

# THE "MAISON VERTE"

## A FRENCH EXPERIMENT IN OPEN SCHOOLS AIMED AT PREVENTING PSYCHO-SOCIAL DISORDERS IN PRE-SCHOOL AGE CHILDREN.

The "Maison Verte" is first of all one of the solutions for "Western" children who are faced with early separation. They are increasingly imprisoned in a "Western" type nuclear family, father-mother-child (one or two), far from their closest relations. This article describes a unique experiment which could open up new horizons and spark off a debate on child-minding for young children 0-4 years, on nursery schools and the starting of school in present-day Sri Lanka.

In traditional societies, the ways in which a human being adapted to the events that mark the stages of his life tended to be defined and standardised on the cultural level. In our time industrial societies are confronted to the main events of life through increasingly complex means of adaptation. The mother-child relationship has come into conflict with the post-industrial mentality. Mothers are often deprived of the legitimate experience of motherhood and the children are deprived of a harmonious "separation". The child is often brutally separated from his mother or his substitute mother. Not only psychoanalysts and psychologists but also pedagogical, political and economic institutions of the industrialised countries are aiming at a "return to normal life". The more traditional societies in countries distant from the industrialised world are also becoming aware that their social structures, which were secure in the past, are in the process of disappearing because of changes brought about by modernisation.

In post-industrialised countries one begins to realise that the respect of biological roots constitutes the best protection against invasion and domination by anti-human social forces. The "Maison Verte" ("Green House"), which was created by Francoise Dolto,<sup>1</sup> a psychoanalyst clinician and specialist in young children's education, can be considered as an experiment in humanising the mother-child separation.

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<sup>1</sup>. Francoise Dolto was born on November 6th 1908 in Paris. She entered medical school and specialised in children's problems. She defended her MD thesis in 1939 on the theme "Psychoanalysis and Paediatrics" and became a founder member of the Paris Psychoanalytical Society in 1939, and later became co-founder, with Jacques Lacan, of the well-known Freudian School of Paris. Specialised in children's psychoanalysis, Francoise Dolto is known worldwide for her work-books, seminars, clinical trials, papers. She became a popular figure, sometimes nicknamed by journalists "the super-gran who understands kids".

The idea behind the "Maison Verte" is to prevent possible neuroses, to prepare the children for the day-nursery or school, and to give parents confidence. It is a place where the child and his parents can prepare gently for the separation between the cocoon of the family and collective living (creche, nursery school etc., a place which is open for children and parents. The aim was to check relationship disorders in very young children by being a social centre for children from birth to three years. It is a half-way house between home and nursery school.

The disorders caused by the anxiety of separation often give rise to malfunctions of biological rhythms, such as sleep and digestion, and sometimes lead to more marked pathogenic consequences. All children's anxieties are anxieties of loss of identity linked to the fear of being abandoned by the mother. The fact of loving another person than his mother gives rise to a fear in the child of losing recourse to her and therefore to himself. During the post-natal period, as long as the child is in perfect symbiosis with his mother, from the point of view of the child there is no demarcation between him and his mother and they are one. But the child's spirit is conscious of the dangers of separation. This means pain. The child has in him, in his spirit, in the liveliness of his budding energies, a need to become separated. Progressively the child becomes aware of the presence of his mother outside himself, in the outside world. If the separation is brutally enforced, without previous preparation or dialogue, the child wishes to regress and return to the "happy" era of symbiosis.

Towards the age of three the child has begun to have some notion of separation and identity. But children do not have a strong degree of emotional constancy. A child may cling to a positive image of his mother when he is far away, at school. He sometimes longs for her presence. Personal cohesion and integrity depend not only on the cohesion of the edenic dialogue of symbiosis, on the fusion of his body with that of his mother, but also on the cohesion which occurs after the formation of the frontiers between self and others.

Thus the "Maison Verte" is intended to prepare children and their parents for the separations demanded by nursery schools, day nurses and schools. The "Maison Verte" is a place where children aged 0 to 3 may run, where their parents play with them or talk amongst themselves. It is a place for leisure, play, meeting, experiencing social life. It prepares the child (aged two months) to being separated from his mother, without having to undergo the adaptation syndrome, to living in society quite safely without her.<sup>2</sup> The "Maison Verte" is meant for the child to experience autonomy for the first time in complete safety.

Experience shows that when they have been prepared by attending the "Maison Verte" the necessary ordeals of separation, when they come, no longer are what they are for many, traumatising ordeals that cause anxiety. From the age of two months, the

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<sup>2</sup>. Françoise Dolto, *La cause des enfants*, Robert Laffont ed. (1985).

child who has attended this place ten times or so before being sent to a creche does not suffer from the adaptation syndrome.

The staff is fairly numerous, so that each member has to be present no more than one day (at most two) a week - the teams are comprised of two or three people for 20 to 30 children and as many parents. Each day one team member is an experienced psychoanalyst. Psychoanalysts, doctors and child-minders are there in a private capacity; there is no consultation or teaching. They are there simply to welcome the children and the parents. The children always come with their parents or the adult who usually looks after them, and never without this parent adult, even for a short time. The child is known by his Christian name, age and sex, and the adult by his role towards the child father, mother or minder of so and so.<sup>3</sup> Anonymity is scrupulously respected so that the children may be considered as the adults' equals. The welcome is thus child-centred. For the children who come for the first time there is an introduction to the "Maison Verte": the play room, the water tub and the main room. These three spaces are symbolically separated by red lines, which mean passage is forbidden. Each time a prohibition is transgressed there is a reminder of the rule. In this way the "Maison Verte" is open, but with precise rules. The parents learn to communicate, the mother understands that the baby understands her. For his part the child is prepared for the first separations and for socialisation in safety, thanks to the presence of the person who guarantees his identity.

Mother and child are prepared for separation and for the child's autonomy, rooted in the certainty of his identity, his filiation, his sex and his position as regards his siblings: he is prepared coming directly into contact with objects and with other children and adults; at the "Maison Verte" he experiments as he pleases. The staff put everything that happens into words; this experience takes place within the presence of his mother or father, who also come to this place to relax and have fun.

The "Maison Verte" is also a "place for words". Francoise Dolto's intention has always been to make adults sensitive to contacts with children, to make them aware that the human being is above all concerned with language. This language expresses his unquenchable desire to meet another, similar to or different from himself, and to establish communication with this other. This desire is unconscious rather than conscious. The spoken language is a particular instance of this desire which very often, deliberately or not, alters the truth of the message. For the developing child this play with the masks of truth always has vitalising effects. The child *needs* truth and he is *entitled* to it. Truth is often painful to hear, but if it is spoken and said on either side, it enables the child to become structured and humanised.<sup>4</sup> Thus it is that in the "Maison Verte" one speaks with the child about separation and about his desires.

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<sup>3</sup>. No family name, no address or economic and social status.

<sup>4</sup>. Francoise Dolto, *Tout est langage*, (1987).

At the "Maison Verte", particularly during the first year, fathers were rarely to be seen, even though it was kept open deliberately until 7 p.m. on Saturdays and Mondays and throughout, of the team of three, there was always at least one man. It became apparent that fathers were afraid that the staff would urge them to become second-line mothers. But the "Maison Verte" asks fathers to come as the child's father and not as its mother. The fathers who come readily speak with the male minder or doctor on duty that day. In that way, at the "Maison Verte" the role of the mother and the role of the father are respected. That is how they are to behave towards the child.

In this house no educational instructions are given, nor psychological advice. The parents or adults are invited to find their own solutions and to follow their intuition. Pregnant women and their husbands are welcome. It is a place for speaking and sharing, not only for the children but also for the adults; those who wish to speak about the difficulties they encounter with their children may do so, those who wish to remain silent are also entitled to do so.

In Sri Lanka the separation between mother and child usually occurs, not between the ages of 0 and 3 but at the age of 5. Besides, in the traditional Sri Lankan community the child lives in a close symbiosis with his mother or with a mother substitute, aunt, grandmother, older sister, until the age of 5. According to Sudhir Kakar, early childhood in traditional India normally lasts until the age of 5, which is also true for traditional Sri Lanka. At the end of this period the child manages to understand the meaning of "mine" and "yours", of "I" and "you". The children who visit other houses in the village before the age of 5 are often better prepared for separation. Even then the fact of entering alone an unknown school and to be surrounded by unknown people creates anxiety in the child. He is haunted by the complex dilemmas of separation. At a time when it is fashionable to send children to nursery schools, the non-working mothers in urban areas do not hesitate to send their children into these institutions. These children have lost half their community life and live in one-family villas. The village children, who live in the community before the age of 5, are less affected than the children in the urban areas of Sri Lanka where the mothers have to send them to nursery school (towards the age of 3 1/2 or 4). In Sri Lanka, where the tradition of substitute mothers is still strong, the problem does not affect children from the age of 0 to 3, who go into creches.

This rapid outline of the "Maison Verte" experiment - half-way house between family and school, seems to me to call for further extensive research in our country as it becomes modernised. The practical conclusion that may already be drawn is that there are means of preventing psychosomatic disorders, disorders caused by the social integration of young children, and, finally, of future adults.

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