Objects as Topics

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The point at which a child who is blind or deafblind becomes interested in an object for its own sake (as distinct from objects as extensions of her own movements) is an exciting moment. It signals an important step in the child's ego development. Usually (though not always) a child will first be interested in people and objects as extensions of herself or as things to be incorporated (put in the mouth), then in movements, then in people as distinct in themselves, and only after some time in objects themselves and what they feel like and can do. When a child becomes interested in objects for their own sakes, she understands that she is a separate being—separate from other people, and separate from objects. Selma Fraiberg has described in her wonderful developmental studies of children who are blind, Insights from the Blind (1976), the extraordinary process that a child without vision must go through in order to reach the stage where objects are of interest to her. In order to have such an interest in objects, a child must have a secure sense of object permanence, knowing that the objects exist even when she is not in physical contact with them. (This is the same knowledge a sighted child exhibits when she is able to search for an object that has been covered up.) When a child reaches this stage, the objects themselves become potential topics of conversation.

We must learn how to make mutual conversational topics not only out of movements, but also out of tactile experiences.

For the child with vision, the interest in objects is usually a visual interest coupled with an interest in what she can do with the objects by manipulating them. If she can hear, she will also be interested in the sounds things can make. For the child who is both blind and deaf, the growing interest in the world outside of himself is primarily of tactile, kinesthetic, and olfactory interest. In order to draw out the interest of a child who is deafblind, we must be very attuned to these senses ourselves. We must learn how to make mutual conversational topics not only out of movements, but also out of tactile experiences.

If the child who is deafblind is looking at or touching an object, whatever she is paying attention to can become a topic that the two of us can share. If a child has vision, establishing a mutual topic often happens by means of pointing. Mother will point to an

object that the child is looking at and comment on it. "Look. Truck!" she may say when she sees her child noticing a truck. We can do the same thing with a child who has limited vision, making sure we point in a way that is visually accessible, and adding sign language and facial expression to our speech. Or, we can do this tactually for the child who is blind. The tactual equivalent of a point is a mutual touch. The child needs to know that we are touching the object along with him, that we are sharing the same topic.

We need to touch carefully in a way that accomplishes three objectives. A good mutual touch is

- non-controlling,
- allows the child to know that you share the experience of touching the same object along with her, and
- does not obstruct the most important parts of the child's own experience of any object that she is touching.

Usually the best way to accomplish these objectives is to gently slide one or two fingertips slightly under the small finger and ring finger of the child's hands. This kind of touch is done, of course, in the context of conversation and assumes we have already approached carefully and with respect, and introduced ourselves to the child. Touching like this is a nonverbal way of saying, "I'm interested in this thing you're touching, too." After we make such a gesture, we need to pause and wait to see what the child will do, what her next turn in the conversation will be.

> *Paul begins to finger the fabric of the seatbelt on his wheelchair in a way that seems to me as if he is interested in it, probably in its texture. I can very gently place one or two of my fingers just a little beneath one of his fingers, so that he knows I am touching the belt along with him. This is like pointing—it is a way of letting him know I would like to have a conversation about this thing he is touching. It is as though I am saying "Oh, yes. I see this belt, too." After I do this, I wait to see what Paul will do next. Perhaps he will push my hand away, or move his hand away from mine. I would accept this as his turn in the conversation, as if he were saying, "I don't want to talk about this right now with you." But I would not immediately move away. I would wait, with my knee still gently touching his, and see if any other potential topics emerged. Perhaps Paul would begin to move another part of his body, and I could gently follow that. Or perhaps he would touch the belt again, in which case I might try again to touch along with him, perhaps in an even more gentle way. Each time that Paul touched something or made a movement, I would respect that as his turn in the conversation, and would try to read its meaning so that my next turn could move the conversation forward in a way that was satisfying to both of us.*
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> *If Paul accepts my gesture of touching the seatbelt along with him, what can I do then to continue our conversation? I may move my own hand to another part of the seatbelt, perhaps the buckle, and see if his hand would follow. This would be a slight expansion of his topic, a way of saying, "Look. Here's something else*

to touch! How do you like this one?" Or I may continue to touch the same belt along with him, but move my hand in a different rhythm than he is using and see if he noticed that. This would be like saying, "This feels interesting - when you move your hands fast like this." I might just continue to touch along with him until he did something different himself, and follow him in his next hand movement. Or I may offer him a new object to touch, ideally one that had an interesting texture, so that I am not completely shifting the topic. This last gesture would be the equivalent of saying something like, "Oh, you like textures. Here's one I find interesting. How do you like this?" Again, I would pause and wait to see what he would do for his next turn in the conversation.

For a child without sight and hearing, and who has learned to become interested in things outside of her own body, the material world provides many, if not most, of the interesting topics. Hence, we need to pay careful attention to the objects we choose to keep in her routine surroundings. We need to make sure she has plenty of interesting items available that will draw her attention and that we can converse about. But we need also to make sure the items and decor we choose are interesting to the child, and not just to us. For example, a bedroom with beautifully flowered wallpaper may be pleasing to a young girl who has sight; however, if a child is blind, an accessible multitextured wall hanging or a Masonite board upon which various interesting toys or materials can be interchanged would be much more interesting. Equipment that invites pleasing movement will stimulate conversational interactions for the child whose interest is in her own body.

Exploring objects along with a child (rather than simply giving objects to the child to explore on her own) will be a way to encourage curiosity and enrich conversations. For example, if a flashlight is interesting to a child with low vision, we may want to help him to explore what makes it work. Together we can get the batteries, unscrew the cap, insert the batteries, find the "on" button, and turn it on. As we do this, we can notice what part of the object seems to interest the child, and we can let her know in whatever way we can (touch, expressive words) that we share that interest. We can also flash the light on different objects and name them and talk about them. This is an enjoyable way of expanding topics of conversation and also empowering the child to make selections. Such a game would be especially beneficial to a child who has limited physical mobility. The light can become a way to point out things at a distance.

Moving in a parallel way alongside a child, with a similar object to explore, allows the teacher to enter into meaningful conversation. A preschool aged child is leaning on the seat of a rolling desk chair and moving around. The teacher finds a similar chair and joins her in the activity.

A similar kind of conversation can happen with a child who is blind if we have some interesting manipulative materials available. Children who are blind often enjoy vibrating toys or materials, and things that give the reward of motion when the child

pushes a switch or manipulates the object in some simple way. When we present objects to a child it is very important that we do so in the context of conversation. It is much more useful to the child in the long run to be engaged in a meaningful interaction about an object than to be taught how to push a switch and then left alone with the object. The latter scenario, done again and again, will condition the child into communicative isolation, while the former— conversing with the child about the object—holds the potential for richness of communication and social learning. (This is not to say that a child should not be allowed time to explore and manipulate objects on his own. It is only to say that if this is the way he spends most of his time, he will miss many opportunities for the kind of incidental learning that can happen during conversational play.)