

PSYCHOLOGY

Little Tragedies of Childhood

Scientists Make a Fascinating Journey Through the Child Mind by Studying Children's Dreams, Wishes and Fears

By MARJORIE VAN de WATER

"IF YOU HAD a wish, and your wish could come true, what would you wish?"

What is the answer to this familiar question of childhood? Dr. Arthur T. Jersild of the Child Development Institute of Teachers College, Columbia University, assisted by Miss Frances V. Markey and Mrs. Catherine L. Jersild, put this query to four hundred boys and girls. They took each one aside, privately, to ask it, and bent an attentive ear to the answer.

So now you may know what boys and girls aged from five to twelve years really want the very most.

Some are pathetically modest in their desires. One little boy wished for a leg or turkey—just a leg.

Others, the more intelligent ones, were surprisingly all-inclusive and expressed a wish for "money" or "ability."

One little boy revealed a secret tragedy in his heart when he stammered that he wished to be a girl, "because Mother'd rather I was a girl." He was the only boy who wanted to change his sex, although twenty-three girls wanted to be boys.

A revealing peep into the child's world of make-believe, his day dreams, is also given us by Dr. Jersild. Here is another of those intimate questions:

"When you are by yourself and imagine things, when you make-believe or pretend, or you are thinking and make up things to yourself—tell me what you imagine."

All the strange people and events of of night dreams, good and bad, were also made a matter of record. And the children's likes and dislikes, what they hope to do when they grow up, what they would do if they had a million dollars, the "worst thing that ever happened" to them, and the nicest thing, reasons for liking or disliking school, and the things that scare them.

You might think that the children who must navigate the crowded streets of New York on their way to school and play would be most afraid of dash-

ing automobiles, of being lost, of having to fight rough older boys.

But if so, you have a surprise in the answers of these youngsters. Here are the things they mention most often as what they are scared of:

"If a lion came and I had nothing." Alligators, gorillas, sharks, tigers, giraffes, bees and so on. And even more frequently than wild animals, children fear supernatural events including such matters as witches, ghosts, devils, spooks, skeletons.

Dreaded "Spooks"

Mystery movies and "spooky" movies or stories and those dealing with murders or gorillas are named very often.

But a surprising number mention deliberate attempts to frighten them.

"Mother puts a sheet over her head and comes at me." Or someone opens eyes big and makes clawing movements. Then too, "Cook says someone will take me," and "Mother says bogey would get me."

Of the four hundred, only three children said they were afraid of particular people or objects, only fifteen said they were scared of traffic accidents, and six of rough games and children, five of falling off high places.

Children's fears seem to be born chiefly of imagination or of the yarns told to them and seen by them in the movies. They have very little relation to the previous unpleasant experiences of the youngsters. This is shown by the "worst happenings" described by them.

Almost three-fourths of the children name physical injury, accident, or illness and narrow escape from these as the worst thing that ever happened to them. Pulled teeth are mentioned, and being dragged by a horse, broken bones, cuts, auto crashes, appendix operations, and falling.

But nary a lion or tiger. In fact only seven had ever been attacked by animals at all, or "almost" attacked by them. Eight mentioned severe beatings, whippings, or other corporal punishments. Only four youngsters were so impressed by school failure and bad reports.

Apparently children do not worry

much about unfortunate social situations that so embarrass their parents. Although many had felt the pinch of poverty very severely, very few mention fear of it or list ridicule, lack of proper clothing, hunger, or other such situations born of deprivation among either their fears or their worst happenings. Neither do they worry much about scoldings, or lack of ability. The children who wish for mental ability are those who already have more than the average.

What is the stuff that dreams are made of? Apparently, for children at least, they are built up from anything that may happen to the child in his waking hours. The common everyday occurrences are represented, and so also are his fancies, fears, and all those things he imagines.

Dreams told of by a great number of children were those picturing amusements, sports, games, and play.

"I was to a Christmas tree," they will say. Or, "I had party in the kitchen." "I went to circus," or "I was riding on a horse."

Movie characters and those of the comic strip of the newspaper people the dreams of a number of children.

"Peter Pan came in the window," one youngster dreamed. Others told of seeing Popeye, cowboys, Joe E. Brown, and Rip Van Winkle.

In dreams they view again movies of mystery and violence. The "Galloping Ghost" chases them, shooting and fighting is going on around them.

Many tell of dreams of the commonplace happenings of everyday life. "I'm getting up in the morning and getting dressed," "Mother was setting the table," and so on.

Fairies For Youngest

The youngest ones see fairies dancing, Santa Claus, snow men, Easter bunnies, and other delightful nursery folk.

And those comical incongruities that nearly every adult can remember as creeping into his dreams once in a while are also known to children. Here are a few samples.

"I saw a dogfish standing on his tail."

"I walked on my nose."

"Yellow pillow case was walking."

Children, too, are familiar with that common nightmare of feeling powerless, or unable to move.



IN DREAM WORLD

The mind of a sleeping child is filled with all the material of the child's waking life, including all the fantastic imaginings of the child.

"I couldn't run away when the red train came after me," one related.

"I'm on the track, train comes and I can't get away," another said.

No evidence was found for any particular theory of dreams. The theory is held by some psychologists that in dreams you fulfill your hidden wishes. Some of the dreams of children were of a character that would fit in with this idea—those which dealt with finding things, having possessions, having adventures and being heroic, and enjoying amusements and pleasures. But the total number of such dreams are a good deal less than half of those reported.

Bad dreams far outnumber good dreams in the descriptions given by the children, and the bad dreams, like the children's fears, are related more to fancied dangers and imaginary experiences than to any actual unpleasant events in the life of the youngster.

When asked whether they have more unpleasant dreams than pleasant ones, however, the children say that the pleasant ones predominate. But still a great number of them insist that they do not want to dream any more.

It would seem that a bad dream is often so horrifying that many children would gladly forfeit any number of good dreams if they could be free from the whole business of dreaming.

Poor children seemed to have more dreams than did the children in better circumstances. This was due, it appeared, to the facts that the poor children attend exciting moving pictures more often and sleep in more disturbed, crowded, and noisy surroundings.

Poor children likewise are more beset with fears, perhaps also attributable to

the movies and to sensational yarns and deliberate attempts to scare them. For poor children are frequently at a show. Youngsters so pressed by actual hunger that they give as their one wish "a bowl of soup" also told of fears that were plainly based on movies they had seen. Wealthier children are not allowed to attend so often.

Children seem to carry around with them a great many more fears than they have any need for to protect them from the dangers of everyday life. But the fact that children have fears does not always mean that they are distressed by them.

Delightful "Terrors"

On the other hand, many youngsters get a real delight from their "terrors." Boys and girls who have been horrified by a melodramatic tale or picture would no doubt take the first chance offered to repeat the experience. Haven't you seen adults shriek with terror in the swift descent of a roller-coaster, but willingly hand over another dime for the thrill of a second trip?

Even little children in a nursery school will make up games in which they take turns scaring each other by playing "bogey man" or "lions" and "tigers." Each will shriek with terror when he is scared, but will keep right on with the game.

The poorer children differ from those better off financially in wishes also. Those from the poorer neighborhood wish for specific objects, while the wishes of the wealthier ones are more comprehensive. This seems to be due partly to a difference in intelligence and vocabulary—partly to the fact that the

one group is more up against the concrete realities of life.

A similar difference was found in the ways in which the two groups thought they would spend a million dollars. The richer children mentioned philanthropic ventures such as starting a hospital and "rebuilding the east side," much more often than did the poor ones. But when they were asked later what they would do if they should find a quarter on the way home, their answers showed that they saw no necessity for beginning the noble business on a small scale at once. It would seem that the uses for the hypothetical million dollars were largely lip service to the ideals learned in school and at home.

What would you do with a million dollars? Many of the children would save it or spend some and save the rest. Another large group would dispose of it by getting good things for the family—as one child said, "Dump it in Mother's lap." Only twenty-four out of the four hundred mentioned buying a good home, and four spoke of such improvements as "get a new stove," and "get good beds."

One child might have heard of the investigations of the millionaire bankers, for he answered, "I'd give it to a cop cause I'd get arrested."

Another optimist said, "If I had a million I'd buy the world."

Did you ever ask a child this question? "Tell me what you dislike more than anything else in the world, something you hate or don't like at all."

One out of every five will reply with the name of some food or taste, such as "spinach," or "castor oil" or "liver."

If he is a very bright child, he is more likely to indicate that he dislikes inactivity or having his own activities interrupted. He doesn't want to be bothered, and doesn't want to go to bed early.

Most of the others will mention individuals or groups of individuals. One child disliked, "Twins, they call you names and they are dumb." Cousins are mentioned and the "person who keeps on telling you the same thing all the time." And fresh people, bullies, snobs, stubborn teachers, and children who say "shut up."

Girls mention people and undesirable traits in people more than boys do. Boys on the other hand dislike unpleasant duties and disagreeable foods more.

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