

The child's view of the general practitioner

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IT is hard not to have to see a doctor at some time when you are a schoolchild. There are the routine school medicals, inoculations, and visits to the doctor for common infections and childhood accidents. If there are brothers and sisters in the family the chances of coming into contact with a doctor are increased, and there is always someone at school who is off sick and seeing the doctor, or in hospital. For example, the national child development study found that by the age of seven, 45 per cent of children had been in hospital (Davie, Butler and Goldstein, 1972). Yet what do children think of doctors? What sort of person is the doctor? What do children think of visiting the doctor?

There has been considerable work on the child's reaction to going into hospital. Much of this interest stemmed from the psychological work on childhood separation. Further work has also looked at the child's experience of hospital admission and the child's attitude to the hospital. There is, however, little material on the child's view of the general practitioner. Perhaps it has been assumed that seeing the doctor in general practice is so common that it is not a problem for the child who consults.

Essays

I have recently collected some essays from children written about their visits to general practitioners. Judging by these essays many children are scared or worried about a visit to the doctor. This unease is not only connected with the illness or other reasons for the visit, or with a dislike for the doctor or his surgery, or with a worry about the outcome of the visit. It is connected with these, but furthermore it seems that 'going to the doctor' is something that in itself, as a social activity, is to the child something that is rarely encountered without fearful anticipation.

There were 151 children who wrote essays. They were asked to write about *Going to the Doctor*. Teachers were asked to prompt and lead the children as little as possible, and if they wanted to guide the children, were asked to suggest to them that they wrote about what happened the last time they went to the doctor. The children were aged between 12 and 16 and were at three comprehensive schools. Two of the schools were in London, one school in the outer Western suburbs and the other in the inner suburbs of North London. The third school was in a small town in Westmorland.

Analysis of comments

What did the children write about? They were asked to write simply about going to the doctor, not about whether they liked going or not. Yet evaluative comments predominated. Most of the children brought into the essays likes and dislikes and worries. Of the 151 children, 21 said that they liked going, 21 said that they disliked going, 13 that they both disliked going and were worried about going, and 63 said that they were worried. So altogether over three quarters made some evaluation about visits. Of these evaluations dislikes and worries outnumbered likes by four to one.

Analytically the evaluations can be separated into two elements: there are the simple likes and dislikes about visiting the doctors, then, more significantly, there are the anticipatory fears that surround visits.

Reasons given for liking going to the doctor centred around the doctor's personality, the usefulness of doctors, and the surgery environment. Descriptions of personality were straightforward. One boy launched into this in his first sentence: "I don't mind going to the doctors because I know that all doctors are nice and kind and helpful". Or "My doctor is very nice, I like him" wrote a girl.

The comments on the job of the doctor stressed how useful doctors are, how badly off we would be without them, and how well they do their jobs: "They have been to me, the doctor and nurses I mean, nice and clean and good at there job. I understand what a good job they do and how good they do it. If they had any complaints about work I think I would go along and support them". The last source of 'likes' concerned the "funny smells" and equipment that are part of the environment of the surgery.

Whatever the comments on the doctors, they are described as being a special type of person who is unlike most others. Indeed, a doctor may be liked because he is not like a doctor, as this girl explained: "Some doctors are typical doctors with glasses and fairly tall, usually miserable looking but the best kind of doctors are young, nice looking and you could take them for anything but a doctor".

It is notable that in describing the pleasant side of doctors and of visits to the doctors many of these essays were written as though the writer expected the reader to be, in general, critical of doctors. They start with "I don't mind..." or "I am not frightened..." or "Some people don't like going but I...". This assessment of the general view of the doctor is fairly accurate, for there were more comments about disliking visiting the doctor than there were about liking it.

Dislikes become repetitious on reading many essays. There are those who just gave general negative evaluations of the sort "going to the doctors can be a horrible feeling" but usually the reasons for the dislike are specified. Many complaints concern the environment of the visit, such as the waiting room, the people there, the magazines and the furniture, and the fact of the wait itself which is worse if the surroundings are unpleasant. "I hate going to the doctors because you are always packed with people and you have to wait about half an hour" wrote one 12-year old. "Then you go into the waiting room with the dirty paintwork, last year's magazines with half the pages missing and chairs that look as though they are about to collapse at any moment" wrote another.

The other people in the waiting room can be upsetting because they are invariably "all coughing" and "you may catch a cold off them". Or the others in the waiting room may look as though they are on their last legs: "On the chairs are perched half a dozen people with faces as black as death and not uttering a word" was how one girl described them. Another described how "worsed of all a lady with her daughter who was about eight was suddenly sick (I then of course felt sick myself)".

It is not only what the people look like, or that you may catch something from them that is unpleasant, but the very way people interact in the waiting room, or more accurately their minimal interaction, that can be embarrassing and upsetting. As one 12-year old boy put it: "Then you walk into the waiting room and as you enter you shouldn't be there, the way people look at you as if you're braking the law or something... and that silence is making you nervous and as you wait your turn you think its never going to come". And from a 13-year old girl: "When I get into the waiting room I get all embarrassed because everyone is all quiet and they look up from their magazines or from whatever they are doing. They watch you creep in and sit down. I hate it when the waiting room is full up because I sit their all quiet and don't know what to do I am to frightened to get up and get a magazine cos once when I got up and go over

to get one a woman got up and took the one that I was about to grab. I felt myself go brilliant ”.

Another source of embarrassment is getting confused about whose turn it is to see the doctor. “ The buzzer goes and a green light flickers on the wall. I look up and I find everybody looking at me. ‘ Oh its my turn ’ I say with embarrassment ”.

Much more comment was devoted to dislikes in the preliminaries to consultation than to dislikes about the consultation itself. Things that were not liked about the consultation were mainly the “ cold hands ”, stethoscopes that are always “ cold like ice ” and the “ thing that they put on your tongue ” which is like a “ wooden lolly stick ” because sometimes the doctor may “ nearly choke you with it ”.

Anticipation

It was, however, not the likes and the dislikes that received the most emphasis but the worries about the visit. It was in the period before seeing the doctor that they wrote about worrying and anticipating what was going to happen. This was emphasised, dramatised and given pride of place in the essays. It was described as “ butterflies ”, “ stomach turning somersaults ”, “ feeling nervous ” or “ feeling shaky ”.

Much more stress was placed on anticipating the visit to the doctor, either before going to the surgery or while in the waiting room, than on a description of what actually happened when seeing the doctor or what happened afterwards.

Many of the essays could easily be divided into three separate sections. First came the anticipation of and preparation for the visit. Next came an account of what happened when the doctor was seen in the consultation. Finally came a short reappraisal which was usually a comment that it was silly to have worried or that the consultation had not been as bad as expected, or a mention of going to the chemist and the results of the treatment. This structure was found in 105 essays. It could be that this is the influence of the essay style that is taught in schools—all stories to have a beginning, a middle and an ending. But even so we can ask why the essays did not begin at some other point in the process of visiting the doctor. Why for example did the essays not start with the consultation? What is more, much more of the writing was devoted to the anticipation than to the other sections. Nearly one and a half times as much was written about anticipation than consultation, and reappraisal of the consultation came a poor third (table 1).

TABLE 1
SPACE DEVOTED TO ANTICIPATION, CONSULTATION AND
REAPPRAISAL IN ESSAYS (N=105)

	<i>Mean number of inches</i>	<i>Per cent</i>
Anticipation	4.26	55
Consultation	2.82	36
Reappraisal	0.68	9

Anticipation usually involved worrying about the visit. The feeling may be there before the waiting room is even reached and the day may start with “ the dreadful feeling that today I have to go to the doctor ”. The feeling is amplified on arrival. “ As soon as I stepped inside the waiting room I felt ill. When it was my turn to see the doctor I started shaking ”. Then there is the worry while waiting for the turn. “ When I go to the doctor I feel kind of a nervous feeling go through me. I sit in the waiting room patiently until my turn. Every time the bell rings my stomach turns over ”

was how a 12-year old girl described it. A 14-year old boy wrote that "the last patient goes in before me and I think 'I'm next' and gulp. I make my hair look tidy somehow and prepare for that frightening noise of the buzzer to know it's my turn".

Worried anticipation of some sort was found in half (76) of the essays. Now what is there to be worried about when visiting the doctor? One thing is the question of what the doctor is going to do. Many children mentioned reasons for going to the doctor in their essays. The second most often mentioned reason was for injections, which was mentioned by 31 children (table 2). Not all of those who mentioned injections said that they disliked them, but some said that when going to the doctor they were worried about the possibility of receiving one. "The main reason I don't like going is that I'm frightened I am going to have an injection". Or they were worried that the doctor may be in the mood for giving injections: "Then buzzzzzz! The dreaded buzzer goes, wondering whether the doctor will be needle happy".

If it is not an injection that the doctor is going to give there is the fear of finding out that you have a terrible illness or "some dreaded disease" or thinking of "all the things that could be wrong with me". Here it is partly the uncertainty that is a cause for worry: "I think going to the doctor's is worse than going to the dentist as you now what's wrong with you. But the doctor's you could end up know you have got something quite contagious".

Thinking about the treatment the doctor might give was another cause for worry. Would he give "pills or ointment" and what would the medicine taste like? But perhaps the most commonly expressed worry about the outcome was whether the doctor would send you to hospital, and if there is one thing worse than going to the doctor's it is going to hospital: "Next it was my turn. I was getting worried in case he said I would have to go to hospital". This seemed to be mentioned most often by the boys, not because the girls were not also scared of being sent into hospital, but because the boys seemed to have more occasions when going to hospital might be required: accidents playing games such as football, or accidents when climbing. Injuries of some sort were mentioned by 33 boys, but by only 12 girls.

TABLE 2
REASONS FOR VISITING DOCTOR MENTIONED IN THE ESSAYS

	<i>Total</i>	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Girls</i>	<i>Sex not known</i>
Injuries and accidents	46	33	12	1
Injections	31	11	17	3
Throats, tonsillitis and ears	21	10	10	1
Colds and 'flu	18	8	10	—
Infectious diseases: mumps, w. cough, chickenpox, measles	7	3	4	—
Foot problems	6	2	4	—
Spots, sores, boils	5	1	3	1
Allergies	4	2	2	—
Appendicitis	3	—	2	1
Mouth ulcers, abscesses	3	1	2	—
Others: (mentioned twice or less) adenoids, cyst, dizzy spells, constipation, varicose veins, unspecified pain, check-up	12	7	5	—
<i>Total illnesses</i>	156	78	71	7
<i>Total children</i>	151	74	72	5

Often reasons for worrying about the visit were not given. It is almost as if the child's view of visiting the doctor includes a worry about the visit, a kind of

shared perspective on what happens when you go to the doctor, that includes worrying regardless of whether there is a reason for the worry.

Why there is so much emphasis in the essays on the anticipation and worry about the visit is open to speculation. Undoubtedly the essay style in general encourages the school child to exaggerate and to indulge fantasies, yet the emphasis on worry and anticipation was so consistent as to lead me to suspect that it reflects real worries.

It may be that parents engender a fear of doctors in the child, perhaps threatening the child with the doctor, or impressing on the child the need to behave appropriately in front of the doctor, or making the child worried by stressing the opposite—that there is nothing to be afraid of. It may be that the need to be respectful of anyone in power is impressed on the child and that this respect engenders the worry. Childhood certainly is a time when the child is repeatedly in the position of coming before someone who has power over the child or who can make decisions about the child.

Whatever the reason, going to the doctor does not seem to be something that can be experienced without some worry beforehand. "My conclusion is", summarised one boy "that it is not bad going to the doctor, the worst part is waiting until you go in". Whilst it may be difficult to reduce the worries about the outcome of the visit, it may be possible to better prepare the child for the visit and to make the wait more pleasant.

REFERENCE

Davie, R., Butler, N. & Goldstein, H. (1972). *From Birth to Seven: The Second Report of the National Child Development Study*. London: Longmans.

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