When a Child Has Problems, It's Not Always the Parents' Fault

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"Case discussions" are a type of pedagogical conference which can remind one sometimes of police briefings in those criminal cases at the stage where one has fixed upon a perpetrator, who, owing to lack of evidence, cannot yet be arrested. Under strong suspicion: the parents. Who else? In the old criminal novels, the murderer was always the butler. When a child gets out of line, the parents are always to blame.

I remember the "case" of Selma, eight years old. The problem: extreme shyness. The causes were discussed and, in addition, what remedies might be provided. After the problematical behavior was described a bit more closely, the rounds turned quickly towards analysis of the perpetrator: overly concerned mother, uncommunicative father, tensions in the marriage, and so on.

At some point I brought up the idea that one would really do a child an injustice to regard her as merely the product of her parents. In addition, these people, whom I had had an opportunity to meet beforehand, seemed to me to be quite reasonable. This caused surprise at first. One participant said, "From nothing comes nothing. In the first seven years of life children are most significantly imprinted [*geprägt*] by their parents." Wait a minute. Is that right?

We know of the central importance of imitation in the first seven years. Imitation, however, does not mean being imprinted. The child's urge to imitate is by no means hindered by the child's urge to self-creation. On the contrary, the impulse towards imitation serves the impulse towards self-creation. Healthy imitation has initiative and is discriminating. The child much prefers to imitate that which she can deeply inwardly affirm and ignores what she doesn't like. Through "imprinting" or coercive and suggestive influences, the being of imitation—the first form to appear of the free human being—is repressed.

I experienced Selma's parents as appropriately permissive in their basic attitude and their style of child-rearing. Obviously Selma had taken on the best of both: from her father, a calm, collected seriousness; from her mother, a kind, careful manner of dealing with people and things.

We finally agreed not to speculate further about the parents, but rather to turn our attention to Selma. I could report from the case history that from her birth, Selma was a quiet, somewhat inward child, easily frightened, but also very creative. Among her most distinctive characteristics were a wonderfully dry sense of humor and her musical talent—characteristics that both the mother and the father were lacking.

To no longer view her as if she were simply a formation of "imprints" brought us closer to Selma. In the end we discussed possible ways to work with the parents, who were, after all, quite trustworthy, to find careful assistance for Selma. For, in fact, she was very shy.