

# *Helping the First Grader Help Himself*

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Attention is given to guidance for very young children by a principal, Lilly Peterson, at Sacajawea School, Richland, Washington.

FOR SOME TIME it has been agreed that there is a definite need of counseling in conjunction with the guidance program of both the junior and senior high schools. Not until quite recently, however, has much publicity been accorded the importance of the guidance program in the elementary schools. As a result of study and observation by many interested and trained personnel in the field, it is now agreed that every year of preventive work that is done in the elementary school decreases proportionately the problems of adjustment evident in the average high school.

## **Research in an Elementary School**

How can elementary teachers help to guide pupils toward emotional and social maturity, as well as to assist them intellectually? In an attempt to answer this question and to provide for the wholesome development of every child, the teachers of Sacajawea School, Richland, Washington, entered into some extensive research.

Discussion and an exchange of viewpoints and findings helped to clarify the meaning of guidance for many who had only a vague conception of its scope. It was agreed that the basic philosophy of guidance is to build a program to help the child *help himself* to become a happy, useful, and well-adjusted member of society.

## **Concentrating on the First Grade**

Knowing that each child is an individual whose capacity may differ very materially from that of his neighbor, the first grade teachers recognized the need of learning more about each pupil as an initial step in their work. They filed information in each pupil's folder, which is kept in the homeroom.

The result of the reading readiness test was recorded on the cumulative card, used throughout grades one through twelve. The child's school record of grade placement, schools attended, progress made, and other pertinent data are also kept on this card. A special health card was used for recording diseases, immunizations, physical deficiencies, corrections or treatments in progress.

All this information was obtained by means of a questionnaire sheet that each child received when he registered for school. Additional items were added from time to time as standardized tests were given, as anecdotal records were evaluated, and after the vision and hearing tests had been administered.

A meeting was held with the parents of the children for a discussion of the reading readiness tests. Pertinent family data was also accumulated and included on the cumulative record card.

It was decided that one of the best

sources of information is the child himself. Teachers, by learning what the child says and thinks about himself, by observing how he behaves and how his attitudes change, can more effectively plan preventive measures against maladjustment.

The group itself decided that personality comes before reading, and develops through guidance; that most failures nowadays occur in grade one and are occasioned primarily by maladjustment. The major causes of these maladjustments were found to be lack of security, lack of adequate attention, and lack of satisfaction.

#### Testing Gives Information

A subjective test was chosen to allow each child to express himself about his personality characteristics as he thought of them; then the teacher could take him where she found him.

The Baxter Personality Test, designed to deal with the testing of behavior, responses to situational characteristics in the school, the home, and at play, was selected. This test is in the form of a story with questions so arranged as to minimize the subjective faults of test conditions. The ninety-two questions relate to life situations that call for responses of the following positive characteristics: friendliness, responsiveness, generosity, respect, dependability, day-dreaming, obedience, compliance, self-control, fairness, courage, studiousness, creativity, concentration, temperance, cheerfulness, grace, unselfishness, honesty, courtesy, cooperation, kindness, and tidiness.

Each of the six first grade teachers administered the tests to her own group. One hundred fifty children were tested

in small groups after the manual had been studied. Results have been used as bases for individual counseling.

#### Putting the Information to Work

It is generally conceded that any testing is so much time wasted unless the results are profitably used. To avoid this pitfall, answers to the questions were used as a wedge or springboard for conference and discussion in an effort to help each teacher become better acquainted with her children.

Choosing one significant question, "Do you feel that either of your parents shows more attention to, or loves someone else more than you?" teachers noted all pupils who answered in the affirmative. A total of twenty-five percent of the number tested said, "Yes." Each child was then taken at an opportune time for further conversation. The information obtained from these individual conferences was varied and interesting. First grade children are usually very honest and approachable. Here are some of the answers elicited in the follow up.

#### Identifying Problems of Maladjustment

"Mothers love girls better," Sam remarked with puckered brow. "Mother says she is going to get another child and it's going to be a girl."

Sam was very unhappy about it. His teacher skillfully opened a new vision to him—that of being Big Brother—and also talked with the mother. Before long Sam was relating to the class at school that he was helping to choose the new furniture for the nursery, had a part in the planning for the new baby, went shopping with his parents, and was included in the discussion pertaining to the anticipated arrival. He was greatly relieved to learn that his mother couldn't order a girl; that no one knew just which it would be; but whether

girl or boy, Sam was very important—he was Big Brother in the making and mother's main helper.

Sue said that her Daddy had been in the army and had just recently been discharged. When he was away everything was all right. Mommy and she had lived together in a small apartment and were very cozy. Mother never left her alone. They went to shows together, on trips to visit relatives, and were inseparable. Now that Daddy had returned they were crowded in the apartment. Mother slept with him and Sue had to sleep alone on the davenport. Often a friend kept her while the parents went to evening functions together, and she wished Daddy had stayed at camp.

Sara revealed that father worked nights and mother worked on the day shift. There was a short period of each day when they were all together in the home. That time was usually a mad scramble on the part of the parents to arrange for the next day. Too often there were arguments in the presence of the three children, and financial difficulties were discussed. The children all felt that had it not been for them, all would have been easy for the mother and father. There was no real family life, no feeling of being wanted.

Rose said, "Daddy and Mother do everything together. We children have to stay home with a baby sitter. They go out and have fun." A comfortable home and lovely toys were provided, but young parents did not realize that more was needed in the rearing of children for a wholesome development.

Johnnie frankly stated, "Mother likes you (the teacher) better than she does me." When visits were made by the mother to the school or when the teacher called at the home, the child felt that he should be the center of attention. Instead, the teacher purposely avoided mentioning Johnnie in his presence and conversed in a friendly manner about many other

things. Grandparents and other close relatives had already showered far too much attention upon the little fellow, and he monopolized every conversation in the home. Games could not be continued when started because Johnnie insisted on asking questions, falling over something and crying, or in some way demanding personal attention. The teacher was the first person to recognize this.

Jed was almost belligerently frank. "Mother doesn't love me—you don't love me—the kids don't like me," he asserted. "I'm bigger than the other boys and girls and that's why no one likes me."

True, he was large for his age, but not any more mature socially. Some complaints had been registered about Jed's behavior on the way home from school. He had often annoyed and bullied smaller children on the playground. The mother was discouraged with her failure to remedy these tendencies.

Here consultation with the principal or the guidance consultant might be advantageous. Any individual problem may affect more than the members of one room. A suggestion was made to extend the School Boy Patrol and to have Junior Patrol helpers in primary rooms. This was announced at Student Council. Large boys would be needed so they could see everyone and help the smaller ones.

Many other planned opportunities were arranged so Jed and others could be chosen for temporary positions of prominence. "Shall we move our reading table nearer the windows today so we can have more room for our chair circle?" the teacher asked. "Who will help me move it? I'll need a big, strong boy." And, "Whom would you like to select, children, to place the exhibits on our display shelves? We'll need a strong, careful person, won't we?"

Guided by the teacher, Jed's prestige in his classroom rose rapidly. Care had to be taken not to over-do a situation of this kind, however.

Then there was little Jo, listless, sad-eyed, and non-committal. She had lived

with first one relative and then another for the first few months of school. She didn't answer the question regarding parents' affection. At counseling time she merely shook her head and said she wasn't supposed to talk about her family.

Her family data sheet contained little information, and that was given by an aunt. A second interview with the principal brought out the fact that Jo was interested in shells. Jo said that she and her brother had started to collect shells—then they had to leave their home. A small collection in the school display case was examined and discussed.

Carefully worded questions were directed to make the little girl feel that genuine interest was felt, and she divulged a home tragedy that few of her age have been forced to experience. Her father and mother had been divorced, the father keeping custody of the children. Later he became engaged to another woman who proved false. He shot and killed her, then committed suicide. What feeling of security could a first grade child glean from such a chaotic background?

#### Recognizing Normal Reactions

Fortunately, most of the children's answers were average responses. In fact, due to the higher-than-average economic status of local families, there were no indications of maladjustments from poverty, or even lack of necessities.

"Jimmy, my cousin, plays over at my house a lot. I think my parents like him better than they do me."

\* \* \* \*

"My mother and daddy pay more attention to our company than they do to me."

\* \* \* \*

"I don't think my parents love me very much. They punish me when I do something naughty."

\* \* \* \*

"My father pays more attention to my big sister. Mother spends more time with baby sister."

The feeling of lack of affection when a punishment was meted out was evident in many responses. This furnished an opportunity for the teacher and the parent to work together to aid the child to understand their desire for him to improve. Of greater value, it also gave him an opportunity to evaluate the situation as it seemed to him so he could participate in the planning for improvement. Guidance toward making wise decisions without an excess of trial-and-error experiences should greatly reduce the number of times that punishment for misdemeanors is deemed necessary.

It was felt by some teachers that several of the children had answered "Yes" to their key question without giving much thought to it. They stated also that Henry answered "Yes" on the day of the test but when questioned later, that answer was refuted. Some occurrence at home that morning had probably influenced his response.

However, making allowance for a limited number of answers fluctuating between the affirmative and the negative, the majority seems to indicate a natural desire for attention, a certain variable degree of insecurity and lack of affection (or possibly a fancied lack), and a fear of not being wanted or needed as much as someone else.

#### Stepping Up the Program

There is nothing insurmountable in any of the problems of the average child. It is surprising and pleasing to see how many of them fade into nothingness when handled wisely. However, although progress is gratifying, one can see how much more there is in the immediate future for us to do.

Should counseling and guidance

work be started in the first grade? Taking a longer retrospective view, shouldn't we say that taking it up in the first grade is waiting too long? Wouldn't a program be equally or more valuable in our kindergartens? Could we go back even a step farther and advocate similar work for the pre-school children and for their parents? The results would be, without doubt, very worthwhile.

Some kind of guidance is being given

to all children from the first days of infancy by all who come in contact with them. Counseling of some sort is a part of every daily life. How vastly important that it be the right kind! Public schools can, and should, have an active part in the instituting of a parent-education program in their community which will contribute directly and effectively toward the social, mental, emotional, and spiritual adjustment and development of all children.



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