

❖ ONE ❖

BEN

Having His Way at Preschool and Home



PRIMARY AND SECONDARY ISSUES

Primary Issues:

- Social skill development
- Social cognition
- Peer and family relationships
- Kindergarten readiness

Secondary Issues:

- Cognitive and language development
- Self-perception
- Teacher-student interaction
- Play
- Family-school relations
- Classroom management

CASE

“Playing on the computer is my favorite thing to do,” says Ben in a firm and very convincing voice. Ben, who is nearly four, confidently goes on to explain that his favorite computer game is *Horton the Elephant*. This is a game he plays at Uncle Mike’s, who often baby-sits for Ben when his mom is at school. His face is beaming as he describes his visits to Uncle Mike. “My Uncle Mike lets me play on his computer whenever I want,” shouts a very excited Ben.

Besides playing on the computer, Ben likes to play outside. In particular, he enjoys riding his “super wheels” that his grandfather gave him. He and his father

had to put it together. "It was all in pieces," exclaims Ben. "My daddy and I made the handle and then we made the pedal and everything we need on it." Ben is proud of his accomplishment and of the work he did with his dad. Remembering the first time he rode his bike, he reminds his mother that she forgot to put his helmet on. He says with authority that you have to wear a helmet so "when ya hurt your head, your head won't get hurt. It's just for safety keeping."

Ben is the older of two children. His younger brother, Tyler, is about 18 months old, and they sometimes get into tangles with each other. Mom reports that Ben "doesn't like Tyler to touch anything he doesn't want him to," which seems like just about everything. He makes his little brother aware of his desires by "screaming" at him. He likes to be in charge and to tell his little brother exactly what to do. If Tyler doesn't comply, sometimes the screaming can escalate into physical contact. When Tyler persists, Ben may just knock him over to prevent him from getting his toys. However, even in the same play setting you might see a nurturing side of Ben directed toward Tyler. He loves to hug his brother and can be very protective of him. He says that sometimes he just has to "block" Tyler from getting things that might hurt him. For example, one day Ben noticed that Tyler was about to get into some shoe polish that was on the couch. Ben says, "I needed to protect him because if he got it, he would put it in his mouth and brush it in his mouth and he would cough." So Ben just "blocked" Tyler's access to the couch. In fact, the blocking is something he really likes to do. "I kind of like blocking the way, but when Tyler gets bigger than me, he'll do it with his head." Ben doesn't seem to be overly concerned about his brother getting too much bigger than he. He laughs and says, "Every time Tyler grows, I grow bigger."

Ben will very affectionately tell you that there is a special bed in his room for Tyler when he gets bigger. He is looking forward to the time when Tyler is big enough to sleep on the bottom bunk. Interestingly, when talking about his relationship to Tyler, Ben becomes a bit confused. When he is asked if he (Ben) has a brother, he is quick to respond yes. Then when asked if Tyler has a brother, he initially pauses and says "um, no." Then he continues, "Not, um, I am his brother but he doesn't have another brother yet." When his mother asks, "What about you?" he finally says, "Yes, Tyler has a brother and it is me."

Ben is anxiously waiting for his fourth birthday, which is coming up in a few weeks. He talks about the upcoming party and the presents he might receive. He is looking forward to a party with mostly family and a few friends. He thinks very carefully about what he would like for his birthday. "Last year,

I wanted a magic school bus, but my mom didn't let me." However, Mom has no recollection of such a request. When she tells this to Ben, he laughs, "I was just tricking you." But on his last birthday there was a very special birthday present from Ben's uncle. It was down in his uncle's basement. "We cannot go down there now, so I will just gotta tell you." Ben describes it as "a real, it's a horsey but it's really not real or alive, um, you just pick it up and pretend—it's make believe." When asked if he rides the horse, Ben replies confidently, "Yes." But he seems a bit confused about the horse. He goes on to describe the present as really being two horses. He turns to his mom and asks, "They are not real, right Mommy?" Mom replies that Ben is right and, when asked what make believe horses are, he states, "That means you're riding something, you're making, you're pretending they are real and alive. But it is not this way, that's make believe."

Talking with Ben about his family, one gets a sense that he is a man in control of his destiny and very aware of everything going on in his home. His house is in a residential section of an urban community. He lives there with his mom, dad, brother, and his dog. He reports that he has a new house, but it got very old. "It's old because our house is fixed . . . and in a storm a branch fell and hit the wire and then fell on our house and it got very old." He delighted in watching the repairmen fix the wire leading to the house.

As far as his dog is concerned, Ben loves to help care for her. He says that "big brothers take care of dogs," and he is often called upon to let the dog outside to go "potty." He reports that pets have to go to the bathroom outside. In fact, he asserts that his aunt's dog "never needs to go potty when he is inside."

When Ben is not playing outside, playing on the computer, or playing with his brother, he often asks others to read to him. He explains, "I can't read all of my books." He reports that his favorite book is *There is an Alligator Under My Bed*. He particularly likes the little boy in the book. This little boy is his favorite character because "he puts food and drinks on the ground for the alligator." He talks about the alligator as though it was the little boy's pet and explains that sometimes the alligator stays under the boy's bed or in the garage. Ben seems to like the fact that the little boy is taking good care of his pet alligator, much like he takes care of his dog.

Superheroes are so "cool," according to Ben. His favorite superhero is Superman, but he also likes Superman's friends Spiderman, Batman, and Aquaman. He thinks it is great that Superman has so many friends. He enjoys watching these superheroes on television but also reports enjoying *Oswald the*

Octopus. It seems that Oswald has a good friend, Pongo, that Ben also likes. Pongo is a gentle dragon, and Ben really likes the fact that Pongo is so friendly.

When it comes to his own friends, Ben seems to struggle a bit. He talks about some female playmates in the neighborhood who are friendly toward him. However, when he talks about school friends, he describes them with mixed emotions. Sometimes the kids are friendly, but sometimes the “kids are not so friendly and nice.”

Ben goes to a religious preschool operated by a local synagogue and has been in a mixed-gender class of three- and four-year-olds for two years now. Ben’s preschool serves 40 families who are mostly Caucasian and of middle or high socioeconomic status. The school focuses on both Judaic and secular studies. He says that he usually likes school, especially when they go to the park, sing, and make things. However, Ben adamantly reports that he does not like it when his teachers (he has three) put him in time out. He explains that time out is something that happens when he misbehaves. He knows that the one misbehavior that results in being placed in time out is growling at his classmates or teachers. He only growls when he is “mad” and his teachers are “mean.” Ben proudly states that he never really fights with his friends at school. After thinking about that for a while, he then says that he sometimes fights with them “when they don’t be nice to me.” When these classmates are not nice to him, they “pretend to be dragons and bad guys.” One time, a few of his classmates “hit him with a stick at school.” Ben says that when this happened he went to his teacher and told her that the kids had hit him. Apparently the teacher was talking to another teacher and did not listen to him. But Ben points out that even when “I said ‘excuse me,’ she still didn’t listen.” Ben repeats his feeling that he was not treated fairly and that when he says “excuse me” to someone he expects that person to listen to him.

However, when Ben comes into school, he strolls in confidently and walks right over to the cubby area to put his coat away. He greets his teachers with a big smile and a “hi” and walks over to the refrigerator to put his lunch away. A few classmates say “hi” and Ben responds, but does not seem overly anxious to get involved in a conversation or in a play activity with them. His mom sits down with him as he plays with a complicated puzzle. As he plays with the puzzle, he talks out loud to himself. It almost sounds like babbling. When another child approaches to play with the puzzle, Ben makes it very clear that his intention is to play with the puzzle alone. He remains on task for about four

to five minutes, and during that time Mom kisses him good-bye and leaves. He smiles at her, and she reminds him that his favorite uncle will be picking him up after school. Ben smiles once again and waves good-bye to her. Ben continues working intently on the puzzle as other classmates arrive. His teacher comments that Ben has an incredible attention span and he can remain focused for long periods of time when he is enjoying an activity.

Ben's isolated play continues as two female classmates approach him. He reminds them that they may play with the puzzle when he is done. When one of the girls drops a toy on the floor, Ben offers to help. The other little girl says, "No, we do not need your help." One of the teachers overhears this conversation and reminds the girls how nice it was that Ben offered to help. Within a few minutes, the three children are working on the puzzle together. Ben takes the lead, offering suggestions on where to put the puzzle pieces. Suddenly, Ben decides it might be fun to put the puzzle pieces on the floor. The girls decide this is a grand idea and join in the fun. After a few minutes, however, Ben expresses annoyance at the girls. He no longer wants them to put the puzzle pieces on the floor and tells them so. They ignore him and he starts growling at them, a behavior for which Ben is often scolded by his teachers. One of the teachers comes over and asks the children to pick up the puzzle pieces. Ben ignores the teacher's request as the girls quickly comply. The teacher then repeats the request to Ben and after some coaxing, he also complies.

Ben then joins his classmates who are working together to build a tower in the gross motor play area. Initially, when Ben enters, his classmates seem somewhat reluctant to let him join in, telling each other he "will just knock down whatever we build." However, they let him help, and Ben chatters to himself the entire time. He sings a song and says some rhymes as he plays with the children and does not really have any conversation with his classmates. He appears to be delighted to be included in the play activity. Apparently, however, Ben becomes bored and begins to knock some of the blocks over. The other children initially join in (it seems like a good idea to most of them), but then they express their annoyance when Ben refuses to stop. The children move on to another activity, and Ben continues knocking down the blocks, this time all alone.

Ben seems to know when he is not welcome in an activity. He is quick to point out who likes him and who does not like him. When he senses he is not welcome, he resorts to growling at his classmates and tries to interrupt their play. This makes his classmates more annoyed with him, and they try to ignore him or they simply tell their teacher that he is being "bad."

Ms. Silver, the head teacher in Ben's classroom, holds an advanced degree, as do all the head teachers at Ben's preschool. As a group, these teachers have an average of 10 years of teaching experience. The preschool classroom is divided into two rooms, one essentially devoted to gross motor development and the other to the development of fine motor skills. A myriad of toys and activities are always prepared for the children before they enter in the morning. There is a focus on cooperation and the development of self-control using a system of rewards and punishments. The children receive positive feedback whenever they are engaged in appropriate behavior. Negative feedback and time out are often used to control and minimize undesirable behavior. When asked to describe Ben, Ms. Silver says that he is an "adorable child" who is very bright (IQ score of 130 as measured by WIPPSI) and keenly aware of his surroundings. She indicates that he is very polite when he comes into school in the morning, greeting and saying hello to everyone. "He has very strong verbal skills; however, he is socially quite young," says Ms. Silver. One of the behaviors she is particularly concerned with is his tendency to "get into the faces" of other kids. He knows "exactly whose face to get into." She says that while she has tried various techniques to eliminate the behavior, nothing has seemed to work. She praises him when he is playing cooperatively with the other children. She has also tried a time out when he is behaving inappropriately and tells him that his behavior hurts others' feelings. She explicitly tries to tie the "in your face behavior" to the hurt feelings of others. Ms. Silver says that Ben does not seem to care and that the reprimand does not appear to make any difference to him. She describes him as "physical" at times and "somewhat mischievous." When he plays, he constantly talks to himself. Ms. Silver describes this as "nervous chatter." She says that sometimes he talks so much that she has to remind him that he needs to give *her* a chance to talk.

Another concern of Ms. Silver is when Ben disrupts the play of others or disrupts a group activity. Her observations lead her to conclude that he lacks the social skills necessary to gain entrance into a play activity. While he is extremely verbal, he does not use those skills when he is trying to play with others. If he tries to join a group play activity and is rebuffed, he simply growls and then disrupts the children's play. Ms. Silver says that his classmates then "turn off to him and do not want to play with him." He often then goes off and plays by himself and leaves the group play to others.

Ben's parents are quite involved in the education of their son, particularly Mom who takes Ben to school. They are concerned parents and have had some

conversations with Ms. Silver, although it is only the second month of the school year. His parents report that they are happy with the religious school, especially its director and the structure of his classroom. Mom feels very strongly that Ben needs a structured classroom. He needs to have a time to do one thing, and a time to move on to something else. She says that the home-school communication is good this year, "much better than last year" when he had a different teacher at the same school. A conference is planned in a few weeks and one of the topics of conversation will be Ben's social skill development and his readiness for kindergarten. In a passing conversation with Ben's mom, Ms. Silver found out that Mom was looking at different kindergarten programs. While Ms. Silver believes that Ben has made tremendous progress over the first several months of this year, she is concerned that socially he might not be ready for kindergarten. She believes that Ben is clearly ready to do the academic work of kindergarten, but his social skills need to be further developed. She is likely going to recommend another year of nursery school, especially given the fact that he is just turning four. This is a point she believes she and Ben's mom will disagree on.

Ms. Silver says that she has tried different things to get Ben to cooperate. For example, during the first weeks of school the bell would ring for the children to come in when they were out on the playground. When the bell would ring, Ben would run and get under the playground equipment. At first, she tried running after him and quickly realized that this was not working. She would run and he would run faster. She then tried a different approach. She told Ben that the entire class was going in and he would be the only one left on the playground. As she took the class in (keeping her eye on Ben the entire time), Ben realized that no one was going to run after him. "He watched us leave and then suddenly decided to join us. The next time we went out on the playground, I just reminded him what happened the last time the bell rang and he came right in." Apparently it has not been a problem since then.

Mom describes Ben in some ways that are similar to Ms. Silver's report. She says that he is "very intelligent" and indicates that his personality is "charismatic" and that "he loves people." Mom is in her mid 20s and is currently a college student looking to graduate at the end of next semester. Dad is in his late 20s and works for a government agency. Dad is very interested in sports and also likes to sing. Mom is pretty busy raising two children and attending school. They do many things together as a family, such as TV watching, playing outside, playing in the basement, going to the park, and going to the movies. Mom describes Ben's brother as being more strong-willed and headstrong than Ben. She describes their

relationship as close and says that Ben really “loves Tyler.” In fact, one of her fondest memories of Ben is the first time he met Tyler. Ben was about two and a half when Tyler was born. His first comment was, “Oh, there is my baby brother. Oh, look at his little hands and his little feet and his little toes. Can I hold him?” At that moment there was no jealousy, and Ben acted as if he had waited too long for this special arrival.

That doesn’t mean there is no sibling rivalry. Mom indicates that there is “definite rivalry, but it depends on the moment.” For example, she points out that Ben “doesn’t like Tyler to touch anything or do anything he doesn’t want him to do.” Ben likes to be the “one in charge and tell Tyler exactly what to do.” When Tyler does not comply (which happens often), Ben will scream at him or “play fight.” Ben will “tackle Tyler,” but for the most part they are “pretty good with each other.”

Like Ms. Silver, Mom describes Ben as extremely verbal. She says that he talks constantly and that their conversations range from talking about death to talking about how much they love each other. Mom believes that Ben has a good understanding of death. Ben’s grandfather, with whom he had a very special relationship, died when Ben was only 15 months old. Mom has taken Ben to the cemetery and explained that his grandfather is dead. Ben has told her that when someone dies, they go up to God, are with God, and are not coming back to earth. While he does not dwell on the topic of death, Ben seems to be aware of its finality.

When talking about Ben’s social skills, Mom has some real concerns. She says that his “social skills are a little lacking with his peers.” Like Ms. Silver, Mom believes that Ben has difficulty initiating play activities with other children. He appears to “be rigid and I just wish he would be more flexible,” says Mom. He does not appear to want to compromise with his peers and wants his own way. Mom says that Ben does have one good friend at school with whom he shares very similar interests. They apparently play pretty well together until the little friend does something that Ben doesn’t want him to do. For the most part, she believes that he is “kind of a loner, unless kids want to do what he wants to do.”

As far as family disagreements, Mom says that there are a few things “that really push Ben’s buttons.” “Don’t give him the wrong food, and don’t refuse his request to watch television before bed.” If he is not permitted to watch television before bed, he will just refuse to go upstairs to bed and will tell his mom that she is making him “very angry.” The technique that Mom uses is to

count and tell Ben that if he is not upstairs when she is finished counting, he will not get a bedtime story. He then gets into an argument with her and begs her not to count. "He thinks that if I don't count, then he has as much time as he wants." When she finally gets him upstairs, the next struggle is to pick a book. She tries to give him a choice of a few different books, but usually he doesn't want one of the books she has picked. He looks around his room trying to pick out a book. When Mom tries to get him to make a choice he becomes angry. She tells him that if he has not picked out a book by the time she counts to 10, she is not reading to him. This may cause an angry outburst, and bedtime becomes a difficult experience. It comes down to not getting his way. He will just "scream and cry," but if she keeps repeating, "Ben, it's bedtime," eventually he will "wind down" and go to sleep.

She hopes that in the future Ben will learn to compromise. She worries that he will be the kid who won't sit in his chair and is always in the principal's office because he wants to do what he wants to do. She hopes he will learn to meet people "half way," and have an easy life in which he does well and accomplishes what he wants to do. Hopefully, Ben will.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What aspects of language has Ben mastered? What language skills is he still developing? Give specific examples from the case.
2. How would you characterize Ben's play activities? In what ways has his play influenced his social, cognitive, and language development?
3. Socially, Ben appears to struggle with friendships and peer relationships. What do you believe has influenced his difficulties? Be sure to consider his relationships with adults, contextual factors, and cognitive development in your explanation.
4. In what ways have Ben's mom and his teacher tried to enhance his social skill development? If you were Ben's mom or teacher, what else would you do to deal with his inappropriate social behavior? Justify your actions from a theoretical or research perspective.
5. Evaluate the mother's and teacher's positions on Ben's readiness for kindergarten. What would you do if you were making this decision?

What additional information would you want to have? Support your answer from a research and theoretical perspective.

6. How would you characterize Ben's self-perception? What do you believe influenced Ben's view of himself?
7. What appear to be positive and negative reinforcers for Ben? Do his mother and teacher use reinforcement effectively? Why or why not? What other approaches to discipline do they use?

APPLYING THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

1. Using Social Cultural (Vygotsky), Cognitive Development (Piaget), and Information Processing theories, analyze Ben's cognitive development. In particular, how would Vygotsky and Piaget differ in their perspectives on the role of peers in Ben's development and in their perspectives on Ben's talking to himself?
2. Summarize Ben's progress through the earlier stages of personal and emotional and cognitive development described by Erikson. Thus far, has he overcome the various "crises" described by Erikson? Cite specific evidence from the case to support your answers.
3. According to Piaget's theory of cognitive development, at what stage is Ben likely functioning? Support your answer with specific examples from the case.

Also see "Connecting Across Cases" question 9, in the Introduction to this book.

CLASS ACTIVITIES

1. Role-play the discussion between Ben's mother and his teacher regarding Ben's readiness for kindergarten. Include both cognitive and social development issues in your discussion. Also consider how his mother and teacher might work together to increase his readiness.
2. Role-play bedtime at Ben's house, paying particular attention to Mom's handling of the situation. Demonstrate both effective and ineffective methods of discipline.

3. Role-play a discussion between Ben's parents and teachers in which they develop a joint plan for addressing his social development problems.

RESEARCH SUGGESTION

1. Do children who are gifted experience more problems in peer relationships than children who are not? Explain your answer, citing current research on gifted children. How might it apply to this case?

READINGS AND RESOURCES

The Parent Center Web site at www.parentcenter.com/kindergarten-readiness

This Web site provides information for parents to assist in the assessment of a child's readiness to enter kindergarten. It provides essential information about the necessary skills for success in kindergarten and how to prepare children for their kindergarten experience.

Preschoolers Today Web site at www.preschoolerstoday.com/resources/readykinder.htm

A simple assessment tool that can be used by parents to evaluate kindergarten readiness.

Sankar-DeLeeuw, N. (2002). Gifted preschoolers: Parent and teacher views on identification, early admission, and programming. *Roeper Review* 24(3), 172-177.

An examination of the issues and concerns of parents and teachers of gifted preschoolers, with a focus on early identification and programming.

Webb, J. T. (1994). Nurturing social emotional development of gifted children. Reston, VA: ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED372554) Retrieved June 12, 2004, from www.ericfacility.net/ericdigests/ed372554.html

An analysis of the problems and issues facing gifted children.

