

PSYCHOLOGY

Girls Fight, Too

Study of Pre-school Children Shows That Neither Sex Should be Called the Gentler One; Girls Cry More

By MARJORIE VAN de WATER

YOUNG Joe Mulligan is a "scrapper."

When he comes home from the warpath with his round blue-eyed face blackened and blood-marred but wearing a triumphant smile that like as not reveals the place of a missing tooth, his patient ma sighs with resignation and pa chuckles indulgently.

"Boys will be boys," is the consensus of opinion in the family. They console themselves with the theory that all boys fight—it's just something they have to go through, like measles.

But just let them catch Joe's sister Molly picking a fight with the little girl next door, flying at her with vicious young teeth and fists and kicking feet! They'll teach her, all right! Just imagine a girl behaving like that! Girls don't fight!

That boys are naturally fighters and their sisters are peace-loving is something that "everybody" takes for granted, but as is often the case "everybody" is wrong.

The little Mollies go into battle just as often as do the Joes. At least until they are old enough to have had it drilled into them that girls just do not fight.

This was revealed by a scientific study of children's quarrels and fights in which a total of over two thousand battles between youngsters ranging in age from two to four years were watched with impartial detachment by Dr. Arthur T. Jersild, of the Child Development Institute, Teachers College, Columbia University, and an associate, Miss Frances V. Markey.

Dr. Jersild is a great friend of the small boys and girls of this age who are in the pre-school either at the Child Development Institute or at a day nursery. Recently he wanted to find out what these little ones wish for, what they dream about, what they long for, and what they fear. He made friends with them, one by one, gained their confidence, and persuaded them each to tell him, as they would talk to Santa Claus, just what was in their hearts and minds.

After that achievement, it was not difficult for him to be able to watch them and find out when they fight, how often, what for, and with what weapons.

Different children vary enormously in pugnacity, he observed. At one extreme was a child who took the warpath no less than 70 times during the period of observation. At the other was a youngster who was the aggressor only three times.

At one extreme was a gentle baby who never hit, or pushed, or pinched, or showed any other sign of personal attack or defense. Another little warrior had a record of 87 such acts of violence.

Of course, all the youngsters were involved in conflict sooner or later, either as the aggressor or as the defender. But the number of separate conflicts in which they were involved ranged all the way from 17 to 141.

These were true individual differences; they did not represent any natural variation between the sexes. No indication was found that either sex deserves to be known as the "gentler."

Was there a difference in the man-

ner of their fighting? The answer is possibly yes to this question. After the age of three, the girls were observed to scream and cry somewhat more than the boys, and the boys were seen to hit and snatch somewhat more frequently than did the little girls.

Since at that early age, girls are superior to boys in their use of language, the psychologists rather expected to find that this would be another difference that would crop out in their conflicts. You might expect Molly, with her greater command of her tongue, to stand off and scold, while Joe would just smack the offender without previous exchange of words.

It didn't work out that way, however, neither the girls nor the boys showed any greater use of language during disputes.

The next question to interest the psychologists was the matter of conflict between the sexes. For many years, the world has been troubled by antagonism between the sexes, resulting in discrimination against the other sex or accusations of discrimination; in varying wage scales for men and women; in women's rights movements; in the exclusion of women from men's clubs and vice versa; and in brother-and-sister feuds. It has seemed natural to adults that the little boys should pull the curls of the little girls and that the little girls should stick out juvenile tongues at the little boys.

Yet here again, the small pre-school



YA-A-A-A! TRY AND GET IT!

Please note the expression on the little girl's face. Wouldn't you say that it was exasperating?

fighters provided a surprise for the psychologists. Actually there were more fights between a boy and a boy, or between a girl and a girl, than between a boy and a girl.

Does the explanation lie in the chivalry of the "little gentlemen?" Is the boy so gentlemanly and the girl so lady-like that the fight between them evaporates into chivalrous etiquette?

The answer is given by the facts as listed by Dr. Jersild.

"Boys, when fighting with boys, hit oftener than fighting with girls.

"Girls, when fighting with girls, use more language than when fighting with boys.

"A boy is relatively more often the aggressor in fights with girls than in fights with other boys.

"A girl, when fighting with a girl, will hit less often than will a boy when fighting with a boy.

"A girl, when fighting with a boy, screams and weeps more often than does a boy when fighting with either a boy or a girl."

But if males in the kindergarten must forfeit the right to the title of fighting sex, and if the much talked-of sex conflict is absent from this particular battle-ground, at least one big difference was found between groups of children in their tendency to battle. That is between the children of the poor and those in more fortunate circumstances.

Altogether three groups of children were included in the investigation. Two were in private nursery schools and came from homes of relatively well-to-do families. The third group were children in a nearby day nursery which was supported mostly by charity.

The day nursery bunch were the fighters, and outstandingly so. They averaged more than twice as many conflicts for each child as in the nursery school group nearest to them in age.

Not only were the fights more numerous; they were also more vigorous.

It is true that the nursery school group that were so relatively peaceful had more play space and better play equipment than did their battling neighbors. But this did not seem to explain anything, for when the peaceful group did go to war, it was usually over some toy or play device.

The others seemed to battle more for the sheer love of conflict. They did more hitting than snatching. They attacked one another's persons more than one another's materials. And there were a great number of battles in which no material issue seemed to be involved. They were just out for a fight.



THE OFFENSIVE

Little sister can pick a fight as well as brother. He is more likely to hit when he is fighting with a boy than when the battle is with a girl.

The fighting talk of the day nursery bunch was reported by the psychologists as "more virile" than that of the children in more fortunate economic circumstances. They used more obscene language. And their chosen means of insult to each other was likely to be much more offensive to the esthetic sense of their elders.

Although the number of children was too small to make it possible to draw any sweeping conclusions, it was observed that within these rather small groups that the different nationalities showed varying tendencies to battle.

The day nursery group—the fighters—included North Europeans and Mediterraneans, and within this group the Mediterraneans showed a decidedly greater tendency to fight.

In the other group in the nursery schools, there were Nordics and Jews. Here the Jews were slightly less likely to fight than were the Nordics.

It would seem that children of Spanish, Italian, and Greek parentage do more fighting than children whose parents come originally from Northern European countries. Dr. Jersild unfortunately does not give us any figures for the "fighting Irish."

In watching and recording these thousands of playground quarrels and fights, Dr. Jersild and Miss Markey did not watch the children alone. The old saying has it that it takes two to make a quarrel. But the psychologists found

that in most cases when the quarrel is in a school, there is soon a third person involved—that is the teacher.

Although all these schools were progressive schools where the children are supposed to be allowed to solve their own problems, and learn from their own experience, yet in over a third of all the children's conflicts, the teacher interfered. She would step into the fray and either arbitrarily put an end to a fight or, if the fight had already ended, she might reverse the decision and give the defeated child the final victory.

The kindergarten, or the nursery, has its own Battling Bobs who fight more often than anyone else. And this fighting child is the one who most often takes the aggressive, hits more often, and more often wins his fights than does the child who fights but little.

Still, in spite of this, Dr. Jersild found no child cock-of-the-walk who feels free to attack everyone and who is immune from attacks from others. Neither did he find any put-upon cry-baby who is the object of attack from everyone else and who never takes the warpath on his own behalf. In Dr. Jersild's words:

"Everyone seems, at one time or another, to take a crack at everyone else."

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