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The skin as a means of communicating the difficulties of separation — individuation in toddlerhood

Inge-M Pretorius

Because the skin is a fundamentally important means of communication between mother and child, skin problems disturb this relationship and can lead to a disturbance in the concepts of the self linked to narcissistic difficulties and to an acute sensitivity to object relationships. In psychoanalytic terms, the ego or psychic skin is a metaphor for the biological skin and the psychic skin depends on the bodily skin. This paper considers the metaphorical link between the biological skin and the ego, by drawing on weekly observations, made over a ten-month period, of a male toddler who suffered from infantile eczema. His skin problems seem to reflect his struggle during the separation-individuation process of toddlerhood. His eczema is shown to be a metaphor for his apparent feeling of inconsistent containment, his difficulties in developing a positive concept of the self that has ego strength, and his difficulty in expressing aggression safely.

Keywords
Separation-individuation; toddlerhood; infantile eczema.

Introduction
The skin is a fundamentally important means of communication between mother and child while the mother provides the holding environment in which primary identification of the self is founded and ego development
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occurs. Infantile eczema results in a disturbance of this mother-child relationship that can lead to a disturbance in the concepts of the self linked to narcissistic difficulties and to an acute sensitivity to object relationships. This disturbance manifests and is renewed with every transitional phase of the life cycle (Pines, 1980). According to Bick (1968), early skin disorders result in impaired introjection and a disturbed type of object relationship and, as a consequence, a general fragility in integration and organisation of the personality.

Metaphorical link between the biological skin and the ego

Formal signifiers are representations of things. They originate in early infancy and precede the acquisition of language. They allow sensations, impressions and ordeals that are too early to put into words to be committed to memory (Houzel, 1990). According to Rosolato (1985, p32) ‘it is signifiers that are our objects in a continuous interaction between sensations whose impact is perceptual, the initial innate response of the baby, and the anticipatory attention of the mother to signifiers of demarcation’. Various authors have conceptualised signifiers of demarcation using terms such as ‘container’ (Bion, 1984), ‘psychic skin’ (Bick, 1968), ‘ego-skin’ and ‘psychic envelope’ (Anzieu, 1990b). These formal signifiers all share the same four functions (Houzel, 1990). The first function of containment corresponds to ‘maintaining the mind’ (Anzieu, 1985) and ‘holding’ (Winnicott, 1956a). The second function is to form an excitation screen to establish the first splitting and idealisation of self and objects. Thirdly, the psychic-skin delimits the internal psychic world and the perceptual world, until the containing functions have been introjected, which then allows the concept of the space within the self to arise (Bick, 1968). Fourthly, it forms a double connection by its internal face with the internal (or intrapsychic) world and by its external face with the external (or perceptual) world.

These four functions are also to be found in the ego as described in the Project for a Scientific Psychology (Freud, 1895). Thus, the function of the ego-skin is analogous to that of the ego. The ego-skin can be conceived as a dynamic system that permits a synthesis to be made of the concepts of force and shape of the personality (analogous to the dynamic and topographical points of view of the personality).

Anzieu (1990a) is accredited as being one of the few modern classical psychoanalysts who emphasises the link between body and psyche. He maintains that the body is the bedrock of the mind. Psychic functions spring from a concrete basis in organic functioning. Furthermore, Anzieu (1990a) claims that not only are psychic functions and character
traits based upon the body, but the psychic agencies including the ego are also based on the body. To the four above-mentioned functions, Anzieu (1990b) differentiated a fifth function of the ego-skin, namely individuation.

The ego-skin’s main function – the libidinal recharge of psychic functioning and the maintenance of internal energetic tensions and its unequal distribution among the psychic subsystems – corresponds with the biological skin as the sensorimotor’s permanent surface of stimulation by external excitations. Thus, in psychoanalytic terms, the psychic skin (or ego-skin) is a metaphor for the biological skin, and the psychic skin depends on the bodily skin (Houzel, 1990).

The skin is a fundamentally important means of communication between mother and child, while she provides the holding environment in which primary identification of the self is founded (Pines, 1980). Skin contact re-establishes the mother’s intimate feelings for her child, and is one of the most primitive channels for communication where non-verbal affects may be somatically experienced. Winnicott contends that the physical holding of the infant is a form of loving (1960a). The failure in this holding relationship – due to the mother’s ambivalence or rejection – can place the child in an irresolvable and self-perpetuating conflict between withdrawal and approach to the attachment figure (Hopkins, 1987). The child fears physical rejection as well as physical acceptance, lest physical contact results in mutual aggression. A self representation of being untouchable and repellent is often internalised by the child, as a consequence of the failure in the holding relationship.

The skin establishes a boundary between the self and non-self and represents the container of the self for the mother and child. Through her handling of the child, the mother’s skin may convey the full range of emotions from tenderness and warmth to disgust and hate. The child may react to the mother’s positive feelings by a sense of well-being and to her negative feelings by a skin disorder. Thus, the child’s non-verbal affects find expression through the skin and the skin may itch, weep or rage. The mother will deal with this according to her capacity to accept and soothe a blemished child. Thus, the trauma experienced by the child is not only due to the child’s own condition, but also the mother’s active response to the skin problem. Infants who experience extended periods of bodily soothing learn to translate psychic pain into visible bodily suffering and so arouse concern and care. Such infants often have mothers who are able to care for the body but not for the feelings (Pines, 1980).

The mother’s capacity to contain the infant’s anxiety is introjected by
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the infant; this gives rise to the notion of an internal and external space. The failure to introject the containing function and to accept the containment of the self and other in separate skins leads to pseudo-independence and the inability to recognise the separate existence of the self and object (Pines, 1980). As a consequence of their disturbed concept of self, narcissistic difficulties and sensitivity of object relationships, children with skin problems are often unusually observant and sensitive. They experience high anxiety as a result of a wish to merge with the object, but also an intense fear of regression and loss of the self. According to Pines (1980) such children remain haunted by the need to be understood, but also by the fear of re-experiencing the primary narcissistic hurt; the shame of the blemished child.

Winnicott (1956a) emphasises the importance of maternal care in the development of the infant's ego. The child's needs are at first body-needs, and they gradually become ego-needs as a psychology emerges out of the imaginative elaboration of the physical experience. An ego-relatedness between mother and infant comes into existence in which the mother's ego becomes an auxiliary ego to the infant. The basis for ego establishment is the sufficiency of 'going on being' (Winnicott, 1956a, p303).

According to Bion (1984) the prototype container is the maternal breast where the breast can be understood as representing all the communications between baby and mother. Bick (1968) purports that the containing object is experienced concretely as a skin. Faulty development of this 'first-skin' or 'primal skin' function (Bick, 1968, p484) can be seen to result either from an inadequate object or from fantasy attacks on it, which impair introjection. Disturbance of the primal skin function can lead to the development of a 'second-skin' (Bick, 1968, p485) through which dependence on the object is replaced by pseudo-independence, and a substitute for this container function is created. The second-skin corresponds to Winnicott's (1960b) concept of the 'false self'. In the case of children with skin problems, a split in the ego leading to a false-self frequently occurs in order to avoid experiencing the shame and narcissistic pain resulting from total exposure (Pines, 1980).

The infant experiences this primal skin as holding together the primitive parts of the personality that initially have no binding force amongst themselves. The external binding object must be introjected so that the infant experiences an internal function of containing the parts of the self. Once the containing functions have been introjected, the concept of a space within the self arises and primal splitting of the self and object becomes possible (Klein, 1928).
The case of Jan

This paper considers the relevance of the above discussion to the observations made of Jan, a male toddler, who attended an Anna Freud Centre Toddler Group with his mother. Jan's transitional phase of toddlerhood is considered when he was aged seventeen to twenty-six months. Jan was observed over a ten-month period, during which time allergies were suspected, investigated and established, culminating in Jan beginning to wear a 'medic alert' bracelet detailing his allergies.

The speculative nature of the assertions made in this paper must be emphasised. Jan was observed each week (interrupted by holidays and absences) over a ten-month period only. The information gleaned about his family and skin problems was that information which his mother chose to disclose, as she was never formally interviewed. Anna Freud (1965a) stressed that normal child development includes temporary regression and fixation. Furthermore, individual children show very different rates of development and different capacities for resilience. As a consequence, great caution should be exercised before behaviours are labelled as pathological (Freud, 1965b). A mother can impart to her child only that which she has experienced or been taught. Jan's mother continued to attend the toddler group, which suggested her awareness of the challenges of toddlerhood as well as her desire to give her son her best.

Parents and their toddlers meet weekly at the Anna Freud Toddler Groups which are characterised by their small size, the commitment of regular attendance, and leadership by trained professionals in continual consultation with child psychotherapists (Zaphiriou Woods, 2000). The groups aim to support the parent-child relationship and to nurture child development through play. This is promoted through observations and discussions with the parents in an uncritical environment, which facilitate the discovery and development of new ways of understanding and interacting with their children (Zaphiriou Woods, 1988). Toddler-group parents usually have a concern about their child or about their relationship with the child, yet would not normally look for therapeutic help. Such parents find it easier and more beneficial to come together in an ordinary and typical parent toddler group setting.

Family history

Jan, an attractive little boy with curly blond hair, lived with his parents and older brother. He seemed sensitive, cautious, hesitant, seldom displayed his affects and often looked somewhat dazed. Jan was a keen observer of the activities around him; on numerous occasions, he asked the names of people in the room and showed an awareness of being
observed. His language development lagged behind some of his peers in the group, but this was most probably due to his bilingual environment at home. Father was American, while mother spoke her home language to him. During the toddler group meetings, mother conversed with others in English, but spoke her home language almost exclusively to her son. On the isolated occasions that she addressed him in English, her words seemed to be directed at a larger audience.

Although mother spoke about his eczema, it was not overtly visible to observers. On one hot summer's day when most of the toddlers – including Jan – stripped down to their diapers, no eczema was visible. However, red lacerations were visible on the occasion that mother pulled down his pants to reveal eczema on his legs (eight months after the observation began).

Father worked long hours and business trips regularly took him away from home for periods of a few days. Mother expressed that she experienced difficulties during her husband's absences from home. Mother was an attractive woman with a ready smile. She was always friendly, participated actively in conversations with the other parents, although she revealed an awareness of being observed. Although mother often mentioned her tiredness as a result of Jan's sleepless nights, she conveyed the impression of being energetic and cheerful. Mother took pride in her dress and appearance, as well as that of her son. In contrast to this, she did not pay attention to time, as they seldom arrived punctually at the toddler group meetings.

Development of Jan's skin problems

Month 1. Observations of Jan, aged seventeen months, began.

Month 2. Mother reported that she suspected that Jan had an allergy to nuts and perhaps also to apple juice. However, she did not seem to prevent him from eating specific foods. Her discussions about allergies were characterised by vagueness.

Month 5. Mother reported for the first time that Jan had experienced restless nights during the previous five months. He typically went to sleep at 19h00, but woke at about 21h00, scratched his itching skin and cried. After being soothed back to sleep by mother, he woke frequently throughout the rest of the night, scratching and crying.

Month 6. Medical tests were conducted to investigate Jan's suspected allergies.
Month 8. Mother reported that Jan woke frequently (six to eight times) during the night, scratched his itching skin until he drew blood. Jan's crying woke mother who then held his hands and soothed him verbally until he fell asleep again. On such occasions, she frequently took Jan into her bed with her. Mother expressed an aversion to the group leader's suggestion that Jan's hands could be bound to prevent him from scratching; mother preferred holding his hands until he returned to sleep. On one occasion, while talking about Jan's skin problem, mother pulled down his pants to show the lacerations on the back of his legs.

Month 9. Jan began wearing a 'medic alert' bracelet stating his allergic status. Mother reported that Jan and his older brother had spent five days with their paternal aunt, during which period Jan showed no skin problems. When asked what diet the aunt had given Jan, mother replied that the aunt had offered him the foods that she had specified. Mother also reported that she found it impossible to get Jan to adhere to a strict diet. She thought it was unfair to deprive his brother of foods that he could eat, but to which Jan was allergic. As a consequence, Jan often ate foods to which he had known allergies.

Month 10. End of observation of Jan, aged two years, two months.

Observations of behaviour

Attunement as a mediator of psychic containment

As mentioned above, containment or maintaining the mind is one function of the ego-skin or ego (Houzel, 1990). Initially, this function is performed by the mother's ego in the role of auxiliary ego to the child. Maternal attunement and emotional sensitivity are necessary for the child to feel contained while his ego develops. According to Mahler, Pine and Bergman (1975), the optimal emotional availability of the mother is particularly important during the rapprochement subphase (fifteen - twenty-four months) of the separation-individuation process. 'It is the mother's love of the toddler and the acceptance of his ambivalence that enable the toddler to cathect his self representation with neutralised energy' (Mahler et al, 1975, p77). The mother's continued emotional availability is essential if the child's autonomous ego is to obtain optimal functional capacity, while his reliance on magical omnipotence recedes. Predictable emotional involvement on the part of the mother facilitates the rich unfolding of the toddler's thought processes, reality testing and coping behaviour by the end of the second year.
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Intimate moments of closeness and attunement were observed between Jan and mother. However, these contrasted with moments when mother did not seem emotionally available to Jan, as shown by observations 1 and 2.

Observation 1, of Jan at eighteen months

Jan walked to the red and yellow car. He opened the door and climbed inside with considerable difficulty, such that he stood on the seat and faced the back of the car. He was motionless for a few seconds, then he started turning his body around. Eventually he faced the right way, and sat down on the seat. Jan opened the door, put his left foot out and leaned towards the tea table where his mother sat. He smiled and looked in her direction. Mother was conversing with someone and did not notice Jan for a while. Jan remained motionless, smiling at his mother. Eventually mother saw him, waved and said 'Hello my treasure' (in her home language). Jan smiled, climbed into the car, shut the door and began to turn the steering wheel.

The closeness between mother and child is underlined by mother's use of the endearment 'my treasure'. She often called Jan by a diminutive form of his name. In addition, observation 4 shows that Jan and his mother often used the diminutive form of words like 'little star' when conversing with each other. This use of language seemed to heighten the moments of closeness experienced by the mother and child.

Observation 2, of Jan at twenty-one months

Jan approached the red and yellow car and began to climb inside, facing the back of the car. He climbed onto the seat and with considerable difficulty managed to turn himself around. A broad smile appeared on his face when he eventually managed to sit properly in the car. He scanned the room, but no one (including his mother) seemed to notice him. He sat immobile in the car, while his smile faded gradually.

In observation 1, Jan seemed to need and to be able to use his mother as an object of reassurance; termed 'refuelling' behaviour by Mahler et al (1975, p77). Although interacting with others, mother held Jan in her mind and was aware of his whereabouts in the room. After mother had acknowledged his achievement of climbing into the car unaided,
Jan was able to continue playing alone. Observation 1 contrasts with observation 2, where mother was not available for Jan. It could be argued that by ignoring Jan, mother was gradually destroying his feeling of magical omnipotence and thus promoting his autonomy. The sequence of events described in observation 2 was very painful to witness, as Jan seemed to need to reference his mother, and was left to cope with his feelings of aloneness. Observation 3 shows how rapidly attunement and lack thereof could follow each other in the mother-child interactions.

**Observation 3, of Jan at twenty-three months**

Jan started washing the dishes when his mother approached him carrying a clean diaper. Mother undid his braces while he stood at the sink. When she picked him up and carried him away, he protested by stiffening his body, kicking his legs and crying. ‘You can wash the dishes again soon’ she told him (in her home language) as she laid him on his back on the carpet. Mother gave Jan a piece of play-dough to hold. It fell from his hand and rolled down his chest into his diaper. Both Jan and mother laughed as she removed it, closed the diaper and pulled up his trousers. As soon as mother released him, Jan returned to the sink to resume washing the dishes. A few minutes later, mother approached him anew and said (in her home language) ‘We must go now Jan’. Mother rapidly turned him away from the sink, brushed the water off his hands and put on his jacket. She picked him up quickly and said ‘Say goodbye to the people’ (in her home language). Jan showed no emotions initially, but then began to wave at people as he was carried out of the room.

Jan protested with an outburst of anger when his play was interrupted the first time. Mother managed to calm him by distracting him with the play-dough. The second time, she moved him away from his play with such rapidity that he seemed stunned and did not try to protest. On this occasion, they left the group early. Leaving the group abruptly and unexpectedly, while all others continued to play probably exacerbated Jan’s feeling of frustration, discontinuity and disorientation.

**The role of dependability in establishing the psychic skin**

Maternal dependability is closely linked to the concept of maternal attunement and both are necessary for the child’s developing ego to feel contained. Numerous observations of Jan and his mother,
However, suggested that Jan did not have a secure feeling of containment. Mother revealed unpredictable and inconsistent behaviour with respect to punctuality, remembering names and forming links between events and concepts. Her lack of attention to time contrasted sharply with her attention to the detail of her and Jan's appearance. They seldom arrived at the toddler group on time, and frequently left early. That this had a detrimental effect on Jan was evidenced by his frequent hesitance to enter the room; he seemed overawed by the level of activity and by the number of people already present (observations 4 and 5). In addition, Jan often played frantically at the end of a session, or began to cry and refuse to put on his coat, betraying a great reluctance to leave if he had not been present for the entire 1.5 hour session. By contrast, Jan participated more contentedly and was less reluctant to leave after those sessions he attended from beginning to end.

The group leader addressed mother's lack of punctuality on a number of occasions, stressing the advantages of regularity and predictability for Jan. On one occasion that they arrived on time, the group leader pointed out how Jan had enjoyed playing and was content to leave. This was contrasted with Jan's apparent unsatisfying experiences when his playtime was truncated. However, mother continued to find it difficult to arrive on time.

Observation 4, of Jan aged twenty-two months

Jan, carrying a pink umbrella, arrived with mother, one hour after the toddler group had started. Mother removed his jacket and then her own, while J stood in the entrance looking into the room, but not daring to enter. She said (in her home language), 'Come Jan let us go inside', but he hesitated. Mother took his hand and led him to the play-dough saying 'Would you like to play with the play-dough?' (in her home language). He sat on mother's lap rolling and pressing out shapes. He engaged her in conversation saying 'little star' and 'moon' (in the language they shared) as he pressed out the shapes, but also spent fairly long periods of time looking at the people around him without speaking.

Observation 4 was very characteristic of Jan and mother, arriving late and then mother directing him towards the play-dough. While Jan's verbal engagement of mother was unusually high in this particular observation, his silent observation of his surroundings was a very typical behaviour.
Observation 5, of Jan at twenty-four months

Jan and mother arrived one hour twenty minutes after the toddler group had started. They entered the main door where mother removed Jan’s coat. Jan stood in the doorway looking into the room. Mother entered the room (without removing her own jacket) and greeted those present. Jan remained in the doorway, hesitating to enter the room. While mother spoke to the other adults, Jan became increasingly agitated. He stepped from foot to foot, but did not enter the room. Suddenly, he ran to mother, calling ‘mama’ and held onto her leg once he reached her. Jan stood beside his mother while she continued to talk. Mother then turned and walked towards the entrance hall to deposit her jacket. Jan watched mother walk away from him. He stood as if transfixed for a moment and then ran after her calling ‘mama’.

Jan seemed overwhelmed and frightened by the number of people already present in the room and by their level of activity. In addition, observation 5 occurred after a holiday break that probably compounded Jan’s feeling of unfamiliarity. Mother seemed unaware of his difficulty in entering the room. She also seemed insensitive to his first manifestation of distress, since she walked away from him a second time without warning him.

Mother always engaged herself actively in conversations with other mothers, yet on a few occasions she unexpectedly forgot the names of some of the mothers. This level of her engagement seemed inconsistent with forgetting names.

Just as mother seemed to fail to see the link between punctuality and Jan’s experience of the toddler group, she seemed unable to perceive a potential link between the manifestation of Jan’s skin problems and his immediate environment. As we have seen, Mother reported that Jan suffered no allergies while spending five days with his aunt. When asked what diet the aunt had given Jan, mother replied that he had been given the foods that she had specified. Mother did not seem to question this phenomenon further.

These observations suggested that mother’s emotional availability was not very dependable and predictable to Jan. She was sometimes insensitive to his need for reassurance. Furthermore, Jan seemed unable to use her as an auxiliary ego to reassure and contain himself.

Play as an index of ego-skin development

A further function of the psychic-skin or ego described above, is the delimitation of the psychic world from the perceptual world which effects the development of an internal space (Bick, 1968). This delimitation is
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closely linked to the capacity to play and requires a certain level of ego development. Jan seldom interacted with other children, and did not play with a wide range of toys. On occasions – when his mother was not by his side – he was observed wandering around the room touching various toys in an exploratory manner, but not initiating play with them. He was not observed to play in the sense described by Furman (1992, p268); 'play in the true sense, of endowing symbols with personal meaning and using them to create an experience of their own making in illusory form'. Such play requires a certain level of ego development which allows the child to concentrate on a certain task for an extended period of time.

Jan’s favourite toy was the red and yellow car, which has a roof and a door that opens. Sometimes his mother pushed it while he sat inside. At other times he propelled himself or was content to sit inside and turn the steering wheel. The shape of this car resembles a protective carapace or skin, which provokes the speculation that Jan perhaps felt contained and held, while sitting inside the car.

Another toy that Jan often played with was the play-dough. However, this was more at the suggestion of his mother. The fact that she was often observed manipulating the play-dough alone, long after Jan had started another activity suggested that it was fulfilling a need within her. Jan perhaps complied with her choice of activity in order to be near her and receive her positive approval.

Thus, the observations of Jan’s play suggested that he had not yet reached the level of ego development required to play in the true sense of the word. His predilection for the red and yellow car perhaps indicated his need to feel contained and protected.

The containment of separation anxiety
Anzler (1990b) described individuation as a function of the ego-skin or ego. According to Pines (1980), children with skin problems have a disturbed concept of self and a sensitivity of object relationships. They experience high anxiety as a result of a wish to merge and the fear of loss of the self. As a consequence, such children might experience particular difficulties negotiating the separation-individuation process. According to Mahler et al (1975), increased separation anxiety can be observed, particularly during the rapprochement subphase of the separation-individuation process. Bowlby (1969) delineated the attachment system as utilised by the child to provide security in times of stress and fear, and to strategically reduce and manage these emotional states. Successful resolution enabled the activation of the exploratory system and thus facilitated further development.
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The following two observations (6a and 6b) were made sequentially on one afternoon, while Jan’s father was on a business trip, away from home. The observations describe Jan being separated and then reunited with his mother.

Observation 6a, of Jan at twenty-two months

Mother carried Jan into the garden, thirty minutes after the toddler group had started. She set him down and explained to the group leader that she had not parked her car properly and had to return to the car. She turned to Jan and said (in her home language) ‘Jan, I am quickly going to the car, I will be back soon’. The group leader engaged Jan by rolling a ball to him. He returned it, and the ball passed between them a couple of times. Suddenly Jan ran towards the garden gate (through which his mother had disappeared) and burst into tears, shouting ‘mama’ repeatedly. The group leader restrained him and tried to console him by assuring him (in English) that his mother would soon return. Jan cried inconsolably, occasionally repeating ‘mama’. He sobbed such that his entire body shook and he breathed by occasionally gulping for air. The group leader carried him inside to the tea table. She sat with him on her lap and tried to distract him with the play-dough. Jan sobbed continuously, looking towards the door.

Mother entered the toddler hut seventeen minutes after leaving Jan. She smiled as she quietly approached the table at which he sat. Only when she sat down about 1.5 meters from Jan, did he look up and notice her. He showed no change in facial expression and remained seated on the group leader’s lap. In an animated tone, mother told the group leader about a motorist whom she had seen driving recklessly. Jan remained sitting motionlessly on the leader’s lap, looking at mother. The leader said (in English) ‘I am sure that you want to go to your mother, Jan’ while helping him off her lap. Jan went and stood next to mother, such that the side of his body touched hers and he faced the same direction as she did.

Jan showed high anxiety and was inconsolable during his mother’s absence, despite the efforts of the group leader to distract him with the familiar activity of play-dough. Jan was ambivalent when his mother returned; he showed no change in facial expression and made no attempt to move towards her physically. Only after the leader suggested that he might want to be with his mother and helped him off her lap, did he go and stand next to her. He did not climb onto his mother’s lap, nor did she pick him up.
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The story that mother told the group leader about the reckless driver perhaps reflected her own anxieties about her mothering, or her own recklessness with her child’s safety (discussed under aggression).

Observation 6b, of Jan at twenty-two months

Jan had just been reunited with his mother. She sat on a chair, while he stood next to her with his side touching her body. He gazed blankly ahead, his face red and swollen from crying and two glistening tear lines ran down his face. Mother got up and walked to the entrance hall. Jan seemed startled out of his reverie, as he realised that mother was walking away from him. He followed her and began to cry, as she disappeared into the entrance hall. Mother reappeared, kneeled down and with a slightly impatient tone said to him (in her home language) ‘I am not going away, I am here’. Another mother – Rose – walked past them towards the bathroom, followed by her own toddler daughter, Anne. Anne began to cry as she lost sight of Rose. Mother turned to Anne and picked her up saying that Rose was in the bathroom. When Jan noticed mother pick up another toddler, he began to cry and followed her. Mother turned to him saying (in her home language) ‘It’s alright Jan, I am just taking the girl to her mother’. Jan stood sobbing in front of mother, extending his arms upward, while she held Anne. When Rose reappeared and took her crying daughter, mother bent down and picked up Jan.

Jan seemed unable to use mother as a secure base and to resume his play. Mother seemed unaware of his continued sense of insecurity and the impatience in her voice indicated that she was irritated by his clingy behaviour. She left Jan to reunite Anne with her Rose, unaware of her own son’s needs. Mother was sensitive to Anne’s separation distress, but not her own son’s distress in the identical situation. This suggests that mother experienced some ambivalence towards her own child, which prevented her from responding appropriately to his need for comfort. Perhaps Anne’s gender influenced mother’s response. It could be speculated that mother wanted to foster independence in her own boy, and thus resisted meeting all his needs, while allowing herself to comfort the girl.

Jan showed separation anxiety throughout the afternoon. He seemed unsure of the dependability of his mother’s presence, and was alternately clingy and resistant. This behaviour is characteristic of an insecure attachment, and in particular, an anxious-resistant pattern of attachment (Ainsworth, 1967).
Jan's father's absence from home might have played a role in mother's behaviour. Mother had previously reported that she experienced difficulties when her husband was away on business trips. It could be speculated that mother felt tormented, abandoned and not needed by her husband. Her behaviour could be understood as an attempt to retaliate towards him. However, since Jan was the only one present into whom she could project her anger, she abandoned and tormented Jan. When considering Jan's skin problem, it could be speculated that mother's insistence on holding his hands to prevent him from scratching at night, ensured that she felt needed by Jan. Perhaps this compensated for her feelings of not being needed by her husband.

**The ego-skin's containment of aggression**

Throughout the course of the separation-individuation, one of the most important developmental tasks of the child's evolving ego is that of coping with the aggressive drive in the face of the gradually increasing awareness of separateness. According to Mahler et al. (1975), the strength of the primitive ego determines the success with which this is achieved. The child's coping with aggression is facilitated by a sense of containment; an ego-skin function performed partially by the mother's ego acting as an auxiliary ego to the child. Furman (1992) purports that coping with aggression in ways that serve the ego and further personality growth is the challenge of toddlerhood.

Jan showed few signs of overt aggression in the form of temper tantrums. However, according to Furman (1992) not all toddlers have tantrums; some have none or have them rarely and in a minor form. Jan's aggression most often surfaced in response to frustration as illustrated by observation 3. Jan also seemed to turn his aggression against himself and express it by being accident-prone. Mother frequently reported accidents that had befallen Jan, including; numerous falls, a near drowning in the bath, and a near drowning in a swimming pool while on holiday. Observation 7 describes one of numerous accidents that occurred at the toddler group.

**Observation 7, of Jan at twenty-four months**

While washing the dishes, Jan spilled water onto the wooden step on which he stood. Suddenly he slipped and fell to the ground, hitting his head against a chair. He began to cry. Mother picked him up and set him on his feet saying (in her home language) 'The step is wet and you slipped'. Mother walked towards the bathroom and returned carrying
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a cloth. Jan took a few steps to follow her. When she returned he was still crying. She knelt down to begin wiping the step and asked him (in her home language) ‘Where have you hurt yourself, show me where you have hurt yourself’. Jan moved so that he stood next to his mother. He lay his head in her neck and cried while she mopped the floor.

After he fell, mother did not take him in her arms to comfort him. While it could be argued that verbalising his feelings might help him understand and deal with them, the way in which he stood next to his mother and lay his head in her neck while she wiped the floor, seemed to suggest that he required more or different comforting than he received. Jan seemed to be left alone to deal with the trauma of his fall.

Mother’s behaviour and apparent concern with the mess on the floor perhaps reveals that she struggled to find the appropriate response to the situation. She might have felt guilty at not foreseeing Jan’s fall, ashamed by the mess he made, or embarrassed by the attention he drew to himself and to her. Conversely, she might have been attempting to promote his independence from her by not anticipating every fall, and by giving him the minimum comfort.

Jan’s accident proneness might have been a desperate attempt to control his own overwhelming aggression. However, the fact that this aggression was turned against the self indicates that Jan had not achieved sufficient libidinal cathexis of his own body and the concomitant desire to protect his body and turn his aggression towards the non-self or external world. According to Hoffer (1950) the child builds two protective barriers that safeguard him from his own aggressive attacks. The first barrier is the child’s own pain barrier and the second is the child’s increasing primary narcissism. However, for the ego to develop these two barriers, the child needs constant maternal input. The mother must libidinally cathect her child prior to and during the development of his body-ego. Jan’s apparent lack of libidinal cathexis of his own body may have been due to an insufficient or ambivalent cathexis of his body by his mother.

Jan’s skin problems probably influenced his mother’s cathexis of his body and thus his own cathexis of his body. Pines (1980) posits that the child’s experience of his skin (and by extension his body) is influenced by his mother’s capacity to accept a blemished child. It could be speculated that Jan’s skin problems, compounded by his attendant sleeplessness, aroused numerous negative affects in mother. Mother’s skin ‘communicated’ these negative feelings during her handling of Jan, and Jan eventually introjected these affects as his own feelings about his own body.
Mother sometimes displayed aggression towards Jan as in observation 8, where she teased Jan overtly.

**Observation 8, of Jan at twenty-one months**

Jan seemed interested in the Russian dolls and smiled when his mother opened the bigger doll and showed him that there was a smaller doll inside. He took the small doll and said, 'baby'. It was time to go and mother tried to persuade him to replace the doll, but he refused. Mother held the larger 'mother doll' and asked in a whining voice (in her home language) 'please return me my baby'. Jan smiled at his mother but continued holding the 'baby doll'. She fetched his coat and put it on him as he continued to hold the doll. Mother tried to take the doll away from him, but he turned away. She chased him, grabbed him, took the doll and put it in its place. Jan started to cry. Mother picked him up, but he did not calm down.

This teasing behaviour suggested mother’s difficulty in allowing Jan to individuate. The play provokes the speculation that she was the ‘mother doll’ in the play who wished to keep her ‘baby doll’ safely inside her. Within the context of Jan’s skin problem, mother maintained this closeness holding his hands at night to prevent him from scratching. This possibly gave her the satisfaction of being indispensable to him. Through her actions, she ensured that he needed her, to soothe his itching skin. The extension of the symbiotic phase by the prolonged experience of physical soothing by the mother, is a common feature of infantile eczema, according to Pines (1980).

Mother displayed recklessness with her child’s safety that alarmed the observers. Her behaviour was sometimes overtly aggressive towards Jan.

**Observation 9, of Jan at twenty-five months**

Jan stood in front of the swing putting his hands up. Mother picked him up and put him on the swing. She started pushing the swing while talking to one of the mothers. Each time she pushed him harder and harder. The swing made a squeaking noise and his head went higher than the top bar of the swing's frame. Mother smiled and seemed to enjoy her play with Jan. All those present seemed alarmed at the sight of Jan being pushed in that way. This continued until the group leader approached her, and she slowed the swing down. Mother tried to take Jan out of the swing, but his legs became stuck. Mother then said to
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Jan (in English), ‘Everyone thinks you are going to fall from the swing, but you can’t fall’.

Mother spoke English to Jan revealing her awareness of being observed and of the concern her behaviour elicited. This was one of the very few occasions that mother spoke English to Jan, which suggested that her words were meant for a wider audience. Although addressing Jan, she seemed to wish to reassure the others present – and perhaps also herself – that Jan was safe and could not fall.

Jan’s apparent method of dealing with his aggression – by turning it upon himself – may partly have been a response to his mother’s aggression towards him. According to Furman (1992) a mother’s aggression is often too threatening for toddlers to contemplate. It may be that in the face of his mother’s aggression, Jan was unable to express his own aggression safely. He might have feared some retaliation from the object, or that the object would not survive his aggressive attacks. As a consequence, he turned his aggression onto himself.

The role of the mother in the ego-skin formation

As mentioned above, mother’s method of dealing with Jan’s eczema was to hold his hands and soothe him back to sleep, or to take him into her own bed when he woke and scratched his skin. It could be speculated that this behaviour ensured prolonged physical closeness between mother and child, and encouraged Jan’s dependence on her. It also perpetuated her sleepless nights, but possibly gave her the satisfaction of being needed by Jan to soothe and ‘heal’ him. In addition, mother reported that she found it impossible to get Jan to adhere to a strict diet, ostensibly because it deprived his older brother. This probably also contributed to the perpetuation of Jan’s allergic reactions and consequently, his dependence on his mother.

Analytic investigations of skin disorders in children emphasise the importance of the mother. The presence of psychological problems in the parents is considered the most significant of the etiological factors (Woodhead, 1946). According to Sperling (1978) mothers of children suffering from various psychosomatic problems (including eczema) all shared three characteristics. These included: the carry-over of an unresolved emotional conflict from childhood, projection of part of the mother’s own person onto the child, and a need for control over the child. The solution of the mother’s own conflicts was achieved somatically by the child. Furthermore, the interplay of unconscious fantasies between the mother and child was the most important factor in eczema
and neurodermatitis. Mutual unconscious needs were projected upon the skin. In some cases the dermatitis became the child's way of reacting to frustration and anger, and to the mother in particular (Sperling, 1978).

That Jan's eczema was somehow linked to his mother is suggested by the report that he suffered no skin problems while spending five days with his aunt. According to mother, the aunt had given Jan those foods that mother had specified (i.e. foods that mother also gave him).

Sperling (1978) describes a mother-child relationship that is characterised by a prolonged symbiotic relationship between mother and child, and in which the mother – because of her own needs – encourages bodily illness and dependence of the child by the special care she gives when the child is sick. Sperling calls such a mother-child relationship a psychosomatic type of object relationship. Hopkins used the term 'the too-good mother' (1996, p410) for a mother who promotes regression in her child. Such a mother finds infant care very satisfying and is so closely identified with her child that she meets her own needs through meeting the child's needs.

Conclusion
The skin is fundamentally important as a means of communication between mother and child. The most intimate aspects of the experiences of the skin are elaborated mentally into an 'ego-skin' or 'psychic envelope' (Anzieu, 1990, p52) which is analogous to the concept of the ego as described by Freud in the Project for a Scientific Psychology (1895). Thus, in psychoanalytic terms, the psychic skin is a metaphor for the biological skin, and thus the psychic skin depends on the bodily skin.

Although Jan and his mother experienced intimate moments of attunement, Jan did not seem to be able to depend on his mother's emotional availability. He seemed to have difficulty using her as an auxiliary ego and as a consequence, his behaviour suggested a need for containment and reassurance. Their relationship seemed characterised by mutual ambivalence as exemplified by Jan's profound distress when separated from his mother, and his inability to use her as a secure base to resume his play after reunion. Mother, in turn, sometimes failed to meet Jan's needs for containment and comfort, suggesting a wish to promote his autonomy. However, by holding his hands to prevent him from scratching his eczema, it could be argued that she encouraged physical closeness and his dependence on her. The safe expression of aggression seemed difficult for both Jan and his mother. Mother's occasional overt aggression towards Jan perhaps played a role in his accident proneness, in which he turned his aggression against himself.
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Thus, Jan's skin problem seems to reflect his struggle during the separation-individuation process of toddlerhood. His eczema could be considered a metaphor for his apparent feeling of inconsistent containment, his difficulty in introjecting and developing a positive concept of the self that has ego strength, and his difficulty in expressing aggression safely. Furthermore, his skin problem seemed to promote prolonged closeness and dependence on his mother.

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References

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