

Skills for All Ages

The challenging goals for education set forth in the preceding article by Miss Miel have meaning for all boys and girls—from the nursery-school toddler to the college sophisticate. In the four articles which follow, authors explore ways of working toward these goals in the nursery school and kindergarten, elementary school, secondary school, and college. These articles make clear the great responsibility of education for teaching boys and girls the skills they need in today's complex world.

¶ "We can't ALL ride in the little red wagon ALL the time"

Democracy Begins With the Very Young

HELEN E. STREIT

DEMOCRACY HAS BEEN DEFINED as "government by the people in the interest of all the people with guarantee of civil and religious liberty to every citizen."¹

Can this have any meaning to a young child who dresses himself with difficulty, whose speech is imperfect, whose interest is primarily in "self," to say nothing of having any understanding of civil and religious liberty? Has democracy meaning to the typical possessiveness of a 3-year-old: "This is MY Jimmy. YOU can't play with Jimmy. He's going to play with ME. Aren't you Jimmy?" Or to the negative 2-year-old who wants no interference from adults? The an-

swer is, "Yes," because democracy is a way of life. It is something one can be taught to live before understanding its meaning.

Practice in democratic living starts in the nursery school or in the home where the teaching of social and functional skills is planned to develop good attitudes toward individual and social responsibility. The high level of response that can be achieved by young children demonstrates how early skills can be directed toward our ultimate goal of producing good citizens, not robots. Success in this direction does not come from commands but rather as an outgrowth of situations previously thought through and planned to set the stage for the child's spontaneous response at a later date. Responses are varied because they come from the child and have not been superimposed upon him.

Getting Along With Others

Children who are encouraged to solve their own problems in socially acceptable ways develop different techniques for getting along while pursuing their own interests in a group. Some techniques are imitations of adult patterns, others are highly individual adjustments to a situation.

In a group of children ranging in age from 2 to 5 years, Christopher, age 4, built frequently with the blocks. The problem of preserving his building from others moving around the room was solved by the simple expedient of sprawling in front of the blocks

¹ Nicholas Murray Butler, "Education and Democracy" in *Education for Democracy*. Proceedings of the Congress on Education for Democracy. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1939, p. 26.

A world at peace depends on democratic relations among all people. An understanding of each individual's part in that kind of a relationship can come about through continual emphasis upon democratic action in the life of every child. How the teaching of skills for living in a democratic society can begin in nursery school is discussed by Helen E. Streit, director of child care centers in Lynwood, Calif. "I enjoyed thinking of nursery school experiences in this light," writes Miss Streit, "and hope others get as much from looking at skills from this particular perspective as I did."

so that others had to make a wide detour. This preventive measure was so successful that conflicts seldom arose between him and others. Another child who was generally aggressive when his blocks were knocked down by another, exhibited a high degree of tolerance on one occasion when the offender was a much younger child. His tension relaxed immediately when he saw who was responsible and he said: "Oh, it's you. I guess you don't know any better."

In another group, the typical response of Bobby, almost 5, was instructive. "Look what you did," he would say if his blocks were disarranged by a careless child. "If you do it like this you won't knock them down." Then he would demonstrate the correct procedure. This same Bobby had also learned the advantages of the peaceful approach in other situations. On one occasion George had all the small cars. Bobby went to him in a friendly way and said: "George, I want to tell you something. Is it all right for me to have that tractor over there?" And George, who ordinarily would have held on to all he had, voluntarily gave up two tractors.

On some occasions children go a step beyond solving personal problems and offer a solution to a common difficulty. Betty Jo, 3½, was playing by herself in the sand-pile when she noticed a group of children trying to get a doll out of a tree. She sized up the situation, got a wagon that wasn't in use, and took it to the tree. By standing in the wagon an older child was able to reach the doll. After the rescue Betty Jo returned to her own play, no longer interested in the group.

Sharing Responsibilities

Children like to be given responsibilities and often sharing them means not only doing a fair share of the work but also giving up a turn so that others can do their fair share.

In one child care center the program had been going for some time before table-setting responsibilities had been given the children. They were impressed by the importance of the work and eager to do it. Yet such had been the preliminary experiences that instead of arguing over pet jobs such as pouring milk and wiping off the tables we had such conversations as this from different groups of two or three selected for the work:

"It's your turn now." "I did that many. Now you do it." "Teacher, I had a turn. Gary didn't."

Not all nursery school responsibilities are considered privileges by the children. Picking up is often considered a job to be avoided. "I didn't play with them" is frequently heard, particularly by 4- and 5-year-olds. The teacher who works with children on the assumption that work as well as pleasure must be shared ultimately gets a demonstration that full responsibility can be assumed by nursery school children.

An example of attainment in this direction was given by a group of children whose regular teacher had to leave for a short time. Another teacher took charge in her absence. Most of the children were outside, but a group of four were in the room picking up a large supply of blocks that had been used earlier. Instead of taking advantage of the shift in teachers they continued working for the fifteen or twenty minutes it took to complete the job. Nothing was said to them. Every block was put neatly away. No adult could have been more responsible for his actions than those four boys on that occasion.

Learning by Living

In a democracy the development of functional skills means more than developing competence in particular situations. Coordination of fine and gross muscular control is not an end in itself but a means to a greater end. Through the attainment of skills, freedom is achieved.

Let's look at the dressing situation. The first request we make of the 2-year-old is that he cooperate with us and perhaps try to do a few things for himself. Often 2-year-olds who come to school have the idea that they should be coaxed or teased into dressing, that it is a game, that they should be chased and put into their clothes by force. Others are limp and expect all initiative to come from the adult. A striking example of both these attitudes was exhibited by 2½-year-old David.

When it was a question of taking off or putting on wraps he would always refuse, saying, "No, I don't want to. I'm not going to." The refusal would be accompanied by running away or by completely relaxing himself. To the teacher the basic problem was teaching him to take responsibility for his

actions. By refusing to help him until he showed a willingness to be helped the teacher prepared the way for him to acquire the physical skill of dressing himself, and thus acquire independence.

As children grow older and become more expert in their muscular coordination they are encouraged to help one another. Independence and inter-dependence are intertwined. As the child is freeing himself from the necessity of being helped, he is recognizing at the same time his limitations and in a friendly way the limitations or special abilities of others.

In a group of superior nursery school children a 4-year-old was not sure of his colors, but Mary, half a year younger, could name them all correctly. Billy recognized her superior ability and was observed one day holding up the crayons, one at a time, and asking Mary what the color was as though he were testing her. If it was a color he knew, he said in an approving manner: "Quite right." When it was a color he didn't know he repeated the name several times before going on to the next one. He respected Mary's knowledge, but he wasn't giving himself away.

The development of skills in young children is often a question simply of presenting them with the means of expression. Skill comes from practice rather than precept. A 5-year-old coming to school for the first time had had no experience with painting at an easel. Her first paintings were an experimentation with color, on the level of a much younger child. These were followed by simple designs: a series of balls or lines of different colors. Then she made complicated patterns, crossing lines and filling in the spaces. One such design resembled fairly closely the English flag. A 4-year-old English child in the group, seeing the completed picture, said: "That's my flag." The next development was making single objects: her cat, her doll, a girl, a house. By the end of the year she was drawing scenes with the sky above and grass below. Her growth in self-expression was accompanied by appre-

ciation of the work of others. Although she was the oldest and most talented in the group, she watched the improvement of others with interest. "That's a good car Larry painted, isn't it?" she said to a teacher when Larry made his first recognizable object.

Adults frequently forget that in their development of skills children take pleasure in doing for the fun of doing, not to accomplish anything. A 3-year-old who had learned to lace her shoes correctly was found several times a day taking her shoes off so that she could lace them again. A 4-year-old showed annoyance at her mother for always asking, "What is it?" when she took a painting home. "Does it always have to be something?" she asked in a plaintive voice.

In their dramatic play children reveal their susceptibility to outside influences. Imitation of obsequious behavior touched off by the dramatic is easy. During the war years sporadic heel Hitlers and goose-stepping occurred not infrequently. On the other hand, when a child brought the American flag to school one day and planted it in the soft dirt on the school ground, he was soon joined by a group of ten or twelve children who saluted in a more or less authentic fashion and started singing what to them was the national anthem. "God Bless America" was solemnly sung followed by a community sing of excerpts of popular songs. Then came a parade during which several children took turns carrying the flag. The whole thing was a spontaneous performance.

Children gradually went back to their individual play. Danny became involved in a serious and business-like telephone conversation. "You got the truck ready? . . . You take it over there . . . Yes . . . No . . . I don't think so . . . All right . . . All right . . . O.K." The imaginary conversation ended, he became recipient of the orders, and started carrying out his own instructions.

Democracy was at work granting freedom to each individual to develop his skills and to take his part in a group each in his own manner but in conformance with a pattern contributing to the good of all.

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