Anna Freud, daughter of Jewish psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, is best known for her contributions to child psychology and psychotherapy and for her elaboration of her father's descriptions of psychological defense mechanisms. Anna Freud was born in 1895 in Vienna, Austria. She was the sixth and youngest child of Sigmund and Martha Freud. She grew up in the Freud household while her father and his colleagues were developing psychoanalysis; Sigmund Freud's first book, *Studies on Hysteria*, was published in the year that Anna was born. Although Anna received no formal higher education, she became involved in psychoanalysis by attending meetings of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society beginning in 1918, when she was 23. Within two years, she had become the secretary. She received both official training in psychoanalysis and underwent the psychoanalysis (intensive psychotherapy) that was required to become a psychoanalyst. Her psychoanalyst was her father. During her lifetime she published more than 100 scholarly papers and several books.

Although Freud never married or had children, she was fascinated by children and desired to help them. Most of her career was devoted to developing a new method for treating psychological problems in children. Another follower of Sigmund Freud, Melanie Klein, had created a treatment for children that closely resembled psychoanalytic (Freudian) therapy for adults. Anna Freud believed that such an approach to children was inadequate. Through her observations of children that began with working as a teacher, she produced what came to be known as the *Continental approach* to child psychoanalysis (contrasted with Klein's *British approach*, so named despite the fact that Klein was Austrian). Freud's new approach involved a fairly extensive preparatory phase that was intended to engage the child. During this phase the therapist would demonstrate her usefulness to the child, then establish power of the therapist and reveal the child's vulnerability. Freud's primary techniques were interpretation of the child's fantasies and dreams and interpretation of the relationship between child and therapist. Freud also created an elaborate method, called a “metapsychological profile,” which organized information about the child and produced a diagnosis. Sollod, Wilson, and Monte (2009) describe Freud's contributions to psychological assessment and treatment of children.

Freud is also well known for her elaboration of her father's discussion of ego defense mechanisms, which include repression, denial, projection, displacement, reaction formation, sublimation, regression, and others. In all, Freud described 15 defenses in her classic book published in 1936, *The Ego and Its Mechanisms of Defense*. Ten of these had been either discussed or suggested by her father, and five were ideas of her own. Defense mechanisms remain among the most well-respected and well-supported of Freudian concepts today. Recently, Cramer (2006) and Cramer and Davidson (1998) have reviewed defense mechanisms, discussing research, suggesting areas of further research, and identifying situations in which particular defense mechanisms may be helpful or harmful.

Freud engaged in philanthropic and activist activities to benefit child welfare. In the 1940s she sought funding to open and staff a collection of children's centers which would house children in safe locations. In England, many children were separated from their parents during World War II because their parents lived and worked in areas that were considered relatively unsafe. Her efforts were successful, and the Hampstead Nurseries were established. In 1945, a group of six young children who had had a very unusual experience—they were held as infants in a German concentration camp together, as a small group without their parents—arrived at one of the Hampstead Nurseries. Freud and nurse Sophie Dann
(1951) wrote an account of their behavior at the nursery. They showed uncommon, even fierce, loyalty to one another and acted out against adults in particularly aggressive and regressive ways (e.g., biting, spitting, urinating on the floor). Freud also worked toward securing legal rights for children. For instance, she argued that children should have legal counsel in cases of divorce and adoption. Many of her ideas are presented in the book that she wrote with two colleagues from Yale University (Freud, Goldstein, & Solnit, 1973).

Freud was instrumental in further developing and popularizing many of her famous father’s ideas. She also made significant contributions of her own. In her personal life, Freud was passionately devoted to her father. During his last 16 years of life, he suffered from jaw cancer, and Anna became his primary caretaker, accompanying him to Paris for radium treatments and Berlin for surgeries. She also worked as a secretary and professional assistant, typing his correspondence and delivering his papers to audiences when he was unable to speak. In 1938, when Anna was 43, the Freuds (Anna’s parents and siblings) were compelled to leave Austria to save their lives; German Nazis had occupied Austria a few years earlier. They settled in London, and Sigmund died the following year. After Sigmund’s death, Anna’s life was largely devoted to her work, including care for the children and adults in her psychotherapy practice. She had many friendships. In the 1970s, Anna began to have serious medical problems. In 1982 she suffered a stroke to the cerebellum. Anna Freud died later that year, in London, at age 87.

See also defense mechanisms, Sigmund Freud, psychoanalytic perspective, psychodynamic therapy and psychoanalysis.

Further Readings


References:


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