

10/31/74

FASCINATION vs. NO-NO

"Yankee Doodle came to town a-riding on a turtle;

He turned a corner just in time to see a lady's girdle!"

Drew laughed uproariously but some of his comrades looked puzzled. They were anxious to laugh but confused as to what. "Girdle, dummy," said Drew, and whispered furtively, "LADY'S girdle!" Abhhhhhhh... relieved...his comrades laughed and soon were soon chanting the rhyme to all who would listen. GIRDLLE....LADY'S giddle..one of THOSE words. Until Drew enlightened them, they had not realized that Lady's girdle was one of those delicious, salacious words, along with "poo poo," "doo doo," "pee pee" etc. Children realize that there is a whole area of words that have special quality to cause magnetic attention. They hear adults tell stories (that they don't understand) that cause some adults to blush, mother to say, "Oh George!" and all to be intensely interested in. Children like attention as much as anybody and are quite acute in their ability to judge the quality of attention: absent-minded attention, polite interest, pretended interest, information-acquiring interest, and horrified, astonished, intense interest. Since children don't that have the connotative and denotative vocabulary of sex, they choose the next categories of high interest: bodily functions and bodily parts.

Fatty, fatty two by four
Couldn't get through the bathroom door.
Had to piddle on the floor.

We have always insisted on the phrase: "lavatory time." "Toilet" and all the variations are charged words. "urinate" and "defecate" are arcane words to children and if used without so much as a flicker of an eyelash will avoid being included among THE words. It would be a blessing if parents at home would use flat words for the necessary bodily functions instead of all the "cute" terms. We had one year an entering 3 year old who was taciturn; we cajoled and coaxed to elicit some speech from her. Our joy at our success was somewhat marred when her first succinct utterance was: "I have to go pissy." We were more amazed at the competency of utterance than THE word but our interest was evident and the word spread through the ranks like wildfire. If stated flatly, children understand that there are bodily functions that must be accomplished—~~like throwing out the garbage,~~ but we aren't going to talk about it because ~~garbage~~^{it} isn't as interesting as circuses and animals and Hallowe'en.

Each year I tell a story that includes the phrase, "pig wash." It refers to a bucket of garbage for pigs. This phrase sends children into hysterical giggles. As a high-interest word it knows no equal. We laugh together and repeat the word to one another. It is funny, it can be repeated, and it has no repercussions. So when a child tries out one of THE words, I steal both his laugh and the reinforcement of interested attention by quickly crying, "PIGWASH...OH PIGWASH!"