

UNDERSTANDING WHAT LIFE IS LIKE FOR CHILDREN WHO FEEL TOO WOBBLY INSIDE

Her life was turning, turning,
In mazes of heat and sound.
But for peace her soul was yearning.
(Matthew Arnold, 'Requiescat', cited in Quiller-Couch, 1979)

Feeling wobbly inside can show itself in children through a variety of anxious symptoms, such as phobias, psychosomatic symptoms, obsessive-compulsive rituals, bed-wetting and nightmares. Wobbly children can find it difficult to concentrate. They can seem agitated a lot of the time because they are so unsettled inside. Wobbly feelings all too easily snatch the child's attention away from his

outer world, as there is too much going on in his inner world. Some feel too anxious to explore the world or to be at all adventurous, and so cling to a parent or to home – the known, the familiar. Other wobbly children may lash out because they feel too wobbly inside and are unable to manage the intensity of their feelings:

I was overwhelmed by chaotic feelings, which I discharged in an orgy of smashing. (Little, 1990, p100)

Some children feel wobbly because they do not know who they are. Their sense of self is very fragile. One ten-year-old boy called Tomas said, 'There is no one "me". It makes everything feel very upside-downy.' He complained of there being too little sense of continuity of himself over time 'I never feel I'm quite the Tomas I was yesterday or last week.' Such children can feel all over the place, particularly in stressful



Figure 1 All about Willy

situations as there is no central, organising self to be stable. When a child does not know who he is, he often does not know what he feels either. This also makes him vulnerable to feeling the feelings of the people around him. For example, Polly, aged twelve, had no stable sense of who she was, no central organising core self. So each time she watched television she would present herself for a while afterwards like someone from the television programme. After a cowboy movie she would be aggressive, after a love story tender, after a comedy programme, light and jovial. Of course, it is a very wobbly thing to not know who you are or what you feel. Some children who are wobbly are very untidy. Their inner muddle of wobbly feelings needs an echo in their outer life. They feel at home in mess. It is a mirror of what they are feeling inside. Some children who are wobbly suffer from a mind clutter of ruminations, circular thoughts or different 'voices' running round their heads. This is known as 'mind noise'. Mind noise can feel like interference on the radio, cluttering clear perception of feelings and thoughts. It is very tiring and drains concentration.

Some people find it very difficult being with an anxious, wobbly child, because they end up feeling all the child's wobbliness too. The energy of the child's anxiety enters the atmosphere too powerfully. So wobbly children can end up feeling avoided rather than helped. Some people, as Segal says, 'feel so messed up inside that they seem to have to make everyone around them feel messed up too' (1985, p77). Children living with too much wobbliness, too much anxiety, can believe that 'No one will be able to cope with the mess that is me, so I'd better just manage it all by myself.' This is sometimes a projection. Because the child himself cannot manage the mess of his too many, too strong feelings, and the mess in his mind, he assumes that others cannot either.

Worry as a particularly wobbly feeling

One day [Mr Worry] went for a walk. He was worried that he might walk too far and not be able to get home, but on the other hand, he was worried that if he didn't walk far enough, he wouldn't get enough exercise. He hurried along, worrying. Or you could say, he worried along hurrying. (Hargreaves, 1978, p11)

Many children who feel wobbly inside find the world a very worrying place. Some wobbly children worry about everything: they worry about home, they worry about school; they worry about friends going off them, they worry about being ill or dying. In short, such children are not at peace.
