

# Take Time to Let the Children Know

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Young children are sensitive to and curious about their world and its current problems and happenings. The questions they ask must be answered and discussed fully if these children are to become responsible citizens and if their intellectual curiosity is to stay alive, Emily V. Baker maintains. Miss Baker is associate professor of education at Arizona State College, Tempe.

CHILDREN LIVE in a moving world. Being sensitive people, they respond to the tempo and the spirit of the time and place in which they live.

## OUR SENSITIVE CHILDREN

Five-year-old Tommy's father was killed in the war. Tommy tells his mother he is afraid to go to school because he might have to sit by a Japanese boy.

Girls in the sixth grade argue as to whether Marie is excluded from the crowd because she is Mexican.

Ten-year-old Angela wraps her skirts closely around her as she moves over to let Jenny, a Negro, share her book.

In each of these instances a child is hurt. In each one children encounter problems characteristic of a phase of current American life.

### *Children know about the housing shortage.*

Four-year-old Jimmy lives in a motor court. Frequently he asks, "Mother, will we ever have our own house? Will we have a bathtub in our new house?"

Many children know no home except that afforded by the congested motor court or housing project. They chafe under the restrictions thus imposed upon them. They want permanent homes where they can have bicycles, wagons, and other large toys. The older girls want permanent house furnishings. The boys want yards where they can play.

*Children are aware of the current economic situation.* High prices impinge upon their personalities. Children feel the pinch of poverty and ask questions to stump the economic experts.

"Why is rent going up for?"

"Why is it that some people are rich and some poor?"

"Why can't Congress make all the paper money we need?"

"Why do people in the West work in other people's fields instead of their own?"

Labor tensions are real to them. They are worried when their fathers are in the picket line. They ask their teacher if he will vote for the labor bill.

*Children are sensitive, too, to international tensions.* Several months before the bombing of Pearl Harbor nearly twenty-two percent of the 1,400 children in grades three to six who submitted questions to the author asked questions about the war into which we had not yet been drawn. In 1948 children are again showing the same kind of fear.

Twelve-year-old Fred says we better not elect Truman again because he let them drop the bomb on Hiroshima and he might let them drop more.

Five-year-old Dick cries, "Daddy, if there's a war I don't want you to go."

Seven-year-old Mary asks if all bears are Russian bears.

Eight-year-old Camile asks whether the

Russians would burn us all up if they got the atomic bomb or would they just make us disappear.

*Children talk about the developments in the field of science.* While many of their comments about the atomic bomb reveal only a superficial knowledge of the power of the atom, many girls and boys manifest an intelligent interest in widely different areas of science and reveal a need for help in understanding its wonders.

A third grade child asks, "Is it true that they can make a lot of things from peanuts?"

Elaine can't wait to find out what they see through the new telescope.

One child queries, "How does a thermostat work?"

Another asks, "Can atomic power be harnessed?"

#### What Does Proximity Show?

In 1941 the author found very few children asking questions about the static conditions in their communities. This lack of interest in their environment indicates that we would do well to realize with G. Stanley Hall that "children see an object a hundred times without acquiring consciousness of it" and, therefore, "we need to converse with children about the commonest things."

*But, children are sensitive to the activities of their communities.* They know where the new houses are being built. They know when the circus is coming to town. And some of them worry about the problems of their community.

An eleven-year-old boy in Arizona asks, "Why can't we get more water for the farmers here?"

A sixth grade pupil in Illinois asks, "Why is our water turned off sometimes?"

A ten-year-old boy wonders, "What will we use when our oil is all gone?"

Many of the questions children ask about occupations, taxes, laws regulating traffic, and social and cultural problems suggest avenues through which we can approach a study of the current problems of the community.

*Children wonder about the current situation in their school society.* They want to be intelligent about their world. They ask:

"Why aren't schools nowadays as strict as they were a long time ago?"

"Why does my mother have to go to PTA all the time?"

"How can the teacher tell what grade we belong in?"

#### THAT SPARK OF INTELLECTUAL CURIOSITY

To children life is a going concern. The current events of the life they live and observe from their point of view can well be considered the stuff of which a large part of the elementary curriculum is built.

We want to nurture as a precious behavior pattern an interest in life as it is lived by us and by our contemporaries. Studies of the interests of adults reveal that somewhere along the route to adulthood the child's interest in current life is dulled. Because much of the work in the traditional school is far removed from life, the school must share the responsibility for failing to keep alive this precious and valuable interest which is keen in children. To keep this interest glowing the teacher must be alert to the current situation at all times and must free children to live in the world of their day.

### Thought and Action Skills Developed

Current events is not a subject for the first fifteen minutes each morning or for the last thirty minutes on Friday afternoon. Current events—once the spirit of the times and the current needs of the pupils are recognized—may give flavor to all the work of the class. Conversations about the current happenings replace reports on current events. Older children have panel discussions. All youngsters engage in activities because a need calls for them.

The children's needs and interests determine the topic and the procedure. They may discuss a playground problem, the fire drill system, or the plan by which they can serve the Junior Red Cross. They may discuss the problem of undulant fever in their community and, as a result of their discussion, publish an editorial on the need for laws regulating the production of milk.

These discussions are not impromptu occasions at which the children *just talk*. Children have obligations to meet if they would discuss current affairs. They must develop a sense of responsibility for knowing what they are talking about, for weighing evidence, and for maintaining an attitude of suspended judgment for a time. The last can be carried to extreme, however. Children need the outlet afforded by action. The attention span of children is short. If decisions are postponed long, children may stop short of acting and lose the spiritual benefit which is to be derived from acting after analyzing a need and arriving at a decision.

### Purposeful Action Outlets

With the pupils we can select units of work in line with the needs and in-

terests of our time. In most courses of study a unit on shelter is suggested. In the light of our current housing situation, the unit is needed. But the children don't need to make igloos, Arabian tents, or grass huts. They can, instead, study the trailer camp and auto court, modern means of insulating and heating, and new types of building materials. The teacher can guide the older pupils in a consideration of the cultural problems of zoning and segregation. They can make graphs and charts to clarify their information about health and school attendance in relation to housing conditions. They may write letters to health authorities and legislators. They may help clean up sections of their town or camp.

A unit on housing should include, also, a backward look. There is danger that children who have never known any other way of life will accept the present housing conditions as normal. This we do not want.

To prevent frustration, it is imperative that children act. When children are disturbed by the stories they hear about the unfortunate children abroad or about the need at Van Port, we can help them gain release for their emotions by discussing plans for helping. They may write letters. They may recondition and send discarded toys and clothing. They may organize to send a CARE package. They can discuss these current problems in terms of a situation they must face, a job they may help do.

### Identification with the Current Scene

The children come to us sensitive. We must protect them from unnecessary suffering and preserve that deli-

cate sensitivity which characterizes young children. We can take from them our cues as to their readiness for dealing with their current problems.

One of our chief goals in considering current issues is to help people to want to be intelligent about the world in which we live. For this reason we must take time to help them find the answers to their questions. We want children to have the security which comes from being personally identified with the current scene; therefore, we plan with them activities through which that identification is derived. Because we want to protect children from fears and frustrations, we recognize the psychotherapeutic value of talking with them about their problems and interests. These are their current events.

We must dispel the mystery that surrounds the printed word and the newscast. At some point in the elementary school—perhaps in one of the grades five to eight—we should have a unit of work which will bring to a focus their learnings about the modern means of communication. The sources of news will be studied, editorial policy will be considered, and techniques for reading newspapers and listening to the radio will be developed. We can, for example, help children plan radio logs for themselves. We can keep interest alive and develop standards through some radio listening at school. The habit of reading and listening critically will be developed, not for the purpose of making cynics of the children but for protecting them from the bondage of ignorance.

### **Take Time to Teach Them**

Using the stuff of current events in the elementary school presents many problems. Many teachers are not well enough acquainted with current happenings to have the self-confidence needed to free children to live in the present. Many teachers fear that if they take time to deal with current problems the pupils will not pass the standardized tests. Many teachers themselves lack the feeling of security needed to deal effectively with controversial issues or group tensions. Current issues are heavily charged with problems of the emotions. Some teachers are still under the control of the puritanical notion that emotions must be concealed or subdued.

We all want a socially conscious citizenry. If our democracy is to survive we must have adults who identify themselves with current issues. Keeping abreast of the times is a way of life. It is a way of life common among children. We in the elementary school must not disturb this pattern; we must preserve it.

To preserve the pattern takes time. It takes time to clarify thinking and to solve problems. It takes time to respect individual personalities. Fortunately, changes in the American way of life have freed young people to be in our schools much longer than they were twenty years ago. We have more time in which to do good with the children and youth entrusted to our guidance. It is up to us to use this opportunity to make our democratic way of life more secure.

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