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Struggling against a feeling of becoming lost: a young boy's painful transition to day care[1]

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The article covers one aspect of a current research project, 'Toddlers' Adjustment to Out-of-Home Care'. Financed by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF), it is conducted at the University of Vienna, and is introduced in the present paper in much compressed form. The project operates with an interdisciplinary design, which includes Young Child Observation as a research tool. While data of 100 children are collected and analysed by the use of different research methods, 11 of these children have been observed during the first six months of day care. At the focus of the present paper stands a one-year-and-nine-month-old little boy named Valentine. The (anonymous) day care centre where he spends several hours of each day is distinguished by its modern architectural design, as well as the fact that the children are kept in 'mixed age groups' and taken care of with what is called an 'open group approach'. Within these given structures, the caregivers appear unable to provide Valentine with a feeling of security and comfort. Since he cannot gain the experience of being represented within the minds of the caregivers as a child who requires continual attention and care, he receives scant emotional support in his struggle to overcome the painful experience of being separated from his parents – an experience that soon swells up to a feeling of 'becoming lost'. The fact that the caregivers in Valentine's case (but in other cases as well) only to a limited extent perceive, understand, or in any desirable way consider the toddlers' painful feelings, points to a similar conclusion – an assumption of the existence of institutionalised defenses, whose significance should be taken into consideration if changes in this area are to be aspired to.

Keywords: Tavistock/Bick observation method; young child observation; day care; transition to day care; toddlers' adjustment to out-of-home care; nursery; kindergarten; mixed age groups; open group approach; affect regulation

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Day care centre C.

It is a Monday in September of 2007, when Valentine, a one-year-and-nine-month-old little boy, is brought by his mother to a day care centre in Vienna, which we shall call 'day care centre C'. It is the first day of many when Valentine is to remain here for several hours. But, for the time being, Valentine need not feel alone, as his mother wishes to accompany him today and help him settle in and to become familiar with the caregivers, the other children and the new environment. It will be some days yet before she will expect him to cope with all the emotions once he has to stay, all by himself, in this kindergarten C., which differs from a traditional kindergarten in two ways.

Firstly, there's the conspicuously modern architectural design. The kindergarten is part of a large building with enormous, ceiling-to-floor windows. Approaching it one gains the impression that it is built entirely of glass, an impression that is reinforced, once more, upon entering the day care centre itself, as many of its partitions and demarcations are made of transparent glass.

And secondly, the structure of everyday life within the kindergarten is determinated by 'mixed age groups' and an 'open group approach':

- The term 'mixed age group' is used when children belonging to a group are of various ages. Valentine, for example, is being allocated to the Fraggle Group, named after the fantasy characters, the Fraggles, whose adventures are chronicled in a number of picture books and films. Within this group, Valentine is, at first, the youngest child, while the oldest children will soon turn six. A similar distribution of ages can also be found in the three other groups of this day care centre, named the Pony Group, the Zebra Group and the Dumbo Group.
- To each of these groups belong about 20 children, with two trained caregivers and one female assistant sharing the responsibility for them and taking turns to ensure that, depending on their timetables, two of the three adults will usually be present. Each group also has a certain room allocated to it, although most of the day the doors tend to be open. This is intended to offer the children an opportunity to move around between the various rooms of the kindergarten according to their wishes and needs and to mix with the children of other groups. In this, the day care centre C. is working according to an open group approach.

Mixed age grouping and open group approach as a subject of research

If one sets out to search for scientific publications on the subject of mixed age groups in day care, one soon realises that there has been a lively discussion of the topic for the past 50 years (Fröhlich-Gildhoff, 2008, p. 280). This discussion focuses on four central aspects (cf. Funder, 2009; Heiss, 2009):

1. In a variety of publications we see a very decisive plea in favour of establishing mixed age groups (Erath, 1992; Katz, Evangelou, & Hartman, 1991; Liegle, 2007). In the process, the view is expounded quite generally that children in mixed age groups will already have a more complex and more stimulating everyday experience in the interactions they have with each other than do children in homogeneous age groups. In addition the caregivers, it is claimed, can turn their attention to individual children in a more differentiated way, since in such mixed-aged groups the individual needs of each child can be spotted more easily. This, in turn, ought to benefit those young children who have newly arrived and are in particular need of care, all the more so as the number of such children, based on the low fluctuation predominant in such groups, will ordinarily be kept within limits. In addition, it is assumed that younger children, especially during the familiarisation phase, would be consoled and comforted and cared for not only by the caregivers, but also by the older children – a form of assistance not available to children in more homogeneous age groups (cf. Textor, 1997).
2. Published statistics suggest that a growing number of child care organisations support this view and are increasingly keen to introduce mixed age groups. In Austria, for example, the number of mixed age groups has increased tenfold over the past ten years. The number of children aged between zero and three, who are looked after jointly with four-, five-, and six-year-olds, meanwhile, has by far exceeded the number of children placed in groups solely with their peers in the zero to three-year age bracket.
3. Misgivings directed against the introduction of mixed age groups are encountered more rarely now and are characterised by a worry that caregivers may show preferences for some particular age groups. It is argued that children of other than the favoured age groups may receive insufficient stimulation and support concerning their cognitive and social development.
4. Empirical research results relating to these topics are inconclusive. The studies support some arguments in favour and some against, and for the most part cover only particular points of that wide spectrum of discussed aspects (Dunn, Kontos, & Potter, 1996; Pool, Bijleveld, & Tavecchio, 2000; Rothstein-Fisch & Howes, 1988; Sundell, 1994). In addition, it is quite noticeable, too, that there are no accurate investigations of (i) the way in which small children, toddlers, experience their everyday lives in institutions with mixed age groups and (ii) the impact of their experiences on their development.

Studies about children in day care nurseries operated on an open group approach are to be found less frequently, even though it is here – particularly in studies published in German – that one finds a dominant plea in favour of such nurseries, claiming that they open up to children a broad spectrum of learning

and developmental opportunities, and that therefore children are able to orient themselves more strongly along their interests and developmental needs. Also, it is claimed, that it enhances their development of autonomy and their abilities for self-organisation (cf. Rohnke, 2003). Just what it means for children – in particular, for very young children – in regard to their emotions, if they have to spend daily many hours in such an open-group setting, is as rarely investigated as the question, which consequences result for the caregivers and their tasks.

The Viennese study 'Toddlers' adjustment to out-of-home day care'

When Esther Heiss, one of our advanced students, received permission to observe Valentine at the day care centre C. in Vienna over a period of six months, this allowed us to investigate, by applying the method of young child observation, what it meant for this particular little boy to spend several hours each day at a day care centre (i) with mixed age groups and (ii) where the work is being carried out according to the open group approach.

This observation of this young child took place within the research project 'Toddlers' adjustment to out-of-home day care', which is being carried out at University of Vienna[2]. In this study, the transition from home care to out-of-home care is being investigated by focussing the sample of 100 children aged between 18 and 30 months. The central questions of this research project are, accordingly,

- how the process of adaptation (or maladjustment) to out-of-home day care developed over those first six months;
- which aspects are helpful, or a hindrance, with regard to the development of the children's (i) affect and affective regulation, (ii) their interest in their environment, and (iii) their dynamic interactions with their peers and caregivers.

To investigate these research questions, a number of research tools are applied, including the analysis of video-taped observations and of cortisol-levels to indicate the children's physical stress levels. Beyond that, 11 children have been observed closely by using the method of young child observation as a research tool. The observations began – with the agreement of the parents and the caregivers – at the first day that the observed child spent at the day care centre. In many cases the second and third observation was done on the first and second day when the parents left the day care centre and the children had to stay without them. After that, observations were continued for one hour weekly over a six-month period.

In a first section of our research work young child observation was realised in the same manner well known from training and educational contexts: accounts were weekly presented and discussed in three young child observation seminars[3]. In a second and third section of the research process the accounts and the results thus far gleaned were discussed and analysed in newly-composed small groups

and singles case studies have been worked out with a view to developing answers to the central research questions. In doing so, the procedure has been comparable to the research work which was published by Datler, Trunkenpolz and Lazar (2009)[4].

Taking into account the single case study of Esther Heiss (2009) we shall, in what follows, retrace the emotions that Valentine may have experienced during his initial phase in the day care centre, the process of regulating his emotions and the impact that this may have exerted on Valentine's development within his new care environment.

Valentine and day care centre C.

Valentine's first day at day care centre C.

As Valentine, on the occasion of the aforementioned Monday, approaches day care centre C. together with his mother, the two of them are espied by the caregiver Susan through one of the large picture windows, and are, accordingly, already being expected. Susan shows Valentine and his mother the space allocated for Valentine in the kindergarten cloakroom, and his mother removes her son's street shoes and his jacket, and soon also takes off her own outer garments.

In the report prepared by the observer we read:

> In the meantime, Valentine runs along a bit further. I can see that he is wearing a white pair of pants and a blue-and-white-chequered shirt that protrudes from his pants. The shoes, too, are blue. Apart from this he has blonde, very fine, silky hair and dark eyes. His skin is very pale so that blue veins become visible at his temples. He appears to me to be exceedingly large for his age. His mother comes to stand beside me, saying, 'And there, he's off already'. (Heiss, 2007, 1/2ff.)[5]

Yet a moment later Valentine expresses that he is, after all, still feeling insecure in the new environment, and that he does require his mother's proximity:

> Valentine turns around, and with a smile on his face quickly runs back to his mother. She asks Valentine whether the two of them should perhaps now enter the big room for a bit. She asks him this several times, reaching out her hand to him. As Valentine still hesitates, his mother eventually takes him by the hand and together they enter into the Fraggle Room. (Heiss, 2007, 1/2)

What follows in this hour can be subdivided into two sections, where Valentine encounters certain kinds of experiences, which, over the following weeks and months, will occupy him increasingly more intensely.

1. The first section is characterised by the fact that Valentine starts out to explore the Fraggle Room. In the process, situations alternate where he will turn, by himself, to various toys, with other situations where he will

seek his mother's or the caregiver Susan's assistance in exploring objects. When he starts to become interested in a small, elevated plateau bordered by glass walls and available to the children as a playing area, his mother offers to ascend the stairs together with him. Once up both sit down. Valentine huddles against his mother's body, snuggling up to her, while she reads to him from a book:

> Valentine looks very relaxed, being with his mother. (Heiss, 2007, 1/4)

A little while later, Valentine has two remarkable experiences of separation:

(i) As he starts to explore the low gate, which forms the entrance to the elevated plateau, and as another child comes up to the plateau, Valentine's mother, without any announcement, descends from the plateau. Only a few moments later, Valentine becomes aware of the loss of her immediate proximity and feels pressured to become active in two ways: He seeks to obtain eye contact with his mother while at the same time trying to obtain body sensations similar to those he may have repeatedly experienced as a baby lying close to his mother's body and being breast-fed. In the observer's account we read that,

> . . . his mother . . . waves to Valentine, who moves close to the glass partition, pressing his nose against it. Suddenly he is smiling again. While pushing his face against the sheet of glass, he also contracts his mouth, making a sucking motion with his lips. Occasionally, in doing so, it happens that he also sucks in his cheeks. (Heiss, 2009, 1/4)

He appears to enjoy, in particular, the fact that he is in a palpable manner occupying a solid place in the mind of his mother, who is waving to him. When his mother turns away from him to get her camera and exchanges a few words with the observer, he starts to display a slight feeling of being pressured to descend from the plateau, and to seek the physical proximity to his mother again. Yet he immediately turns around when he sees the camera and hence also feels his mother's attention refocused back on him again:

> His mother comes up to me and collects her bag, which is located somewhere behind me. 'I've got to take some pictures', she tells me. I smile at her and she goes away again to take some photographs of Valentine. He is just then about to descend the stairs, but when his mother takes the pictures, he climbs back up again. (Heiss, 2007, 1/4)

(ii) Now, Susan also goes up to the plateau, sits down with Valentine and leaves him, in an abrupt manner, a short time later. She starts a conversation with the observer:

> I look at her only briefly and then back over to Valentine. He stands by the window, waving. Susan waves back. (Heiss, 2007, 1/4)

When this account was discussed in the seminar, the impression was raised that the observer's attention, which, after a brief diversion or interruption, had

immediately been redirected towards Valentine again, may have lead to Susan's also casting another glance back at Valentine, and waving to him. But this hypothesis may have been influenced by the knowledge of later accounts, as well as of the second part of this session.

2. In this second section, the caregiver initially asks the children to come together in a morning circle. The children then sit, along with their caregivers, in a circle on a carpet to talk about various topics and issues, and to sing songs. Valentine's mother also joins in the circle, sitting down next to her son.

   It can be gleaned from the report that the caregivers in no way attempt to modify proceedings in favour of a young child like Valentine. Valentine repeatedly attempts to leave the morning circle in order to pursue other activities. His mother, however, retrieves him time and again and explains to him that he must stay with the circle even if he would rather gratify other desires. Susan mentions Valentine specifically on just one occasion, pointing out to the other children that two new children have joined the group:

> 'Today we are starting a new week and we have also got two new children. Does anybody know who they are? Has anybody seen them yet?' A few of the children nod their heads. Susan continues speaking, and she introduces Valentine. She adds that all the children should look after him a bit and show him where the toys are. Then, the other new child is introduced. (Heiss, 2009, 1/5)

Many later observations reveal that the caregivers in no way consider it necessary to support the children beyond this point in any continual or specific way of helping them to become related with one another. How relations between the children come about is left largely to their initiative and ingenuity. This attitude is also reflected in the circumstance that Susan, through the entire duration of the morning circle, never once creates a situation where Valentine is either directly addressed or indeed invited to enter into direct interactions with any of the other children.

The first two days without mother

Four days later, it is now a Thursday, Valentine is left by his mother, for the first time, who is going to pick him up again three hours later. While Valentine and his mother are in the cloakroom, Susan comes up to them and stays with Valentine while his mother is saying goodbye to him. At this stage, Valentine is already intensely occupied with watching the other children playing around in the cloakroom. No particular reaction can be seen when his mother kisses him good-bye on his cheek.

> A short while later Susan says that they may now be going over to the Fraggle Group. Susan takes Valentine by the hand and I follow them. (Heiss, 2007, 2/2)

After they have entered the Fraggle Room, Valentine suddenly stands alone, without Susan, and has to decide for himself how things are going to proceed for him now.

> Valentine moves to the right rear of the room, where the painting corner is situated. There, Alexandra, one of the caregivers, is busy spreading a plastic desk mat and a sheet of paper on the table. In one corner stands a small box . . . with several jars, each filled with crayons of the same colour. Valentine takes one of the crayons and clambers up on a chair. He has a purple crayon in his left hand and another of the same colour in his right hand, drawing circles with both hands simultaneously. After a short while, he gets up and fetches a brown crayon. (Heiss, 2007, 2/2)

Alexandra witnesses that Valentine has merely placed the purple crayons on the tabletop, rather than replacing them in the appropriate jar. This causes Alexandra to address Valentine directly whether he knows where the other crayons belong, and Valentine correctly sticks them into the appropriate jar.

For the remainder of the observation period, Valentine stays with Alexandra, who places his drawing into a drawer and shows him by which rules he must play with the objects that Valentine fetches from a shelf. Repeatedly, Valentine is informed about the kind of behaviour that is expected of him. Once, when he takes toy objects into his mouth, Alexandra points out to him that these would not have a nice flavour and that in any case the objects are designed for a different purpose or use. When he loses interest in a particular card-placing game, he is encouraged to put all the cards back into the box.

> After playing for some time . . . Valentine sticks the index fingers of both hands into his mouth. He slips down from the chair and walks to and fro a little. Alexandra points out to him that some of the cards of the game are still lying scattered on the floor. Valentine picks up the cards and replaces them in the box provided for storing the game. (Heiss, 2007, 2/3)

Alexandra also stays with Valentine during the subsequent morning circle, and retrieves him back into the circle whenever he sets out to play on the elevated plateau. The activities of the morning, once again, barely take into account small children like Valentine. Most of the time, he just sits there calmly, neither displaying any exaggerated interest nor any specific emotions. This pattern is interrupted only three times. Once, Alexandra assists him when the children are encouraged to hold hands with their neighbours sitting next to them; and then twice, on two further occasions, Valentine's interest is majorly aroused when another child displays a large fire brigade vehicle brought in from home. It is handed around in the shape of a picture, which Valentine scrutinises intently.

When Valentine returns on the following *Monday*, he is given the following reception by Susan at the Fraggle Group:

> Susan asks him whether he wants to play with anything, and takes a box from the shelf containing wooden railway tracks, which can be stuck together. The box also contains colourful wooden trains. Valentine sits himself down on the floor and Susan takes out two of the tracks and sticks them together. Valentine then also takes out a track and attaches it to the previous two, then another, which is connected to a red bridge. (Heiss, 2007, 3/2)

Yet, then, all of a sudden, Susan gets up and Valentine is left alone. Valentine, initially, continues to play with the train set, whose carriages can be linked magnetically. When other children join in, he sees no further chance of continuing his playing and withdraws. A feeling of powerlessness and loneliness seems to arise:

> Valentine stands up and places himself with his back against the wall, watching the other children at play. His facial expression is serious and his arms droop down loosely by the sides of his body. After a short while he sits down and grabs hold of one of the wooden track elements. He turns it to and fro in his hands, and sticks a finger into the small hole of the track into which one pushes a part of the other piece of the track when the pieces are made to link up. The sides of his mouth are pulled downwards and he looks very withdrawn. (Heiss, 2007, 2/2)

It seems that Valentine is dealing with the question of how a given emptiness can be removed in such a way, and how a noticeable hole can be filled by connecting objects with one another or by putting one object into another one. He soon feels motivated to re-obtain a sense of vitality and strength through an effort of his own. The observer notes:

> After some time he gets up and goes over to the shelf where the children's drawers are located, as well as a table. He places his arms on the table corner, holding on to it and lifting his legs up in the air. *I am surprised by how strong he is, as he is able to hold himself and his entire body weight up in balance with his arms alone.* (Heiss, 2007, 2/2)

In this situation, Valentine is once again being addressed by Susan that he ought to pack away the toys that he'd been playing with. Valentine starts to load the toys back into the box (Heiss, 2007, 2/2).

Then Susan lends him a hand and remains with him for the rest of the hour. She directs Valentine's attention to a variety of games as well as to the option of eating bread or having a drink. In so doing, Susan behaves in a manner similar to Alexandra's, continually advising Valentine on (i) how to behave properly, by (ii) encouraging him to play games in the prescribed way, telling him (iii) to clear off toys before starting any new games, and (iv) telling him to stay seated by the table while eating. Valentine appears to be intent on experiencing emotions of connectedness, by increasingly adhering to the prescribed rules. And indeed it is in this way that he manages to obtain praise[6].

In some of the discussions about these accounts the impression was repeatedly gained that Valentine encountered little cordiality and warmth. Also, the caregivers appear to be little concerned with the question of how Valentine may be experiencing the situation at the day care centre, in emotional terms. The fact that this impression arose seems to be linked with the impression that Susan and Alexandra appear to be barely at all connecting with, or referring to, Valentine's internal world, nor are they giving the boy explicitly to understand that he is welcome at the day care centre. Beyond that, it was noticed during these discussions that Valentine himself has to repeatedly make an effort to come into a close relationship with the caregivers and other children – even though the caregivers frequently turn towards Valentine and remain close to him.

From the fourth observation on, this kind of caregivers' effort could no longer be noted to take place at any time at all.

The third week at the day care centre

When on the Tuesday of the third week Valentine was observed for the next time, he has already been spending the forenoons from 7:30 a.m. as well as the lunch and sleeping time at the day care centre. When the observer enters the building at 8:45 a.m., she is confused when she finds the door to the Fraggle Group locked. From one of the caregivers, whose name is unknown to her, she is informed that Valentine is already present. The observer then sets out looking for him and, peeking into another group room, whose door stands open, she sees that Valentine is staying in that room. The observer notes:

> The room is equipped in much the same way as the Fraggle Room – it does appear to me to be much smaller, though. Since there are many children present in it already, it is quite noisy and restless. Upon entering the room I notice two caregivers, whom I have never seen before. (Heiss, 2007, 4/1)

The fact that the observer does not encounter little Valentine in the Fraggle Room with Susan or Alexandra, but in another room with two other caregivers, generates a clear sense of discomfort within the observer. As an adult, she is able to cope with this situation and to enter into communication and contact with these other adults. By that way she is informed that one of the caregivers is Julia, a trainee (Heiss, 2007, 4/1).

Valentine, on the other hand, who has already spent 75 minutes at the day care centre, experiences the situation as much more oppressive.

> Valentine is sitting at a table and eating a piece of an apple. His hair is tousled and he looks tired. Upon finishing the piece of the apple, he takes a new one. He gnaws around the inside of the apple. While eating, he gazes about himself aimlessly, not taking in much of his environment. At one point, he sticks his finger up his nose. (Heiss, 2007, 4/1)

Valentine gives the impression of lacking in strength and being lost. While, some moments later, he turns his weak attention on the other children at play, he is approached by one of the caregivers. She, too, does not, however, appear to be primarily concerned with Valentine's wellbeing, but rather more so with the question of whether Valentine is following the rules of behaviour that prevail at the day care centre:

> The caregiver tells him to sit down at the table when eating something. Just at this moment he has taken a final piece of the apple into his mouth, and she asks him whether he wants anything else to eat. At the same time, she pushes the tin with the apple pieces to the rim of the table. She also moves the chair away from the table so that Valentine should be able to sit down. Yet Valentine does not sit down and he pushes the chair back, close up to the table. The caregiver leaves him. (Heiss, 2007, 4/1)

Once again left to his own devices, Valentine appears to be occupied with the task of limiting the incipient feelings of emptiness and lostness by generating a number of varying activities:

> Valentine now takes another slice of the apple. After a short time, he does, after all, set himself down on the chair he sat on before, and turns his body at an angle to the table. Again, he keeps gnawing the apple and gazing about the room. He pulls an unoccupied chair over to his side and starts to wobble it to and fro by its back. The chair finally topples over and Valentine stares at the floor. (Heiss, 2007, 4/1)

This disturbance causes the caregiver to return once again to Valentine, and to admonish him – and to go away (Heiss, 2007, 4/1).

Valentine's discomfort now has become so overpowering that he makes an attempt to escape from the day care centre. He walks out to the cloak room and then onwards to a glass door through which one can leave the day care centre.

> He reaches up, stretching all the way to the door handle. The door is locked, and Valentine is clinging to it with all his weight. Both his hands, in the process, are holding on to the handle and he even briefly lifts his legs off the ground. At that moment, a woman is about to go out through the door, and Valentine moves sideways somewhat. The woman locks the door, pushing the safety lever into place. Again, Valentine attempts to open the door .... He continues to pull the door handle. (Heiss, 2007, 4/2)

The observer now sees the caregiver standing beside her, who also watches Valentine's activities. She briefly inquires into the state of our research project, and then turns towards Valentine, making it clear to him that she has grasped Valentine's longing for maternal care and attention:

> She tells Valentine that his Mama will come once he has finished his wee afternoon nap. (Heiss, 2007, 4/2)

Then she goes off and leaves Valentine who is staying behind by the glass door. Valentine now steers towards various points in the hall, before being

detected and called over by the (previous) caregiver who is now seated in the office by a desk. She tells him to come closer and demands of Valentine that he immediately should separate from her again, by exhorting him to go into the room of the Fraggle Group.

Valentine runs forth into the room where he had previously been. The trainee Julia sees him and lifts him up. Together with her, he participates, in a lively and interested manner, in a game, where animals and various objects have to be named. But Valentine's feelings of closeness and connectedness do not persist for long.

> Shortly afterwards the caregiver asks Julia to join the Pony Group. Julia agrees, brings the game to an end and raises herself, ready to go with Valentine still in her arms. She tells him that the two of them will now be joining the Pony Group. (Heiss, 2007, 4/2ff.)

On the way Julia realises that the door to the Fraggle Group room has been opened and that Susan is standing in front of it. Julia veers off her course and enters the Fraggle Room with Valentine. When the observer, a few seconds later, detects Valentine again, he is sitting all by himself underneath the elevated plateau, playing with a toy fire engine. The situation has evidently become anything but satisfying, and so he walks up to a glass door leading towards the outside, but he cannot open it. He goes up to a box containing large rolls made of cardboard. As he touches one of them, he is advised by another trainee not to break anything. When other children come over and start to play with the rolls, Valentine remains standing beside them, not participating:

> His arms hang down beside him and his facial expression is serious. (Heiss, 2007, 4/3)

His longing to be held in a caring manner, and to be enveloped by someone attentive to him, seems to be growing. He therefore feels himself forced to seek such an envelopement for and by himself, squeezing himself inside a crack between the wall and a shelf. This, too, fails to provide him with any degree of satisfaction:

> Only a short time later he emerges again, attempting once more to open the glass door. The female trainee, who had previously addressed him over the cardboard rolls, tells him: 'No, people cannot go out there'. She concurrently pushes his hands away from the door handles. Next, she goes and leaves him to himself, again. Valentine once more gazes outside, pressing his face and his hands against the glass partition. I can only see him from behind. His head is held a little to one side and his shoulders are drooping down. (Heiss, 2007, 4/3)

When Valentine had pressed his body against the glass partition, which encases the elevated plateau, on that first day, he was able to see his mother beyond the glass sheet and feel connected to her in a live and lively exchange with her. But now there is no one, neither on this nor on that side of the glass, who is there in a comparable way for Valentine. He walks around aimlessly, and then comes to a standstill near Julia, who is busy painting with some children. But there, too, he does not find sufficient solace and understanding,

because Julia only seems to want to make sure now that Valentine does not besmirch the table and that he should put the crayons back into their proper jars. As Julia rises from the table, Valentine once more seems to appeal to her for comfort:

> Valentine rises and walks over to Julia, who stands in the middle of the room. He touches her hand and she looks down towards him. Valentine hands her the crayons, but she gives them back to him and says he should clear them away if he's not going to do anymore painting. (Heiss, 2007, 4/4)

Once again Valentine has to find a substitute for all of what he does not receive from others by himself. But that substitute is insufficient, and so Valentine is left alone even with the feeling that he can barely keep himself upright anymore:

> Valentine returns to his seat and starts to run a crayon around his face and down along his throat. Then he sticks it into his mouth and begins to lick it or suck on it. He sticks out his tongue and then licks his left hand. He appears to be *quite absent-minded*, staring blankly ahead of himself. Then he slips off the chair and falls to the ground. He gets up again and takes the crayons to the place where they are sorted into jars. He pops them in, willy-nilly, with Julia watching him as he does so. She tells him he hasn't sorted them in correctly and asks, does he know where they belong? (Heiss, 2007, 4/4)

Valentine moves to one of the small niches situated under the windows. They are also boundaried towards the outside with glass. He sits himself down inside this area, looking out and mumbling to himself. He is briefly addressed by one of the trainees, and responds with a tortured smile. He then goes over to one of the shelves. Now not even Julia can win him over to join in a game with her. He returns to his niche, pressing his feet against the boundary and sucking his thumb. Susan sees Valentine:

> She walks over to him and points out to him that it may well be possible to see a lot of cars through that glass-window. Valentine looks at her and points to the outside with his finger. She tells him, he will still have to wait, till his mummy comes. Then she gets up and leaves. (Heiss, 2007, 4/4)

Valentine, too, leaves the niche, he hears Susan calling 'Morning circle!' and leans against a shelf:

> He ambles about aimlessly in the room and I notice how his facial expression is changing. He is squinting his eyes and compressing his lips. His chin hardens so much as though he is about to burst into tears. He manages to get a hold of himself, and then presses his lips together again, hard. At the same time, his arms are hanging down loosely by his side. (Heiss, 2007, 4/4ff.)

And the observer adds:

> *I notice how I suddenly experience tears welling up in my eyes and I feel a powerful impulse to go over and pick up Valentine and comfort him.* (Heiss, 2007, 4/4ff.)

Now Susan reacts to Valentine's emotions:

> She rises from her seat and sits down next to him. She strokes his head and asks him a question. He looks up at her and says: 'Mummy'. Susan says something and lifts him up on her lap. Valentine briefly starts to weep but quickly gets a hold of himself again, and now looks much more relaxed. Susan embraces him. (Heiss, 2007, 4/5)

When the observer, soon after, leaves the day care centre, she experiences within herself a feeling of deep sadness. Later, as the account is discussed, the participants of the discussion groups feel anger about the fact that Valentine receives so little support in his efforts to come to terms with all those emotions that being separated from his family entails.

The next five months at day care centre C.

Anger, too, is increasing in Valentine, and leads, after about two-and-a-half months, to aggressive behaviour patterns for a number of weeks, repeatedly hitting on some of the other children (Heiss, 2009, 95ff.).

Other changes also can be observed: Valentine's interest in objects increases, as does his interaction with other children. The same is true for situations where he plays, fully absorbed and concentrated, with toys for several minutes. Valentine is increasingly beginning to appreciate the Morning Circle. Often he is among the first to follow the call to be seated on the carpet intended for this event. This latter keenness appears, however, to be predicated largely upon the fact that the Morning Circle offers one of the few solid time slots where the caregivers – actually and voluntarily – become actively involved for an extended period with the children; where they show an interest in what the children have to say; and generally convey the impression to the children, that they do indeed belong to and are a part of a group (Heiss, 2009, 121ff.).

Other parts of everyday life, however, barely change over the course of several months: in the mornings it is still never quite clear which group room is going to be open and which of the caregivers are going to be present. During the day, even if Susan or Alexandra is on duty, contacts between Valentine and the caregivers are brief and only intermittent. The caregivers only turn Valentine in a tender and caring manner on those rare occasions when he – for example, by weeping – clearly expresses a feeling of sadness or pain. Apart from that it is left to Valentine himself to pick ways and means of becoming active, either alone or in conjunction with other children. All the more so as the caregivers only rarely appear to show any tangible interest, or even get involved, in the emotions of the children or the ways that they may interact with one another. As to group activities specifically suited for young children like Valentine, we read still nothing at all in any of the observer's accounts.

In all of the accounts, similarly, it is difficult to identify any passages where Valentine shows uninterrupted feelings of joy, pleasure, or well-being that would extend over periods of several minutes. One does, however, find pervasive descriptions of situations where Valentine ambles about aimlessly, gazes about himself in an indecisive manner, and time and again seeks out a niche where he can find refuge. So it is, also, not surprising, that Valentine occasionally takes advantage of those moments when the doors of the group rooms are open to go into other parts of the day care centre in search of games or children or caregivers with whom he may occupy himself or can feel connected in some satisfying manner. For the most part, however, Valentine appears to wander disorientedly about the vast spaces of the day care centre, often, it would appear, in search of the experience of a kind of satisfying contact, which he is yet unable to find.

It is in this sense that the observer notes in her seventh account of observations what happened during a Morning Circle session that had been held under candle light:

> The children get up and walk about. Valentine, on the other hand, remains seated and again only gazes about. Only after Alexandra turns on the light, does he rise. He walks over to the washroom, then immediately out again to the aisle and past me towards the exit. Again he places himself against the glass partition. A wooden beam divides the glass and Valentine has both of his hand placed on the beam. For some time he merely stares outside and does not move. Eventually, he turns away and moves over to the left towards the cloakroom. He goes up to the wall, where the magnetic game is hung. He takes out one of the magnets and sticks it on to the magnetic wall.
>
> Then he pushes it up until it reaches the end of the magnetic wall and the magnet crashes down to the floor. He looks at me a few times. I see how he huddles down behind a chair, looking my way through the holes of the back of the chair. He produces a series of quaint noises and looks at me. Then he emerges and runs over to the other cloak room. One of the kindergarten pedagogues strolls by and sees Valentine. She tells him to come along with her. When Valentine seems reluctant to do so, she takes him by the hand and tells him he can choose whether he wishes to join the Fraggle Group or the Pony Group. They walk past the Fraggle Room in the direction of the Pony Group. Once inside the room, she lets go of Valentine. He now stands in the room and remains standing in the selfsame spot where the pedagogue has let go of him. (Heiss, 2007, 7/3)

It is, likewise, not very surprising that six months after his first day at the day care centre Valentine continues to have difficulties separating from his mother. When we read, for example, in the observer's last account, that Valentine, after shrugging off his street clothes, puts his arms around his mother's neck, it seems that the internal representation of mother as a good object has been lost:

> She is getting up to go and he clings to her body, so that as she gets up she lifts him up along with her. He cuddles her very closely. She goes over with him to the Fraggle

> Room and notices that it is still closed as no one else has arrived yet. She tells him, 'The Fraggle Room is still closed. Which group would you like to go to? Shall we go over there?' She's already going to the Pony Group's room, and Valentine nods assent. Over there, Claudia, the resident caregiver, is just then busy watering pots with watercress. She is standing right beside the entrance and says hello to Valentine. And she also asks him straight away if he would care to eat something? Yet Valentine turns away and cuddles his mother once again, who in turn presses him against her body. Then, when she attempts to put him down, he resists and stiffens up. She presses him against herself again and asks, 'Well now, what's the matter with you?' She cuddles him again, just as Claudia asks Valentine, 'Would you care to give me a hand watering the flowers?' (Heiss, 2008, 19/1)

Valentine nods, and he can now let go of his mother, and is, jointly with Claudia, concentrating on watering the flowers. This kind attentive directedness, the harmonious, joint activity and the helpful scaffolding and support which Valentine now experiences, is only rarely to be found in the descriptions that make up these accounts. All of this, however, reaches an end even within the observation period and a short while later Valentine can again be seen in the Pony Room seeking sanctuary in a hidey hole beneath one of the windows. A little bit later he is playing, all by himself, at one of the tables, with a set of building blocks. (Heiss, 2008, 19/2ff.)

Concluding remarks regarding affect regulation and institutionalised defenses

The discussion of the accounts raises a multiplicity of questions as well as deliberations leading to new directions and further research. There are two aspects we would like to examine more closely before concluding.

Some remarks about Valentine's struggling for affect regulation

The analysis of the accounts makes quite clear that Valentine can mostly only experience joy, vitality and lightheartedness when he knows himself to be closely related to familiar objects

- in whose minds he knows himself to be represented as a child who requires continual attention and care;
- and to whom it is clear that it is possible for him, only with such help, to soothe the painful emotions of being separated from his family and to experience the day care centre as a location where he can gather satisfying and enriching experiences.

The caregivers provide Valentine, only to an extremely limited degree, with the opportunity of experiencing emotional gratification as being physically held and contained. He experiences, therefore, that there is no deep-rooted image of him and his needs in the caregivers' mind, and so, with good

reason, he is forced continuously to struggle against a feeling of 'being or becoming lost'.

He doesn't have enough opportunities of alleviating these emotions and of sharing these feelings with others; neither he can create these opportunities of his own accord. In this regard, the assorted games, short contacts with the caregivers, various interactions with same-age and also older children, and presumably the feeling that by behaving extra obediently he can be in harmony with the caregivers, – all of this can provide him only with passing moments of alleviation. Valentine's preoccupation with magnets, railway tracks, building blocks or Memory® cards, all of which seem to centre on the themes of separation and reconnection, appears to be helping him somewhat, when it comes to focusing on his concern with the subject of separation and being separated, expressed in a proto-symbolic way (Lorenzer, 1981, p. 161) – but it cannot bring about any deep kind of change into his situation (cf. Heiss, 2009).

It seems to be of interest in this context to take a look, too, at Valentine's tendency to retreat, repeatedly, to niches. Following in the footsteps of Esther Bick (1968) it might be worth considering whether these niches have the function of a 'third skin',

- with the help of which Valentine attempts to provide for himself feelings of stability, a foothold, or support, and also feelings of being enveloped, encased, protected;
- within situations where the external objects that are present cannot provide, convey, mediate such a feeling or emotion;
- while the internal objects have not as yet been sufficiently built up or developed or stabilised in order to generate such feelings independent of the immediate relationship experience at hand (cf. Klein, 1963/1987).

Some remarks on the behaviour of the caregivers and on institutionalised defenses

How are we to understand the ways, in which the caregivers are behaving? The assumption may occur that Valentine often behaves in the manner of an anxious-avoidant attached child who only rarely expresses unpleasant emotions in an unmistakeable wise, and who did not even make it clear to his own mother for months how strenuous he experienced being separated from her (Heiss, 2007, 2/1, 4; Heiss, 2007, 3/2, 5). This might have caused the caregivers to disregard Valentine's emotional needs.

Trying, with the help of such a hypothesis, to explain the *entire* spectrum of the caregivers' behaviour, does not, however, appear very satisfactory: What can be gleaned from the accounts, is firstly, that the caregivers behave in a similar manner towards all of the children. Secondly, it is noticeable that the caregivers barely structure the overall course of the day, so that all children for many hours of the day are left to their own devices. With the exception of the Morning Circle

there are no routines which would cause the caregivers to engage more deeply with the children's' internal world, their experiences, feelings and thoughts. Thirdly, there are situations, where Valentine is not crying and where the caregivers quite evidently grasp his longing for togetherness with his mother and hence his need for bondedness and closeness. They even express this verbally – without, however, beyond that, engaging with Valentine in a really sensitively caring manner[7].

Although not all the toddlers who were observed in our research project had to suffer like Valentine we gleaned similar impressions in other day care centres as well. This corresponds to the fact that on the topic of early education – outside the spectrum of psychoanalytic writings – almost no publications are existing, where single case studies convey a deep understanding of the intensity and complexity of primitive emotions which overwhelm toddlers in an intensive way if they have to spend time regularly at out-of-home-care institutions[8].

Literature surveys[9] reveal that even fairly general descriptions or commentaries on that topic, like published by Ross Lazar (1987) or Isca Wittenberg (2001), can barely be found to any comparable level of differentiation anywhere outside the psychoanalytical literature[10] although psychoanalytical publications regarding the significance of early childhood experiences of separation are well known and available for decades. All of this leads us – according to authors like Menzies-Lyth (1959/1988), Hopkins (1988) or Elfer (2007a, 2007b) – to draw the following final conclusions:

1. Within the framework of our research project we were obliged, repeatedly, to witness the experience of how hard and disturbing it is to be confronted so intimately with the primitive – and often catastrophic – emotions of very young children during their process of transition from home care to out-of-home-care. From this point of view the caregivers' indifferent and reserved behaviour can be understood as an expression of their desire to protect themselves from becoming overwhelmed by primitive emotions, if they were to allow for a greater proximity to and understanding of such children as Valentine.
2. These defensive efforts are successful not at least because they seem to be embedded in a net of institutionalised defenses which are part of the system of early education. A widespread unconscious consensus seems to be existing that there is no obligation, either within the training of caregivers, nor within the care-giving centres as such, to educate and to teach caregivers how to understand in a deep way the emotions of very small children experiencing out-of-home-care. As a result of this there is no adequate concept of professional work established that includes the conviction that struggling with the task of understanding children's primitive emotions is part of the job of caregivers.

3. Widespread beliefs about the advantages of mixed age grouping and the benefits of working in an open group approach environment belong to the factors, which often stabilise the system of institutionalised defenses. Because these beliefs nourish the conception that it is not really the challenge of the caregivers and the care giving centres to develop a deep understanding of the toddlers, or to take their emotional requirements into account in a helpful, sensible way within the context of every day work; for one might believe a large proportion of these tasks are covered by the larger children and by the smaller children themselves in a process of self-organisation in an open group setting.
4. Endeavours to weaken this system of defenses can be successful only if the experiences and hence also the primitive emotions of the caregivers themselves are carefully taken into account. This implicates that the training and continuing education of caregivers and directors of care-giving organisations have to take account for the structures that caregivers, too, need, if deeper reflections about the emotions of young children, about the caregivers' counter transference and about relationships between children, caregivers, parents and other significant persons should take place in day care centres, some general reflections on the dynamics in care giving organisations included (Kahn, 2005; Pecotic, 2009).

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Notes

1. A first version of this paper was presented in a workshop chaired by Lisa Miller at the 5th International Conference for Teachers of Infant Observation: Infant Observation in a Globalised World, 27–29 August 2009, Tavistock Centre, London.
2. For some more details see the acknowledgement at the end of this paper.
3. These seminars were run by Margit Datler and Wilfried Datler, both members of the Infant Observation Study Group Vienna.
4. A more detailed description of these research steps were published in German language by Datler, Steinhardt, Trunkenpolz, & Hover-Reisner (2008).

5. The first number indicates the number of the observation from which the quotation is derived. The number after the slash refers to the page of the report from which the passage has been excepted.
6. Susan stands by the exit and asks Valentine, if he would like something to eat. Valentine says, 'Yes!' and claps his hands. Susan moves in the direction of the table, yet Valentine steers towards the toys that are still lying on the floor. Susan asks him whether he is going to first pick up the toys, and praises him for it when he does so (Heiss, 2007, 2/3).
7. During the third observation session Susan even specifically mentions that in her opinion Valentine is too young for a mixed age kindergarten group – again, however, without feeling motivated, in the face of this estimation, to develop any deeper understanding of Valentine, to seek a greater closeness to the boy or to take his state of being into further account.
8. Single case studies concerning the transition from home care to out of home care of children who are younger than three years are, even in psychoanalytical writings, very rare. This might be caused by the fact that infant observation focuses on children between zero and two in their families, while young child observation focuses on children who are usually three years or older (cf. Adamo, 2001; Adamo & Rustin, 2001; Dennis, 2001).
9. See, for example, Hover-Reisner & Funder (2009).
10. This also can be mentioned in regard to writings with an attachment theory background, where just particular aspects of children's emotions and internal worlds are focused (Datler, 2003; Elfer, 2007a, p. 112). Nevertheless, based on attachment theory Laewen et al. (2007) have developed an elaborate concept for giving support to toddlers in the phase of their transition from home care to out-of-home-care and have published impressive videos to illustrate this concept with case material (Infans, 2003a; 2003b).

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