

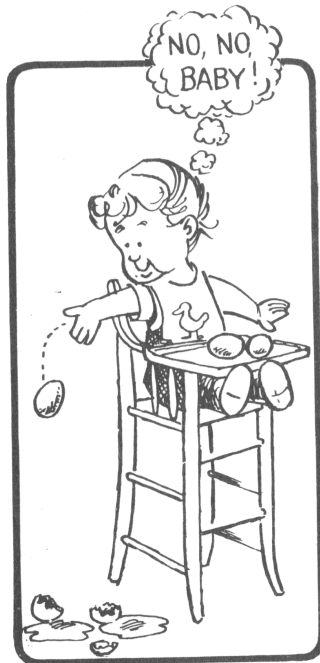
# The World of Inner Speech

By Dee Joy Coulter, Ed.D. © 1986

"Quiet! I can't hear myself think." Rejoice when you first hear your child or students say that. It means they have finally discovered the most important reasoning tool they possess! It is called "inner speech". Without it, they can't really reason. They can't shut down their outer attention, turn inward and have a conversation with themselves.

Inner speech has its own brain region and its own developmental process. This process has three major steps. The first step shows up as soon as a toddler begins to speak. Most of this newfound speech is directed toward others, but occasionally the child is heard talking to him or herself. Rules are remembered (though not obeyed yet), plans are spoken aloud ("I'm going to get my teddy bear.") This period from ages 2 to 4, causes parents great frustration. Their child understands the rules, even voices the rules and then proceeds to break them anyhow. It's a time when child abuse is most likely because it's hard to realize that children are not yet able to obey their own minds. The brain cells which regulate inner speech also regulate motor impulses. Until the child is about 4 and has developed strong language skills, the speech powers of those cells just aren't capable of overriding the motor urges of those same cells.

Step two comes when the child finally shows signs of impulse control. We see signs of thinking first, counting to ten, planning ahead, resisting the urge to lash out. By 2nd or 3rd grade, children



who have weak inner speech skills are also beginning to have more social problems. As their peers develop more restraint, these children begin to look more impulsive and more quick tempered by contrast.

The third and final inner speech quality is reasoning. It has been developing all along but becomes very important by 4th grade as the curriculum begins to stress reasoning skills. It is now ready to become the child's key tool for organizing thought, for arranging sequences of steps in problem solving, and for bringing forth language during writing tasks. It will eventually be able to draw forth eloquent, poetic language, develop logical arguments and explanations, discover new problems to solve and stimulate creative brainstorming.

How can we encourage this marvelous quality? We can think aloud in front of children, honestly listen to them as they begin to talk about problems and ideas, and allow them to think aloud as well. After age 9, inner speech finally becomes silent or truly 'inner'. Now we must somehow create quiet environments so they can 'hear themselves think'. (Some teachers are finding sound insulating earmuffs very helpful.) Schools are beginning to develop many methods for teaching basic reasoning skills. As this gets coupled with strategies for developing and strengthening inner speech, we may see some exciting results.

