

# *A Cooperative Approach to Child Study*

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During the past two years, the Illinois ASCD and the University of Chicago have sponsored a state-wide child study program in which five communities are currently participating. Cooperation between parents and teachers is a noteworthy feature of this project, of which Ethel Kawin, lecturer at the University of Chicago, is consultant.

A MOTHER having her first experience in a workshop in which parents and educators were working together, wrote in her notebook: "I have just reached the conclusion, after five days in a workshop devoted to studying problems in child guidance, that teachers are 'people.' Warm, friendly people who are as deeply concerned as parents that all children, everywhere, have the very best chance possible to grow to the limit of their capabilities and to learn to adjust themselves to their environment.

"It was a truly revealing experience for me, to get a glimpse through the invisible wall that, unfortunately, often exists in parent-teacher relationships. I had not realized that teachers are frequently as bewildered as fathers and mothers and are anxious to do everything in their power to cooperate with parents to develop the best potentialities of children."

These excerpts are indicative of some of the exciting new developments in home-school relationships as parents and teachers discover each other as persons. The farm mother who wrote those paragraphs was a member of the second Annual Workshop sponsored by the Illinois Association for Supervision and

Curriculum Development at the University of Chicago, as part of the Association's Child Growth and Development Project. She was one of a workshop group of thirty—twenty were from the city school systems of Rockford and Rock Island and ten were from the rural communities of McHenry and Whiteside Counties. All were trying to learn more about how children grow and develop. Parents and teachers together were striving for deeper understanding of the children entrusted to their care. This is typical of the new day in which the family and the school are at long last discovering their interdependence.

## History of the Project

How did this Illinois project begin? In the spring of 1947, at its annual meeting at Carbondale, the membership of Illinois ASCD voted unanimously to establish a program for the study of child development and asked the Department of Education of the University of Chicago if the services of the writer could be made available as consultant for the project. Through Ralph W. Tyler, then chairman of the Department, the request was granted, and a pilot project was launched in East St.

Louis through the interest and efforts of Cecile Coombs, then president of IASCD, and music supervisor of the East St. Louis public schools. The program got under way there in January, 1948. The local education association helped to sponsor it, and the public schools cooperated. The Illinois ASCD appointed a research committee to study and evaluate the project; Charlotte Meyer, elementary supervisor of Decatur, was elected chairman.

By the summer of 1948, other communities expressed interest in participating in the project. The public schools of Rockford and Rock Island joined it in the summer of 1948 and sent groups to a one-week workshop at the University of Chicago for the purpose of planning child development study programs for their towns for the school year 1948-49. Because of budgetary problems in its field services, the University of Chicago felt unable to provide consultant services beyond the first year. The school boards of Rockford and Rock Island voted to continue the projects and to pay for the writer's consultant services.

At a second workshop in August, 1949, groups from these two cities worked out plans for the second year of their programs. Two rural communities joined the 1949 workshop and developed plans for launching child development programs in their areas, McHenry County and Whiteside County. In the current school year, therefore, five communities are participating in the Child Growth and Development Project, jointly sponsored by the Illinois ASCD and the University of Chicago. Several other communities are now considering plans for joining the project next year. A community

wishing to become a participating member of the project applies to the Research Committee of the Illinois ASCD, of which Charlotte Meyer is still chairman.

### **Purpose of the Project**

Parents and teachers are the major guides of children. The purpose of the project is to help them gain greater understanding of how boys and girls grow and develop from birth through adolescence. Next to his parents, a child's teachers play the most important role in influencing the development of his personality. All other specialists—counselors, social workers, psychologists, and other so-called experts—are really resource persons who should be available to parents and teachers to help them in their guidance of children. The child's foundations for mental health are laid by parents and teachers who handle each child wisely in their close daily contacts with him.

To prepare them for these major roles, both parents and teachers need special "education." There is little truth in the idea that if one is biologically capable of parenthood that makes one psychologically competent to be a wise parent. That is one major reason for programs of child study and parent education.

Most teachers in their pre-service training learned much about subject matter and how it should be taught, but all too little about children and their needs. Carrying on study-discussion programs together is essential to remove that traditional barrier between parents and teachers which the mother in our opening paragraphs referred to as "the invisible wall." Knowledge and under-

standing do not, of course, insure wise handling of children. Even the most informed adults may fail to establish good relationships with children because their own personality difficulties and emotional problems get in their way. However, without knowing how children grow and develop and what it is reasonable to expect at each stage from infancy through adolescence, the parent and teacher lack important foundation stones upon which to build good relationships.

Another purpose of this project is to help each community develop local leadership among parents and teachers to carry on continuous study-action programs to improve the welfare and education of its children. Since new parents and teachers constantly come into being, and since new research continues to push the boundary lines of our knowledge a little further over the large territory of our ignorance, more or less continuous study is desirable for both parents and teachers to help them keep abreast of new facts and improved methods in this vital field of child development and guidance. Since the acquisition of knowledge is not an end in itself in projects like these, study of facts should always be followed by consideration of their implications and applications regarding mental-health practices in homes and schools.

#### How the Program Is Carried On

Each community which comes into the project determines its own program in terms of its local situation, needs, and interests. It is essential that an outstanding local leader should head the project in each community and be responsible for the over-all program. In some com-

munities the IASCD project is led by the superintendent or his assistant and in others by the elementary supervisor—but this major role may be played by any qualified person. Planning committees meet with the consultant and discuss possible subjects for study and discussion. Subjects selected naturally vary somewhat from community to community. Illustrative of the scope of the project are the five major questions included by both Rockford and Rock Island in their 1948-49 programs. They were:

- What are the outstanding characteristics of growth and development—physical, intellectual, social, and emotional—of children as they progress from infancy through adolescence, period by period?
- What are the basic needs and developmental tasks of children as they progress from level to level of development?
- What are the common problems which arise in homes and schools as children strive to satisfy their needs and accomplish their developmental tasks of each age period?
- How can discipline and freedom be integrated in the training of youth?
- Home-school relationships: how can parents and teachers cooperate to help children develop wholesome, adjustable, effective personalities?

Public announcement is made of the project, the subjects to be studied and discussed, and the general plan of the program. Parents and teachers are invited to enroll in study-discussion groups, choosing the subject they prefer. The response to this invitation has been surprisingly large in every community. Even in rural areas the number of persons enrolled has been about two hundred; in the urban areas the number often rises to four or five hundred in the course of a year's program. An effort is made to keep each study group

small so that everyone may participate in free discussion. Ways of dividing the groups are decided in terms of the subject matter with which the group is concerned. Some like to divide into smaller units that will concentrate on certain age levels or on special aspects of a topic.

Each study group usually has co-leaders, one an educator and one a parent. Each group has two recorders who keep careful records of the entire project. Annotated bibliographies, topically arranged, are provided by the consultant and are often also cooperatively developed during the summer workshop. It is important that reading materials, both books and pamphlets, be provided and made easily available to those who enroll in study groups. These study groups arrange their own meetings and vary considerably in the frequency with which they get together, but twice a month is the usual practice. Each group is responsible for presenting the results of its study and discussion to the community in some sort of a public program during the course of the year.

These public programs have been to the writer, serving as consultant for them, one of the most stimulating and encouraging professional experiences she has known. Most groups began feeling a little frightened at the prospect of such an undertaking. Usually, only about a half dozen members of the group were willing to attempt such public appearances. The early programs, therefore, took the form of a symposium or a panel or round-table discussion. Members of the group who did not appear on the program participated by turning in careful reports of books and pamphlets which they had found help-

ful in relation to the subject being studied and discussed. These reports were put at the disposal of those who did appear on the public program, to help them in the preparation of their presentations. Attendance at these public meetings in most communities is between four and five hundred, so that others besides those definitely involved in study-discussion groups have at least been exposed to the learnings gained by those who are actively engaged in the groups.

As time has gone on, participants have gained in self confidence and resourcefulness. Larger numbers have participated in the public programs, revealing originality and creativity that has been dormant and not hitherto revealed for lack of opportunities of this sort. Programs have grown beyond the usual symposium, panel, or similar presentation, to include original skits, role-playing, movies, and other unusual forms of interpretation. Teachers, parents, and children all participate in these public performances.

After their first year devoted to study and discussion of the five questions listed above, Rockford and Rock Island turned their attention to the implications and applications of what they had learned. This involved consideration of present practices in regard to children in homes and schools. Soon they were launched into studies of school practices involved in pupil records, testing programs, report cards, and parent-teacher conferences. Discussions of such matters inevitably brought up questions of parental attitudes toward school marks, report cards, and many other important areas of home-school understandings and cooperation. Two of the

most effective programs the writer has seen included series of original skits which showed children coming home with their report cards, illustrating the whole gamut of parental attitudes and children's emotions commonly involved in this traditional practice.

In several communities, the basic knowledge gained through study of child growth and development is forming the foundation for curriculum revision. Child development, guidance, curriculum—all these areas are so inter-related that genuine advance in one is not likely to be made without progress in the others.

#### **Role of the Consultant**

In such a project a consultant serves in many and varied ways: in helping to plan each program and trying to guide when a local group feels that it has struck an "impasse"; suggesting appropriate readings, movies, and other related materials; and, in general, putting at the disposal of the groups whatever resources the consultant can offer. In this Illinois project, the writer goes into each participating community several times a year.

In addition, several times a year representatives from all participating communities come to Chicago for a joint meeting with the consultant on Saturday afternoons. Fifty or sixty persons usually gather for these discussions. A leader from each community gives a brief report on current activities of their program. The group feeling that has developed among those active in the five communities is a marked achievement of these Saturday meetings. After hearing about each other's programs there is ample opportunity for exchange of ideas, especially in regard to ways of solving common problems.

The February issue of *Survey* magazine quoted Melvin A. Glasser, executive director of the Midcentury White House Conference on Children and Youth, as follows: "If we can take knowledge about children's mental, emotional, and spiritual needs from the library shelves, integrate it and bring it into current usage, the 1950 Conference will have been a real success." That is precisely what teachers and parents have been endeavoring to do during these past three years in the Illinois Child Growth and Development Project.

## **1950 CONVENTION SUMMARY**

This is what you've been asking for. The report of the study groups from the 1950 Denver meeting will be available late in June. Compiled and edited by Francis Drag, Gladys Potter, Howardine Hoffman, and Mary Beauchamp, the Summary will be on sale in the ASCD office for \$1. Write Arno A. Bellack, 1201 Sixteenth Street, N.W., Washington 6, D.C. Discounts on quantity orders: 2-9 copies, 10%; 10-99 copies, 25%; 100 or more copies, 33 1/3%.

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