

Clearing the Fog of Misunderstanding

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Children cannot integrate their home and school worlds and feel secure in both without the joint help of parents and teachers. Mrs. Alice Shallenberger of the Kingsbury Elementary School, Redlands, California makes a plea for professional initiative which will lead to parents' understanding of the program of learning and school experiences as they lastingly affect children.

IF THE AIMS of all parents and all teachers could be crystallized and the intangible goals which each are seeking could be summed up in just one word, I believe that word would be *Security*. Security—"Freedom from danger, care, or fear. Feeling or condition of being safe." How much those words encompass! A parent will go to almost any length to see that his child is physically secure—that his needs and wants are supplied, and that his environment is as free from danger as is humanly possible. Yet every thinking parent knows that physical security is not enough, and tries to give the child a background in

religious or philosophical ideas which will help him meet those situations which are beyond human control. In other words, he will do all in his power to give the child a "feeling of being safe."

The teacher, too, is attempting to give security through knowledge and understanding of the world. In dispelling not only ignorance, but a narrowness of vision which keeps the world out of focus, a teacher is providing the security that comes as a natural outgrowth of better understanding. By making situations and conditions familiar, by helping a child think clearly,

and by getting him to realize his own capabilities and assume the attendant responsibility, the teacher again is trying to establish "freedom from fear."

Failure Too Often the Rule

That someone is not succeeding in giving children this prized possession is self-evident when we consider the number of delinquents, problem children, "nervous" children who are heading for neurotic adulthood, to say nothing of those unhappy shy youngsters who escape notice by conformity. Since these problems arise out of apparently normal situations, where both teachers and parents are earnestly trying, what is at fault for the failures?

That question, of course, cannot be answered glibly, for the causes are many and complex. One glaring cause is a lack of "togetherness" between parents and teachers—those people most responsible for the child's environment. While the ultimate goal is the same, difference over immediate goals or methods of obtaining them are defeating the very ideal both are striving to achieve. Both are trying to get to the same place finally, but in the meantime the pulling in opposite directions is literally tearing the child to pieces emotionally.

Two Worlds for Youngsters

To achieve an effective program there must be sympathy between the home and the school. No matter how excellent the one, there can be no success unless it supplements the other. Sympathy between the home and school is more than mere surface amenities. To the child it is something fundamental. The home, good or bad, is the child's world. It is familiar and safe. School is

the unknown. No matter how much pleasurable anticipation is connected with his first entrance, there is still something a little frightening about this first adventure. Usually, to his delight, he finds school wonderful. It is exciting and challenging, and he takes the situation in his stride. This point is crucial in establishing the delicate structure of adjustment, and at this point much of the success lies in the hands of the parents. It is their attitude of encouragement and understanding which will send their child forth in confidence, or a lack of understanding which will create chaos. Most parents would hotly deny that they would do anything to hamper growth, but that they thoughtlessly do so is best shown by the cases of Johnny and Susie.

Johnny's Enthusiasm Squelched

Johnny comes home full of delight about the things they're doing at school. He has had a good day and is anxious to tell about the turtle Billy brought to school and the "poem" they wrote about it. Father is preoccupied; besides, he's tired. Mother has been to her club and thoughtlessly repeats some idle chatter about the school. She's not sure just what the criticism is about, or that it's justified, but criticizing the schools seems to be the current fad. Then, too, it does make a topic of conversation for what might otherwise be a boring interlude. Johnny decides against mentioning the turtle.

Then one day Mrs. Smith comes in. She is convinced, and determined to convince Mother, that the schools "aren't teaching the three R's." Johnny, playing with some blocks near a sunny window, isn't sure what the three R's

are, but, from Mrs. Smith's voice, he's quite sure he doesn't want any. An uncomfortable feeling comes over him. He's not sure what is wrong for issues aren't clear at his age, but he knows that things aren't quite so much fun. The first seeds of doubt are being planted and he's not so sure of his brave new world. His fierce loyalty to the familiar battles with his pleasure in the new. The sun dims a little. With a sudden petulant push the blocks go over.

Susie's Problems Mount

Then there's Susie. She looks worried as she says, "Mother hasn't any scraps for me to sew, and she says that's not what I'm coming to school for anyway. She says why don't we read like we're supposed to?" Susan's troubled eyes look up to her teacher for reassurance. She continues in a puzzled way, "I took our newspaper home and read to Daddy, but he says that's not reading. He says I just mem'itized it. It is too reading, isn't it?"

Multiply these two examples by the majority of the children in the room, and you will see the anxiety and uncertainty that has unwittingly been created. The reaction may be almost anything, depending entirely upon the make-up of the child involved. Johnny, feeling inadequate and unsure, may attempt to cover up by showing off or clowning at school. Or the reaction may go the other way and he may vent his unconscious agitation at home, and Mother will wonder "why she can't do a thing with Johnny." Susie may, after a few more times, refuse to take part in the group activities and feel that her

contributions are of little worth. Yet it would take a discerning parent to see the connection between these two first graders and the junior high trouble maker or wall flower.

Integrate the Child's Worlds

The initiative for clearing this fog of misunderstanding must come from the schools. A well defined program of parent education planned not only to acquaint the parent with the subject matter taught, but with an overview of the whole school plan and the parent's relationship to it, is the first step. When he understands that he has an integral part in that plan, he is more apt to help make it succeed. At least he must be made to realize how much power for good or ill lies with him.

Such understanding should clear the way for a better individual parent-teacher relationship. Again, the largest responsibility will rest with the teacher. She should understand that the parent's longer acquaintance with the child will be of invaluable aid in helping her to understand him. Never must she allow a parent to misinterpret haste as indifference, or permit the parent to feel that he is intruding. She should encourage the parent to "talk out" his questions with the proper persons, and if he feels there is a justifiable criticism, seek to work it out constructively with the persons responsible. It is only through understanding each other's goals, and through infinite tact and tolerance that a united front of mutual respect, confidence, and loyalty can be achieved. Yet isn't it worth the effort if it gives our children that priceless gift, *Security*?

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