeutic Strategies in the Latency Years*

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Created in the United States of America

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The Developmental Period

One of the primary thrusts in psychiatry in recent years has been the investigation of the developmental phases from birth to maturity. Initially, workers pursued an understanding of the phases of childhood through reconstruction based upon observations of adults in states of regression that approximated earlier phases. Though accuracy was achieved for the most part, a certain amount of inexactitude was bound to slip in. For this reason, direct observation of developing children was undertaken. Workers such as Mahler (1969) and Piaget (1945) have pursued this work in research settings, while those who work with children in therapy contributed insights based on clinical observations. Vast amounts of data began to accumulate in regard to the child from birth to 5 years of age, and much attention was paid to the adolescent.

Although the latency-age child contributes the lion's share to the case rolls of clinics and private practitioners of child therapy, little in the way of observation or investigation into the finer points of the development of children of the latency age was undertaken or published. In psychiatric educational programs scant time was assigned to lectures on latency. Honor went to those who, though devoting themselves to the care of the child in his latency years, could recount the details of the latest theories about the first years of life. Worse yet, when it came to explaining the events of latency, the technique of reconstruction was invoked and the latency child's behavior was explained on the basis of theories derived from observations from other ages and circumstances. The events of latency more often than not were approached with preconceived ideas based on experience with other ages.

Latency, a period that direct observation has shown to be a seething caldron of developmental events, was viewed as a wasteland, its features no more than patterns of shadows cast from other zones of development.

The devaluation of the latency period as an area of study has been an intermittent phenomenon. During the last decades of the nineteenth century, when Freud first called attention to the importance of understanding the child as a basis for comprehending the adult, the differentiation of the latency period from early childhood was established. Freud (1950) observed that the time period we associate with

latency is one “during which repression usually takes place” (p. 163). He noted a paucity of material in adult analyses related to sexuality from this period. Thus he reconstructed the latency period as a time of aversion to sexuality. During this time Freud (1905) reconstructed that “the influx of sexuality does not stop even in this latency period, but its energy is deflected either wholly or partially from sexual utilization and conducted to other aims” (p. 178). Reconstructions of mental life in the latency period became a matter of concern. Emphasis ran to the development of morality and defense mechanisms (ego).

Then in 1926, Freud declared that latency occurred when “the sexual drives diminish in strength” (1926c, p. 210). This shift was followed by a de-emphasis of the latency years in reconstructions and observational studies: where drives are diminished, there is little reason to search for their derivatives or for ego functions that defend against them. Latency underwent a latency period of its own that endured for forty years. Latency, a time of waiting and of few beginnings in the development of the person, had little to call attention to itself. Yet given the cognitive growth and sexual maturation that occurs between the end of early childhood and the onset of adolescence, these were clearly not six empty years. Explanations were called for. In addition, more children from cultural backgrounds with fractured or nonexistent latency states came to the attention of psychotherapists. Freud’s early observation—that latency was a time of much defensive psychological activity—was seen to conform more closely to the actual state of affairs.

Psychiatric training programs, child psychiatry, and child analytic programs began to include more material on the events of latency. In essence, sexuality in masked form was now recognized, cognitive maturation was depicted, and the role of a successful latency in preparing for a successful adolescence and a successful adult life was stressed. With the introduction of latency as a developmental period with characteristics of its own, a whole new area of study has been opened on the psychiatric horizon.

There are two definitions for latency that are both useful and commonly used. These are:

1. *Latency as an age period.* Latency is used as a term to represent the time period from 6 to 12 years of age.
2. *Latency as a psychological state.* Latency is here used to describe a period of dynamic defenses during which the child experiences a complex reorganization of the defensive structure of the ego. A state of good behavior, pliability, and educability is maintained as a result of

an equilibrium between defenses and drives. This state is possible because of the evolution and ontogenesis of mechanisms of defense that can produce it. It is not obligatory, however, and is facultatively present at the discretion of the culture in which the individual lives.

The main clinical characteristic of the *state* of latency is a manifest behavior pattern of calm, pliability, and educability. This apparent quiescence encouraged the use of the term latency in describing the entire time period, and seems to give credence to the concept of diminished drive energies as the biological factor in its onset. Actually, the state of latency (calm, pliability, and educability) is the result of an active process of organization of ego functions in the service of social demands. As Bornstein (1951) has pointed out, there is, as a response to the dangers inherent in oedipal fantasy (castration fears), a defensive regression from phallic to anal-sadistic levels of drive organization and associated fantasy structures. This regressive shift is a characteristic of the latency-age ego, dominating the typical latent fantasies and drive activities of latency-age children. Yet the child's behavior is not dominated by overt anal sadism because of the modifying influence of the special ego organizations of latency.

These special ego organizations of latency provide an adaptive alternative to the undifferentiated massive drive discharge patterns typical of anal-sadistic regressions in early childhood. The range of control typical of late childhood, which makes learning possible in the classroom, is achieved through the following steps. When a child has made the defensive regression he is confronted by a situation different from that found in the original anal stage. There are newer and more mature ego mechanisms of defense to use in dealing with anal-sadistic drive energies. These provide for the interposition of modifications of aggression. Among the defenses available are sublimation, obsessive-compulsive activities, doing and undoing, reaction formation, and repression. Their activities produce the psychological state of calm, pliability, and educability that characterizes the latency state. They help the child to adapt to a world requiring social compliance and the ability to acquire knowledge.

In the latency-age child capable of entering into the state of latency, the defenses of reaction formation, obsessional activities (collecting coins, stamps, and shells), cleanliness, symbolization, and sublimation are available to keep in check otherwise disruptive id derivatives. The latency-age child is physically too small to express his aggressive drive effectively in his relationships with adult caretakers. Latency-age children are, with few exceptions, maturationally incapable of achieving orgasm or

ejaculation and are therefore physically incapable of expressing sexual drives effectively through the direct use of a primary organ and physiological apparatus for discharge. There is no way out, in reality, for this biologically celibate soldier-dwarf. Regression and the defenses described above serve as the primary techniques for coping with the sexual drives during the latency period. Fantasy, reaction formations, and carefully monitored socially accepted behavior patterns (i.e., school recess and athletics) become the primary outlets for aggression. The child is expected to surrender and to attempt to please his masters by learning well what there is to be learned.

The patterns of defense learned from a template acquired in latency will influence the permissible expression of the drives during puberty. Thus there develops, as a byproduct of the formation of this part of the latency ego, a deformation of possible derivatives and expressions of the drives during adolescence and adult life.

The defenses that help to produce the state of latency may be overwhelmed if the child's drives are strongly stimulated by seductive behavior, either in direct form or in a form that stimulates sympathetic activation of the drives. In order that these defenses may maintain the state of latency undisturbed, a safeguard is provided to preserve their function in the face of these seductions and traumas. A child with a normal symbolizing function and capacity for symbolization organizes a "structure of latency." The child quells the humiliation of trauma and the excitement of drive activation through seduction, by dismantling the memories of the traumatic event or seduction and the latent fantasies they arouse and actively reorganizing and synthesizing them into highly symbolized and displaced stories (manifest fantasies). By living through these stories in the form of latency play, the child finds a safety valve for his heightened drives, and maintains the state of latency. Thus he gains comfort or revenge without threatening the situation (such as school) in which he hopes to function well or interfering with his emotional equilibrium or adjustment.

Mechanisms similar to those involved in actively producing discharge fantasies and symbols, in which the hero can be covertly identified with the child's own self, can be utilized for passive identification with the myths and legends provided by the child's social group. These ego organizations, similar to the structure of latency, persist beyond latency. Through them the individual acquires, and will continue to acquire, the imagoes for cultural patterns of behavior, ritual, and belief that will guide his life,

his mores, his opinions, and his social reactions for as long as a lifetime.

The manifest behavior observed in latency-age children is an amalgam of the drives, the defenses of latency, and the manifestations of ongoing maturational processes. Maturation influences the achievement of states of latency from as early as the first year of life. Disorders in latency and interferences with entrance into the state of latency can often be traced to pathological interferences in development during very early developmental stages. The developmental lines most related to the latency state are those involved in cognitive and sexual development. The state of latency is in itself a developmental stage whose proper negotiation is necessary for the establishment of socially oriented aspects of the superego and such group phenomena as participation in culture.

Cognitive Development

Of all the precursor cognitive capacities that lead to the development of the state of latency, the capacity to form symbols of a special sort is the most important. There is a regular march of symbolic forms from early childhood on. With each step, the symbol is marked by greater complexity. Prior to the years of latency, the symbols in primary use are ordinary metaphorical symbols. These flourish from 18 to 26 months. They consist of "thought" elements and "thing" elements in the child's field of knowledge and experience that can be used to represent something else. Here the use of a single item in achieving a dual representation is conscious. Such play symbols are the precursors of masking symbols. Masking symbols, sometimes called psychoanalytic symbols, are characterized by their masking of meaning. They first appear at about 26 months of age. They are essential for the development of the latency state. In essence, in their formation, the conscious link between the signifier (symbol) and what is signified (latent content) has been repressed. Through the use of such symbols, latent fantasies can be expressed in the form of distorted manifest fantasies. Treasured loved ones can thus be spared the role of targets of forbidden drives.

The work of the structure of latency during the age period 6 to 12 in developing manifest fantasies, which distort the latent fantasy to the point that is unrecognizable, depends heavily on the capacity to form masking symbols and, in turn, upon the acquisition of abstract thinking, delay, and repression. As early as 26 months of age there are evidences of the development of fantasy distortions for conflict

resolution and drive discharge. This is a precursor of the structure of latency.

It is not uncommon for a young child, as a neophyte symbolizer, to utilize concrete objects found in the environment as symbols around which to build distortion fantasies. The use of concrete objects as symbols thus precedes the use of spontaneous verbal symbols in the creation of distortion fantasy. As a parallel to this, the early latency child uses found symbols encountered in stories for the discharge of his own drives. Because he has not actively created the symbol, this is called passive symbolization. Symbols and tales passively acquired become the prototypes and precursors of the spontaneously produced masking symbols and fantasies of the state of latency.

An important step in the first year of life is the development of the capacity for memory, especially recall memory, which consists of recognition of that which has been previously experienced in the absence of any concrete representation or reminder of it. Eventually this skill reaches the point at which a child is able to evoke an image of a mother who is separated from him in the absence of reminding stimuli. Recall memory contributes to what is called object constancy, providing the ability to comfort oneself with a psychic representation of a departed object. It is based on the ability to retain images and concepts for spontaneous recall at moments when it is required.

This phenomenon becomes fully effective by the third year of life. A related phenomenon, also occurring during the early years of the latency age is basic to its development: an improvement in the synthetic function in relation to the ability to integrate the self in society. Differential patterns of behavior in specific situations, such as school or recess, are acquired, retained, and recalled in appropriate situations in response to concrete cues as well as spontaneously. This occurs in the period between 4 and 7 years of age. Consistent behavioral responses ensue, resulting in behavioral constancy. This facilitates the ability of the child to function in the classroom.

Through this he can acquire and retain admonitions based on the precepts of the parents and other important adults and examples acquired from tales and myths. Information about expected patterns of behavior is gathered, integrated, and retained by the child, becoming part of the ego ideal. The ego ideal calls for pliability, calm, and educability. Control over the latent sadomasochistic drive organization of latency becomes mandatory in order to conform with this ego ideal. In conformance with these demands,

the group of defenses consisting of obsessional responses and reaction formation produce the calm of the latency state. Its maintenance is effectuated and supported by activation of the structure of latency, whose product, play, is itself governed by patterns acquired through the mechanisms of behavioral constancy. Channeling of energies and recognition of permissible locations for the more direct discharge of drives, such as school recess, is thus maintained.

Patterns of social behavior guiding the discharge of drive, which have been learned in this way during latency, dominate the development of patterns for discharge of drives in adolescence and adulthood. This mechanism aids in the acquisition of superego elements during the latency time period and is part of the work of latency. These superego acquisitions are epigenetic products of the development of the state of latency. Other contributions to the superego that occur during the early latency time period include the internalization of parental imagoes of the oedipal phase, which accompanies the passing into repression of the Oedipus complex. This is, in part, a concomitant of the regression to anal-sadistic drive organization.

A third contributor to the superego is a shift in the style of memory, in about the fifth and sixth years of life, from the predominance of affectomotor to verbal concepts in memory. In this shift, memory elements that relate primarily to recall of things, feelings, and experiences in a primarily visual and sensory context are superseded in part by a memory style that is primarily conceptual and verbal. Drives that formerly had found expression through topographic regressions (i.e., sensory recall of prior experiences organized into fantasy content or in organized motor syntaxes appearing in play) are forced to find conceptual verbal expressions. Fortunately, myths, tales, and concrete symbols are provided by the environment (society) and can be used for the expression of these drives.

As elements of the verbal fantasy have become familiar enough to the child for him to form identifications with the content, subtle messages related to expected patterns of behavior are conveyed to the child. These undergo internalization and incorporation into that portion of the superego governing social behavior and ethical relationships between people. The contents and identification thus acquired are retained through the mechanisms that produce behavioral constancy. The fact that these retained identifications can be represented and recalled verbally, indeed that they can be expressed, codified, checked, reinforced, and validated in words, forms the basis of social intercourse and makes it possible

for the individual to participate in moral philosophy and to comprehend law.

During latency many verbal concepts are remembered in association with high charges of affect. Defensively, they are excluded from consciousness. These concepts are the ones that find their way into the masking manifest fantasies of the state of latency. Through a process utilizing symbols that have other meanings, their latent import is hidden to such a degree that the painful affects are lost to consciousness. Also lost in the bargain is the possibility of working through, recognizing, and modifying distortions through the correcting and validating effects of verbal communication. As a result, latency play, though quite informative in psychotherapeutic situations, becomes counterproductive once its living through and discharge functions have been served. Technically, it is necessary to work back from the fantasy to the words of the original conflict and then to work it through psychotherapeutically. The more a child has matured into adolescence, the greater will be his tendency to spend longer periods of time in verbal, conceptual discussions rather than in the defensive and therapeutically diluted world of latency state play.

Once a socially approved doctrine of behavior or heroic attribute has been internalized, it is cathected with narcissistic energies and becomes identified with the individual. Thus is established the social identity that will cause the child to reject new inputs as foreign. Rejection of foreign inputs persists until early adolescence, when an upsurge of exploratory projections occurs. Such adolescent explorations are aimed at the acquisition of culture elements not approved of by the parents and result in the establishment of superego elements in conflict with parental views.

A modification in creativity occurs during the transition from prelatency to latency. The prelatency child is considered more creative in that he is freer in his concepts, while the latency child seems more bound to societally dominated, directed, and indicated themes. Yet from another viewpoint the latency child could be considered more creative, for he is richer in representations and symbolizations used in the creation of stories and works of art. During the latency years, cognitive shifts have occurred such that the child expresses the resolution of conflict through fantasy on a culturally dominated, verbal level; the child is locked into verbal representation of verbal memory. For him, the rich tendency to use verbal symbols from a pre-established vocabulary informs the quality of creativity. In contrast, the prelatency child deals more with an awareness in memory dominated by affective, sensate, affectomotor elements.

Ideas of things are communicated in affect-laden words and in play, less dominated by cultural patterns than the expressions of latency-age children. They are far less influenced and modified by repressions and as a result their symbols are less rich. The concepts of the prelatency child are more free; the stories are transparently about himself and his experiences, while the latency-age child tends more to tell stories based upon tales he has heard. The prelatency child lives close to his feelings and to his memories of feeling, whereas latency-age children—especially those in a state of latency—are usually far from their feelings and live in terms of verbal memories whose patterns are dominated by the expectations of others. An intensification of this shift affecting the symbolic forms used is characteristic of the cognitive changes accompanying the transition from latency into adolescence. The role of the structure of latency in modifying and hiding affects produces a latency-age child who appears hardly to mourn or to experience depression.

Within the latency time period there is a turning point with the development of concrete operational thinking. This Piagetian term describes a step in the improvement of reality testing which begins at $7\frac{1}{2}$ years of age. Simple and concretely conceived scientific principles (abstractions) can now be appreciated and applied to concrete situations. The importance of this development to the state of latency is that fantasies, which are under the impact of improved reality testing, become less useful for discharge of drives. A substitute object satisfies less when love for a real object becomes possible. Magical fulfillment through fantasy succumbs to reality. With the development and strengthening of concrete operational thinking, the use of fantasy created by the structure of latency as a means of discharge thus becomes less satisfactory. Fortunately, with adolescence there is a concurrent shift in object to nonincestuous peers, as well as maturation of the primary organs for sexual gratification. As a result, after fantasy declines as a means of drive gratification (for all but neurotics and the creative), the world of reality can be met with physiological capacities for the articulation of drives.

The normal latency-age child shifts, at about 9 years of age, from a cathexis of the parent as a primary arbiter of social behavior to an appreciation of the environment and the social situation in which he lives. The acquisition of self-concepts and identifications through internalization of experiences with objects in the environment are pertinent to the future role of the child in society.

In late latency, modification of identifications occurs when there is comparison of fantasy contents

with reality. It is not uncommon for a child, during periods of guilt, to project punishing parental images into the shadows of dusk. Comparisons can be made between the realities of the world and the contents of these projections. In those with appropriately modulated narcissism, a reassuringly benign reality may result in modification of the original fantasy and of the internalized self-punitive concepts upon which it was based.

Sexual Development

Most drives, such as the hunger drive, have, from birth, an organ and object for discharge (i.e., mouth and food). For the sexual drive, the maturation of this apparatus awaits puberty. Latency-age sexual experiences are attempts on the part of the organism to express drives in the absence of a mature physiological organization for discharge, namely an exclusive effector organ and an object. In early childhood the sexual drive found outlet through a sort of parasitic arrangement whereby other organ functions, such as sucking with the mouth to obtain food, were also used as a pathway for sexual discharge. Such a parasitic arrangement is called autoerotic. Subsequently, excretion and manipulation of parts of the body, including the genitals, served in a similar capacity vis a vis the sexual drive. With the development of conceptual thought during the period of 18 months to 3 years, concepts (both affectomotor and verbal) become an erotic pathway, in the form of fantasies.

By the time the child reaches latency age, although he may occasionally discharge through genital stimulation with rare climax or even with an object in reality, he expresses sexuality mostly through distorted manifest fantasies by means of movement of the whole body in play activities. All early latency children have some erotic sensory response to stimulation of the genitals. A small percentage even have the capacity for orgasmic-like responses. Because of parental pressures, reactions to the content of fantasies, and the strength of sensations experienced, there is a tendency for early latency-age children (6 to 8 years old) to limit direct genital stimulation and to deal with intensifications of drive through the creation of fantasies and action for discharge according to the patterns described above under the structure of latency. Direct stimulation, though still available, becomes less and less common.

In late latency (9 to 12), with the advent of heightened sexual sensations from the genitals and the acceptance by the superego of more realistic objects in fantasy, an increase in genital masturbation occurs.

The advent of ejaculation and orgasmic competence signals the maturation of the organ for the discharge of the sexual drives. Concurrently there is a shift in the thought representations of the acceptable objects. In early childhood these were the parents. In early latency the symbolizing function produces amorphous fantasy figures, often in the role of attackers or historical figures. In late latency, realistic figures appear. In late latency and early adolescence, thinly masked representations of parents appear in fantasies that accompany masturbation, soon to be replaced by mature objects in the form of nonincestuous peers who appear first in fantasy and then as partners in sexual play and related activities. When this step has been firmly established, all vestiges of latency have passed.

Conclusion

In spite of neglect in recent years, the concept of latency as a developmental stage in child development has persisted. The term and concept describe a discrete clinical phenomenon that must be taken into account if the nature of childhood is to be comprehended in its entirety.

The latency state has always intruded itself into the awareness of mental health scientists in the form of unexpected behavior that called for an explanation. The explanations have resulted in the various theories of latency. At first it was noticed that adults in analysis do not bring to their sessions associations that reflect sexuality during the latency time period. This caused the pioneers of psychoanalysis to observe children of this age and to attempt reconstructions of the factors that make the difference. At first explanations of latency emphasized ego function. In time, observations of children revealed periods of quiet, calm, pliability, and educability to which the term *latency*, derived from the fact that sexual memories from this period remained latent in adult analyses, was then transferred. Calm was then equated with latency. Recently (Sarnoff 1976) I have described a disparity between the memory organizations of the latency child and the adult. In the analyses of adults, this disparity has resulted in difficulty in recalling the affectomotor (memory in action) and symbolically distorted (fantasy) memory organizations to which the latency child resorts in time of trouble. Through the creation of fantasies embodying symbols and whole-body activity (memory in action in latency-age fantasy play), the child is able to maintain latency calm, quiet, and educability in the face of stress. There is thus an intrinsic link between the paucity of verbal memories for sexuality during the latency period as reflected in adult analyses and the quiet of the latency state. The tendency to maintain calm by turning uncomfortable

memories into symbols and play activity later creates problems in associative retrieval of memories for this period.

That there is, in the latency years, a process with consistent intrinsic characteristics defined in terms of ego functions (the mechanisms of restraint and the structure of latency) can no longer be denied or ignored. This process of ongoing development during the latency years may be defined in terms of normal and pathological aspects of both functional and maturational elements. Clinically normal and pathological characteristics may be delineated and may be of use to the therapist in evaluating the underpinnings of aberrant behavior.