

**YOUNG CHILDREN in BRIEF SEPARATION
(1967 – 1973)**

by
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Five films on the responses of healthy young children to separation from the mother when their mothering needs are met – or not met.

JANE, 17 months, in Foster care for 10 days.

LUCY, 21 months, in Foster care for 19 days.

THOMAS, 2 yrs 4 months, in Foster care for 10 days.

KATE, 2 yrs 5 months, in Foster care for 27 days.

JOHN, 17 months, for 9 days in a Residential Nursery.

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INTRODUCTION (from 1976 film guide)

In recent years there has been growing awareness that separation from the mother may impair the social and emotional development of young children. But there has been much confusion of thought about the issues, partly because the literature on early separation derives almost entirely from studies done in hospitals and other institutional settings where the child has to cope with many stresses additional to loss of the mother.

These institutional studies are agreed that young children admitted to institutional care usually respond with acute distress and despair, followed by a slow and painful process of adaptation. But institutional studies have the limitation that the data they provide do not permit responses to separation from the mother to be reliably differentiated from the influence of associated adverse factors such as the confusion which follows transfer from home into a strange environment, unfamiliar foods and routines, multiple caretakers, illness, pain, confinement to cot.

Apart from a few anecdotes no descriptive accounts have been published on the behaviour of healthy young children separated into benign care free of the stresses which complicate institutional studies. Believing that detailed qualitative accounts are essential if adequate understanding is to be achieved, we decided that the only way of ensuring continuity of optimum care and observation was to take children into our own family and there look after them to the best of our ability. Their behaviour would then be compared with that of a matched child admitted to the already well documented inadequacies of institutional care.

We therefore conducted a small but intensive observational study of 5 separated young children (aged 17 months to 2 years 5 months) in which continuous naturalistic observations covered most of their waking hours and were complemented by *cine verite* filming. Although we had a social concern, as scientists our purpose was to gain insight into the influence of factors such as age, level of maturity, previous parent-child relationships, length of separation and quality of substitute care on the responses of healthy young children of previous good experience to brief separation from the mother.

The subjects were:

a. Four children (JANE, LUCY, THOMAS, KATE), fostered one at a time, who were in the sole care of a responsive substitute mother in a family setting which was free of the environmental stresses which characterise institutional care.

One child (JOHN) who was looked after by multiple caretakers in a residential nursery where routines were unfamiliar and the behaviour of his peer group noisy and aggressive.

The four fostered children were taken one at a time into the Robertson home while the mothers were in hospital (length of stay 10 days to 27 days). Each child was made familiar beforehand with the foster home and foster family, and was supported throughout by Joyce Robertson who was fully available to meet the child's needs. *None of the four fostered children got into states of acute distress.*

In the film of JANE, for instance, it is shown that this child of 17 months, although under strain because of the continuing absence of the mother, made a warm attachment to the foster mother and with her support and understanding came through a 10-day separation without loss of function or being overcome by distress; and how when the mother reappeared Jane reunited with her warmly, the expectation of good mothering having been sustained by the positive ways in which the separation had been managed. The outcome with the other fostered children is shown to be similarly good.

But in the film of JOHN, also 17 months, it will be seen that during 9 days in a residential nursery in which the system of care failed to meet his need of stable and responsive substitute mothering he reacted with protest, despair, and withdrawal.

Since JANE, LUCY, THOMAS and KATE were held in a state of 'manageable anxiety' by care geared to meet their emotional needs, while JOHN was overwhelmed in a setting which failed to do so, there is clearly scope for experiment to prevent the acute distress commonly shown by young children admitted to foster care, children's homes, hospital wards, etc. Much that is widely believed to be a consequence of separation, and therefore inevitable, may be caused by inappropriate systems of care.

But it should not be assumed that because acute distress need not occur the risks associated with early separation can be eliminated. As we show in the 'foster films' and have written elsewhere, 'no matter how good the substitute care, separation from the mother remains a hazard for the young child'.

We are well aware that the 'foster films' do not illustrate fostering situations of the more difficult kind dealt with by child care agencies. The films are not intended to do so, since they derive from a research study of child behaviour which required that the children be of previous good experience and be cared for by one person taking the place of the mother. But they raise considerations which are relevant to all forms of child care.

Finally, we trust that viewers of JANE, LUCY, THOMAS, and KATE will not only find in them aids to understanding the nature and needs of young children; the normal behaviour of these children can also be enjoyed, behaviour which is at times moving and delightful in its subtlety and beauty. These films can therefore be used effectively in the teaching of normal child development, as well as in discussing the stresses of early separation.

SUGGESTIONS FOR USING THE FILMS

Although each film stands on its own, together they make a complementary series. **JOHN** shows vividly and painfully the consequence of inappropriate substitute care. The other films show ways of reducing stress during separation from the mother and the subtle differences between young children. All illustrate many aspects of normal child behaviour.

For those who cannot use all the films but wish to use **JOHN**, we strongly urge that this film should not be used in isolation. There should always be another session in which **KATE**, **JANE**, **LUCY** or **THOMAS** is shown to counterbalance the upset often caused by **JOHN**.

Only one film should be used in each session, and not less than 90 minutes be allowed for introduction, showing, and discussion. Preferably, audiences should not be larger than 25-30, particularly for the **JOHN** film. If the audience is larger and time can be found, it will be helpful to break up into smaller groups for discussion.

Statement Which May be Found Useful in Introducing Any of the Foster Films

This film is not intended to show a typical foster care situation. It is one of a series made during research into how healthy young children of previous good experience would cope with a short separation from the mother when cared for by a fully available substitute mother.

Although children of previous good experience are not typical of those dealt with by social service departments, the films raise considerations of understanding and practice which are relevant to all foster care - and to the care of young children in residential nurseries and hospital wards.

In each instance the mother was going into hospital to have a second baby, and there was no relative to care for the child. During the weeks before the separation the child was made familiar with the foster home and foster family, so that when the mother went into the hospital the child would transfer to a setting which was already familiar and had pleasant associations for him. The foster mother had by then gained some knowledge of the child's likes and dislikes, and how the parents handled him.