

Play Along With Growth

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AT EVERY LEVEL of maturity children show many forms of behavior which they will change or abandon in their own good time. If adults knew enough and were patient enough to take account of this fact, the business of being a child or of being a parent or teacher would be much more comfortable. Such is the thesis of the *principle of developmental revision of habits*. This principle takes account of the fact that, in the course of development, forms of behavior that are useful at one level of maturity are, at a later stage, modified or replaced by other forms of behavior that are more useful or appropriate.

Some Habits Are Temporary

Among forms of behavior that will be modified or discarded as a child grows older there are some which adults do recognize and accept as temporary. We allow a child at first to take his food by sucking. We know that later he will be able to bite and chew. The fact that he sucks for many months does not mean that the child will become addicted to this way of behaving. Similarly, we take it for granted that a child will creep before he walks. The fact that he practices his creeping a good deal will not bar him from walking at a later time. These are rather obvious examples, yet they have profound implications. As an integral feature of his development and only incidentally, if

at all, as a result of teaching, the child himself has revised his way of doing things. He demonstrates a truth which has not adequately been taken into account in psychologies of learning, namely, that *repetition of behavior which is appropriate, or is the best a child can do, at a given level of maturity does not necessarily entrench a habit that will be carried over to a later level of maturity.*

Many other forms of behavior are similarly discarded or changed. If adults could only recognize such behavior for what it is—a temporary expedient, serving a particular phase of the child's growth—they would save themselves and the children a good deal of time and annoyance. Adults are constantly tempted to try to hurry the process of development, notably while children are young. Indeed, there even are adults who try to hasten the departure of behavior so honorable as sucking and creeping. But the urge to hurry things is perhaps even more noticeable in connection with certain other forms of behavior. Let us look at a few of these.

The "Destructive" Phase

Somewhere approximately between the age of eighteen months and three years children go through what might be called the Bull in the China Shop phase of development. In the process of exploring and manipulating their environment they lay hands on everything within reach and scatter it about. Drawers are looted, the contents of shelves, racks and cabinets are thrown upon the floor, ash-trays are emptied on the rug, all bric-a-brac within reach is subject to violence. These are times that try a parent's soul. Yet, this phase will pass. At the age of three or three-and-a-half a few admonitions and reminders may have more effect in inhibiting this kind of behavior than did frequent and drastic punishment at an earlier age. It is better during this phase to do more to change the environment by arranging things for the protection of the child and of property than to try to change the nature of the child by harsh forms of discipline. Many other similar

The growth of a child is conditioned by the influences of his environment, his parents, and his teachers. Some habits acquired during various stages of his development often cause needless anxiety to those who try to help him. However, these patterns of behavior are constantly changing until the child reaches his majority. It is up to the adults to recognize these phases and try to aid the child when he is ready for help rather than to change him as a person. This article, by Arthur T. Jersild, Teachers College, Columbia University, N. Y., deals with two principles of child development which have practical implications for education.

examples could be mentioned at the late infancy and early preschool level, including the behavior that precedes the child's acquisition of the skill in handling table utensils and feeding himself.

New Habits Replace Old

Much that is analogous to this happens during elementary school and adolescent years. There is a time, for example, when a large proportion of children seem to be hopelessly addicted to certain types of radio programs which many adults regard as being trashy and completely lacking in good taste. Yet within a few years the child who was so fond of these programs forsakes them. At the age of twelve or thirteen he may be even more bitter as a critic of a program he adored at the age of eight than were his own parents.

Spelling offers a good example of behavior that is revised. At about the fourth-grade level children are able to use a great many words in writing even though their spelling is incorrect. In writing the names of radio programs he listens to, a fourth-grader may misspell twelve or more names. Yet in the sixth grade this same child is likely to spell many of these same names correctly even though they have not been singled out for attention in school and even though no one has directly tried to teach him. The child learns a great deal of correct spelling incidentally. That is one consideration. A second consideration is quite as important, namely, the act of exercising the misspelling of a word will not in itself perpetuate a tendency to misspell.

So far as spelling is concerned both of these considerations may be correct but still leave some uncertainty as to just what the teacher should do. While children, through their own discovery, are able to revise their earlier misspelling, we know also that there are individual children who move into high-school, college, and post-graduate work with serious spelling disabilities. In other words, the process of incidental learning (plus instruction) has not been enough to produce correct spelling (at least in these people). It seems reasonable to assume that if we had complete knowledge as to how to proceed we would not only put more faith in the child's ability to learn for himself but we would also, somewhere along the line, direct attention specifically to spelling, including

rules and generalizations with respect to familiar words that might help the child to make a good guess about the correct spelling of unfamiliar words. We need more systematic evidence than now is available concerning *when* such teaching would be most timely.

Many boys during the elementary school years and at the beginning of the adolescent years are rather nonchalant about their grooming and physical appearance. But many such boys who were quite unkempt at twelve may at sixteen become veritable dandies. Incentives that come into play in the youngster's own life with the development of an interest in the opposite sex produces a concern about grooming. Hair that was encouraged in unruly habits at an earlier age now is neatly combed with the help of water and slickum. Where earlier the complaint was that the boy groomed himself too little now the complaint may be that he grooms himself too much.

Similarly, at the eighth-, ninth-, or tenth-grade level there are many boys who shy away from social projects that bring them into the company of girls. This indifference similarly yields as development proceeds, and later such boys may seem, if anything, to have too much interest in girls.

These are only a few examples of the principle. It is not implied that changes such as those mentioned above take place in a vacuum. Learning is involved, and conditions for learning must be supplied. The argument is not against education as such. The point, rather, is that in providing opportunities for learning that are designed to help a child replace a less mature with a more mature form of behavior *we should make sure that these opportunities are as timely and strategic as possible.*

Present Activities Are Investments for the Future

At all maturity levels the developments that are taking place not only serve the present but also are an investment for the future. This second principle we may call the *principle of anticipation*. It rests on the fact that development constantly involves preparation for the future.

An educational program cognizant of principles of human growth and development

should similarly have an eye to future needs and future use. A program that is built only upon the present does not do justice to a child's potentialities. Indeed, an educational program that takes account only of what seems currently to interest the child may be partially out-of-date. Children's interests are a product of past learning and growth and present opportunity. What now interests the child may represent the last lines of a chapter of development that is closing rather than the first lines of a chapter that is beginning.

Present and Future Needs Are Interrelated

Accordingly, when we make choices in the educational program, they should be made not only in the light of present use and present need but also in the light of developments that lie ahead. This does not mean, of course, that future use should be the only criterion. At any particular maturity level there is a great range of choices of activities that not only can be enjoyable and useful at the moment but also represent a good investment for the future. This is true not only of the ordinary academic skills such as reading, writing, and number work—skills which incidentally can be very fascinating to a child if they are introduced when he is ready for them and is able to fit them into his own way of living and learning. It holds true also of a vast range of skills that the school has tended to neglect, such as skills involved in music, other arts, crafts, and mechanical activities.

Another way of stating the principle of anticipation is that everything in a child's behavior at a given time has its roots in the past. A child brings to each new chapter in his school career a tremendous accumulation of learning from the past. This fact is obvious and yet sometimes it is not properly appreciated. When, for example, we find twenty, thirty, or forty first-grade children sitting quietly, or at least rather quietly, at their desks, conforming with what the teacher and the school expect, we are observing what really is a remarkable phenomenon. The fact that these children are now quiet instead of noisy, are careful of school property, and follow the instructions of the teacher is an outcome in part of countless lessons in conformity that children have been learning from the time they were born.

Work-Experience Begins in Infancy

A great deal of education that has future value to the child takes place inevitably whether or not it is planned. However, in planning the educational program from early age levels onward it would pay to give more attention to this principle. To use an example: during recent years there has been a good deal of discussion and agitation around the subject of work-experience. This topic has been considered largely as something pertaining to the secondary-school level, yet many of the habits, skills, attitudes and adjustments that "work-experience" is designed to promote are in process of being established from an early age. The behavior involved in economic competence and the ability to take responsibility as a self-supporting citizen as an adult begins to take shape when a child is a little infant.

From an early age the child begins to learn the value of tangible things, to care for his possessions. If given a chance, he begins at the preschool level to understand the value of money and some of the processes involved in the exchange of money for goods. Experiences of the sort that will enable him gradually to acquire what we call a sense of responsibility, ability to think for himself, to make good practical decisions, to perceive what it means to carry his share of the load, befall him from an early age. In other words, outcomes that are sought through work experience, to use only this example, are in process of achievement from earliest childhood years. Plans for this particular aspect of education should embrace educational provisions at all age levels.

In the conventional educational program of the past much attention was given to training for future use. Children were taught, for example, to figure compound interest long before they had any money to hire out. This practice has been criticized, and justly at times. But it was not the principle that was wrong—the choice and timing were wrong. There are a great many things that children could learn and enjoy as children and also use with profit as adults. Many children fail, for example, to learn to swim. Many never really learn to use or enjoy their voices. A great many who might enjoy playing a musical instrument never are encouraged

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half of the group. The other half cringed, dodged and ran away. A few stood up to a knock down drag out fight. This apparently went on day after day. Young children are most likely to take out these aggressions built up under too rigid or too coercive classroom environments on their own classmates.

Older children, with their much more highly organized society, are more likely to find more organized channels through which to express their hostility. Sometimes they select a scapegoat. Sometimes a war with another gang will clear the air in one's own gang. Sometimes destruction or defacing of property serves as an outlet. Sometimes devious methods of annoying adults suffice. The random expression of hostility most often found in the younger children is destructive to the morale of the group. The variety of expressions more often used by older children will preserve and may even raise morale.

The teacher may herself be caught up in a pattern that coerces her to use methods and pressures with which she is not in sympathy. Parents may demand certain kinds of educational practice that must inevitably produce tension in the children. The philosophy of the school or school system may be one which would prevent experiences in group living that are conducive to good patterns of interrelationship. Various tensions such as those which arise out of racial, ethnic, or religious differences in a neighborhood may be reflected in the interrelationship patterns of children in school. Speeded up time schedules, lack of space for play and activity are other factors producing tension. The extent of the array of external pressures on classroom groups is by no means fully explored. *But the basic principle that many of these pressures beget tensions and that these tensions in turn find expression in hostile behavior is well established.*

Each Child Has His Own Motivational Patterns

At the age of four, or five, or six each child comes to his first day of school with a personality well formed. He has had many vivid, important experiences that have shaped his feelings and emotions, have trained him to certain characteristic ways of meeting successes and failures. Each was also a unique

human being at birth with potentialities for certain ways of developing. Each child then is a dynamic factor in shaping the pattern of group interrelationships; and each child in turn is affected by the group dynamics.

It is only as we study the life stories of these children that we see how each seeks to fulfill some of his aspirations and needs. Some children early seek and achieve a prominent place in the group out of feelings of insecurity or affectional deprivation; others find themselves in prominent places because of their spontaneous good humor, enthusiasm and capacity for warmth and friendliness. Others may come filled with hostility and resentment toward a world that has so far mistreated them. Each child then is a complex human being even at this early age. *Our task as teachers is to understand each individual as well as we can so that the individual may contribute to the enrichment of the group and so that the group may contribute to his needs.*

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to learn. The same is true with respect to the many other skills that are useful for work or play in everyday life and that can be of great value for work or for recreation in adult years. Moreover, it appears in connection with many of these skills that the chances become very small that a person who has not learned them as a youngster will learn them as an adult.

Help When the Child Is Ready

At first glance the principle of developmental revision of habits and the principle of anticipation may seem to be contradictory. Actually, they complement each other. It would require more research than yet has been done to show the full practical implications—and limitations—of these principles. But enough is known to suggest that much of the time and effort spent in trying to produce changes that are out of season with the child's growth might better be spent in helping him to acquire skills that not only are reasonable but also will have future value.

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