

## THE LONELY CHILD

It was the end of the school day, and many children were on their way to the after school child care program. Mr. Hardy, the child care supervisor, stood talking with several other school personnel, including a third grade teacher, the P.E. teacher, the art teacher, and the school social worker. As they stood talking, eight year old Ricardo walked by. Expressionless when his eyes met theirs, he bent his head, shrugged his shoulders and continued his walk.

"What do you think of Ricardo?" asked Ms. Schrum, his third grade teacher. "Have you noticed that he never seems to interact with the other children?"

"I see that, too," responded Mr. Hardy, the after school playground supervisor. "When the children go out to play, he wanders over to a shade tree, sits down and plays in the dirt. And in the gym, when we have homework time, he seldom talks to others. I did notice that if one of the other kids asks him a question, he answers it, but he doesn't interact any further. And he never initiates the interaction. How are his grades?"

"They're average," his teacher responded. "Ricardo seems to pay attention, and he answers my questions, but he's always the last to be picked by others for group work."

"That's how it is for him in P.E.," said the Phys Ed instructor. "He is always the last to be picked. And he seems to avoid any group play. I thought at first, he had an elitist attitude – you know, thinking that he was better than the others – the type of attitude children have when they are over-affirmed by their parents, but I'm not sure that's the case. Maybe he's just shy."

Turning to the art teacher, she said, "What do you see in his drawings? Do they give us any clues?"

"Well, Ricardo doesn't like to draw, and when he does, his pictures aren't grounded," the art teacher began. "Sometimes eight years olds still don't know to create a base for the people or buildings to sit on. That doesn't concern me as much as what I see in his self-portraits and in drawings of his family. The children all have very large, circular eyes and spindly arms and legs."

"That could be an indicator of anxiety," chimed in the social worker, suddenly very interested. "Tell us more about what you see."

"His trees are kind of spindly, too, and they always have red apples on them," the art teacher continued. "There is always a hole in the tree – you know – a place where a squirrel might live. And the tree stands alone – there are never roots or grass or flowers near it."

"His drawing of his house is pretty much what you'd expect from an eight year old. But the windows are always partially closed by curtains, and there is never smoke coming out of the chimney. Sometimes he puts a circular window with bars at the very top – where the roof comes together in a point. And the door is very odd."

"Does he ever draw his parents?" the social worker asked.

"He did once. His father was very large and prominent - big arms and thick hands. Mother was standing next to him - smaller, but with similar arms and hands. Her teeth were really large. She looked more like she was snarling than smiling. The children seemed to have forced smiles - except for Ricardo, whose mouth was a big circle - like he was screaming.

"I had asked them to draw their family engaged in a fun activity. He drew them on a playground. There were swings and a tower in the background. And, I seem to remember a dog running around. They were playing jump rope. Ricardo and his sister were turning it, and an older child was jumping."

"What do you think this means?" asked the art teacher, "and how does it relate to Ricardo's being lonely?"

"A child's art can tell us a lot about what they are experiencing. For instance, the trees with the apples may indicate a need for nurturance, and the big arms and thick hands on the parents may indicate Ricardo's feelings of fear or powerlessness when he is with them. Without hearing more from Ricardo, we really don't know very much. But let me give you some information about why children may be lonely:

"Some children are reared to believe that they are better than everybody else. They are taught that they are more exclusive because of their family's economic status, religious beliefs, ethnicity, or education.

"These children can appear a snobbish as well as lonely. They feel lost in the school milieu because they are caught in a loyalty trap. If they make "the wrong kind of friends," their parents will be angry with them. Consequently, friendships become dangerous commodities in these children's world.

"However, it's important to understand the importance family values play. These same children can come from homes where they are not taught prejudice or elitism; they are taught wholesome values. Their peer group at school may consist largely of children whose families do not teach this. They become lonely because they believe it's wrong to hit, punch, steal, sass, cheat, lie or dress inappropriately.

"That leads me to say that some children are lonely because their parents fail to role model social skills. The parents may be too busy or preoccupied with other things to develop friendships of their own. Sometimes this preoccupation is work related, or it occurs because the parents may be caring for elderly relatives. Some parents are just shy. Other times, the parents are involved in illegal activities, and they don't want to jeopardize themselves or their illegal behaviors.

"When parents are involved this way, children are warned not to tell. They may even be threatened by adults who tell them that they, their siblings or their pets will be harmed or killed if they reveal family secrets. This same form of intimidation is used for children who are being sexually or physically abused. Sadly, some of these children also experience abuse as part of cult rituals.

"A child's art can be a window into their lives," the social worker went on.

"Interpreting a child's art is a specialized skill. And, of course, it's always helpful to hear the child's thoughts about their pictures because sometimes what we might want to interpret as problematic is actually the child achieving a normal development task.

"For instance, trees with red apples or cherries may symbolize a lack of nurturance. But it can also mean that the child has learned about colors and how to draw circles.

"Big hands may indicate brute power, but they can also mean that the child is still developing the fine motor skills needed to draw hands.

"The same is true of the house picture. Often draped windows, a lack of smoke in the chimney, and a circular window with bars at the top may indicate activities that parents want to remain hidden. It can also mean that the child has learned that windows have curtains that are sometimes closed, fireplaces are sometimes dormant, and houses have attics.

"The Canadian psychologist John Allan wrote an excellent book titled *Inscapes of a Child's World*. If you're interested in learning more, I'm sure our librarian can get it through inter-library loan. Two other good books are *Dibs in Search of Self* by Virginia Axline and *Windows to Our Children* by Violet Oaklander. *Dibs* tells the story of a young child who is growing up in a family where his parents fail to nurture him. Oaklander's book contains activities which help children improve their social skills. And my friend Paris Goodyear Brown has two books called *Digging for Buried Treasure, Vol. 1 and 2*. Paris is a registered play therapist, certified by the American Association of Play Therapists, and her books are easy to read and follow. Her web-site is [parisandme.com](http://parisandme.com). You might have to type in the link."

"I've heard some children have developmental delay problems that make them lonely," the teacher added. "Often I have children in my class who started school before they were socially mature. I find them playing with children in first or second grade because they have more in common.

"Then, a few years ago," the teacher went on, "I had two interesting children in my class. One was diagnosed with Asperger's, a form of autism; the other was said to have pervasive developmental disorder (PDD). Both of these children fluctuated academically, but they were passing. What each *really* struggled with were social skills. Neither could understand the common social cues other children give. Common cues such as a child moving their fingers inward to motion come here, or saying 'No!' to cutting in line.

"I remember that one of their classmates became frustrated with an assignment and threw up her hands. The child with Asperger's interpreted it as her wanting to fight with him. He had to be sent out of the room to calm down. And I remember how angry he would get with me if I asked him to draw something specific. When we were studying space, I asked him to draw a picture of himself with a team of astronauts working aboard the shuttle. Art was hard for him, even if it involved fantasy. He lacked the ability to draw social exchanges.

"Something that did make a difference was animals. I was always talking about my dog, Worthless. One day, the principal allowed Worthless to come to class for a few hours. Both of these children showed compassionate, interactive parts of

themselves that I had never seen before. I had heard that pet and equine therapy could be helpful, so I suggested that the parents look into local programs."

"I guess we have our work cut out for us," said Mr. Hardy. "We really don't know why Ricardo is lonely or how we can best help him. But you've certainly given me a lot to think about!"

"Now that I've heard your concerns, perhaps he can spend some time with me," suggested the social worker. "And maybe we could arrange for a home visit to learn more about Ricardo's family and neighborhood."

"I'll help Ricardo catch up on what he misses," his teacher said. "And thanks for all your information. I really learned a lot!"

"Me, too," responded the others. "This has been a very helpful hall conference!"