

## Mastery, Climbing Stairs, and Box Building

By Christiane Elsbree, MSW



I want to share some thoughts on mastery. In my notes from one of Violet's training programs I found a quote from Violet, "Frustration doesn't teach children how to handle frustration." In *Hidden Treasure* (p.57-58) Violet addresses the issue of mastery and the difference between struggle and frustration. She discusses the need for an appropriate level of struggle so that children can grow and cope with the frustrations that life brings their way. She says, "A baby learns from struggle, and with each mastery experience develops the strength to deal with frustration."

The concept of growing through struggle has been central to Gestalt therapy from its inception. In 1984 I attended a workshop with Laura Perls, one of the founders of Gestalt therapy. Laura talked about how one grows through incorporation, working through and coping with the other as the other. I have always been drawn to the Gestalt therapy view of dental development, the analogy that it provides for tackling new things throughout life. As Laura said in that workshop, "We learn through the chewing process to take time with relieving the tension, being aware of what one tackles. This sets a pattern for coping with the other in every respect."

If a child has been given baby food long after she could chew and digest solid food, she will expect life to be easy and unchallenging. If she has been given solid food long before she has the ability to bite and chew, she'll view life as inaccessible to her, overwhelming and unsatisfying.

So the task is to provide an appropriate balance between struggle and frustration. The dictionary installed in my laptop defines struggle as "to strive to achieve or attain something in the face of difficulty or resistance." Frustrate is defined as "to prevent someone from doing or achieving something ... implies rendering all attempts or efforts useless ... suggests barriers that impede normal development or prevent the realization of natural desires."

In my work with children and their parents I often give the following example to demonstrate supporting a child's attempts toward mastery:

Picture a young toddler at the top or bottom of a stairway, giving every indication of interest and curiosity about the stairs. The adult caregiver has several choices. I'll play with extremes to show how the adult could respond. To provide absolute and certain safety with regard to stairs a parent could move the family out of this home into a home that has no stairs until the child is much older, or perhaps barricade the stairway with bricks and mortar, or maybe post a sentry at the stairway 24/7 who would threateningly and sternly deter the child from approaching the stairs. This parent would never allow the child to attempt the stairs. At the other end of this extreme spectrum, equally absurd, the parent would allow the child to "play" on the stairs at any time totally unsupervised and at high risk of injury, believing that the child will eventually learn from experience and figure it out. Of course no sane adults would choose either of these approaches.

Ideally, a baby or toddler is closely supervised on stairs. The parent is just close enough. Close enough to prevent any injury, but not so close as to interfere with safe exploration. The parent provides a practicing experience that will allow for success and mastery.

To successfully create a healthful experience for the child with the stairs, the parent takes many things into consideration. The parent knows the child, is aware of the child's needs. Does the child have what it takes to struggle with this situation at this moment in time? Or is the child too distracted, hungry, sleepy, ill, or in some other way not able to benefit from the experience? Does the parent have at that moment what is needed for the experience to end well? Can the parent be available at that moment to attentively supervise the practice? If so, the parent sits on the step under the child, or stands below the child, staying just close enough based on the child's ability, ensuring that if the child missteps the parent can intervene before the child is injured, but not so close or so involved that the child can't move her body to do what's necessary to go from one step to the next and gain the necessary confidence and mastery to venture on.

If the parent sees the child's struggle turning into frustration, the parent may make suggestions such as "Go feet first." "Try sitting on your bottom." "Let's take your socks off so you can use your bare feet." "Hold the handrail." Or perhaps, "All that climbing has tired you out, let's [do something else], you can practice more another time."

The parent's willingness to provide a practice experience helps the child to acquire a new and necessary skill. The child develops skills and grows in confidence. The parent then, too, becomes more at ease and confident in the child's ability to navigate her environment safely.

Children benefit most during practice experiences (which, by the way, are happening continuously throughout life—not only at appointed times) if the adult can stand by in an attitude of flexibility and acceptance, not rigidly attached to one right way of accomplishing a task, and if the task is in keeping with the child's developmental stage.

Human beings are faced with opportunities to master challenges throughout life—among these are sucking for nourishment, how to roll over, experiencing gravity, figuring out how to creep, crawl, stand and walk, using a cup, bowel and bladder control, riding a bicycle, losing teeth, writing your name, reading a book, making friends, meeting new people, completing schoolwork, entertaining yourself, dating, driving a car, acquiring sports skills, developing artistic skills, communicating, self-expression, mastering feelings and emotional states, and on and on and on. Success and confidence in one arena transfers to other areas of life. Being constricted or judged also impacts one's approach to other new tasks.

I'll share a recent specific opportunity to support a child's sense of mastery that came up for me in a therapy session. An eight year-old boy had been learning lots of new things at home assisting his father with several home improvement tasks. He came into our therapy session wanting to make a drum. He found some cardboard and took the child scissors from my play table and began to try to cut the cardboard to the size he wanted.

This was not working well, the scissors were not up to the task, and even the adult scissors that I provided weren't helpful. His struggle was turning into frustration. I thought carefully in the moment about this child, what I had been observing about his ability to follow directions and use tools safely. I considered the level of tasks that had recently been successfully entrusted to him by his father. I decided to go to my desk to get a segmented blade utility knife that I knew could make the cuts he wanted in this large piece of cardboard.

Before I gave him the knife to use, I provided information about the sharpness of the blade. I demonstrated how to use it safely, and I set clear boundaries about its use. When I was sure that he understood and could be safe, I gave him the knife. I sat near him and provided support as needed without interfering with his own learning about how the knife, his hand and the cardboard interacted together to accomplish the task.

He was able to cut the cardboard and then was faced with how to put the pieces together. I watched, without giving a suggestion, as he chose from the available materials. He had difficulty with the plastic tape dispenser. After several frustrating attempts I demonstrated how he might adjust the angle of the tape as he tore it. That still didn't solve the difficulty, so I went to my desk and this time brought over the desk tape dispenser that could be used with one hand and had metal teeth for cutting the tape rather than plastic ones. He could proceed with his project without getting bogged down by the frustrating tape dispenser. After all, he was still faced with the challenges of how to best place the tape to hold the sides of the drum together and what length of tape was right, and how to hold the pieces in position while they were being taped together.

This session was rich in mastery experiences, and his face showed his pleasure in what he had accomplished in the end. We didn't talk about the many psychological difficulties of his life, the losses and the trauma he has suffered, but in this session, I provided an experience, not unlike the experiential pieces of an adult Gestalt therapy sessions, in which he could sustain his self-support through several challenges, and gain a sense of mastery which will contribute to his sense of self. I tried to step in just at those points where I could see that an intervention on my part would bring the challenge to a more digestible level when his struggle was becoming frustration.

There are so many ways that adults are constantly faced with the choice of when and how to allow a child to try something new. Adults have the opportunity to provide children with the tools and opportunities that they need to master the tasks of life. Adults can say, "No, don't!" or can inquire, "What is your plan?" They can give complete or adequate information and instruction, or just watch in the wings.

To discern which approach to take, trust in the emerging gestalt, trust in the unfolding of life, be present and aware, be contactful, and bring yourself into the moment.

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