

Your Child's Mind Space

Your child has a room or a shared room where he sleeps, reads, plays video games, and all the rest. But what about that other room where he *really* resides, the room that is his mind? He takes that room with him everywhere, to school, to the playground, to aunt Rose's house, to the dinner table; and that interior room has a certain look, feel, and smell to it, just as his literal room does. He dwells in his room; he indwells in the room that is his mind; and it is the quality of that indwelling that determines his emotional wellbeing.

Human beings don't just have thoughts. They engage in all sorts of activities with names like contemplation, problem-solving, daydreaming, musing, calculating, and so on. Everyone does this, children included. Where do they do this work? In "the room that is their mind." Employing the metaphor of a "room that is your mind" has a lot of utility and therapeutic power and can help you improve your child's emotional health and wellbeing.

Picture your child. You tell him that there's something he mustn't do. You watch him carefully and you see that he's calculating and deciding. It may only take him a split second to complete that calculating and deciding but some intensely human and immensely complicated operation occurs in that split second. He has a kind of conversation with himself, all in that split second, the outcome of which is that he will or won't cooperate with you. That calculating and deciding happened in "the room that his mind," with its particular atmosphere and its idiosyncratic fittings and furnishings. That's where we go to think—and where we live our lives.

If a child just had a thought, or just one thought after another, we wouldn't think of him as mischievous, sullen, sad, oppositional, hyperactive, etc. We label our child in such ways because we have the clear sense that something is going on inside of him that results in mischief, sullenness, sadness, and so on. That's what we mean by words like personality and temperament: that, when a child goes inside his own mind, he has a consistent

experience there, one with specific dynamics and colorations. He has, for example, sad thoughts not because he “had a thought” but because when he indwells he is “made sad” by the experience of being in that particular room—his own mind is making him sad.

Picture the difference between living in a jail cell versus living in a charming cottage by the sea or the difference between living in the noisy boiler room of a ship versus spending the day in a lovely hotel room overlooking a bustling promenade. Imagine living in one or the other all of the time. Yes, you could conceivably still be happy in your jail cell or contemplative in your boiler room: but how easy would that be? Yes, you could still be sad in your charming cottage or internally noisy in that hotel room, but wouldn't you have a better chance for happiness and calm in those environments?

If you think of your child's mind as a “room where he goes,” then you present yourself with the opportunity to conceptualize what might help him change for the better, heal traumas, and upgrade

his personality. You can help him “redecorate” his mind, “refurnish” his mind, and change its look and atmosphere. You can help him “install windows” in his mind so that he has a breezier experience rather than a stuffy experience. You can help him exchange his internal “bed of nails” for an internal “easy chair.” Yes, these are merely linguistic and metaphoric solutions. Yes, this is merely engaging in a certain sort of visualization. But there is real power in language, metaphor, and visualization: they can really help.

I’ll explain more in subsequent posts. For now, before you have a conversation with your child, you might want to have one with yourself. What is “the room that is your mind” like? When you enter it, is the experience more like settling into an easy chair or landing on a bed of nails? Is it as noisy as a boiler room in there or as calm and quiet as a day in the country? Is it windowless and airless or cheerful and breezy? What sort of place is it and what sort of experience do you have when you enter it and when you spend time there?

You can do a better job of picturing and understanding your child's mind if you take the time to picture and understand your own mind. If you do this work, you'll find yourself less surprised and less flustered by your child's attitudes, moods, behaviors and personality. Rather than supposing that little Johnny or little Mary has contracted a mental disorder when he or she exhibits certain behaviors or moods, you'll be more inclined to wonder about the quality and content of his or her indwelling—and what you can do to improve your child's mental environment.

You know how messy your child's room can get. You also know what it looks like when it's cleaned up, aired out, and organized. That room you can see with your own two eyes. But what about the room that is your child's mind? That room is only visible second-hand via what your child says and does, by his moods and how he appears to be feeling. To learn more about what is really going on in there, you will need to do some investigating. We'll examine what that investigating might look like and get clear on the concept of *dynamic self-regulation*

in my next post. For now, do some important self-investigating. What is *your* experience of “the room that is your mind” like? If you feel like it, please share your thoughts in the comments section.