



Courtesy St. Louis (Mo.) Schools

*Discussion is healthy*

Parents and teachers evaluate aspects of child growth

## Our Children—Their Assets and Liabilities

CHARLOTTE FEHLMAN

IT IS SPRING, a significant educational season! For a large proportion of our population, the year comes to an end at 11:59 on December 31st. At that time many look back for perhaps less than a second and try to evaluate their deeds of the fleeing year. The educator's year, however, ends sometime in the spring and then begins anew in the fall. During the springtime months teachers, professors, deans and principals have a nagging feeling that they should pass some judgment on the past two semesters. What has been happening?

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*To witness the growth of a child is a great privilege. That parents and teachers who are aware of this enjoyment in working with and for children can do much to alleviate "growing pains" by thoughtful evaluation of individual behavior is evidenced in this article by Charlotte Fehlman, Teachers College, Columbia University. Miss Fehlman cites, among other things, the necessity for parents and teachers to establish a common meeting-ground for sensitive appraisal of today's children.*

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What has been done? What have been the goals? How far have we traveled?

Answers do not come to mind readily. We can, of course, answer in terms of comfortable, non-specific generalities. We can report that "During the past year, the third grade has gained considerable understanding and information concerning 'Early American Life and Its Relation to Present-Day Living'" or "The freshman orientation course has succeeded in presenting to students an over-view of the contemporary and historical forces at work in today's social scheme" or we may simply state, and with pride, that "The fourth grade's mean reading age has gone from 3.8 to 4.9." But what about Bob, Sue and Will? What can we say about them? How may we judge our influence as educators on these unique, growing individuals?

When we try to evaluate in terms of individual growth, the story becomes confusing and clouded. Our difficulties with respect to evaluation of an individual's development are

based, in part, on the fact that we cannot recognize the many signs of growth. Some aspects of growth, it is true, are less elusive than others. We can almost see the teen-ager grow taller; we can keep track of new words which appear in the two-year-old's vocabulary; and we can see the infant gain control over his forefinger and thumb. We find it difficult to determine, however, if the teen-ager is becoming more responsible; the two-year-old more sociable; or the infant less apprehensive.

Our standards of evaluation are far from clear-cut in these areas. Sixteen-year-old Bill's sly "borrowing" of the family car may look like a sure sign of devil-may-care irresponsibility to his father, yet indicate increasing maturity and willingness to accept adult responsibilities to an outsider. Two-year-old Mary's new fear of strangers may seem to be a step backward to her mother but most likely is a sign of increasing intellectual and social awareness.

Examples such as these may be presented with respect to any aspect of personal-social development. As a rule, parents and teachers of children and adolescents are most interested in evaluating those aspects of a child's development which are most difficult to appraise.

### Let's Understand Each Other

An ever-increasing number of our schools are trying to give parents some report on the children's personal-social adjustment to school. Oftentimes, however, it is difficult to have a meeting of minds between parents and teachers. When it comes to comparing notes on the children under their supervision, parents and teachers do not seem to speak the same language. They have much to say about this or that child but they say it in their own professional dialect and hence communicate rather little of importance to one another.

In one elementary school, where parents and teachers make an effort to share and compare their understanding of the children under their supervision, a study was made of how these adults appraise the youngsters. Just what do parents and teachers like and dislike about the children in their homes and classrooms? Just what educational goals are being set for these children? What types of improvement do parents and teachers expect? In short, what are the hopes, aspirations and dreams of the future that the parents and

teachers hold for these elementary school children? It was hoped that such a study would indicate similarities and differences between a parent's and teacher's approach to the task of education.

### Merits Outweigh Faults

In the first place, the parents and teachers had more good than bad to say about the children. The parents were especially prone to report at length on the many satisfying and desirable qualities possessed by their children. The parents reported on the average of two satisfactions for each problem, whereas the teachers discussed as many satisfactions as problems.

Both adult groups were pleased with a



*Courtesy San Francisco (Calif.) Schools*

*Individuals constitute the group*

large variety of the children's personality characteristics, social, intellectual and artistic abilities. The parents appeared to gain considerable joy from qualities within their children which had a moral, ethical slant. They reported that they were pleased that the youngsters were trustworthy and amenable and had gained a certain inner emotional strength. The teachers, for their part, discussed at relatively greater length qualities such as eagerness, pep, vivacity, gaiety and cheerfulness. The teachers, in contrast to the parents, found many of the children to be persistent.

The children's happy social relationships with schoolmates and adults were a source of satisfaction to both parents and teachers. The parents were especially pleased with the children's manners. Many of the children were just beginning to appreciate and understand the value of a pleasant "thank you" or "excuse me." The fact that the children were taking some responsibility for the simple social amenities, was a joy to parents who had been droning manners into their offspring for years. The parents also found satisfaction in the children's sensitivity to the feelings of others. A mother of an eight-year-old girl (and two-year-old boy) reported the following incident which typifies such satisfaction rather well.

For one reason or another, this mother was extremely angry with her young son

and had finished giving him a sound scolding when her daughter came home from school. The mother turned to her daughter and scowled at her. The little girl smiled shyly and said, "It must be awfully hard to be nice to one child when you're mad at the other." The mother could not help but laugh and wished she had as much good sense about the ways of the human animal as her young daughter.

The children's intellectual and artistic abilities were sources of satisfaction to both parents and teachers. All of the children were of average or above-average intelligence and it was to be expected that the adults working with them enjoyed observing the growth of their mental abilities. It did not appear, however, that the majority of the children were particularly gifted artistically. The parents and teachers nevertheless were pleased that the children were developing what talents they might possess.

Parents and teachers reported at greatest length problems which related to the children's personality characteristics, social relationships and intellectual abilities. Although they found much that was desirable in the children's development along such lines, they also were aware of weaknesses and problems.

The children's outstanding problem was their tendency toward "anxiety-tinged" qualities. A large majority of the youngsters were described as being tense, fearful, shy or hypersensitive to emotional stimuli. Both parents and teachers wished to give the children a more relaxed and easy-going approach to life. It was most difficult for either group, however, to indicate what practical steps



Courtesy San Diego (Calif.) Schools

*Learning through doing*



Courtesy San Francisco (Calif.) Schools

*In his own time*

could be taken at home or at school to give the youngsters a less apprehensive view of the world.

Some of the children found it difficult to make and keep friends; they were either too bossy and aggressive or could not make themselves felt in any social gathering. The adults were greatly concerned with the children's social lacks. They believed that one of the primary functions of the children's school experiences was to learn how to live, play and work with others.

It was not surprising that the children presented to their parents and teachers problems with respect to intellectual abilities. The parents worried over the children's lack of power of concentration. The teachers believed their students could stick to a task which demanded persistent intellectual effort. Some of the children, according to their teachers, had difficulties with skill subjects. In many instances, the teachers believed a youngster was not using his full mental capacity because of personality and maladjustment. Various emotional blocks seemed to keep a number of the children from doing their best in academic work.

#### **Parenthood Pays Dividends**

Thus far a picture has been presented of what a group of parents and teachers enjoy and what they view with some alarm with respect to the children in their homes and school. There is not much more to say as far as the teachers are concerned. The parents, for their part, however, reported a cluster of distinctive satisfactions and problems. These parental interests were concerned with the children's companionship, their eating, sleeping and toileting habits, and their relations with their brothers and sisters. Almost all parents were grateful for the companionship their children had afforded them. They did not seem to have expected such a satisfaction from parenthood and looked upon it as an unearned dividend.

From their reports it appeared that the parents were still struggling to domesticate their children. A parent would be pleased that a feeding problem was becoming less severe and, at the same time, worried about his child's poor grooming or sloppy dress. A youngster's friendly or hostile relations with his brothers and sisters were also issues close to the parent's heart.



*Courtesy Denver (Colo.) Schools*

#### ***Creative skills are satisfying***

The teachers reported few items which pertained to everyday, close-to-home matters. They were interested, it will be recalled, in the children's personality characteristics, social, intellectual and artistic abilities. The children at school were getting a taste of how one is judged outside one's home. They were learning, perhaps for the first time, that you cannot expect the world to love you for your companionship alone, or because you are learning how to eat vegetables, or are now washing the back of your neck, or are learning to like your brother.

Throughout the parents' appraisals of their children one could sense the emotional stake they had in their youngsters. Somehow when they spoke of the satisfactions and problems they had experienced as parents, one could get a glimpse of intimate family rows and fights and again of warm, happy hours when all was joy. The teachers evaluated the children more coolly and, one suspects, in a more objective manner. They could spot weaknesses and strong points which a parent could not see from his highly personal vantage point.

#### **Points-of-View Need Airing**

It is obvious that both parent and teacher can learn from one another if they are able to respect each other's distinctive points of view. Sometimes, however, they think they are

appraising a child from the same point of view and when the inevitable disagreement arises they argue more or less politely or perhaps dismiss the whole problem by ceasing to communicate with one another. A large number of parent-teacher misunderstandings could be avoided if both parties realized from the outset that they are seeing and judging their common educational responsibility in terms of differing standards and goals.

Both parents and teachers are educators but

their methods, aims and, most important of all, their emotional involvement in their work differ. When they look back on the work of a school year it would be well for them to first look at themselves and ask what was it they wanted for Bill, Mary or Paul. By what standards are they going to judge these youngsters? Only then can they set out to appreciate truly the distinctive contributions each has made to growth and development of the youngster.

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☛ *Awareness of individual differences increases understanding*

## Peas in a Pod

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ELIZABETH MECHEM FULLER

ONE SATURDAY AFTERNOON everyone was gone from our busy household but me. The house is usually so bustling and alive that its quiet was oppressive. I read for a while and then just *had* to get outdoors. I wandered down to our struggling little victory garden which was about to get its first fall frost. There were a few tomatoes and carrots left, and one row of new peas. I picked them all and then decided that shelling peas was exactly the sort of work I needed—no thinking, not hard on the eyes or nerves—as the perfect Saturday afternoon relaxer. The fourth pod ruined all that!

The pod looked just like any other, but the peas within started me thinking. There were five peas—two large and three small—four light green and one brown—two soft and tender and three hard and tough—four fastened securely to the pod and one dangling loosely. As alike as peas in a pod? Well now,

isn't this something! Five peas with similar heredity and the most similar environment one can imagine—yet so different. They remind me of children in a family or schoolroom (here we go). Like the peas, brothers and sisters have similar heredity, and an environment not quite as similar as peas in a pod, but similar nevertheless. Like the peas, too, brothers and sisters are sometimes fat and lean, short and tall, blonde and brunette, tough and tender, dependent and independent. Botanists and geneticists can explain it all in terms of pollen grains and genes and chromosomes and aren't in the least surprised at these differences within families. Botanists will explain that the peas' heredity determines potential characteristics but their environment figures in the development of these characteristics and this environment is not as much the same as we think; for example, in this case the peas farthest away from the stem or point of nurture were smallest—those closest were largest; the toughest (those with best chance for survival) were also closest to nurture. So with children, even where heredity seems similar and they are living in environments with many like characteristics, so many differences remain that they often seem to outnumber the likenesses.

Now multiply these hereditary and environmental variables by the number of children in a classroom—do you still expect any two children to be alike? Like the peas, they may look a bit alike from the outside, but we must not be fooled.

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*The grouping of children in the classroom on the basis of chronological age has proven to be more practicable than the use of any other single factor of similarity. However, this does not provide a solution to the problem of the individual differences in children, as shown in this article by Elizabeth Mechem Fuller, Institute of Child Welfare, University of Minnesota. Mrs. Fuller emphasizes that recognition of, and sensitivity to these differences in children by the teacher is the quality that must be nurtured and fully developed in education today.*

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