

# *New Skills for Teachers—*

## *New Understanding of Children—*

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This article comes from the Institute of Child Study at the University of Maryland, College Park, written by Madelaine Mershon, Gerthon Morgan, and Daniel Prescott. Examples are cited of how teachers unknowingly contribute to children's poor emotional health, some folk ideas held by adults about children, and a positive course which can be followed. It is becoming increasingly clear that new skills in applying reasoning must be developed to understand children and their problems.

THE TEACHERS of the United States are devoted, sincere, hard-working, really wonderful people. It is a great privilege to know hundreds of them—to see how modest they are in their demands for themselves and how earnest and concerned they are in their efforts to help children learn. The number of exceptions to these generalizations is extremely small.

### **We Admire Teachers Immensely!**

We know this to be true from years of direct consulting experience with teachers meeting regularly in small study groups in the effort to understand individual children in their classrooms. We have learned it as we have applied and developed further the child-study techniques worked out under the Commission on Teacher Education of the American Council on Education. Our staff of the Institute for Child Study at the University of Maryland is rendering consultant help to more than six thousand teachers and, since we work with each study group for a minimum of three years, we feel that we may claim that we know what American teachers are like.

### **Why Don't Children**

#### **Come Happily to School?**

Nevertheless, there is no denying that schools are not good, healthful places for many children. Too often curiosity is stifled and children learn to hate reading, numbers, literature, history, or some other subject—and so their mental development is dwarfed by the manner of operation in the very institution established to nourish the growth of the intellect. Also, the experiences some children have at school actually create disciplinary problems, deepen emotional maladjustments, and evoke anti-social attitudes. They can undermine the self-confidence and the self-respect of some children. They give rise to habits of protective lying, of scapegoating, and of rationalization in many children; while still others retreat into fantasy, day-dreaming, and social isolation.

The causes of the classroom and school policies and practices which have these unwholesome effects on children are many. They include community traditions and public ignorance of the laws of human development; they

arise from school board policies, administrative decisions, supervisory techniques, parental interference, and special group pressures. Certainly no panacea is to be found by which schools can insure their contributing positively to the mental and emotional health of all children. But much can be done to help teachers, despite the resisting and contaminating forces acting upon and through them. For teachers themselves contribute their share to the unfortunate and unwholesome experiences which children undergo at school.

### Some Causes—and Effects

We have made a beginning in analyzing the bases for some of the unwholesome experiences teachers bring to children. We find the following general causes, each of which will be analyzed briefly in following paragraphs.

- ▶ Many teachers have actual misconceptions of the causes of behavior and of what constitutes unwholesome conditions for learning and development. The judgments they make on the basis of this misinformation often result in serious harm to children.
- ▶ Many teachers are simply ignorant of essential, existing, scientific information and conclusions about growth, learning, behavior, and emotional adjustment. Obviously they cannot make sound decisions on the basis of knowledge which they do not possess.
- ▶ Most teachers have never been trained to know and use the necessary sequence of steps in scientific reasoning by which they can arrive at sound judgments about the motivations and needs of children in their classrooms. Consequently, they do many wrong things as a result of their faulty reasoning processes.
- ▶ Most teachers are unaware of the

scope of the information they must have about each child in order to understand that child. Nor are they skilled in gathering, recording, or organizing this information. Since most school administrators are equally unaware of the kinds of data a school should have, the cumulative records almost never make available to teachers the information they need to make sound judgments. The wrong things that teachers do to children are almost never matters of malice or hatred toward the child and they are not a result of teachers' own maladjustments as often as we used to think. Instead, they are most often the result of mistaken folk ideas, ignorance of scientific truth, lack of training in the scientific method of thinking, or of the lack of available information about the child. The teachers are not responsible for any of these. We who train them are responsible and those who administer or determine the school policies are responsible.

### Let's Examine Some Misconceptions

There is not space to give a full list of the untrue concepts held by many teachers. What follows is simply illustrative of the kinds of false ideas about emotions that are widespread.

- ▶ Many teachers believe that learning, reasoning, problem-solving, and classroom social interaction can and should occur largely without accompanying affect.
- ▶ Many believe that emotions are specifically patterned, instinctive sequences of behavior set off always by equally specific stimuli from outside the child.
- ▶ Teachers often think that the adjustment mechanisms used by school children are wholly willful acts, are completely unnecessary and undesirable, and are evidences of "bad" character and/or of "bad" biological heredity.
- ▶ Many believe that children should be trained to repress almost all forms of expression of emotion, and particularly those

that show hostility, aggression, erotic interest, self-interest, desire for attention, fantasy, and defensive lying.

► Teachers frequently regard the following behavior patterns as characteristic of “good” and well-adjusted children: showing strong guilt feelings, being quiet in the classroom, refusing or failing to defend themselves against the aggressions of other children, devoting themselves exclusively to school work, quietly withdrawing from sports or social activities, making many contacts with the teacher, depending continuously upon evidences of the teacher’s approval and affection, being quick to help other children by pointing out their mistakes and telling what they should have done.

It is obvious that the educative process often miscarries for the children most in need of help when their teachers hold these and many other mistaken concepts about the emotional life of human beings. But why blame the teachers? These are widely held folk ideas.

### These Things Are True

Even more responsible for mistaken judgments in dealing with children are the ideas of which teachers are ignorant, although the underlying knowledge now exists. The list of positive ideas that teachers need is far too long to enumerate, but a few samples will be cited. They illustrate ideas that change teachers’ attitudes toward their pupils, that modify teachers’ concepts of their own roles in the educative process, and that can and should be communicated to teachers by adequate pre- and in-service training in the sciences that study human beings. Some ideas gravely needed by teachers follow.

► Children’s behavior is caused. It is not due to innate tendencies to sin, to bio-

logically inherited willfulness, nor to uncontrolled whimsy. It results from describable forces and processes going on within the child and acting upon him.

► The interacting processes that cause behavior are constantly going on in children’s bodies, in their families, in their minds, in their communities, in the child groups in which they function, and in the classrooms as a result of school policies. All these processes constantly interact and together they evoke the child’s behavior—none can be left out of consideration at any time.

► Affect is co-extensive with experience. Feelings and emotions are natural and inevitable in all life situations. They reflect the ways these situations are meeting the child’s needs, providing opportunities for working on his own developmental tasks, maintaining and expressing interpersonal relationships, achieving immediate personal goals, affording opportunities for social role-taking, and orienting the child consistently in society and in the universe. Since affect is the result of such a complicated set of simultaneous processes, it obviously is not simple stimulus-response behavior.

► A child is an indivisible unity—one aspect of his development or behavior cannot be understood, influenced, or changed without taking many other factors and processes into consideration.

► Every child is different from every other child. Children differ from each other quantitatively and qualitatively in each of the forces and processes that interact to produce their behavior and their further development. For this reason extensive knowledge about each individual is necessary as the basis for making sound judgments about how to help him learn and adjust.

► While all children follow the same pattern of growth, they do so at strikingly different rates. Thus children of the same chronological age may be markedly different in physical and mental maturity.

► The developmental tasks on which children are working are related primarily to their physical maturity levels rather than to their "mental ages."

► Children from different regions of the country, from different ethnic groups, from different social classes, and from different maturity level groups will show different concepts of reality, different attitudes, different values, different defense mechanisms, and different immediate goals. Not only will these children differ markedly from each other, many of them will differ markedly from the teacher in each of these characteristics. This does not mean that the teacher is right in each of these matters and the children wrong—it means merely that they have different backgrounds of experience and, consequently, interpret and react to life differently.

► Adjustment mechanisms actually are valuable and help the individual to prevent himself from being damaged by too much unpleasant emotion. Of course, overuse of adjustment mechanisms may interfere with the child's further wholesome development and adjustment. These two ideas, selected almost at random from a very extensive list, illustrate knowledge which now exists but which has not been communicated widely enough to teachers. Or, if it has been communicated, they are not permitted or encouraged to act on it.

### New Skills in the Thinking Process

Habitual use of the scientific method of reasoning is not practiced without rigorous training, and even then it isn't always followed. Some may question whether run-of-the-mill teachers can develop this capacity or would have the will to use it. The work of the Commission on Teacher Education<sup>1</sup> and our own further development of child study techniques for in-service teachers have

demonstrated that teachers *can* habituate themselves to reason scientifically. We also know that the knowledge that they are reasoning scientifically reassures teachers, relieves them of anxiety about why children act as they do, and, as they themselves say, makes them happier in their work because they feel professionally more competent.

We can report that teachers who conscientiously participate in the child-study program throughout its three- or four-year cycle do become aware of the scope of the information they need about individual children. They learn to observe and record information objectively and to organize it so as to facilitate its interpretation; to get something of value out of school records; to consult with parents and to get useful knowledge of the child through home visits; to see the child's life space somewhat through the child's eyes; to let the child's creative activities speak to them of his preoccupations and emotions; to see his behavior in terms of his motives instead of in terms of their own intentions—but all this learning takes time.

The skills described in the last two paragraphs are skills in applying scientific ways of using the mind. Schools will decrease the unwholesome things they do to children if these scientific safeguards to teachers' ways of deciding how to treat children become widely used. But the task is a long-term one and requires outside help. It takes three or four years to become habituated to these skills. And everyone needs consultant help from time to time in order to see the tricks and traps that can occur in the thinking processes of the best of us when emotions are involved.

<sup>1</sup> Commission on Teacher Education, *Helping Teachers Understand Children*, Washington, D. C.: American Council on Education, 1944.

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