INTRODUCTION

I have a very vivid recollection of my first experience when visiting a social welfare nursing home in 1993. The children’s groups were overcrowded; the kids were confined to cage-like play pens – from 8 to10 kids in each. Three nurses (mostly these were adult patients of the same nursing facility) “gave them food” three times a day: they would just thrust spoonfuls of mash meal in the kids’ mouths or simply pour liquid down their throats. They cleaned the wards only once a day. This was the only communication with the outer world and the people that those kids had. The kids looked like tiny animals; they looked as if their development got stuck at some pre-human level. They moved only by crawling or on all fours. They used their arms only to support themselves when moving or for enclasping or keeping hold of something. They approached the adults sidewise and pressed their faces, cheeks, shoulders or sometimes their backs to the adults’ legs (see Fig. B1). They were not hugging them but, instead, were climbing the adults as if they would climb a tree seizing them firmly by the hair or clothes. They picked food with their mouths (see Fig. В2); when given a large piece to eat they would not take bites of it – they were tearing off mouthfuls by head jerking.

 This was the first time when it occurred to me that the kids were communicating with us at a level which is different and unusual to us.

Later on, when working with the special children, I discovered a virtual drop out of entire levels of movement control. For instance, children can walk, run, scratch but they are unable to make any goal-directed movement with their hands (or these movements are too difficult for a child to perform). These observations gave rise to an impression that entire levels – due to a particular pathology – dropped out. The idea of a multi-level work of the brain was expressed by many doctors, physiologists and psychologists (Orbeli, Vygorsky, Piaget, Inhelder, Erickson). L.S. Vygorsky wrote that the existence of genetically different layers in human behavior was research-proven. In this sense “geology” of human behavior is definitely a reflection of the brain’s “geological” origin and development.

Indeed, these “ancient types of psychological functions” functioning, including communication, are something that we often observe in this or that pathology of a child’s development.

Communication – just like the majority of psychological functions – has a complex structure inclusive of biological and social components. Communication in its manifestation is an entity. Its both biological (material) and social (psychological, soul-related) components are close-knit and wedded tight in its development. Any splitting of those, including the one offered below, is conventional and artificial. But in case of pathology this splitting is convenient because it helps one define the level of impairments and point out the lines of their correction. The levels of movement construction are best explored in the work by N.A. Bernstein “On the Construction of Movements” (1947).

I believe that the levels of movement construction offered by N.A Bernstein can be seen in a much wider context – as levels of mental functioning, a levels of mental response by the human organism.

This work proceeds from N.A Bernstein’s movement levels and explores the construction of communication – in health, in pathology, as well as the diagnostics and possible lines of correction. At the same time there is a timid attempt to look at the emotional responses and human behavior from the viewpoint of N.A. Bernstein’s levels of movement construction. The chief symptom in the symptoms set of autistic disorder is impaired communication.

The author is of the opinion that the primary feature of many psychic pathologies is impaired perception, while impaired communication, impaired emotional response and impaired behavior are secondary, - a tenet that sometimes fails to match the viewpoint accepted in modern psychology and psychiatry. We share the viewpoint held by O.S. Nikolskaya [80] who is offering her own approach to the levels of an individual’s affective habitus. We shall be making frequent references to her work but on some occasions we shall put forward our own explanations of the observed impairment of mental development of the special children.

The article was written on the basis of experience of my own work with the special children, as well as on research literature and on training seminars run by O.S. Nikolskaya, B.A. Arkhipov and D. Sokolov. Main ideas of this book were contained in the report made at the conference at the Institute of Corrective Pedagogy of the Russian Academy of Education [69]. This article mostly consists of the texts of seminars held for the parents of the special children on the topics: “Movement Construction”, “Communication Construction” and “Behavior”, so the author apologizes for the colloquial intonation intermittent both in the theoretical part and in the practical recommendations.