

Case study on a cautionary fable

[Sociology](#), [Violence](#)



Abstract

This paper is an examination of some of the psychological aspects of the child/parent relationship. Hansel and Gretel has been analyzed by many, who put forth the notion that it offers a model for understanding the psychological roots of child abandonment, abuse and neglect. As such, this essay offers an overview of a preventive approach that may be applicable to the plight of families, particularly impoverished families such as Hansel and Gretel's.

A Cautionary Fable: Understanding Primal Fear and Violence in 'Hansel and Gretel'

Hansel and Gretel is an expression of childhood anxiety over abandonment and parental rejection. It touches some of the deepest, most primal fears involving the relationship between mother and child, about sustenance, validation and motherly love, and abandonment. It is customary for a child to misunderstand the words of an adult, to read too much into a parent's comments and assume that those things they identify with home and security will be taken away. Overhearing their parents plotting to abandon them in the woods, Hansel and Gretel realize a child's worst-case scenario. Their parents' horrific decision is the manifestation of deep-seated worries having to do with fundamental feelings of safety and survival.

In the Uses of Enchantment, Bruno Bettelheim contends that stories such as Hansel and Gretel bring to life those shadowy phantoms and closet monsters that are always present in the psyches of young children. "The fairy tale expresses in words and actions the things that go on in children's minds"

(Bettelheim, 159). They are cautionary tales, morality plays, parables that draw on powerful psychological forces to make some moral point. “ The child views existential dangers not objectively, but fantastically exaggerated in line with his immature dread – for example, personified as a child-devouring witch” (Bettelheim, 166). The witch is a familiar feature, part of the iconic tradition in most fairy tales in which the innocent (or innocents) must overcome a threatening evil, often only after they have identified and conquered some shortcoming within themselves. For Hansel and Gretel, they must overcome the temptation to indulge their ravenous hunger in order to survive.

A Cautionary Fable

As must all children, Hansel and Gretel have to learn a sense of self-reliance and responsibility. As they devour the witch’s gingerbread house, they hear a voice asking who is eating the house. We are made to believe that it is the voice of the witch herself, but there exists the possibility that it could instead be the conscience of the children, calling to mind their transgression. “ Even after Hansel and his sister descend on the witch’s house and eat their fill, they continue to devour greedily: ‘ Hansel, who liked the taste of the roof, tore down a great piece of it, and Gretel pushed out the whole of a sugar window pane.’ One of the great challenges of childhood is knowing when enough is enough” (Cashdan, 13). Failing to learn this lesson, in other words refusing to grow up, can have fatal consequences.

While the children learn their lesson, it comes after a terrifying and painful experience, which they survive due only to Gretel’s resourcefulness.

Resourcefulness and courage are valued and time-honored traits in fairy tales such as Hansel and Gretel, as is the wicked stepmother. While stepmothers are not the only ones guilty of threatening children in fairy tales, they have a unique interest in undoing children to whom they are not biologically tied. The wicked stepmother can be seen as an allegory for the abusive parent or guardian who, genetic ties or no, will seek to harm the child. “ There is no doubt that the step-parent/step-child relationship has special complications; while parental abuse is by no means confined to step-parents, but it is more common” (Apter, 2008). If fairy tales teach us important lessons about common sense and moral behavior, they also teach us about the fragility and vulnerability of children.

Child abuse and neglect statistics for Cook County confirm the fragility and vulnerability of children in our society. The most recent available figures indicate that the Chicagoland region accounted for nearly 35, 000 cases of child abuse, which represents nearly one third of all cases reported statewide. Perhaps the most alarming fact is that most of the abuse that resulted in fatalities were the result of intentional violence (Slack, et al, 2004). If what Hansel and Gretel endured represented a child’s worst fears, the result of intentional abuse and neglect, the rate and nature of child violence in Chicago are the unspeakable horror of a nightmare no child can imagine. Chief players in this issue range from the Illinois Department of Health to legally based groups such as the Court Appointed Special Advocates and faith-based organizations like the Illinois Center for Violence Prevention.

All of the organizations that work to combat child abuse in Chicago concur with the theory that prevention is key to making a difference for children (ICVP, 2010). Domestic violence, whether perpetrated by a family or non-family member, has a profoundly powerful and lasting effect on children and that persistent prevention initiatives are proven successful at breaking the chain of domestic violence. “ Research indicates that child abuse prevention efforts are not only successful in reducing violence against children, but also in reducing children’s risk of experiencing – whether as a victim or perpetrator – other forms of violence later in life” (ICVP, 2010). Prevention stands as the best way to remove the kind of anxiety that plagued Hansel and Gretel, the primal fear of abandonment by the most important figure in their lives - their parents - and to reduce the likelihood that the cycle will be passed on.

Prevention may have done much in Hansel and Gretel’s case. As an impoverished family, they would have been a prime candidate for this kind of intervention, particularly from faith-based organizations, which are particularly effective in poor communities. In many such cases, they are the only viable option in Chicago’s many lower-income neighborhoods. In addition to a safe physical locale (church), these groups can provide ethically based training and intimate support networks that would otherwise be unavailable to impoverished families (Jarrett, 197). These community-based approaches can be effective in teaching at-risk individuals when “ enough is enough,” and how to control negative impulses and avoid indulging one’s frustrations and violent inclinations. In this way, abusers and potential

abusers can be taught to listen to that voice from their conscience, the one that Hansel and Gretel ignored.

The community-based approach to the problem has earned the support of national agencies, such as the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). The CDC has cited the ability of individuals providing services within communities to reach directly into homes, relate better than state social workers to others in their communities and provide greater value than government agencies through specific counseling services. One problem to such an approach is that many such counselors do not necessarily have professional training and education. Nevertheless, it makes far more sense for someone with an intimate understanding of the poverty and consequent pressures faced by poor families, like Hansel and Gretel's, to provide useful aid. This can be an especially effective way to help children confront and recognize their infantile fears or help their parents deal with potentially self-destructive impulses.

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