



## Dr. Henry writes about PPS and The Toddler Mystique

Two years ago, a survey was done on our support group. Among the 61 PPSers that responded, 24 or nearly 40% had acute polio at age five or younger. The next larger number was 18 or 30% in the age group 6 to 10. Other age groups were ages 11 to 15 with 18%, ages 16 to 20 with 8%, and ages 21 and older with 5%. Most of the age 5 and younger group would naturally have few memories of their acute polio experience. Further analysis of this youngest group reveals the following distribution of ages of acute polio.

Birth to age 1 -- 10 cases

Age 1 to age 3 -- 9 cases

Age 3 to age 5 -- 5 cases

This data reveals that almost one-third of the entire group had acute polio under age 3. Retrievable memory of a stressful event under age three would be most unlikely, although not impossible. You may recall that I wrote an article entitled [Recovered Memories](#) on this topic last year.

Several years ago at one of our support group's regular monthly meetings, we divided into three groups based on our age when we had acute polio. One group was age five and under, one was age 6 to 18, and one was over 18. We discussed our memories of the acute polio experience. The two older groups were most serious in their discussion and recall of memories. The younger group had a joyous, somewhat noisy, and upbeat discussion. Thereafter, this subgroup of PPSers has been identified as "Toddlers." As a result of having acute polio at such a young age, were the Toddlers less stressed by the acute polio event than older children and adults who have many vivid memories of their acute polio experience? Most of the Toddlers admit that they have very few memories of acute polio. Some do recall the smell of wool hot packs, the diagnostic spinal tap, and the feeling of separation from their parents when in isolation. Some have stories of their early polio rehabilitation, but some of these stories are often stories that they have heard from their parents.

If residual damage resulted from acute polio, the older children would have memories of being whole in body. For example, I had polio at age eleven. I have many wonderful memories of running in races and playing various sports. I remember simple things like bounding up steps two at a time. I treasure these memories. Now, which is the better situation? The toddlers have few if any memories of being physically whole. The older children and adults have many memories of being physically whole. Are the toddlers more "freed up" and less encumbered by stressful polio memories? Are they better defended and thus, simply able to have more fun? Are they more extroverted and engaging? Are the non-toddlers more serious and more introspective? I do not believe these questions have categorical answers, but a number of speculations might arise.

The group of polio children over age five may have experienced more of a conscious experience of loss.

They remember being whole and being normal. Thus, they knew the difference between before and after polio. Their loss and grief was conscious. The less than five age group (toddlers) started their conscious life as after polio and had few if any memories of being any different. Perhaps, they did not experience a feeling of loss or grief and were emotionally spared this stress.

Psychologist Erik Erikson is known for his formulation of the Stages of the Life Cycle. The stages in the first five years are:

1. Basic trust versus basic mistrust, age birth to 1 year;
2. Autonomy versus shame and doubt, age 1 to 3;
3. Initiative versus guilt, ages 3 to 5.

Would a stressful and damaging disease such as polio have a negative impact on a child's developing personality during these five years? During the first year of life, consistent parenting is most important in developing basic trust. If polio resulted in a prolonged separation from parents, would the polio stricken infant feel less trust, less hope, and less confidence?

From age 1 to 3, would the polio child feel more self conscious and even shame at being different or being treated different by parents and other caretakers?

From age 3 to 5, would the polio child develop less initiative due to failure to compete equally with able bodied peer children, resulting in some feeling of guilt?

Among the Polio Toddlers that I have met, most have demonstrated healthy trust, a determined autonomy, and an outgoing initiative. I am not sure that any generalizations can be applied to polio children. If there is one, it is the resolve to persevere and never give up. Hope, initiative, independence, and courage are other shared characteristics.

It is my opinion that polio children with an absence of able-bodied memories and those with able-bodied memories have evolved from their experiences toward healthy character development. Nevertheless, the joy, optimism, good humor, initiative, exuded confidence, and pure pleasure of being among our group's Toddlers may possibly only be explained as the Toddler Mystique. My Webster's defines "Mystique" as "an air or attitude of mystery and reverence developing around something or someone" and "the special esoteric skill essential in a calling or activity." That definition does fit our Toddlers. I wonder if other Post-Polio Support Groups have noticed a similar Mystique among their Toddlers?

As I asked previously, which is the better situation; to have memories of pre polio bodily wholeness or not? My conclusion is that there is no definitive answer. To me, each polio child has made every effort to live life to the fullest. The necessary psychological adjustments made as a result of polio probably helped in experiencing life to the fullest.

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*October 1999*

*Originally published in the [Central Va PPS Support Group \(PPSG\)](#)'s newsletter, *The Deja View*, in 1999.*

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Document preparation: Chris Salter, [Original Think-tank](#), Cornwall, United Kingdom.

Created: 3rd October 1999

Last modification: 24th January 2010.

