Social Learning Begins at Home

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The influence of the family in determining children's social behavior is frequently ignored by the schools in planning programs of social education. In this article, Elizabeth H. Brady, field consultant and staff member of the Center for Intergroup Education, University of Chicago, from whose files illustrations were drawn, discusses the relationship between family background and children's social behavior in school.

SOCIAL BEHAVIOR includes all that children do in relation to other people. Children are learning their social behaviors all the time, each child differently in some respects from others. By the time children enter school they developed some patterns of behaving toward others and toward social situations. Consider the children below:

☾ Sally is very polite and well behaved. She is afraid to get dirty at finger painting or at "housecleaning time," so she hangs back and refuses to paint or clean. She reads fast and writes well, but she doesn't know how to play the games the other second graders play. Sally often comes to adults for help. She tells the other children at her party, "My mother will help you open your ice-cream cup," though the others are taking care of themselves. Sally is what many adults call "a very good little girl," but she doesn't get along too well with other seven-year-olds.

☾ The first grade teachers in the Lincoln school complain that first graders come to them without ever having learned "the simplest things." These children don't know how to hang up their wraps; they haven't habits of washing hands, saying "please," and "yes, ma'am"; they have difficulty sitting quietly in their seats. A few don't even know how to use the bathroom. Whereas other first grade teachers in the city take it for granted that their pupils will know these things, the teachers at Lincoln say they must concentrate on these behaviors before they begin teaching "first grade skills."

☾ Carl, a sixth grader, is uncommunicative. He doesn't talk during class discussions nor enter into games on the playground. He sits for long periods by the window. He has told his teacher that he likes most to walk alone outside. No matter what is going on, Carl doesn't take part. His parents are divorced and he rarely sees his father. His mother tried to commit suicide after the divorce. Now she threatens to leave Carl and his sisters. Carl thinks a lot about the things that are happening at home.

☾ Arthur is in high school. When a story is read he laughs at one character's difficulties and says, "He's stupid." Asked to explain, "Because he isn't English or Irish." Pressed on this point, Arthur remarks that other Europeans are "pretty dumb. They must be or they wouldn't have stayed in such bad conditions and always had wars."

The School in Society

Each of these children meets and manages social situations and problems in a different way. The family is one of the several groups in which each has acquired social learnings.

In a society more homogeneous than ours, it would be easier for schools to identify and comprehend the influence of families on social behavior. But ours is a society of many groups. We know

that people learn the culture pattern of their group and that each of the multiple groups in our society has some peculiar cultural characteristics. Social anthropologists and sociologists report that the majority of teachers come from middle-class families and embody the beliefs, values, habits, and concepts of the middle class, while the majority of children—two-thirds or more—come from families whose backgrounds differ from the teachers' because of socio-economic, ethnic, and racial factors. This means that teachers cannot accurately predict from their own experience what children have learned. Since each of us tends to accept his group pattern as right, teachers are more apt to criticize children's social behaviors and consider them bad than to recognize them as behaviors learned in a context unfamiliar to teachers.

Families have had a hand in determining social behaviors long before the child reaches school, but schools frequently fail to find out what the child's previous socializing experiences have been. Families influence social behavior by what they teach, directly and indirectly, consciously and unconsciously: Arthur may have heard remarks about Central Europeans at home; Sally may have been rewarded more for good grades than for doing things for herself. Therefore, schools need to know what children have learned in their families.

Families also influence social behavior by what they fail to teach: the Lincoln first graders are ill equipped to meet the school's expectations because they have not been taught certain behaviors at home: Arthur has learned to relate stupidity to nationality, but he has not learned that many factors determine what happens to people. Schools must therefore identify the limitations homes have set. Events in the family and feelings and interpretations of these events which the child makes influence his social behavior outside the family: Carl thinks about his family situation when he might be entering into school activities. Schools need to be aware of what is happening to children in their homes.

Children Learn from Families

It is rather easy for teachers to discover whether children have acquired or failed to acquire a certain set of manners and skills. Because they can see these obvious behaviors they may miss more subtle social learnings which affect behavior.

Children learn ways to express feelings—how to show anger, friendliness, or sadness. They learn from imitating a parent, or from the punishment or approval a parent gives them. They learn a set of values—what is good or bad, important or unimportant, and meanings for words like "good," "bad," "cooperative." One child learns that to be good is to get high grades so parents can be proud; another learns that to be good means to keep quiet and not bother anyone at home. One child learns that you should be polite to others and conform to their wishes; another, that you shouldn't let anyone get ahead of you.

Children learn ways of relating themselves to others; how to get what they want by wheedling or by doing it themselves; how to play with other children; and how to speak to adults. They acquire concepts and feelings by which they pattern their behavior in social situations. Some of these concepts are

about themselves—"I can do it," or "It's too hard for me; I'd never be able to." Some have to do with their picture of their community and society: "The people who live west of Prairie are dumb and you shouldn't go around with them," and "The swells run everything at the high school. They don't want you in their clubs and you'd be smart not to try to get in." Some have to do with their attitudes toward school: "You have to do well so you can go East to college like your brother," and "Nobody in that school knows anything that's important. They'd never give a kid from our neighborhood a break or a good grade anyway." Not all of these things are learned directly in families, though some are.

Families Limit Social Learnings

Just as every family setting fosters social learning, so every family setting inevitably limits social learning. It limits, obviously, by what it fails to teach. Frequently teachers comment, "But that is something the home should teach!" Usually this comment refers to something teachers, because of their own backgrounds, set store by—how to be polite, to keep clean, to speak "properly," to hold certain values. Yet particular homes are quite unable to teach those behaviors which are part of neither the pattern of living nor the values of that home. Intense awareness of these omissions may blind teachers to the social behaviors children have learned, such as independence in taking care of themselves, knowledge of many places in a community and how to behave there—how to behave, not in the sense of politeness, but to handle the business connected with that place, such as shopping at the grocery, using the community center, holding a job.

On the other hand, gaps in social learning are less obvious to teachers when children have mastered the behaviors teachers value. Not every second grade teacher will be as concerned as Sally's was over her failure to get along with other children and her lack of initiative in non-academic areas, which showed limitations in social learning.

All homes are limited in another sense. By transmitting a particular pattern, homes tend to exclude, even to devalue, other patterns. If Arthur's family has encouraged and rewarded initiative in making money, in getting ahead, in achieving social status, Arthur is apt to think there is something wrong with people who do not do these things. Children who learn their own pattern of family life may think there is something odd about families who are different: where there are many children, where the mother works, or where more time is spent on having fun than on getting ahead. They may act toward people from such families as though there were something wrong with them. Schools need to identify these limitations, but it is not always easy for them to do so.

A junior high school teacher was reporting to a curriculum committee the content of students' papers which told about their families. She concluded her summary, "It's apparent that these children already have a very good view of family life. I decided after reading these that we just don't need to read stories about families, because they already have a very good attitude about what families should be like." The purpose of her analysis was to identify the students' present concepts of family life and to

infer from these what extensions of concepts about the nature of families should be provided. The children's accounts matched the teacher's own view of proper family life, and she was unable, without further study, to see the necessity of any extension or revision of their concepts and attitudes, although the families they pictured showed a narrow view indeed. There was equal congruence in regard to other matters between the concepts and attitudes of these students and those of their teacher, so it was difficult for her to spot where their social learning was deficient for life in a society of many social patterns.

Although families are not well equipped to provide the social learnings children need to get along with others in a highly diverse society, public schools are. With a variety of experiences represented among the children who attend, and freedom to create situations which can increase the range of social learnings, schools can supplement what homes teach and help free children from the limitations of a particular family or cultural group. But first, schools need to know which limitations exist.

Children Carry Concerns with Them

A child is not one person at home and another at school. He does not slough off when he enters school what has happened to him at home, but carries with him concerns and interests and feelings about events in his family. Thus happenings in family life, as well as what is taught there, affect children's social behavior.

Many children are quite successful at burying or skillfully concealing their family and personal concerns while they are at school. Often they are forced to do so, inasmuch as no time or attention is allotted for consideration of life outside the school. Many children are not so successful. The events at home preoccupy their thought and energies and distract them from the situation at hand.

Children carry to school anxieties derived in the family context. They hear about parents' worries at home—about rent or housing or jobs or health—and they absorb them. A child writes, "At home I have worries. My mother and father are both different from each other and are going to separate and I love them both, but I don't know which one to go with when they separate." A child busy trying to solve a problem like this may handle school situations with difficulty. The urgency of dealing with present emergencies at home is frequently far greater than the urgency of school tasks.

Pressures of expectations also carry over. "I want my parents to be proud of me. I don't think I am capable of coming up to their expectations," writes a ninth grader. Lack of awareness of such pressures may lead teachers to increase the amount of school work, on the assumption that "these children haven't enough to keep them busy." Disagreements are upsetting: "Relatives try to interfere with problems which are no concern to them. My family argues over my education. My parents think I would be better off if I quit school and went to work. I disagree. But I don't know what I should do."

It is not only anxieties, problems, and worries which occupy children; they think of happy things too, of course. Schools may be unready to deal with the former; they may think that the latter do not "belong in school." Many teachers

find it impossible to imagine the problems, tensions in relationships, worries, and fears which students, even very young children, are forced to deal with. We therefore fail to provide for them; or, fearful of not handling them adequately, the school rules out consideration of these problems as "too personal for school" and at the same time discounts their effects.

Not only are children preoccupied with out-of-school events but children form, in relation to those events, concepts of their own adequacy to deal with any problems. Children who have been blamed or who blame themselves for the ways problems or conflicts at home turned out are handicapped by their own doubts and fears when they tackle new problems at school. Children who have gained confidence in their own ability to get along with people will attempt new associations with assurance. The actual abilities of children have less to do with their behavior than their feelings about their own abilities.

Because it is time consuming to keep track of these aspects of children's lives, we often neglect to find out what children's "outside" lives are like, what they are experiencing there, how many and how difficult are the tasks they face. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to allow for the informal chats, papers written about feelings and personal concerns, the opportunity to talk about things that happen to people even at the expense of other aspects of the program. By these means teachers obtain glimpses of those areas of living which affect social behavior and social learning in school. When such inquiry is neglected, the social learnings the school attempts to provide often badly miss fire.

At present we know that children have learned social behavior, but not precisely *what* they have learned. We know their lives are complicated by many events and concerns, but not which ones and how. Each teacher must try to find answers to these questions as she plans learning experiences for her students.

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