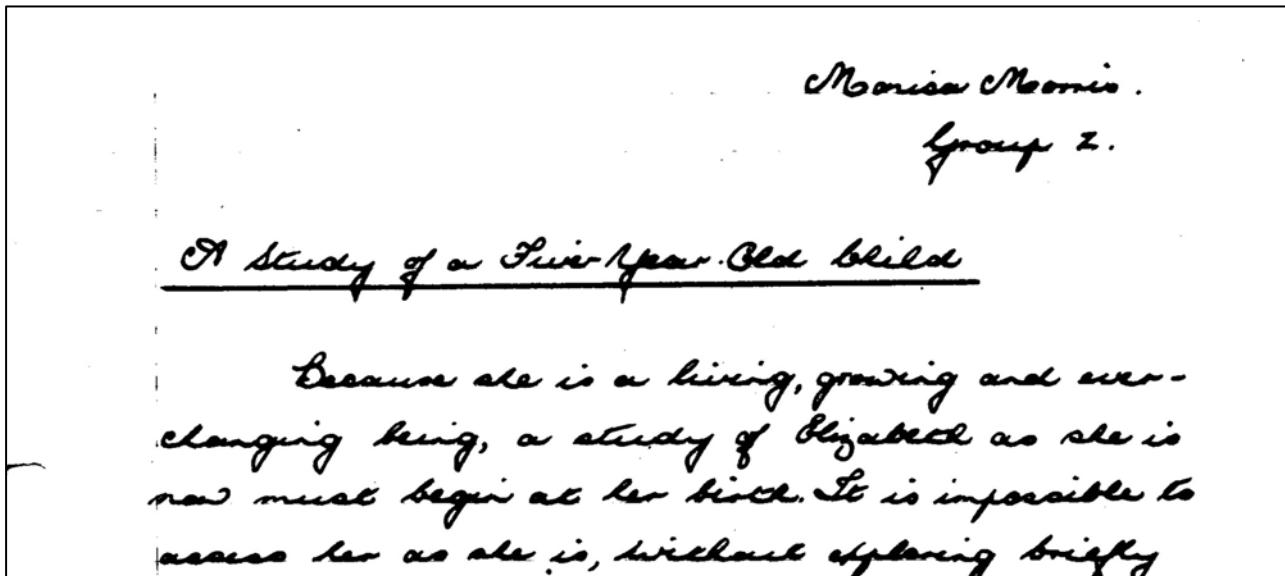


A Study of a Five Year Old Child

By Monica Morris

In 1955 Monica Morris, Beth's mother, wrote an essay entitled "A study of a Five Year Old Child". We are pleased to publish this essay in two parts. It was beautifully hand written, but due to photocopying limitations it has been typed...



Because she is a living, growing and ever-changing being, a study of Elizabeth as she is now must begin at her birth. It is impossible to assess her as she is, without exploring briefly the five years during which she has developed to become her own self.

Elizabeth was born on Whit Sunday in 1950 and was the second child in the family, her sister, Catherine, being three years and three months old at the time. She was given for a second name Gay, in the hope that she would live up to the old adage for Sabbath children and be "blithe and bonny, good and gay". For the first year of her life she did fulfil that expectation; problems were practically non-existent and her contentment was wonderful to see. She would lie for any length of time in her cot or pram gurgling and smiling at her fingers, or the things around her. Rarely did she cry and if she did, neighbours came out to discover the cause. An essentially demonstrative baby, accepting the love she received with obvious satisfaction, yet she was not dependent upon a constant show of that love for she never demanded attention when it was not forthcoming. At the end of her first year then, she was a beautiful baby physically and a joy to live with. Even at such a young age she exerted a great influence upon the household. Because she was always so happy there grew up around her a spirit of contentment and joy in the moment, which spread out to include all who came into contact with her.

When at the age of fourteen months she caught whooping cough I felt that payment was being exacted for the trouble-free time which had gone before: but worse was to follow. After a course of serum injections to check the cough she had encephalitis which sent her to hospital for three weeks. She was paralysed down one side during this time and owing to the whooping cough infection had to be isolated. The nurses who looked after her said that she had not made a sound of any description the whole time. Once the fear of possible mental deficiency and paralysis had passed, I was allowed to peep at her through the chink of the door and there she would sit, in the white hospital nightdress, with her neat silver hair and fair skin, completely absorbed in every detail and movement around her, but being so quiet that all who entered the room went on tiptoe. I have never seen anybody look so unreal or give such an impression of silence.

Elizabeth, however, was being far too busy adjusting herself to the process of learning to sit and move again and to the unnatural surroundings in which she was placed, to be able to concentrate on learning to speak; and she had never been in the habit of crying. When she came home she appeared to have forgotten everything, but she quickly settled down and set about overtaking the physical skills which had been mastered once, but which now needed to be re learned. Apart from the fact that she was backward in this direction and that she was now a great thumb sucker, there was no outward sign of the effects of this separation from home. Elizabeth was nearly two years old before she began to speak, but when she did it was plain, fluent speech in sentence form. This was an indication of her temperament and still is. She rarely practises any manipulative or physical skill when it first comes within her experience; she gets so completely absorbed in her concentration of the thing that she is deaf to all about her; but if invited to try for herself, she says very firmly, "I shall do it next week," and she keeps her word. When that first attempt is made it is never fumbling, but almost perfect, as though she had indeed practised in the intervening time.

I have often wondered about this, and I think it may partly be due to a constant desire to emulate Catherine, whom she greatly admires. As a result of this admiration she often used to display a lack of self-confidence, because "Sister" could do so many things easily which Elizabeth still had to learn. She was therefore afraid of seeming at a disadvantage in making errors which trial brings and so she waited until she was sure she could do a thing well before attempting. I was aware of the fact that she compared herself with her sister in many ways.

This lack of confidence is one of the things which impressed itself upon me most up till the time she started school. Quite often it showed itself in an unwillingness to try new things and it was called laziness by some who knew her less well than I did. Sometimes, too, I felt that this unwillingness was due to the fact that Elizabeth concentrated so hard on things that she just was not able to do more than one piece of learning at a time;; and even as a little one, she could never be persuaded to abandon a thing half done in favour of something new.

Gradually she has gained confidence with gathering momentum, especially since she began school a year ago and associated with children of her own age and stage of development. Not the least of the things which has aided this growth of confidence has been the opportunity to use physical apparatus. The difference in her physical confidence in so short a time is very marked and this has had an affect upon her mentally also. She is now gradually losing the feeling that she can never be like her sister in capabilities, for she said to me a few months ago, "I can do anything Catherine can do – if I want to – except read and I shall read when I am six". And I am perfectly certain that she will read very well by then.

She gains a great deal of confidence from the clothes she wears and for this reason I allow her a little free choice in what she wears each day. At one time she would vary them every day and gave much thought to her choice, but lately this has not been of such importance; although she loves notice to be taken of something new by her school friends in spite of the fact that she is shy of notice generally. Recently she wore a new blue, with white polka dots, Vyella blouse to school. In the evening she told me that nobody had remarked about it or "crowded around". I commented that I thought she would not have liked that anyway, but she said "No, I shouldn't have liked it, but you'd think they would have for a blue spotty blouse!"

One remarkable thing about clothes which calls for mention, is the fact that she delights in Catherine's 'hand me downs'. She is more delighted with these than in something new and gets more pleasure out of Catherine having something new than if it is herself. Possibly it is tangible evidence that she is growing herself for them to fit her, but in fact, everything to do with "Sister" is superlative.

Monica Morris