

Moral Security for Mental Health

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"Fostering Security and Satisfaction" is one of the seven aspects of better teaching discussed in some detail in the Association's 1949 yearbook, *Toward Better Teaching*. In this article Harold G. Shane, superintendent of the Winnetka, Illinois, public schools, discusses the type of security which we can give our children, the responsibility of both parents and teachers for fostering it, and the goals toward which curriculum planning must point if our children are to have the type of moral security necessary to sound mental health.

A FEELING OF SECURITY is one of the basic requirements for normal human growth and development. Upon this point, at least, there seems strong consensus among psychologists and psychiatrists, anthropologists and sociologists. Political scientists and economists as well have for years been aware of its importance.¹ "The lack of security in childhood," one writer states, "brings many dire results, examples of which may be seen in any mental hospital or any mob out of control. On this one need the specialists meet in practically unanimous agreement."²

Educators generally seem to have been made increasingly aware of the importance of security during the past twenty years. Hardly a statement of objectives has been phrased by a school staff recently without including a pronouncement in the interests of "building and maintaining" or "fostering the growth of" security. There is scarcely a teacher who has not heard the topic discussed at institutes or workshops, in

college classes, or in conferences sponsored by professional organizations.

Despite what would seem to be a rather general awareness—on a verbal level—of the need for security, actual classroom situations often reveal only the most meagre efforts to help children develop this important component of mental health.

WHEREIN LIES "SECURITY"?

In a time of troubles like the present (and much of the past, for that matter), material security for most people is wishful thinking. Indeed, a recent estimate states that a 110 percent increase over 1948's bumper food crops would be required to give the earth's more than two billion inhabitants a diet that would be suitable even for minimal health requirements. We are in no way assured that our economy can avoid another "bust," and the present peace seems little more than an armed truce with fifteen billion dollars in the National Budget for military expenditures.

It follows that the only kind of security American education can be sure of helping a child acquire is emotional security that comes through the knowledge that one is loved and has someone

¹ Cf. H. D. Lasswell, *World Politics and Personal Insecurity*, New York: Whittlesey House, 1935; and Karl Mannheim, *Man and Society in an Age of Reconstruction*, New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1940.

² Stuart Chase, *The Proper Study of Mankind*, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1948, p. 11.

to whom to give affection in return; moral security through a knowledge of what is good for himself and others like him; faith in himself and others regardless of race or religion. This involves molding the values of human beings so as to help them set the truest possible course for troubled living.

Home and school share in the responsibility for building moral security, and a clear-cut separation of their functions is impossible. In view of this fact, an effort is made in subsequent paragraphs to mention a few simple ways in which home and/or school can do a better job than generally has been done.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

Postpone exposure to adult problems. While the child needs experience in facing and solving problems within the scope of his ability,

"Parents [and teachers] frequently make the mistake of trying to foster social maturity in their child by parading adult problems, adult uncertainties, and adult disillusionments continually before him—doubts concerning food and shelter, financial worries, adult social strivings, and parental discords that divide his loyalties and threaten the fundamental security of his home."³

Parents can do a great deal to build security by recognizing that the best way to "make a man" of their child is to begin where *he* is. The school should recognize at the same time that the insecure parent himself may offer a clue to the source of insecurity in the child. By contagion children sometimes absorb and reflect the unmet needs of mother

or father or teacher. The sensitive adult should be aware of this problem and make efforts to counteract its effect through eliminating causes.

Ease parents' ambitions for children. Few parents achieve all that they seek for themselves. Almost invariably they wish more for their children than *they* had. This may lead to an effort on the part of one or both parents (either consciously or unconsciously) to use a child as a vehicle for unrealized personal ambition. This can lead to a particularly insidious form of insecurity in the child who is made to feel that he is a disappointment to the parents who "have done everything" for him. Teachers need to face the problem—essentially a home relationship one—with courage and tact.

Decrease irrational pressure for achieving. The parent who is unreasonably ambitious for his child may have a counterpart in the teacher who applies pressure in school to bring all children "up to standard" in achievements as shown by standardized test scores. This is a common but highly potent source of insecurity, and may result in lasting harm to boys and girls. Pressure for "high standards" which ignores the fact that a group of children should be *expected* to vary in achievements is difficult to excuse in teacher or administrator. The pressure for subject achievement is widespread, moreover, despite current verbal acceptance of the fact of individual differences.

Self-confidence is necessary for doing the work of which one is capable. When replaced by insecurity created by unreasonable demands the child may do

³ Norman Cameron, *The Psychology of Behavior Disorders*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1948, p. 268

even less than "normal," feel still greater insecurity, and ultimately become severely maladjusted.

Prevent guilt feelings. Home and school can, and often do, increase or decrease security by their attitude toward the "scrapes" in which all children are at one time or another involved. It is highly important for both parents and teachers to avoid "the old-fashioned practice of constantly impressing upon little children the . . . terrifying fruits of worldly wickedness. . . ." ⁴ This is especially important since the very vagueness to the child of the logic of adult morality may make admonitions the more frightening and the more likely to create insecurity arising from doing too few things well. Careful guidance of activities is implied as is study of the curriculum with an eye to increasing mental and physical welfare of both child and teacher.

Protect from overprotection. Present in all schools is the challenge of meeting the insecurity that accompanies overprotection. Undue parental concern—overprotective concern—may jeopardize the child's sense of security by filling an imaginative mind with nebulous fears. This can be met in considerable measure by creating guarded situations in which he may face those fears and discover that they need not exist.

Help children believe they are persons of consequence. In the school, the home, and the community children

need to gain security through learning that they do some things well. But whatever recognition is forthcoming must be truly merited recognition. Undeserved recognition merely may add to insecurity. Recent pieces of research in industry ⁵ provide interesting evidence of the need for legitimate attention, even among adults.

Respect children. Sometimes, because they are small, children are both literally and figuratively pushed around by adults. Even teachers fall into this error. Such high-handed treatment usually is associated with authoritarian discipline and strikes at the roots of security by making the child heavily dependent upon adults for control and direction. It is far better to live with children so that they acquire through discussion and evaluation the personal criteria needed when making independent decisions. Respect for children involves not only courteous treatment but full recognition of their need to mature through the exercise of self-reliance and responsibility.

Recognize individual security as a part of group security. As teachers work with children they must be sensitive to the fact that the child is a part of a social environment with which he is completely interrelated. As an individual, the child has small reason and little chance to feel secure unless his peers also are secure. Particularly in the

⁵ Chase, *op. cit.*, pp. 137-146, describes the Harvard Business School experiments at Hawthorne, Illinois, and in California aircraft plants, which help to document this point. See Chapter XIV for Chase's analysis of strikes resulting in situations in which employees could no longer identify themselves with their work.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 313

gang or clique stage the entire group must have opportunity to develop security so that the individual may achieve it. This is true in the school and it is true of society as a whole.

Encourage children to do things for others. Socially useful work of all kinds helps to meet the need for self-respect, a need which is related to security. To satisfy this demand schools are sending food and clothing overseas, "adopting" schools or classrooms in less favored districts than their own, and finding direct ways of making communities better places in which to live because the schools are there. These practices are desirable but cannot fully satisfy the need of the insecure child for many and frequent opportunities to feel worthwhile in childlike ways. Numerous chances for service to the immediate group are what are required.

HOW ABOUT THE CURRICULUM?

No real effort seems to have been made anywhere to develop a curriculum that deliberately seeks to build many-sided security in children. The rather obvious points above are but a few pertinent parts of the broad goals education must seek. As suggested earlier, the child's school living should provide a sense of direction that is rooted in socially oriented faith in himself and others. This challenges the curriculum maker to face squarely the planning of

experiences fundamental to such genuine moral security. In general terms curriculum change should seek to promote a feeling of security:

- by building devotion to democracy through helping children to understand clearly the successes (and failures) of Americans in creating a practical democracy; the best way yet devised for successful group living
- by creating in children a willingness to serve in directions that will insure better community living
- by equipping children with such personal and social goals as will be standards by which to live in a democratic society
- by developing pride in distinctive American achievements and appreciation for equally distinguished achievements by persons in other lands
- by crystalizing a warmth and friendliness toward all people of good will, both here and overseas.

Such goals as these are basic in education if children are to find their way around with security in a world of technological wonders, and if they are to remain secure masters of the machine. They are goals which persons of vision can achieve in their work with children. And they can be reached by sensitive parents and teachers who recognize and act in terms of simple but important principles such as those which this article suggests. If we observe both broad principles and simple practices, the interests of mental hygiene will be well served.



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