

# Accentuate the Positive

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*Helping man to understand himself is a major purpose of mental hygiene. William E. Hall, associate professor, Educational Psychology and Measurements, University of Nebraska, at Lincoln, presents a point of view for mental hygiene in teaching, wherein he cites the effectiveness of the positive attack in determining causes of behavior, and its aid in the elimination of those habits which bar the way to a successful life pattern.*



*Courtesy Teachers College, University of Nebraska*

*Good preparation is a vital need*

NEVER BEFORE in the history of mankind has more emphasis been placed on the mental well-being of man. The reasons for this emphasis are not difficult to understand. (1) Man's unprecedented control over the earth's energy has given to him visions of unlimited power and grandeur which could easily result in the literal disintegration of all men. (2) The breathtaking developments of weapons of self-destruction are almost within the grasp of the unscrupulous and greedy as well as the virtuous and just. Thus man finds his greatest enemy is man. The battle for man's self-mastery is a more important struggle than any battle in the past

against famine, or flood, or pestilence.

Although mental hygiene has had limited interpretation, it is a branch of psychology most widely devoted to man's understanding of himself. As education has been recognized by modern man as his hope for future progress, so has the importance of mental hygiene been recognized as a basis for the most effective education because its emphasis is the understanding of man. Thus, we see the emphasis on mental hygiene grow for the teacher, for the pupil, for the parents, and for the community.

## Negative Influences at Work

Mental hygiene, however, has been

limited in its effectiveness because of its negative interpretations heretofore. To get a picture of the extent of this negative influence one needs only to survey the commonly used textbooks in this field. A study of the most widely-used texts shows from fifty to seventy-five per cent of the total pages in these texts are devoted to the history and description of various maladjustments and mental disorders. The rest of the text considers to a large extent how home, school, and community may contribute to misbehavior or unacceptable behavior. It must be admitted that it is important to recognize maladjustment when it appears, but improvement or progress must be based primarily on a positive objective attack.

It seems profitable to consider the causes of this negative approach. First, mental hygiene was launched and given impetus as a formal movement in 1908 by a book written by Clifford Beers, who had been an inmate of an institution for the insane. This book, *A Mind that Found Itself*, related the deplorable conditions that existed in institutions for the mentally ill. The book was written with such candor and skill that it aroused students of human behavior to do something about such conditions. Such a beginning would tend to center interest on the mentally sick rather than foster a concern for the development of the normal. This new movement, although it attracted the interest of all students of human behavior, was particularly backed by medical scientists. It is not surprising that etiology of the mentally sick became a dominant emphasis. Cure was probably the most positive aspect of the whole discipline in those early years.

There are, however, several other more subtle causes for this negative approach. First, extremes in any form attract attention and interest, especially if these are of a morbid nature or are frowned on by the group. One can always receive favorable attention by discussing the unacceptable behavior of others, whereas if he performed the behavior himself he would be vigorously censured. The behavior of the abnormal is so effective in attracting attention that we see it imitated for exactly that reason. Who has not seen the eccentricities of the artist simulated as a counterfeit for true artistry of the genius? Thus we see the amateur or mediocre musician with long hair and eccentric dress suspended in dreamy musing over the keyboard, or the second-rate actor display a temper tantrum as evidence of artistic temperament. So the description of the mentally deranged is studied and described with great interest by most mentally sound people.

The second of these more subtle reasons for the negative approach is probably most basic of all causes. An abnormal person is relatively easily distinguished from the normal, but to determine what is the best development for an individual is a complex matter. Most authorities are at least agreed as to types of activity that are abnormal even if they are not agreed as to the exact type or nature of the cause. On the other hand, the determination of that which is the good type or the best type of behavior is made difficult because of the lack of commonly accepted standards. Indeed, it takes courage, intelligence, and insight of the highest order to determine that which is the best

pattern of behavior. On the other hand, to determine bad behavior is merely to state that this behavior does not follow the present pattern of accepted behavior. Because all good is relative to the time, place, and culture, thus constantly changing, so are the elements and objectives of good behavior constantly changing and man is constantly resisting the change. The road of human history is strewn with the ashes and crosses of men who dared to proclaim and live what they considered the good life.

There is evidence on every hand that civilization is losing its race between education and catastrophe. The negative treatment has been tried—war, death, and occupation have not cured the present world's ills. Conditions in Europe are much worse in 1946 than in 1919. Our strikes in this country are bigger and more paralyzing than ever before, and evidence of a great and last war grips the thoughtful men in every nation. The need is so great that the discovery and use of a new and positive attack on man's self-mastery take precedence over all problems that he faces.

#### Accent the Affirmative

What, then, are the prerequisites of this positive attack? The first great need is a new purpose in mental hygiene that accentuates the positive particularly in the learning in our homes and schools. This new purpose for mental hygiene is to aid education in its effort to develop individuals who can live more and more harmoniously and productively in their world. The major emphasis must be placed on harmony. The totalitarian states gave adequate

evidence of the possibilities of human production, but harmony was an alien concept even within the framework of their own social group. *Without harmony any organization, biological or otherwise, is doomed to disintegration.*

It is not suggested here that study of the problem child is unnecessary, but it is strongly asserted that development of the normal to better achievement is most important for two reasons. First, the largest proportion of any population is normal. Secondly, it is reasonable to assume that those individuals who are making any adjustment in a positive fashion are much more apt to make further progress than those who are negatively adapting themselves.

The second great need is a concept of the elements and objectives of harmonious and productive behavior. The problem that immediately arises is how these elements and objectives can be determined. The most important method yet discovered by man for the solution of his problems is the *scientific method*. This method simply stated involves *hypothesis, experimentation, generalization, and application*. Consider now the extent of the use of this method in education. Too frequently educators have used *hypothesis* almost entirely. Ask any educator to explain why he teaches the course he teaches. Examine the activities of the student in any classroom, anywhere in the United States, and it is the author's guess that the educator will say, "That's the way it is done elsewhere." And maybe he can quote the authority who gave the original armchair guess, but ask about the experimentation and the effectiveness of his course and he lapses into the great rationalizing concept. "The great value

of my course cannot be measured. It is intangible." At best he has never tried any other method. Further he knows nothing about any other method.

#### What Elements Have Come to Light?

Immediately arises the question—are there any elements or objectives of good behavior that have been discovered by science? The answer is "Yes." The most important element to successful adjustment is *increasing self-direction*. One of the most important discoveries in recent methods in psychotherapy, is the ability of the mentally ill, when given an opportunity, to choose new and better goals on his initiative in terms of greater psychological growth and maturity. This element of successful adjustment is based on the fact that within organizations of any human personality lies the potentiality for the best adjustment for that personality. The process is one that demands freedom for the individual to express himself and the problem of the teacher is, in the most effective fashion, to show the individual the limits of reality not in terms of restriction, but in terms of more profitable realization of the individual's potentiality. Herein lies that fine distinction between the negative and positive approach. The youngster plays with another boy because, together, they can pool their resources and have more fun, not because he had "better share," or his companion will take his playthings away from him.

Another significant element in development of adjustment is a *feeling of security*. Another expression of it is the need to "be counted" as a part of the group. This foundation is most securely laid in the early years of every in-

dividual's life. Research has established this element as being one of the most significant cornerstones for adequate adjustment.

The word *life* connotes action. In fact, the physicians' test of *life* is to see if the heart is still beating, for when activity has ceased *life* no longer exists. In teaching, this element is called the necessity for doing. Action and doing are not only beneficial, but they are also necessary for all learning. How can a youngster create in art without freedom? Every school program must make ample provision for activity both mental and physical.

The individual will show signs of *readiness* for each new step in his development. Science has established without question that readiness is the first prerequisite for learning. A child will not learn to read successfully until he is physically and psychologically ready for that process. The objective of the educator is to determine whether or not the individual *is* ready.

*Much behavior is symptomatic of more than appears on the surface.* This behavior may express itself in many forms, but most frequently shows itself in verbal situations. "God hears every word you say, Mommy." This sentence was packed with implications that did not meet the ear of the mother who was busily engaged in gossip about her friends. Probably she would have thought it extremely cute had she noticed the remark, not realizing that it was a symptom of extreme neglect and rejection. The symptomatic behavior may display itself in any play situation, but particularly in imaginary play. In this kind of play, the person carries out his repressions and ideals in terms of

his play. Understanding of symptoms as a part of growth should be an objective in any positive attack.

### Use the Right Tools

It is not suggested that the above elements and objectives are the only scientifically established ones, but they are important and illustrate some of the concepts that must be understood and used. With the knowledge of these elements and objectives, what are the tools that the teacher may use to attack objectively and positively the problems of harmonious and productive development of youngsters intrusted to her care? One tool is use of a private conference or talk with the individual when he shows a readiness for benefit from such an experience. This readiness is based on confidence or trust that a good teacher develops with her students. The author has many times had a student, in the noon hour, start casually talking about the weather and finish by pouring his heart out on a problem that above all needed listening to. The great danger is that the teacher misinterprets the statement of the student, "I want to ask your advice." She believes that he wants advice, when what he really wants is an opportunity to talk his problem through. The teacher often kills her opportunity to heal by starting to advise when she should be listening. I know of no better tool to help build a positive attack on a problem than to listen to the student who needs to talk to some one.

Another tool is allowing the individual an opportunity to grow. Let students make decisions and make mistakes, if you have set limits for them. Rarely does a child make a wrong decision

again, if he is given a free choice in the first place and allowed to reap the consequences of his mistakes.

A third tool is recognition. In no area of our culture have we made so many blundering mistakes. Our recognition is showered on the athlete who already has physical perfection and academic ability and who needs not so much praise for his physical perfection and academic ability, but recognition of any progress in his undeveloped socialization. It would seem a good thing to build monuments for outstandingly successful ditch diggers because they were good ditch diggers and awards for elevator operators who were good elevator operators. This recognition would go a long way to improve vocational choices among youngsters who choose to be doctors when obviously they should choose to be freight handlers.

I would suggest, too, cooperation between teacher and parent in developing the best for each child. It is conceivable that a parent's report to the teacher on the development of the child would be as valuable as the teacher's report to the parents. One of the most successful ventures in education experienced by the author was such a cooperative effort.

It is a sad commentary on contemporary educational procedure that although we know that some of the most important years of a child's life in terms of future development are spent at home, yet they go unreported to the teacher in school. It is contended that much in our education is good and that the negative approach should not be neglected. But our education is not good enough, and accentuating the positive is the way to meet man's problem of self-mastery.

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