

SHARING SPACE

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Abstract: None available.

Full Text: Headnote Report on Research Project: Interviews with 2 1/2 to 3 1/2 Year Old Children Regarding Their Memories of Birth and the Pre-Natal Period This project was undertaken in conjunction with an independent study of pre- and peri-natal psychology and was suggested by Dr. Thomas Verny, author of *The secret Life of the Unborn Child*. The original goal was to interview fifty children. This was revised due to time constraints and the study, as it now stands, includes interviews with twenty nine children. The purpose of the study was to check the hypothesis that children in this age group had access to birth memories and would be able to verbalize them. The study was designed to be administered primarily with the cooperation of pre-school and day care centers in the Denver, Colorado area. However, the option of doing in-home interviews was included. By including both settings it was possible to contrast results obtained in these two settings. In addition, the settings in the Pre-School and Day Care Centers varied, with some interviews taking place in rooms where other adults and/or children were present and some in rooms where the interviewer and the child being interviewed were alone. Day care centers were contacted in person and a letter delivered explaining the project, along with several copies of a form for parents, explaining the project and providing a reply space for them to request further information and/or to sign giving permission for their child to participate in the study. This was followed a few days later with telephone calls to determine if the center could help in the study and, if so, later telephone calls were made to monitor the return of forms by parents. Once the forms were received from parents, contact was made by telephone to answer any questions and to let them know when the interviews were scheduled. Following the interview, the parents were again contacted with a report on the interview and suggestions for follow up with the child. In-home interviews were arranged directly with parents who were made aware of the study through various sources (for example, La Leche League, family and friends). In most of these cases discussion with the parents took place immediately before and after the interview with the child. In early interviews an attempt was made to do audio recordings of the interviews, but the presence of a small tape recorder proved to be a distraction, so that was discontinued and notes taken immediately after the interview were relied upon to reconstruct the interview in a typed narrative as soon as possible after the interview. The question format varied somewhat, as this interviewer found that it was most effective to allow the child to lead, resulting in the sequence and content of questions not being precise. Of the twenty nine interviews, nineteen were held in pre-school or day care settings and ten were held either in the child's home or the home of a friend. The most productive setting seemed to be the preschool or day care settings where some privacy was provided for the interviews. Two children whose parents had given permission for the interview refused to be interviewed. These two are not included in numbers cited above. All interviews were brief, lasting from ten to twenty minutes. When the child began to show signs of restlessness or discomfort, the interviews were terminated. Interviews in day care settings were followed with telephone calls to parents to report on the interview and to suggest that they might want to follow up with conversations with the child regarding the child's experience with the interview and possibly further questions about the child's experience of birth and pre-birth. This suggestion was also given to parents at the time of the in-home interviews. All positive results were obtained in the pre-school or day care settings. The criteria used for positive results was that the child made a statement or statements that were from their own point of view and did not seem to reflect something that they might have heard from someone else. Of the twenty nine interviews, five demonstrated positive results. These five were interviews number four, five, ten, twenty one and twenty two. Possible positive results were obtained in four additional interviews,

numbers one, sixteen, twenty, and twenty three. In these last four cases, this interviewer hesitates to classify them as positive, as the statements might be attributed to something the child had heard or seen. However, they seemed to be significant enough to single out as possibilities. The following are excerpts from those interviews producing results meeting the above criteria. These excerpts are taken from the midpoint of the interviews, following a brief get acquainted period and introduction of the subject to be discussed.

Interview No. 4: A three year old boy. Interviewer: "How small were you when you were in mommy's tummy?" Child: "This small." (Indicating with both hands, bringing the thumbs and forefingers together to form a small diamond) Interviewer: "What did you do while you were in mommy's tummy?" Child: "I played." Interviewer: "When you decided to come out, how did you get out?" Child: "There was a hole down there." Interviewer: "What was it like?" Child: "It was long and there was light." Interviewer: "Was it hard to get out?" Child: (Holding his head with both hands and nodding) "Yes." Interview No. 5: A 3 1/2 year old girl Interviewer: "What happened when you came out of mommy's tummy?" Child: "The man wiped that stuff off of me and wrapped me in a blanket-and now I'm big and I'm a koala (the name of her age group in pre-school)." Note: This child's mother later reported a conversation with the child in which the child replied to the same question with the response, "The man cut that thing off me," indicating her belly button. Interview No. 10: A 3 1/2 year old boy. Interviewer: "What was it like in mommy's tummy?" Child: "Things bumped me." Interviewer: "Could you hear anything?" Child: "It's like fish, gluck, gluck." Interviewer: "That's wonderful, can you tell me anything else about it?" Child: "They pushed me out." Interviewer: "Who pushed you out?" Child: "Man." Interviewer: "Man?" Child: "Yes, mans." Interviewer: "What happened when you were pushed out?" Child: "I hurted." Note: In the follow up telephone call with this child's mother, she reported that his birth had been an emergency caesarean. Interview No. 21: A 3 year old girl. Interviewer: "When you decided to come out of mommy's tummy, how did you get out?" Child: "Mommy told the doctor to get me out." Interviewer: "What did you do while you were in mommy's tummy?" Child: "Nobody, I was all alone." Interviewer: "When you came out, what was the first thing you saw?" Child: "A piece of balloon." Interviewer: "Where was it?" Child: "It was backwards." Interview No. 22: A 3 1/2 year old boy. Interviewer: "What was it like in mommy's tummy?" Child: "It was like the light was turned down." Interviewer: "What else can you tell me about that?" Child: "It was like looking for fish. It was kind of hot in there." Interviewer: "Were you comfortable, did you fit in there?" Child: With a disdainful look, "I was a baby." Interviewer: "How did you get out?" Child: "Mans pulled me out." Interviewer: "How did that feel?" Child: "It kind of hurted. I was kind of crying, but I was laughing." The four interviews demonstrating possible positive results are presented below.

Interview No. 1: A boy just under 3 years old. The results from this interview were felt to be important not so much from the actual narrative as from the child's reaction to the questions. As we got into the questions concerning his birth he became increasingly sad and very quiet until the interviewer felt it necessary to apologize for making him sad and asked if he would like to hear a story. The interview was terminated after the story. In the later telephone contact with his mother, she reported that he had experienced a very difficult birth. It also seemed significant that a week later this same child came up to the interviewer and hugged her leg when she came to interview another child. Apparently she had been forgiven for the sadness created by the original experience.

Interview No. 16: A 3% year old boy. Interviewer: "Do you remember being in mommy's tummy?" Child: "I made mommy's tummy really big because I was a big baby." He further indicated that it was the lower part of her tummy that he made big. Interviewer: "Did you hear anything when you were in mommy's tummy?" Child: "No, I cried a little-and I dropped out." Interviewer: "You dropped out, how did you do that?" Child: "I just went plopp and I made a hole in her tummy?" Note: This child was delivered by caesarean. The mother indicated that she had discussed this with him previously. Interview No. 20: A 3% year old boy. Interviewer: "What was it like in mommy's tummy?" Child: "It was like swimming." Interviewer: "How did you get out of mommy's tummy?" Child: "I popped out." Interviewer: "Who was there when you came out?" Child: "Mom was, and Dad was, and you were. Note: I was present at this birth as this is my grandson. In an earlier conversation with his mother, when she asked where he was before he was born, he replied, "I was a bird flying around the sky and then I was in

the hospital and Grandma was there." When she asked him what it was like after he was born, he said, "They poked me," indicating his toe. He was jaundiced and had multiple pokes for blood tests. Interview No. 23: A girl just under age 4. Interviewer: "How did you get out of mommy's tummy?" Child: "I poked out my head-my hair came first." Interviewer: "Who did you see when you came out?" Child: "I was born (pause) after I was born (pause). When is my mommy coming?" Further attempts to return to the subject of her birth were not successful. In addition to the verbal responses obtained during these interviews, this interviewer noted that five of the children who did not talk much assumed a seated fetal position with their knees drawn up to the chest, soon after the questions regarding their birth commenced. Four of the children indicated their size in the womb as being very tiny, in the same manner quoted in interview number four above. Five children were extremely skillful in avoiding answering the questions, quickly changing the subject. This seemed to be correlated with difficult births, but further confirmation would be required for this to be any more than speculation on my part. Very interesting responses were obtained to the question, "Where were you before you were born?", such as: "In the sky." "I was a bird." "I was an airplane." The most interesting response was, "I was in a machine and the machine made me into a baby." One child interviewed at home responded to this question by going to get a photograph album and showing me a picture of his mother early in her pregnancy, wearing a pink shirt, and saying, "In the pink shirt." It is hoped that this small contribution to research in the field of preand peri-natal psychology will prove helpful to others undertaking similar studies. This interviewer also feels that the children included in the study will benefit. This seems to have been demonstrated already with children with whom I am acquainted in that they have talked several times since about their birth experiences and, in the case of one grandchild, seemed to release some trauma after the interview with a prolonged and otherwise unexplainable crying spell, followed by a greatly improved mood. A follow up study of these same children in perhaps six months to a year might shed some light on the possibility that talking about birth experiences is beneficial to the child. It would also be interesting to determine if talking about these experiences helps to keep the memories alive and conscious. One interview conducted with five year old twins was interesting in that they are the only children interviewed who showed any embarrassment in response to the questions, which leads me to wonder if this plays a role in the fading of these memories with age. Future studies of this nature might benefit from a more carefully controlled question format and setting for the interviews. The body language is an important component also, so the possibility of video taped interviews might be worth exploring, if it could be arranged without distracting the child. I did not employ drawings in any of the interviews, with the one exception of a child who was involved in painting when I arrived for the interview. This also might be a powerful tool for an interviewer who was skilled in interpretation of children's drawings, or has access to that expertise. I personally found this study to be very enjoyable and informative. Any doubts I might have had about the possibility that children in this age group could remember and articulate their memories have been dispelled by the direct comments of the children. It will remain for others to determine if the results obtained here have significance for other researchers in the field. Jeane Rhodes

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