

Selma's emotional outbursts

The drama of the misunderstood child

by Marita Brune-Koch

Selma, 7, doesn't listen to what the teacher says, she has outbursts of anger and frustration, is stubborn and screams, throws pens and other writing utensils around the class room. Persuasion doesn't work, neither from the teacher nor the parents. The teacher cannot reach her, the school psychologist is called in, diagnosing an early childhood autism disorder. The parents are advised that Selma be referred to a psychiatric institution for in-patient treatment.

What is the problem with Selma, with the family, with school?

Selma is a bright child. She is ambitious and eager to learn. She achieves good results. She is well looked after from her family, the contact is loving, the parents care for their children. The older sister is even-tempered, well-behaved and she is coping well. Only Selma "causes problems".

It turns out that sometimes she is "difficult" at home, too. She doesn't listen well to her mother, she has to be told a number of times. Often she is wilful. If she can't get her own way, she screams, is stubborn and doesn't cooperate. Gradually it becomes apparent that irritations have developed in Selma's relationship with her mother and the other family members: Selma wants to be able to accomplish everything straight away. She doesn't want to take her time learning. So, if she doesn't grasp things immediately, she gets angry, shouts about and refuses any further cooperation.

At the same time, she is very diligent: she can occupy herself constructively and peacefully for hours, making things, building something, and she has imagination. She also enjoys helping her father with practical activities, showing eagerness, perseverance and thoroughness. But she can't bear it when things don't work out immediately.

Her mother was unable to pin down and understand her resistance, she always reacted with a lot of persuasion, with the result that in the family much revolved around "Selma's tantrums". Thus she has practised and developed



*Learning is not always easy.
(Bild keystone/Westend61/Sandra Roesch)*

this irritated and unsuitable behaviour and now applies it at school, where she reaches her limits.

Understanding the style of life

This behaviour has become part of Selma's "style of life", as *Alfred Adler*, the founder of individual psychology, would say. He postulated that every child strives to overcome its natural insufficiency or inferiority, its weakness, striving for attention and recognition by his fellow human beings and seeking acceptance in the community.

In Selma's case, one can assume that she hopes to assert herself a position by immediate accomplishments and comprehension. Her sister *Lisa*, who is two years older, often gives the impression that she can get good grades without studying. Selma can't know that this is impossible, that everyone has to learn in order to be able to do and understand something. However, her parents admire the fact that Lisa can do everything "at the flick of her wrist". So it stands to reason that Selma also believes she has to be able to do it that way. And when it doesn't work, she despairs.

According to Adler, children try out different behaviours in order to gain acceptance, recognition and attention. It looks as if Selma is trying to distract from her supposed failures via her temper tantrums. She probably thinks she is incapable if she does not understand things immediately. She may want to distract from this ignominy with her temper tantrums.

This behaviour is “successful”, because teachers and parents are preoccupied with the behaviour; school psychologists, remedial teachers, psychiatrists, everyone only focusses on her behavioural problems and deals with them. In this sense, Selma’s behaviour is definitely crowned with success.

Behaviour that leads to “success” is, as Adler noted, maintained and further expanded. It develops into a “style of life”, often with disastrous consequences. According to Adler, it is the parents’ and teachers’ task to recognise such irritated behaviour, to understand and to correct it lovingly but consequently.

Modern school management lets children down

Unfortunately, in this case the teaching methods are even encouraging the misdirected behaviour: In Selma’s class, individualised learning is the order of the day. The children get their weekly schedule and work plans and are supposed to figure out everything by themselves. Of course they are allowed to ask the teacher – but, as the reader might guess – what does a child do that expects to be able to do everything right away and without any help, otherwise he or she were stupid?

On the other hand, in a class where most of the learning is done together in whole class teaching where the teacher introduces the subject material or goes through it together with the children, a child is not left on its own. The question of whether a child has grasped it or not, does not become so overbearing. Because it has the opportunity to follow the others, to learn from their questions and contributions. Then, it also experiences that everyone has to learn and that learning is pleasurable.

Selma’s problem could have been greatly alleviated; her learning career could have been guided into a different direction relatively easily.

Insight into a child’s personality

It would also be helpful if the teacher had an insight into the development of a child’s personality. He or she should know that all children like to learn, that it is important to them to perform well, to have a position and acceptance in the community.

If children seemingly behave contrary to this desire, the teacher has to find out why they are discouraged and no longer trust themselves to



Together we work better. (Bild keystone/Photoalto/Michele Constantini)

achieve these goals. In the teacher’s training he or she should have learned that children make their own interpretation from their experiences with parents and siblings and later with classmates and teachers at school. From their interpretations they draw conclusions about how they themselves are seen, what position they are taking and how they can come into their own best – and that interpretations and conclusions drawn from it can both be deficient.

The children develop their own “style of life”, that is, a way they believe they can cope best with the difficulties they encounter. Often, it is not overly difficult to help a child out of its erroneous behaviour, if one understands why the child behaves the way it does, which image of itself and the world are underlying its behaviour and how the child believes it can assert itself.

A correction is often easy, if a child feels understood. The children are happy to be guided when they realise that it is better to do things differently, thus enabling them to reach their goal much easier and more satisfying. Sometimes, as in Selma’s case, it would take an inner certainty from parents’ and teachers.

They shouldn’t let themselves be so impressed by the temper tantrums, instead they should guide the child calmly and with a sure hand on how to learn thereby encouraging it. Maybe occasionally even talk about how to learn and that it is impossible to be able to do everything “just like that”.

Discussions about such topics are often most beneficial in a class community where everyone thinks along, where everyone is concerned, and where no one is singled out to be the “problem”. In general, the importance of the class community cannot be overrated: here children can learn to be an integral part of the community, to

empathise, to experience themselves as significant by taking an interest in others and by contributing toward a successful whole. To do without a good class community is a pedagogical "capital offence".

Discouragement, unfavourable behaviour, wrong perceptions can be counteracted when experienced in the class community in a way that a teacher alone could never achieve, nor a psychologist in a therapy. Of course, a "familiar and supportive class community"¹ has to be developed by the teacher in cooperation with the children.

The teacher must understand the nature of children, she must understand what drives them, what do they need; she must know how the upbringing influences the children but also know about their "creative power".

With this term, Adler characterises the human ability his will is even stronger not to let the course of his life be dictated by negative, discouraging experiences, but to overcome them with individual, creative power".²

Wrong paradigm: a biological concept of man

The good message: teachers can learn that. You *are* not a good teacher, you *become* a good teacher. If you have good educators.

The bad news: today's teacher training programmes do not provide for the study of this elementary knowledge about the child's soul. Teachers learn a lot of useful things about didactics and methodology in their training, but they simply do not learn what motivates children, how they feel, what can result in behavioural problems, and how to support children to cope in school, among their peers and in society.

Instead, the prospective teachers learn exactly what Selma's teacher did: when difficulties arise, they immediately call for "experts". But they don't know it any better, depth psychology is hardly mentioned in their training either.

Instead, a biological, mechanistic view of the child is predominant today: behavioural anomalies are electively classified and shelved in autism spectrum disorder (autism, Asperger's), ASD, ADHD and similar labels, depending on the symptoms. The children are given medications and are to learn to live with their "limitations", "peculiarities".

Sometimes the environment also has to learn to live with the children's social problems, teach-

ers and classmates are asked to adapt to the most peculiar behaviour. This doesn't help anyone: neither the affected children and their families nor the teachers and schoolmates.

Thus we often have the sad picture that teachers and other professionals – although they try very hard – do not really look at and listen to the children to find out how they really feel. They often do not understand what is bothering the child, what it looks like inside him. The cause of the behaviour is believed to lie within the brain, in the metabolism or in some other physical process. A lot of money is spent on examinations, therapies and special institutions. But this rarely helps the children.³

There is hope: Individual Psychology is alive

But there are also some good prospects. In Vienna in the 1930s, Adler established a wide system of educational and teacher counselling centres. These institutions had a very beneficial effect on the total student body of those years. For example, juvenile delinquency, a serious problem at that time, decreased significantly in Vienna.

During fascism, the entire successfully working network was smashed. The psychologists, counsellors and teachers who worked according to individual psychological methods were forced to adapt, or, like Adler himself, to flee.

Today, however, individual psychology is being taken up again, admittedly only occasionally, but all the more courageously and with enthusiasm. Michael Felten, educationalist and publicist in Cologne, has been working in this direction for a long time. He conducts teacher trainings and publishes educational textbooks. His book, "Auf die Lehrer kommt es an. Für eine Rückkehr der Pädagogik in die Schule"⁴ is a beneficial reading for every educator. He has created a wonderful, clear website on the work and teachings of Alfred Adler. Here the interested person can delve into individual psychology in an appealing way (<http://alfred-adler-panorama.info/>).



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In northern Germany, *Beate Letschert-Grabbe*, a teacher trainer successfully instructs teachers how to meet their pupils' needs based on individual psychology. A recent book by her is recommended at this point.⁵

We live at a time when child psychiatric institutions can hardly cope with the onrush of children and young people in need of help. Thus, it would be appropriate to finally reflect on these valuable and beneficial insights for children, parents, families and teachers and to instruct educators to be educators. Beneficial de-



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velopments for many Selmas would be the reward.

¹ Letschert-Grabbe, Beate. *Das übersehene Kind. Wenn «Super» zu wenig und Verwöhnten Vernachlässigten ist.* [The overlooked child] Weinheim/Basel 2021, p. 253.

² Ibid. p. 216

³ Institutions such as school psychology and child psychiatry services, psychosocial counselling services, etc. do have their justification and there are cases where it is necessary and sensible to make use of their help. The author primarily opposes the almost reflexive use of these institutions in numerous cases where trained teachers could help the children very well.

⁴ Felten, Michael. *Auf die Lehrer kommt es an! Für eine Rückkehr der Pädagogik in die Schule.* [It's all about the teachers! For a return of pedagogics to school.] Gütersloh 2013

⁵ Letschert-Grabbe, Beate. *Das übersehene Kind. Wenn «Super» zu wenig und Verwöhnten Vernachlässigten ist.* Weinheim/Basel 2021