

For Today's Children and Tomorrow's Adults

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In their efforts to provide a good life for boys and girls, both in school and out of it, today's educators can gain insight through counsel with individuals in a variety of specialized fields. Dr. Mabel Ross, director of Prince George's County Mental Health Clinic, Maryland, discusses the mental health of children from the standpoint of the psychiatrist.

TODAY EDUCATORS are interested in the whole life of the child. They are aware that experiences in school affect not only the child of today but also the man of tomorrow. No longer is "book learning" the total aim of the days and years of classroom attendance.

There is also the recognition that the health of the child determines his ability to deal with his school tasks. The next step toward understanding man at his various stages of development is being taken by recognizing that only the mentally healthy child can make full use of the tools for living handed him in school.

Education for Living

Despite the increasing interest in mental health, there continues to be an aura of mystery surrounding the subject, with a good deal of skepticism as to whether it be fact or fad. The mentally healthy individual is one who faces life and copes with it to the best of his ability and, at the same time, remembers that he is a member of society and respects the rights of every member of that society, *including himself*.

On a simple level this means that if he is afraid to speak before a group, he faces his fear and either learns how to

speak easily or finds a substitute while he carries his share of responsibility in some other sphere. To face a fact does not mean to fight it; it means to adjust to it—to evaluate, judge, and act accordingly.

Just as the caveman had to determine whether it was better to choose fight or flight when he met the hairy mammoth, so the modern man has to choose how to meet the less tangible dangers and challenges of his life. With the increase in intangible challenges, modern man has found it more difficult to learn how to deal with life and has accordingly found anxiety-producing situations at every stage of development. In view of this, the goal of education has changed from teaching how to use a spear effectively to teaching how to deal with the many aspects of an increasingly complex social order.

As the world of the individual shrinks and his inescapable associations with other individuals increase, he has larger and larger numbers of social rules to learn. No longer can he retreat to his private world and live self-sufficiently as a hermit, or as patriarch of his family. He is forced to live closely with his fellowman, in some type of relationship, throughout his life.

It is this increasing closeness of living which makes it necessary for education to give attention to individual adjustment and to include teaching how to live with others as part of the curriculum. But it soon becomes obvious that rules of behavior alone do not make a social being, even as knowledge of artistic balance and form alone does not make an artist. It is apparent that each child has certain fundamental needs which must be satisfied before he is able to use his knowledge in effecting interpersonal relationships which are satisfying to him and of constructive value to society.

What are these fundamental needs? The full story is not yet known, but certain ones can be discussed with certainty.

Nutrition and Emotional Stability

In our interest in the psychological aspects of mental health, it is easy to overlook the physical factors. Adequate food is known to be a fundamental need for life, but it has been possible through the experiments carried on by Cornell University with the voluntary cooperation of conscientious objectors to prove the relationship of good nutrition and emotional stability. This has long been known from a practical point of view—neither a hungry child nor a starving adult can be reached by logic.

As a result of the above-mentioned studies, both objective and subjective accounts of the effect of all stages of malnutrition prove its effect on personality as well as upon mental alertness. In the interest in improving the health of children there has been considerable education as to the importance of breakfast for the school child, and the program of school lunches has become

widely accepted as a school responsibility. Those interested in mental health and stable personalities now recognize that they, too, have a stake in supporting these programs.

On the psychological side, it is important to remember that from infancy onward food symbolizes affection for the child. Thus, the hungry child has the feeling of rejection and being unloved added to the physical effects of inadequate diet. It may well be that school lunches represent the interest of the community to some lost children who have no reason to believe anyone in the world wants them. Certainly this has been the experience of workers among starving children during and after the war. In any event, the child is not only physically uncomfortable but emotionally disturbed as well.

Shelter and Clothing As Security

Every child has need of protection from the elements to maintain life, but beyond the minimal requirement of clothing and shelter he needs to have a familiar haven from which he can explore the world about him with the secure knowledge that he can return. In this shelter he needs the assurance of rest and comfort (from cold or rain or vermin) if he is to be expected to cope with his world in a stable fashion.

Shelter and clothing are concrete proof to the child that the adults upon whom he must depend are interested in his welfare. The tired or cold child is both physically and emotionally handicapped in his school life.

Freedom from Crippling Illness

In the report of the International Preparatory Commission to the Inter-

national Congress of Mental Health in 1948, "minimum food, shelter, and clothing, and reasonable freedom from epidemics" were considered elementary human needs and "indispensable prerequisites" of mental health.

In attempting to control epidemics and crippling illnesses, society is accepting the responsibility for protecting children against this additional obstacle to well-balanced living. The ill or physically handicapped child automatically has a greater problem of personal and social adjustment. His condition makes him feel different and useless, and in his effort to feel important he may use this very handicap. This is not to say that the handicapped child cannot be mentally healthy, but when he is it is, at great effort *in spite of* (and not because of) the handicap. Freedom from severe and crippling illness is a basic need for mental health of the child.

Belonging to a Group

The family unit is an expression of the need of the human of all ages to belong to and be wanted by a group. To the infant it brings protection, security, and care; to the school child it is a haven to return to after the strain of the larger world; to the adolescent it is a safe area for experimentation in adult behavior while protected by the child role; to the mature adult it is the focus of his responsibility and the area in which he is most wanted and needed.

In spite of all that has been written, the child needs to feel that he belongs to a group who *want him to be part of the group*. The members of the group act as anchoring lines, giving him security. It is not only that he distrusts

his ability to deal with events alone and wants to know he has friends when in trouble, but he also feels larger than himself when he is in the group. He needs to look at others when the disturbing questions of "whom am I" and "what am I" plague him so that he can say "I am like them and they are like me." The fear of being "queer and different" is a frequent accompaniment of timid behavior. (The adult must beware of over-denying this fact as the child quickly feels "the lady doth protest too much.")

The sense of belonging is far deeper than words or symbols, but it is the reason why badges, uniforms, secret rituals, and grips are so popular among children and adolescents. These are the reassuring outward signs to others of his belonging. Where for the younger child the family largely satisfies this need to belong, the adolescent begins to identify himself with a group of his own age and is often accused by adults of "slavishly following" them. He needs reassurance at a time when doubt of self is peculiar to the age.

Small wonder that the unattractive girl will not forego the pleasure of "belonging" to the group who will accept her while they walk the streets or sit in bars. Her self-doubt and experience make her unsure of being accepted elsewhere and she must cling to this bit of security and belonging, perhaps feeling closer to them because of the adults' disapproval.

The devastating effect of lack of a sense of belonging is best seen in small children from certain types of repressive institutions. Although the best of physical care may be given these children, they are obvious misfits in school

groups and give the impression of being lost—as they are. Some institutions do give the children a sense of belonging. For the adolescent rendered homeless, need for identification with his own age group may make placement with his own age group the best choice.

Another unhappy result is sometimes seen in foster children or adopted children who learn of this fact in a damaging way. An attractive thirteen-year-old boy was popular and happy at school and liked by his teachers. His father, in a moment of anger at an example of normal adolescent rebellion, shouted, "I'm glad you're no son of mine!" The statement was a revelation to the boy who had not known of it; and the ashamed father was powerless to recall it. The mother had never been overly fond of the boy, and this was the final blow. Understandably, he adopted the attitude that he was nobody and nobody cared about him so why should he care what he did? It is not surprising that he soon reached juvenile court. To belong nowhere and to be wanted nowhere is too much for anyone, particularly a child, to endure.

The Necessity of Being Important

Every person wants to be unusual although he does not want to be "queer." He has the need to be outstanding in the eyes of his group, to feel that his contribution is valuable, and that he would be missed if he were absent. He needs to feel that he can do one thing—impressive to his friends—well.

To tell a boy of eight or ten that he causes the most trouble in the class is more apt to be a source of pride than not. Conversely, to ridicule a child's ability is effective only if the adult

wishes to destroy the child. To give deserved notice for ability in darts or football, for promptness, for neat papers (without undue criticism of others) is to give the child a sense of importance. Such a feeling is necessary for balance and self-respect and will become egotism only if in the minds of the adults in his environment praising of one person means belittling of others.

At every age the child (or adult) delights in being useful or needed, which is another way of being important. He is quick to sense false praise or "made work" but he responds to honest appreciation as a flower does to the sun, and it is as essential to his health. Only then can he be sure that he is valued enough, important enough, that he will not be lost in the crowd.

The Basic Right to Respect

The child wants to be respected for himself—a human being with specific abilities, interests, and rights. He wants to be considered as a living factor in his environment. No person wants to be a cog, an indistinguishable unit as in "Brave New World." Our greatest punishment is to take away a man's name and give him a number.

For a child to realize that he is "a pupil" to his teacher rather than John Smith is to feel (and rightly so) that he is not respected. To have an adult talk of him as if he were a post or look at him as if he were in a museum is an insult to which he may react violently. One small boy tried to express his outrage against his teacher's attitude and finally exploded, "She pushed me." It was her disrespect of him as a feeling person which brought on his reaction, and which, incidentally, prevented his

cooperating with her. Respect as a person not only is a fundamental for mental health but also a basic right of every child.

The Unique Place of the School

The question is often raised as to what the school can do when the home does not supply the child's needs. Sometimes this has led to the hopeless attitude that the school can do nothing if the child's difficulty lies in home conditions. The desire to do something has, unfortunately, led to some schools trying to assume the functions of the home. The school cannot and should not attempt to take the place of the home. However inadequate the home, the school is still only the school. But with

knowledge of the lacks in the home, the teachers and other responsible adults can often understand what the child is trying to attain by his "bad" behavior.

To understand is not to condone but to direct; not to accuse but to teach. If a child ties his shoes incorrectly he is taught, but too often if he carries on his social activities incorrectly he is accused. Even punishment can be carried out with respect—and results in respect by the child. The school cannot entirely negate the effect of home situations—either a good school and a poor home or a poor school and a good home—but it does go far in establishing the child's concept of what the community accepts as standards and expects of its members, whatever their age.

The Cost of Failure

AUDREY ARKOLA and REYNOLD A. JENSEN

Many educators have long questioned the schools' policy of failure in terms of its effect upon a child. In this article Audrey Arkola, instructor in the department of pediatrics and clinical psychologist, and Dr. Reynold A. Jensen, associate professor of pediatrics and psychiatry, both of the University of Minnesota Medical School, look at school failure from the standpoint of the individual who works with children in a psychiatric clinic. Dr. Jensen and Miss Arkola tell us that of the total number of children referred to a psychiatric clinic, a fairly large number have difficulties related in one way or another to the school situation.

SCHOOL FAILURE is a real threat to total life adjustment. It is costly, not only in terms of time and money, but also in its total effect upon the child and his family.

The causes of failure are many and often complex. They vary with different age groups. In many instances failure is due to a combination of factors

which require definition before a rational remedial program can be arranged. These factors do, however, tend to fall into broad general groups.

The Intellectual "Borderline"

In evaluating a child having school difficulties it is essential to determine his intellectual capacity. Adequate intelli-

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