

The Importance of People

Ruth Cunningham

EVERYONE NEEDS TO BELONG

"MANY VALUABLE INSIGHTS may be gained by watching children during periods of free play." That's what the book had said. She could see the words quite

clearly, on the bottom of a left-hand page. She remembered making a special mental note of it, and planning, as she sat in her dormitory room at college, that she would always, always, sun, snow or mud, go to the play-



The book said

ground with her children and observe them carefully. The chill in the air this morning made it a bit uncomfortable to be standing outdoors, but she wasn't going to let a shiver or two deter her from gaining "valuable insights." She set her teeth and observed the more intently.

Joan Arthur was worried about her group. They didn't seem to have that "cohesion" they had talked about in her courses at college. And, at the outset, she had decided she was going to start her first year of teaching by developing the best, the most cohesive group of any teacher in the land.

For a month, now, Joan had worked hard to develop good group feeling. She had helped the youngsters learn to plan together,—with considerable success, she felt. Why only yesterday when Susan had suggested, "Let's vote on it, and the majority wins.", Polly had said, "Wait a minute. We ought to talk it over first. Maybe we can find something we can *all* agree on." Joan had almost purred, she was so pleased at this sign of progress.

She had made sociograms, studied intragroup organization, and discovered the isolates. Of course she would have to do something about the isolates. "Every child has a need to 'belong'." She wouldn't ever forget *that*, for they'd discussed it at length in class. She hadn't overcome the feeling yet that the word "belongingness" used by Professor Wood was a strange coinage, but the idea it connoted was a good one, she was sure. Yes sir! Every child in her room was going to belong, even if she had to work her heart out to make it so.

She hadn't been able as yet to *do* something about each isolate, but she was pretty sure she knew the *reason* for each, and that was a good start. Jack Benton, for example, just couldn't do the things the others did. He couldn't seem to fit into the ball games or the "horsing around" with the other



Professor Wood

boys. It was understandable, of course, since he'd been ill and out of school for a year or so. Joan had made a mental note

to try to teach him a few tricks about throwing and catching balls. She wasn't so sure of herself on the football skills, though. Maybe, she considered, she could get Billy to give Jack some coaching.

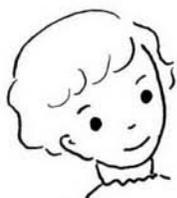


Jack

Then there was Sally Lou, a sweet little thing. She was always wanting to help the teacher. She'd offer

to arrange the flowers, or to erase the blackboards, or to stay in at recess to clean the art cupboard.

"I'd have thought Sally Lou was per-

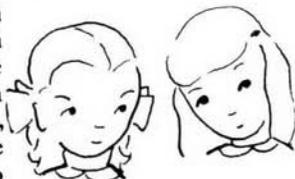


Sally Lou

fectly adjusted if I hadn't had Ed.Psych. 112," Joan decided. "Now, of course, I know she is clinging to an adult for recognition because she hasn't made a satisfactory peer adjustment."

Joan smiled, pleased with herself that she knew so much. But the smile faded as she thought about some other problems.

For the last week or two, there had been little bursts of whispering in small groups, and sidelong glances, mostly in the direction of the teacher. As Joan approached such a group, there would be a hushed silence, or someone would begin to talk loud and fast in a way that made her sure the conversation had shifted. Funny, too, that Nancy, Tom, and Jack seemed to be the leaders in this subversive activity, sometimes talking among themselves, and sometimes joining other groups to initiate the undercover work. All this, Joan felt, was not good for "cohesion."



Sidelong glances

Moreover, the ways things worked weren't what she had learned to expect in Ed.Psych.112. The sociogram showed that both Nancy and Tom were leaders, so maybe that explained the way they could stir things up. But Nancy and Tom seemed to be in on this business together, and according to all the authorities, boys and girls at that age are not supposed to cooperate. Unless, Joan remembered with a frightened gasp, they were precociously mature. A quick glimpse of Nancy's flying pigtails as she raced across the playground in a swift game of tag,



Flying pigtails

was reassuring. Joan couldn't see Tom, but she was reasonably certain he was somewhere on the bottom in that football-playing pile of boys. That, according to the book, was "normal" for a twelve-year-old.

But on the sociogram Jack had showed up as an isolate, and shouldn't have been a leader, or even associated with leaders like Nancy and Tom. Yet in this whispering campaign he was acting just as though he were a leader in spite of what the sociogram had indicated. There was something definitely queer about the whole affair.

When it was time to go in from the playground, Joan wasn't sure whether to be glad or sorry—glad to get thawed out after her chilly vigil—or sorry because she'd have to live through more of that sly, subversive whispering.



Chilly vigil

Just before the afternoon recess, the whispering and the side-glancing became even more acute. It was Jack who detached himself from one of the groups and approached Joan.

"Miss Arthur," he said, "we wanta all play kickball together this afternoon, the boys and girls and everybody. And we want you to play, too."

The last few words came out in a breathless rush. Glancing around the room, Joan saw that every eye was on her, that everyone seemed to be holding his breath for her reply.

"Why, yes," she said slowly. "That might be a good idea."

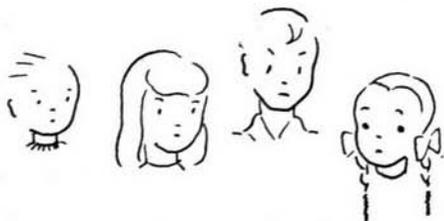
The feeling of gratified relief that swept the room was so intense as to be almost tangible. The looks of deep concern melted into broad grins.

In the kickball game, the ball came Joan's direction so often that she was kept busy most of the time. In one brief moment of inactivity she had a twinge of conscience.

"I'm not observing the way I should," she thought. "I really ought to be watching the isolates. But, gee, these are swell kids.

and this is really *fun*. Here comes that ball again."

Joan, as flushed and breathless as any of



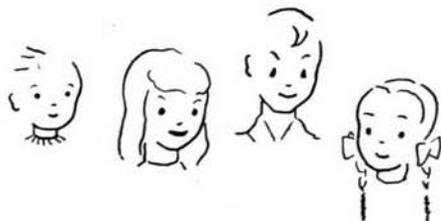
Deep concern

the youngsters, was called from the room just as the group came in from recess. No sooner had the door closed behind her, than conversation began to pop in the room.

"Gee kids," said Jack. "It really worked, didn't it?"

"Sure," agreed Martha. "She laughed right out and seemed to have fun."

"And," chimed in Sally Lou, "she never



... to broad grins

guessed how hard we worked to get the idea over."

"Nope." Tom's face was very serious as he spoke. "It sure took an awful lot of planning, but it was worth it. Now she really belongs."

The Changing World

(Continued from page 56)

ship and the promise of our institutions. But we are so selfish and greedy in the economic scene that we are unwilling to live up to the full meaning of our democracy, and in failing to live up to our dynamic concept of life we are giving the proponents of conflicting ideologies a worldwide heyday with the masses of people.

It is still time for America to reassert her leadership. It is still time for us to take a firm position in defense of human rights everywhere in the international scene. It is still time for us to apply our democratic principles of human relations in the domestic scene, keeping faith with employees, employers, and the public. It is still time to do something for our veterans in the way of housing, job opportunities, and a stable economic order. But if we are to assert ourselves in the international scene and be successful with our democracy at home we must overcome our silly fears, stop blaming Russia, and stop talking about war. We must make a careful analysis of the problems which confront us both at home and abroad. We must plan and carry

out a constructive program for their solution. From an educational standpoint we need a better interpretation of American free institutions. We need something more than a mere theoretical interpretation of democracy. We need to make clear what democracy means in the various areas of human relations. We need the courage and the unselfishness to follow this philosophy even though it may force us in spots to break with some of our traditional patterns. Those of us who are teachers are particularly in need of renewed vision and courage in these directions. We shall not lead America out of the present doldrums of defeatism and confusion without a clear sense of direction and a determined faith in our concepts of freedom. We should be constantly reminded of the fact that we have a strong, vital, and creative tradition of freedom and human values. We need only to give it free play and full application to make it a success, and through this success to commend it to the world. Only in this way can we overcome our defeatism and regain what we have lost in the way of world moral leadership since VJ Day.

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