

The Gift of Observation

by Chantal Lamothe

NOTE: *Chantal was a Waldorf class (elementary) teacher for many years before taking up work with the young children. Her professional goal is to work with mothers. Along with her training at Sophia's Hearth Family Center, she is pursuing a master's degree in social work in her native language, French.*

My research project looks in depth at Observation as a tool in the context of a mother-child or parent-child relationship. My question began as: Does the mother's observation abilities affect her connection with her child and, if so, how?

First I felt the need to look at the more theoretical aspects of observation. Then, in a practical way, I wanted to experiment with observing as objectively as possible on a regular basis. Through that, I wanted to refine the use of the tool itself. In fact, I finally enjoyed pushing the process even further: observing myself observing.

Then, I questioned mothers who experimented with observing in the parent-infant program. I also grouped together three other mothers who volunteered to do a daily observation exercise. Following these experiences, my question changed: Why is observation so important? What is hidden behind this process?

I will conclude with my reflections and discoveries about the process of observing and its importance, not only in the mother-child connection, but also about the insights that this tool can give us.

THE THEORY

From the theoretical concepts I studied, I found that there are many ways to observe. In our context, mothers observing their children, three functions are relevant:

- The descriptive function: "we observe to describe a phenomenon". In this context, the phenomenon will mostly be the child's development.
- The formative function: "we observe to retroact" since observation can be used to adjust one's intervention toward a child.
- The evaluative function: "we observe to evaluate". Even if it is not the first goal of observing, observing one's child with other children gives the chance to evaluate or compare some aspects of its personality.

Several more points seemed important to consider in the context of parents observing their child. First I wanted to consider inference, or what conclusions the observer deduces from what he sees. Another significant part of the observation is the situation. The observation situation can be natural or created, manipulated or free. It is also worth noting why we choose this or that way of observing, as it seems important to use the observation tool according to our needs. Postic and Ketele conclude this way:

"There are many possible ways to observe. The analysis of the research process, the many possible functions of observation, the many possible biases linked to observation, the very diverse ways to observe, all that must prevent us from the preconceived idea that there would be a "good" way to observe. There is not right or wrong way: there are only more or less adequate ways according to different situations." (Free translation.)⁴

These theoretical ideas helped me shape my thoughts about observation.

SOME ANSWERS

I found many answers by practicing daily observation myself. At first I wanted to observe people around me, particularly children, to stay close to my research subject. But Life took me on an unexpected path. My very sick mother was hospitalized while I was completing my school year and my practical training, and her severe condition brought me to her side every day. I chose her to be the subject of my daily observation.

Day after day I visited my mother and took care of her, washing her, dressing her, dressing her hair, helping her to the bathroom. And apart from that, being with her, half asleep, half awake. Confronted with the general intensity of my life, I soon realized that each time I would come to the hospital, I had to become centered, calm and peaceful. I would adjust my voice tone, the speed of my movements and my breathing. Even if I was in the hurry of the school year's end, whenever I entered her room I had to stop time and slow to another rhythm, her rhythm.

As her sleeping periods got longer, I had more time to observe her. One thought was always present: my mother is going to die. I felt it deeply in me. I lived many emotions because I had not seen this coming, it was so sudden and brutal. Then, I decided to observe her intensely to find what in her behavior or attitude made me think she was dying, since no diagnosis had been given.

Here are some excerpts from my daily observations.

MY MOTHER

Day after day, I visit my mother at the Palliative Care Unit. Most of the time, she sleeps or half sleeps, and I am close to her. I generally observe her from the foot of her bed. I surrender to simply be with her. I feel that her life is leaving her physical body. But on what grounds do I conclude that? My observation process begins.

- *Her skin. Her skin no longer has the same color, the same life. Her skin seems thinner, more transparent and pale.*
- *Her breath. Her breath is more superficial and less regular. Sometimes it looks as if she is not breathing at all. Then suddenly, it seems a little better. Breathing in and out is clearly not easy.*
- *Her eyes. Her eyes are probably the most noticeable sign. The color of her eyes has changed. The white part is yellowish, and they are more fixed, less mobile. When she looks at something, her eyes are more rigid. Instead of moving her eyes, her whole head, or even her whole body turns. When she sleeps, her eyes are not completely closed.*
- *Her body. She has lost a lot of weight and is now thinner. Her entire skull is more and more apparent.*
- *Her movements. It is surprising to see how her movements are slow and carefully calculated. Each step, each movement is planned. The sequence of moves has to be decided and deliberate.*
- *Her bearing. My mother is getting shorter day after day. Is it really what is happening? I observe that when she is standing, her head goes down, as if it is too heavy for her to keep it straight. (Just as when a child is sad or moody. This posture makes her look so melancholic.) Her shoulders are rounded inside. When I wash her back, I can see this new curve in her shoulders. Her back also gets more and more rounded.*
- *Her balance. It is fragile. We must watch her balance and be on the alert for possible imbalance. She requires a lot of assistance when moving.*

My observations give me the opportunity to be much closer to her, to see and understand these changes. The more I observe her, the more I am profoundly with her. A new communication appears: I need less language and less explanation. When I put together all the elements of my observation, I realize that her body is doing the opposite movement of a baby developing himself: her body is contracting and returning to a fetal position. This image of a birth into another world becomes clear and beautiful. I feel it is a moment of deep truth. I am clear that she will be leaving soon for elsewhere.

This experience with my mother not only brought closure, but also gave me clarity. I was able to describe "how" to observe: by being calm and centered inside in order to be fully available, and then observing what is there. It also answered the "why": to let her reveal herself to me, slowly, with simplicity.

THE MOTHERS AND THEIR CHILDREN

I wanted to use this observation process in an experiment with some mothers. Three mothers accepted my invitation to observe their children on a regular daily basis for three weeks. The children were three boys: Mathis, 18 months, Émile; 14 months and Dorick, also 14 months. At first, they all had the same questions I had: What should we observe, in which way and why? (WHAT-HOW-WHY).

I purposely chose not to impose a precise frame, because I wanted to discover the answers with them. We decided together to leave the observation free for the first week. The only rule was to observe for five minutes each day and to write down the results. Here are some of the elements that appeared most important:

- The questioning of the mothers: what, how and why do I observe? Depending on the reason I observe, I will not observe in the same way.
- The inference issue. Frequently the mothers would interpret their child's behaviors. When I asked them how they had come to this or that conclusion, they were surprised to notice that they were indeed inferring, without even noticing it.
- The mothers became aware of the acuteness of their observation. "I now specifically observe my child apart from the specified daily five minutes; I am generally more watchful."

Even if it seemed difficult for the mothers to do the exercise regularly, each realized that she was more and more aware of the moments where she was observing her child. After the three weeks, they all had enjoyed the experience and were happy to discover characteristics of their child that they had not noticed before.

MORE MOTHERS

To deepen the scope of my question, I put together the comments of about ten mothers concerning their observation experiences at Sophia's Family Center. I was surprised to see how much they deeply benefit from their observation time during the parent-infant program. Their comments reminded me of the interesting theoretical answers that Magda Gerber and Emmi Pikler give about the How and Why to observe. [Editor's note: Emmi Pikler was a Hungarian pediatrician who founded the Pikler Institute in Budapest in the 1940s; Magda Gerber as her colleague who brought their insights to California through RIE™.]

How?

"Observation is a state of quiet and focused attention that cannot occur when the mind is in motion. The less you do, the more you observe...To observe means to be open and detached so that you can see the situation more clearly...

As you observe your baby, relax and focus on what you see and hear. Look at your child. Look at her face, her arms, her legs. What is her body language saying? See what she responds to. See what holds her interest. See what bothers her. The process becomes easier as your child grows because she gives clearer signals and you get better at reading them."⁵

Why?

"As you carefully observe your newborn, you will discover her unique personality. You will see your real child as she is rather than the "imaginary child" of your own creation. You observe her so that in time, you will understand her likes and dislikes, moods and abilities. And understanding these things will help you to better care for her, communicate with her, and improve your relationship."⁶

Dr. Pikler writes in *Peaceful Babies-Contented Mothers*: "What is essential is to observe. Get to know your child. If you really recognize what your child needs, if you feel what is causing him grief, feel what she needs, then you will respond in the right way. You will guide and bring up your child well."⁷

"Human beings tend to project their own feelings upon other people, including their children. For instance, if a parent is hungry, he may project or assume that his crying child is also hungry. This is where observation is important. Instead of projecting or assuming, why not observe your child for the answer? Over time you will understand her needs."⁸

CONCLUSION

If I come back to my original question "Does the mother's observation abilities affect her connection with her child and if so how?", the answer now seems obvious. By observing her child, a mother learns to answer profoundly to the needs of this very child. The connection is based on mutual confidence. All the mothers that answered the questionnaire said it in their own words.

But this answer is not enough. The observation process is more than a way to know how to respond to someone's needs, a child's for example. I think there is something more fundamental. Behind this process is hidden the question: Who are you? And asking this question means understanding and accepting that this being is truly different and unique. It means to make ourselves fully available for this encounter, so that a young child has the chance to become who she is, and that we stay who we are. Observation brings us to the most authentic meeting, the true meeting.

This process of true meeting is described by the fox in St-Exupéry's *The Little Prince*:

"You have to be very patient," the fox answered. "First you'll sit down a little ways away from me, over there, in the grass. I'll watch you out of the corner of my eye, and you won't say anything. Language is the source of misunderstandings. But day by day, you'll be able to sit a little closer..."
...One sees clearly only with the heart. Anything essential is invisible to the eyes."¹¹

FOOTNOTES

⁴ Postic, Marcel et Jean-Marie De Ketele, *Observer les situations éducatives*, « pédagogie d'aujourd'hui », 1ère édition, Paris :Presses universitaires de France, c1988, p. 77

⁵ Gerber, Magda and Allison, *Your Self-Confident Baby*, « John Wiley & Sons, Inc. », 1ère édition, 605 Third Avenue, New York, N.Y., 1998, p.26

⁶ Gerber, Magda and Allison, *Your Self-Confident Baby*, « John Wiley & Sons, Inc. », 1ère édition, 605 Third Avenue, New York, N.Y., 1998, p.26

⁷ Gerber, Magda and Allison, *Your Self-Confident Baby*, « John Wiley & Sons, Inc. », 1ère édition, 605 Third Avenue, New York, N.Y., 1998, p.26

⁸ Gerber, Magda and Allison, *Your Self-Confident Baby*, « John Wiley & Sons, Inc. », 1ère édition, 605 Third Avenue, New York, N.Y., 1998, p.84

¹¹ Saint-Exupéry, Antoine, *The Little Prince*, translated by, R.Howard, Florida, A Harvest Book Harcourt, Inc. (1ère édition1943), 2000, p.60-63

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