

# SOCIAL INTEREST IN CHILDREN

Rudolf Dreikurs

May I perhaps first try to explain to you what social interest is at least in my own opinion? It is a very poor translation of the German word, *Gemeinschaftsgefuehl*, a feeling of communion, a feeling of belonging. This feeling of belonging is of extreme importance. People have stated that it was Adler alone who so far gave us any indication about what is normalcy. The term normality was usually based on two unreliable assumptions. First of all, the person is normal if he is not sick, which is a negative definition. Second, it is normal when you are like anybody else. Normalcy is like average. A positive identification of what is normal has been missing. And I think the people who have pointed it out are correct that Adler's concept of the *Gemeinschaftsgefuehl* is a basis for normalcy.

We can say that only to the extent to which a person feels belonging is he capable and willing to function fully; is he capable and willing to contribute and to participate in a give and take. Only when he feels belonging does he have, as we call it, a "high tolerance level" that means he can take in his stride whatever may come without withdrawing or without becoming antagonistic. Adler always said that we are constantly tested to the extent to which we feel belonging, to which we have a social interest. And the crisis situation which comes to every person on a different level and in a different situation is just the limit of our social interest.

Now this social interest is not inherited as such. But what we have inherited is a potential to develop this feeling of belonging. It is the expression of millions and billions of generations of people who had to live together. We had to have the capacity to share, to communicate. Many students of child development overlook the fact that the very infant, almost from birth on, is receptive to and willing to go into social relationships. We can see that an infant of four weeks old can already manipulate his environment. He is not merely a parasite, he is not driven by instinct, he is responding to social atmosphere. He will be happy and unhappy in line with the social atmosphere around him. He is truly a social being.

Therefore, we can say that, what makes our society so neurotic is the limited feeling of belonging which we develop in this society. Particularly in the present competitive strife, where man becomes man's enemy and the closer we are the more we fight with each other for the sake of our individual superiority, we are driven by the fear that if we are not superior, then we are inferior and we are worthless. We are living in a society where we never are sure of our place; a society where we are deadly afraid of being failures. And we are mostly concerned with elevating ourselves to safeguard the sentiment of being a failure. Therefore, we are vulnerable.

It takes unusual experiences in our present generation to create a feeling of belonging, a feeling of having a place. And it is interesting to note that the strongest sentiment of belonging is usually found only in adversities. When the people in London were subject to the blitz, when they lived under the most horrible conditions anybody can imagine, when they left their houses in the morning they did not know if they would come home alive, or whether they would be

maimed, or their relatives would survive, or their place would still stand, they lost the distinction between the work of the lady and the prostitute and all were human beings in the same boat. And under these most horrible conditions was a peculiar feeling of exhilaration because, for the first time in their lives, modern man in his bomb shelters lost the distinction of superiority and inferiority and all were equal.

...I don't know how to describe this...I had a situation in Israel where I had this class for principals. Some of them had a class with me last year. And last year they said they should continue their work. And one of the principals got up and said, "It is so deplorable. Only when Dr. Dreikurs comes here do we all get together and if he is not here everyone goes for himself." And I said, "It is quite embarrassing for me to be put in the same category with the Arabs. Because the Israeli get together only when the Arabs make war and only when I come, and I hope you will learn to get together without the Arabs and without me."

One needs something to get people together which normally is not in existence. As I said before, under adversities they would feel much more belonging to each other, without these hostilities, these suspicions, these antagonisms created by our competitive atmosphere. And so the question then arises, although I have never been asked about it, never spoke to it directly, "What can we do to develop a social interest in our children?" And as I said before, merely raising this question puts our whole work in a different perspective. And I think we should keep this perspective in mind. What is the goal of our education?

I spoke with somebody in the ministry in Israel who said, "The goal of education is knowledge." Fine. Nothing wrong with that. But how can you impart knowledge to children who don't want to learn, who don't want to participate, who refuse to grow? Therefore, it seems more and more as Adler said, "The teacher who wants to teach his class has to win the children and has to work on their social adjustment." One interesting experience may fit herein. How we have to open the eyes of the teachers to other obligations besides those of teaching the three R's. At the University we are in charge now of the training of the counselors. And the person now in a position to appoint the professors to one program appointed one of our friends who is a teacher of remedial reading but does it in a very unique, stimulating way that has surprising results. And she tried an experiment. Instead of teaching her students merely remedial reading, she got an idea. She asked the teachers, "Do you think that your class is interesting?" And they looked up and they thought about it. In spite of the fact that when you talk with children, the one requirement they have of a good teacher is that he should be interesting, they are not willing to learn when it is dull or boring. The students know the importance of having a class interesting only the teachers never thought of it. So she asked the teachers, "Would you try to make your classes interesting?" And then something very strange happened. Within, I think, a few weeks or months or so they all reported how different their classes were. They were really very interesting.

I don't know whether you realize the significance of this. Every teacher could make his class interesting if he would only think about it, but who thought of it? One is here to teach, not to make it interesting. In other words, all it takes is to think about the need to make it interesting and something happens to you. You forget then about teaching and about the subject and all that, but you begin to think in a different dimension. Make it interesting.

And so the same can be said perhaps for the task of parents and of teacher to create a feeling of belonging. I never used this term. I always spoke about the need to integrate the class, which is actually the same. Integrating means "making each one of the children a part of the educational process". In contrast, what happens to a teacher who does not know how to integrate a class. She will then always deal with the broken up class, the distinction between the good and the bad, the slow and the fast, and she doesn't know the technique, how to integrate it. The process of integration is identical with the process to give each child the feeling of belonging. Now how do we go about it?

First of all, and that is usually the first step, we must know what not to do. Unless we stop doing the things which inhibit this feeling of belonging, no positive procedure would be possible. Now what interferes with the feeling of belonging? And this Adler has pointed out clearly, and we Adlerians follow his lead. You can't fully feel belonging anywhere when you feel inferior, inadequate. It prohibits your sentiment of belonging, of feeling of worth, because you doubt your worth. So the first thing you have to avoid everything which humiliates, which degrades, which weakens the feeling of worth. It is one of my pet phrases that I say our present methods of raising children constitute a series of discouraging experiences for the child. It is rather strange that opposite ways can have the same results. Whether you humiliate a child, criticize him, distrust him, boss him, or whether you spoil him and do everything for him and let him get by with everything, it has the same effect. It deprives the child of the experience of his own strength. And, therefore, it discourages him. Whatever we do in school to correct the child in criticism, in pointing out their faults, it discourages the child and deprives him of the sense of his own value and, therefore, his feeling of belonging. I came to the conclusion that it is very dangerous to bring to teachers' attention the importance of avoiding discouragement. When I tell them, "Watch tomorrow when you come to your class, and catch yourself when you discourage a child." And then I caught myself and said, "For Heaven's sake, what do I do to these poor teachers? If they would stop discouraging the children, they would not know what to do because their whole practice consists of discouraging children, pointing out what is wrong."

We have to revise our book, *Psychology in the Classroom*, because the college book department of Harpers' is taking over and one of the many suggestions for changes, on of the changes we will make is to make clear that one does not have to point out to a child what is wrong in order to make him find out what is right. That we do not have to continue in this world of mistakes that teachers generally live; always concerned with correcting and preventing mistakes. We have to avoid all that which degrades a child which gives him more and more the feeling that he has no place he is not worthwhile.

Now what happens when the child feels he has no place? He then switches to the useless side. He uses his reference group, as we call it, where he may have a place without the burden of behaving himself and studying. He is then doing all his tricks which we know to give him a false sense of belonging. If he can keep you busy, if he can defeat you, if he can hurt you, if he is left alone, or later on if he joins a subgroup of adolescents against society, he has a sense of belonging but at what expense? And what is perhaps more sad is that these forms of belonging are based on anti-social, anti-educational attitudes.

The child may, perhaps, feel very secure in his own gang or in his own teenage group, but he does not feel secure in our society. He takes a stand against the society. He is at war with adults to various degrees. Therefore, this sense of security is a false sense of security because it is not embedded in this love of mankind, in a desire to contribute. On the contrary, it is based on the assumption, "I have a place if I don't contribute, if I only look for myself, if I look for fun, if I look for my personal power, and I don't care what else happens." But it is even more sad when we find this sense of belonging on the positive side through students who really contribute, who seem to hold the schools against the bad ones. But are they really good students because of a sense of belonging, of a social interest in mankind, or are they only good students because they think about their own glory, how superior they want to be? Even those who seem to act in line with social interest, who seem to contribute to the welfare of society, very often do it for very much neurotic personal reasons, only for their own sake of glory or their own superiority.

The number of people who are really enjoying their lives on the basis of what they contribute, on what they can participate with is minimal in our society, particularly in the big cities. Perhaps in the country you have a stronger feeling of belonging to the soil, to the family, to a situation in which you find yourself. And so we have to think in terms, "What can we do to open the gates to our children that they can fully have a sense of belonging in their home, in their schools, and in our society." And I venture saying that this point of view deserves perhaps more of our attention than we have given it before. Whatever we suggested, whatever we do, comes around in the final analysis to this opening of a sense of belonging, but is not directly, not consciously connected with this striving.

...I am very grateful that I was invited here today to address myself to this all important question, "How can we help children to feel belonging?" Now the first prerequisite is almost impossible to achieve unless we have a change in our social values, unless we have a revolution in our society. You cannot feel belonging if you don't feel that you are good enough. And it is this very feeling of being good enough which is held away from our children. No child grows up with the feeling that he is good enough, because we all suffer from the illusion that the only way to stimulate progress is to impress people with the fact that they are not good enough as they are. Maybe when they learn, when they make better grades, when they do this and that, maybe then they will belong.

People simply do not know the facts of life. Anyone who tries to find a place for himself will never find it, regardless how many degrees, regardless how much money, power, beauty, success, he may have amassed. Because unless he first realizes that he has a place by his very existence, if he doesn't realize this, no attribute, no conquest, no skill, no achievement will give him the feeling of being good enough. Whatever he may achieve, it may not be good enough or enough of it, or whatever he may have gotten he may lose it.

It is this aspect of our society which makes us so neurotic, living in a neurotic society. As I pointed out in some papers, psychotherapy, counseling means fundamentally to extricate the child and the adult from the faulty values of our society, which we fortify in our colleges and our school more and more. This over-ambition which we instill in them which inevitably leads to a sense of failure. "If I can't be the best, I am the worst." And the schools contribute directly to

the neurosis of our students. The harm which we are doing to our students is indescribable. It is hard to believe what goes on that people don't see.

I have a friend from Israel who came to study with me to get his degree. He had difficulty with the language. And so he could not understand something and went to a colleague and said, "Could you explain it to me or could I have your notes?" "No." He couldn't believe himself. He was a nice guy who had plenty of time so why didn't he do it? So he asked another friend, "Would you explain this to me?" "No." Finally, he found an Israeli girl who understood him and he said, "Look what goes on. What is going on in the school?" She said, "They may fail if you succeed because so and so many have to fail. And if they help you do better they may fail on it." This is what our schools at this time and day do to students. So and so many have to fail. Your achievement doesn't depend upon what you are doing; it's what the others are doing because you are graded on the curve. Pitching one against the other one and from the time they are small children and pouring it on, more, more, more.

I remember one case of a 12 year old girl. The mother came and said, "She doesn't apply herself. She doesn't do well enough." Actually, the child wasn't too much interested in studying and she would barely do her homework. And I spoke with her. And I immediately realized what it was. The child was over-ambitious and so I asked her to tell me, "You don't feel you are good enough for this school?" "No." "Why are you not satisfied?" "I could be better." "Well how good do you think you have to be to be good in your class?" And after a little prodding it came out, "I think perhaps the first or second in my class would be good enough." And when I told it to her mother that she has to learn to be good enough as she is, she said, "The teacher who complains to me that my girl is not working up to her capacity is in the subject that my girl got an A-. Please, it was not good enough because you could have made an A+. The whole approach which we have in our classes stirring up this false ambition that if you can't be the best academically, scholastically, athletically, then you have to switch to the useless side.

These mental tortures, and particularly at universities, are growing a generation of people who have to find their place. It is hard to believe what can go on without anybody crying out loud, "Let's stop ruining our kids. Let's stop giving them the feeling that they never can live up to what we the parents, the schools expect from them."

First of all, we have to convey to the child that he has a place. He may abuse it, he may provoke us, he may have the wrong idea about having a place unless you first can treat each one with this respect for what he is and not for what he could be. There are too many teachers who try to encourage the child "You could be so good, which means you aren't." Always implying, "Eventually you might amount to something." It is hardly possible for most of our parents and our teachers even to visualize that one could be satisfied with a child as he is unless he is an especially good student, a particular leader, or whatever else you demand from him. Our universities are just as bankrupt as our schools in general. And there are more and more people who question whether all this time of training which we give is worth it. There are many others without this training who are much better off, without going to colleges maybe have much better successes in life. We have to reevaluate, reconsider our whole educational methods before we can stimulate in children this feeling of an inner freedom and the responsibility by choice and not by obligation. It requires a change in our whole method of dealing with them at home and in

school. It is a major revolution in line with the major revolution in science, in our social values in general, in our social organization.

Now how can we then convey to children this respect? And please, I have to say here to make it clear; indulging children does not show respect for them. When you do for a child what he can do for himself, you deprive him of his strength because you do not believe in his strength. I am not in favor of permissiveness. Permissiveness is not respect, it is disrespect, too. Because unless you have the confidence in a child that he can behave himself properly and don't let him get by when he does something wrong, then you have no respect for him. You have to have respect for yourself, too, and set the limit. But people don't know how to set limits because they talk too much and you can't be firm if you talk. You have to learn to be quiet and firm and friendly and this is what our parents don't know and our teachers usually don't know. They are either firm and not friendly or friendly and not firm; and when they are firm and friendly they are never at the same time.

Think what we have to learn in our relationships to establish this mutual respect that is fit for the child and can show our respect to him. We have to learn to listen to the child. At the present time there is only a one-way relationship about talk. We talk and the child is supposed to listen. It doesn't mean that the child doesn't like us to talk, he likes the attention, but he will not listen. We have to learn to have a two-way relationship. And this we have to do with individuals as well as in groups. We have to have the family counsel where we listen to the child and give him a feeling that he is important, that he has something to say, that he can, not only must, take on responsibility. And we have to do the very same thing in our classrooms. Where we have to discuss with children as our partners what has to be done, including what has to be done with their disturbances, with their failures. We have to share the responsibility with them in our group discussions

The most important point is perhaps this: instead of blaming children for having qualities of freshness, laziness, of aggressiveness, all kinds of bad things, we have to realize and appeal to the children's realization of their own decision making. Man is a decision-making animal. But we don't know it. We still believe in our slave mortality that we are either driven by our hereditary endowment, by our emotions, by our irrational unconscious, or something so that we really are not quite responsible for what we are doing.

We can't feel belonging unless we realize that we have a chance to decide what to do good or bad. And that we are a part of what everybody belongs. We have to learn to see life not in admiration of something strange, in a towering waterfall, or a snowcapped mountain, or in a thunderstorm. We have to realize that we are a part of this life that we belong in this life because life is in us. We have to stop thinking "here am I and there is society," and realize that we are part of this society by our existence. The society is not outside of us, that we are a part and only in this way then when we can stimulate this sense of inner freedom where we are no longer confronted with the question of what others want us to do but really face the issues, "What do we decide to do." Only then can we feel belonging in a world which gives us a part as participants but no longer makes demands. We have no autocracy. We have no powers. The demands which are made are irrelevant because nobody feels obligated to give in. Everyone feels free today to make his own decisions.

So then I would like to conclude with this suggestion: When we deal with children at home and in our school; do we give them this feeling that they are worthwhile? And they are. Do we give them this feeling that we can accept them, which means appreciate them? Do we give them this feeling that they are satisfying or not satisfying? That means that we don't have to have special achievement to be worthwhile but that we can enjoy them? Perhaps the first important revolutionary step for parents and teachers to take is: when a child misbehaves, when he doesn't study, when he does everything wrong let us perhaps appreciate the effort which goes into being wrong. The sacrifice which this takes, the persistence.

I think that we have no chance to get out of the dilemma, unless we stop this moral and intellectual snobbishness where we look down on people. We no longer have the superiority of the white man, no longer the superiority of the nobility, no longer even the superiority of masculinity, but we have now created a new bugaboo of superiority which is the moral and intellectual superiority. And as we pushed people down before they were low born, or because they were women, or colored, now we push them down when they are not good enough. I think that this moral and intellectual superiority and snobbishness prevents us from recognizing the dignity and respect for an individual who decides to be different. First we have to approve his right to belong before we can hope to change him to be different.

I think I told you probably all and may I repeat it, this experiment which was made in Oregon about how to stop high school children from smoking. I think that I had something to do with it because I think our influence in Oregon about teachers and so on is quite definitely established and is in line with our thinking. Somebody had the idea how can one stop children from smoking? And they broke the class into four groups. In the first group they discussed with the children everything that is wrong with smoking; why it is wrong, dangerous, and so on. Did it have any impression on them? No. They were still smoking. In the second group they were a little bit smarter. They told the students, "Go home and tell your parents why smoking is no good." The children did it with great delight. But they didn't stop smoking. In the third group they went about it in a scientific way. They tried to figure out in dollars and cents how much it would cost when they went on smoking so and so much, how uncomfortable they would feel when you can't smoke somewhere, eventually the danger of cancer and so on. It didn't make an impression. In the fourth group they stopped to smoke. And that is our Adlerian paradigm in helping people, in promoting new ideas. What did they do? They first wrote down all the benefits of smoking. It makes you feel big, you are not a sissy when you smoke, you can defeat your parents, you can defeat the order of your school by secretly smoking, all the benefits. And then they pointed out all the disadvantages. And then they left it to them to decide. And then the children decided not to smoke.

Now what does that mean? It means the end of this hope for moralistic preaching and getting anywhere. It means an understanding of the private logic of the sense of doing something wrong. It means swinging with them and acknowledging their ideas as valuable even though they may be wrong from the point of your society or school. And then give them alternatives. A child who doesn't study must first get the appreciation for the reasons why he doesn't study. If he doesn't behave, we have first to see him how wonderful he is in defeating us. We have to give him credit for what he deserves credit by defeating us so soundly, by outsmarting us at every

turn. Only then when you can see the negative, the decision, the values, the validity, the logic, only then do you have a chance with free people to come to a different conclusion. And this feeling of belonging of being understood.

Our children don't feel understood either by parents or teachers and for a good reason because the parents and teachers just don't understand them. The first is to give them the feeling of seeing eye to eye, of humaneness of the feeling that we are together we belong together only then can you open the gate of this feeling of belonging by overcoming this deep sense of failure, of deficiency which we presently systematically instill in our children.