



Boy looking at bee

The Transformation of the Possessive Instinct

For the child under the age of seven years another indicator of on-track development is the sublimation of the possessive instinct. This transformation of the possessive instinct occurs when the child is given an environment where he or she has the right to use the materials as long as he or she wishes, while respecting others' right to do the same.

In the next stage of a child's development, from around 6 to 12 years, "mine" becomes an important concept as the child brings tools and toys for group activities. But for the younger child the materials in the environment are seen as community property, much like the way we think of a library. When we check out a book we can use it knowing that no one is going to ask for it back or take it from us until we are finished.

Our inner being knows when our needs are being met or unmet as the case may be. When needs are being met in the young child, the possessive instinct modifies and we rarely hear the word "mine" coming from the young child.

The child's love of working alone, as discussed previously, and being able to naturally develop the other qualities inherent in normal and healthy development, transform this instinct for the child to own individual items in the child's environment.

Parents over the years have asked me about the right age to get a pet for a child. My usual answer is that children are ready for a pet after they have kept a plant alive for a year.

In the initial stages of taking care of a plant, a young child is in the first stage of gaining knowledge by simply learning the facts of life about the plant, sometimes through mishandling (which at this point is ignorance) of the plant. The child learns by taking care of a plant some of these realities: Plants need soil to grow. Plants have roots that need to be kept in the soil. Plants need water, sunshine and warmth. They need their leaves. They need their stems or trunks to be unbroken. They need to be protected from outside forces--rainstorms, snow, animals, insects, etc.

As the child gains knowledge of the plant, a true understanding of the needs of the plant develops within the child, an understanding that we might also see as love. From this love comes a desire to serve the needs of the plant. The plant then thrives with the care given by the child. From experience comes knowledge, then love and respect, and at last, a desire to be of service.

To the child, the plant goes from being "my plant" to "the plant" during this development of knowledge, love and service. The child doesn't need to "own the plant" once the "need to know" the plant is being satisfied. In normal development the child's interest in an object becomes one of seeking knowledge of the object versus having possession of it.

Knowledge, understanding, love and service create a sublimation of the possessive instinct in the child. That is the path of normal development for healthy human beings. When you see it in your

children you'll know that they'll be ready and able to take care of the dog, and many other things, living and non-living.