

THE SYMBOLIC SIGNIFICANCE OF FOOD IN THE TREATMENT, CARE AND RECOVERY OF EMOTIONALLY DAMAGED CHILDREN

[In order to avoid unnecessary repetition of him/her, she/he etc I have presented the caregiver as female and the child as male. This does not presume that the gender of either cannot be interchanged.]

As grown-ups we all, at some level or another, can appreciate the symbolic significance of food and its provision.

The emotional and cultural importance of food is most visible during times of celebration when large groups gather, for instance, weddings and festivals. For the family group, Christmas and birthdays will often have the same tradition of shared meals. This “breaking of bread” transcends countries, cultures and social class and as grown-ups we are able to articulate and demonstrate the importance we place on such provision.

In this short paper I hope to explore some of the elements around the provision of food that can create massive levels of frustration in caregivers – be they parents, foster carers, or residential workers.

I hope to demonstrate that by looking under the surface of grown-ups' practice and children's behaviour, we can exploit more fully the opportunities for therapeutic intervention that food and its provision can make available to us.

In terms of emotional development, food and its provision is crucially important for a child, from infancy when he will feed from the mother's breast or be fed frequently

and reliably from a bottle. The experience of being fed, or not, can create significant emotional responses in him. However, unlike grown-ups, he will be unlikely to articulate these acute experiences. Instead, he will communicate these feelings through his behaviour. Much to the exhaustion of his carer he will continue to express in his behaviour what he cannot say, abating only when a perceptive grown-up receives, understands and reflects back to him the message he has been trying, however clumsily, to get across.

During such interaction, the child's behaviour can be thought of as somewhat eccentric in as much as it may have certain components:

- His communication will often be relentless until responded to.
- He will be seeking a very specific response.
- The solution once discovered by the grown-up is likely to become a reliable source of comfort.

Throughout this exchange, grown-ups will be left feeling inadequate or impotent in the face of rising levels of behaviour after each unsuccessful attempt to placate the child.

Often it is what the child craves but is unable to say, or in the case of older children, can't bear to say. Such cravings can be at odds with received wisdom, for instance, a 14 year old may have a genuine, albeit emotionally based need for baby-like food, ie, rusks or mashed vegetables.

Food and its relevance to the recovery of severely damaged children

From the moment a child is born the process of emotional development is well under way. At first he is completely dependent on the mother for all his primary needs and thus food becomes a major part of this relationship with rich symbolism. Feeding provides an immediate and intimate transaction of care and pre-occupation that can only be experienced from the mother and is therefore an exclusive contract underlining the importance of the mother and baby bond. It involves the giving of food from the mother to the baby and, upon completion, will leave him satisfied at a very deep level. In time, if this experience has been reliable he will develop sufficient trust and confidence to enable others to provide food and its associated message of containment and provision, ie, a father or other caregiver. This is a tangible example to him that there are others in the world besides mother and that he can be separate and realise that he and mother are individuals rather than two halves of an exclusive relationship. If we can accept this we can then consider the power of food and how, if this process is disrupted in early life, it will inevitably leave a mark on the child's emotional blueprint as he goes through life. As the child grows older food will continue to play a part in his development. Sustained negative experiences will compound the damage already experienced; conversely intervention that seeks to repair the damage done in infancy stands a fair chance of redressing the balance.

The provision of food, as a symbolic communication of care, pre-occupation and, indeed, love

During infancy a child quickly learns that when hungry a specific cry will create a specific response, namely that he will be fed. A mother learns equally quickly to respond to this by feeding her baby. All of this happens without words and can be evidenced elsewhere in nature and is not peculiar to the human race. This intimate meeting of a dependent child's needs confirms in the child a sense that his mother is fully in tune with his primary needs. As he grows older he will benefit from repeated experiences of his mother being in tune or "pre-occupied" within him.

Similar feelings of someone being "pre-occupied" with oneself can be created for damaged children if caregivers lend sufficient importance to the provision of food.

A perceptive carer will realise that children who have been severely neglected will anticipate nothing less than chaotic meal times where the "survival of the fittest" appears to be the rule. Furthermore, these children may believe that there is no food to be had or, if it is available, will be hopelessly inadequate with very little to go round. Both these states indicate a huge degree of deprivation at a physical level. Emotionally, that warm, satisfying feeling of one's needs being met will be entirely absent. A child who has survived such physical and emotional deprivation will prove to be a challenge to even the most sympathetic caregiver.

To overcome this challenge, grown-ups must give some thought to the importance of routine. We must be careful not to confuse this with "regime" which is an altogether more enforced concept. "Routine", instead, is the culture around the provision of

food which confirms it will always be available at certain times or in certain ways. This is necessary in order to, over time, help the child move away from his firmly held view that eventually grown-ups will let him down and forget his need for food and, therefore, forget that he is dependent on them. The provision of food should not revolve around the needs of the institution but must take into account the needs of the child both as an individual and as part of a group.

In my years working at the Cotswold Community I learned much about food and its place in the curative treatment of emotionally damaged children.

At the Community we worked with boys who were no older than 12 years of age on admission. We looked after them in groups of 10 or fewer, with a dedicated staff team of 8 grown-ups. It might be of interest to note that one grown-up in each team, in addition to looking after the children, was responsible for thinking about all aspects of food and its provision. You will not be surprised to learn that I held this role for a while!

Throughout the day, children would be fed numerous times. In addition to the 3 main meals, breakfast, lunch and dinner, the children would be provided with modest snacks. During school time there would be mid-morning and mid-afternoon snacks. Upon returning home they would be greeted with milk and cookies. After dinner, and much play, supper would follow and the day would end with a final snack being brought to their room as they settled for bed.

Whilst this may appear to be a massive consumption of food it was, in fact, very carefully managed. Importantly, wherever possible, all food was prepared by the

staff from raw ingredients, avoiding too much use of pre-packed meals. Many of the meals were presented in such a way as to allow the child to see exactly what their meal contained. More complicated foods such as lasagnes or curry had to be carefully thought about. The anxiety caused to the children when offered foods that may contain something mysterious, or indeed, may have been contaminated, was considerable.

The crucial thinking behind this level of provision was that the children, much like babies, were fed regularly and predictably. Whereby the well looked after infant may be fed every 3 to 4 hours, the damage previously experienced by these children was such that this level of provision had to be re-created more frequently, paying due attention to the severe deprivation the child may have experienced.

Despite the most careful planning by caregivers, damaged children will frequently seek to "rubbish" all attempts to provide them with a good experience. This can take many forms, such as the child seeking to disrupt the meal for the whole group or family, spitting chewed up food onto the table, and so on.

Whilst it is understandable that grown-ups can all become enraged by such antics, they must steel themselves to understand what the child might be trying to make them feel or do. This understanding will then give them a clue as to how the child himself may be feeling.

For instance, if a child has learned from his early life that grown-ups are consistently cruel or depriving, he will have every reason to think that his present carers will be too. Daily life for such a child may be so exhausting as he occupies a state of

unspoken and fearful anticipation waiting for the inevitable beating which he is convinced will occur at some point in the day.

In order to end this exhaustion many children may seek to disgust and repel grown-ups to the point where a violent explosion may be, in the child's world at least, likely.

If the grown-ups can survive this onslaught the child can slowly begin to believe that despite all his previous experiences, not all grown-ups are violent or withholding and eventually meal times will become slightly less fraught.

Clearly, at this point, the grown-up may not yet have managed to repair the deep-seated damage the child has experienced. Nonetheless, a significant milestone in the relationship has been reached. The child has begun to internalise that the provision of food need not exist within a punitive culture.

There is an equally exhausting trip ahead to convince the child that grown-ups worry and think about him, even when he is not present, essentially that his carer is "pre-occupied" with him. If a child can be helped to believe that he is valued by his carer, that she can anticipate his likes, dislikes, needs and fears, it may be possible, to create inside of him that feeling of a caregiver thinking and worrying about him much of the day. Most of us enjoyed this level of pre-occupation from our mothers without even realising it.

As he continues to destroy all manner of provision, the child is not now seeking to create a violent outburst. Hopefully he has been convinced that this will not happen, instead he is trying to breach what he may perceive as the grown-up's caring façade.

He will want to get beneath this façade and prove that she shares his perception of himself as worthless and unlovable.

Once again the carer needs to develop a kind of "therapeutic stubbornness" whereby she continues to provide the opportunity for a good experience despite being shown by the child that she is completely hopeless. If a grown-up outwardly expresses this hopelessness, the child is likely to feel helpless. One way to begin to dismantle the child's campaign is to provide special foods or treats, away from the battleground of the meal table. This can take the form of a chocolate bar in his packed lunch, a special sandwich to eat during a long journey or an individually made cake with his name iced on it. The crucial bit in this is the message to the child that despite all that he does, his carer can still think of him as deserving of special things. That he is special. If done in such a way as to allow the child to discover his treat when the caregiver is physically absent, we remove from him the opportunity to throw it back to his carer in a rage. Instead, he is reminded that his carer has thought about him and in the absence of a possible conflict, the child can allow himself to think he may, in fact, be worthy of thought and love.

A carer may think that once she has survived and made sense of all the scenarios I have previously described, her work is complete. She may also imagine that once the child begins to feed himself, ie, prepare his own snacks and meals, that he truly has reached a state of emotional security. This can often be an inaccurate assumption.

In order to plug the gaps caused by emotional neglect, most children have had to feel safe enough to expose themselves to the experience of being cared for and

loved. Their previous experience of this provision proved to be unreliable and damaging and to occupy this position again is extremely threatening.

Many of our children will, understandably, avoid this feeling at all costs, in turn denying themselves the opportunity of curative therapeutic experiences. One of the most sophisticated and convincing responses to this is the development by the child of a very functioning persona conveying a sense of calm, ordered living and a child who is very good at looking after himself. In this way, he can avoid the risk of developing a meaningful relationship with a carer.

We may think that, considering their background, these children have coped remarkably well and, against all odds, are growing up to be very likeable young people. The illusion often works and many children manage to avoid the pain of their earlier life by ensuring that grown-ups don't get close enough to see the cracks.

I wouldn't suggest for a moment that we encourage the child to "get-in-touch" with their awful early life experiences. That could, in fact, be cruel and possibly dangerous for, however superficial his persona is, it has been a necessary response by the child to avoid further emotional pain.

What I am suggesting is that we must still find a way of allowing him to have some form or experience of "maternal pre-occupation" in order to fill some of the gaps in his early emotional development.

This child will, perhaps, find it too painful to expose himself to provision in the routine I described previously. He may, however, be able to localise his experience around

a symbolic dish, or experience, that he can reliably share with a trusted carer. The following example, drawn from the work carried out at the Cotswold Community, serves my point well.

John came to the Community from a very dysfunctional family within which it was highly suspected he had been sexually abused by family members. John was highly materialistic and was frequently presented with lavish and expensive gifts from his family. We believed these gifts were used to buy John's continued silence around his early life experiences. In addition, John was encouraged to disparage much of the work being done with him at the Community. Suffice to say he was highly suspicious of any meaningful provision and would seek to diminish any importance he may unexpectedly begin to link to his carer.

Over time, John became aware that many of the children were provided with what we termed as "adaptations". This is essentially a special experience shared between a child and his main carer, which frequently involved food. Each adaptation was specific to the child and, indeed, its exact nature was devised by the child with help from grown-ups, if necessary. As John's curiosity around adaptations grew, he began to talk to his carer about them. Even though he could be frequently mocking about the other children needing such treatment, his carer realised that he was, finally, testing out how he might have something special from someone special. Despite being reassured that he could also have this special snack, John remained awkward and embarrassed to actually suggest that he might like one.

One day, when John was being particularly disruptive and unkind to the other children, he stormed off to the garden where he strutted around until his main carer came to find him. Realising he had been successful in placing both himself and his carer out of earshot of the rest of the household, he blurted out that what he would really like as a special food was a knickerbocker glory! For those who may not know, a knickerbocker glory is probably king of the ice cream desserts.

True to his rather materialistic streak, John's dessert had to have 3 different flavours of ice-cream, chocolate sprinkles, fresh cream, fruit, syrup and anything else he could think of. The important aspect of this dessert was that it was made up from basic ingredients and it was the carer's time and diligence which ensured the final product was meaningful. With this very elaborate dessert, John was trying to offer his materialistic nature as the recipient of such a feast. What his carer understood him to be doing was, in fact, testing out that, despite his rather vulgar, greedy presentation, grown-ups could still see him as a child who needed the care and concern he had missed out on in his early childhood.

John had his knickerbocker glory at the same time every week for about 3 months and then, of his own free will, told his carer he didn't feel he needed it any more. From this small intervention we managed to carefully introduce John to further therapeutic experiences.

In closing, I would like to share with you a short passage from a book written by Nigel Slater. Slater, as many of you may know, is a very successful British chef. He has recently published a light-hearted biography of his childhood which illustrates beautifully how well-cared-for children can view food.

Toast

My mother is scraping a piece of burned toast out of the kitchen window, a crease of annoyance across her forehead. This is not an occasional occurrence, a once-in-a-while hic-cup in a busy mother's day. My mother burns the toast as surely as the sun rises each morning. In fact, I doubt if she has ever made a round of toast in her life that failed to fill the kitchen with plumes of throat-catching smoke. I am nine now and have never seen butter without black bits in it.

It is impossible not to love someone who makes toast for you. People's failings, even major ones such as when they make you wear short trousers to school, fall into insignificance as your teeth break through the rough, toasted crust and sink into the doughy cushion of white bread underneath. Once the warm, salty butter has hit your tongue, you are smitten. Putty in their hands.

*[Toast - the story of a boy's hunger
Nigel Slater]*

Jim Hamil
Head of Development
ISP