

a closer bond between school and community.

Some school-community efforts are relatively insignificant educationally. But it is likely that some avenues of school-community cooperation which will be more and more available to the schools in these times of confusion and doubt will represent cooperation not with the community as a whole, but rather with various segments of the community which are essentially interested in furthering their private convictions. It matters little how sincere or well-meaning such groups may be. The end result, educationally, is clearly a

negation of the very democracy which both the school and the community are so vigorously trying to uphold.

In consequence, it would be well for us to judge carefully and critically the various avenues of school-community cooperation available to us. That we should genuinely cooperate with the real community is perfectly obvious. But we should be clear as to whether we are cooperating with the real community or with some more vocal, but partial, element within the community. The one approach is educationally and socially sound, the other is educationally and socially indefensible.

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## *Programs for Young Children*

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**Schools must meet certain challenges if they are to develop satisfactory programs for young children. Some of these challenges are discussed by Millie Almy, Associate Professor of Child Development and Family Life at the University of Cincinnati.**

"THE young children in our neighborhood have no place to play but the street." "Our children need an earlier opportunity to learn how to get along well with each other." "We ought to start our parent education long before children reach first grade." "Our children come from such limited home backgrounds. We need a kindergarten to enrich their experiences before they tackle learning to read." These are but a few of the comments one hears nowadays which indicate a growing conviction of the need for increased educational services for young children.

Schools that already have kindergartens are stressing their importance

by urging all parents to send their children to them, and by drawing kindergartens into closer relationship with the rest of the school program. In addition to their kindergartens for five-year-olds, some schools are including groups for four-year-olds, and in a few instances even for three-year-olds. Rural schools as well as those in urban areas are increasingly concerned with providing for young children.

Whether or not children will benefit from this concern may depend both on the kind of program provided and on the expectations held for it. Is it not possible to detect in some of the thinking about the extension of school serv-

ices downward, the idea that here is a panacea for many educational ills? Reading difficulties, emotional and social maladjustments, problems with parents—all of these are to be remedied by an earlier beginning in school life. Some discussions of what is to be achieved by such a program suggest that once again children are to be the pawns in an adult scheme of things. In the depression years they went to nursery schools set up to give work to unemployed teachers; in the war years they went to child care centers to release women for defense industry. Now there are at least some instances in which children are going to kindergarten because the adults are placing a premium on "reading readiness."

### Improvement of Living

Justification for a good program for young children does not need to be sought in their future well-being, though it may well contribute to that, but can rather be found in the immediate improvement of their day-to-day living. Young children whose growing muscles and minds seek challenge and soon exhaust the possibilities in cramped, overcrowded city living; children whose social powers are expanding too rapidly to find complete satisfaction in the typical small family of today; children who have little opportunity to live at their own pace but must constantly keep up with adults or older children; children who have become the victims of such circumstances in the adult world as frequent moving from one place to another, divorce, separation or death; children whose living is so lacking in stimulation or so remote from other families as to tend toward

passivity and dullness; all of these and a variety of others are children for whom the school rightly feels increasing concern. If it is to be of help to them it will consider no one aspect of their development apart from any other. It will face the question of the kinds of services it should offer to supplement the experiences children are already having.

### Children Are Family-Minded

By and large the under-sixes are family-minded. At three and at four, and sometimes even at five, the child is very much involved in living through his relationships with his parents and his brothers and sisters. These are the years when, having established for himself the fact of his parents' love for him and their appreciation of him as a unique individual, he begins to work out certain identifications with them. His early dramatic play is largely centered around the roles of father and mother, although as he grows older and imagination flourishes he may in kaleidoscopic succession be a bus driver, a milkman, a roaring tiger or a Hopalong Cassidy. Despite these make-believe ventures into the world beyond his home, he wants frequent reassurance of his special place in the family.

### SCHOOLS MUST MEET THESE CHALLENGES

Whatever program is planned for the young child, then, will need to be such as to reinforce his feelings of acceptance and security in his family.

**Can the transition from home to school be a gradual one?**

The assumption that "school begins" on some one day in early September, at

which time the beginners appear with their mothers, or in the tow of an older brother or sister, needs revision insofar as the under-sixes are concerned. Their beginning days may be extended over a period of a week or more. Threes and fours especially often require the protection of mother's presence as they explore the new environment. When they have found that there are fascinating things to do, interesting youngsters to do them with, and teachers who are sympathetic and understanding to help them settle the difficulties which inevitably arise, they themselves are ready to say, "Bye now. See you later."

This kind of parent participation in the child's school entrance involves getting to know something about each child and his parent *before* the beginning days of school. Whether Johnny is an indulged only child who has never been out of his mother's sight, an upset little boy who has lived in ten different places in four short years, or a "toughie" who has been well schooled by his older brothers is an important consideration in deciding whether his "first" day should be when there are to be only a few children, or whether it should come later when the full group is assembled.

Some schools have already worked out arrangements whereby teachers see prospective kindergartners in the spring before they enter, or the first half-month of school is devoted to interviews and a gradual beginning of the regular program. In too many other schools teachers who have the courage of their convictions in this matter find that they somehow must create the time for it, perhaps even by cutting their vacations short, since it is not con-

sistent with school policy to permit less than the full quota of children to enter at one time.

School attendance policies also may be seriously challenged by the needs of the under-sixes. This is not merely a matter of their somewhat greater susceptibility to illness, but is related to the necessity for making the relationship between home and school an easy and flexible one. For example, the child who quite naturally feels his place in the family threatened by a new baby certainly should not begin school at the moment the baby is about to arrive, nor if he has been in school for some time is it unreasonable to plan a short "vacation" from school for him when his mother returns from the hospital. Similarly, the three- or four-year-old whose daddy's business keeps him away from home for weeks at a time ought not be penalized for his healthy desire to stay out of school on his father's infrequent days at home.

### Can parents play a real part in the program for young children?

While there is increasing recognition of the importance of parent involvement at all levels of the school program, at no other time is participation by parents more essential than at the beginning. Parents participate not only in the early days of helping the child find his way in the new environment but continuously as the year goes on. This is not to say that every parent takes a turn actually working in the group, or serving on some committee, or even attends every parent meeting, although these are ways in which many parents do maintain a degree of closeness to their child. It does mean that

the teacher, coming to know the parents, helps each one to find the ways in which he or she can be most helpful to the child. It involves a respect for individual differences among parents which has often been sadly lacking in traditional school programs, and even in many modern schools. It assumes that every parent, with his own particular background of experience, does the best he can with his child, even though that "best" may not at all conform to usual standards. It recognizes that it is only in an atmosphere in which there is respect for them as human beings and a deep appreciation of the problems with which they struggle, that parents can develop the insights and understandings which may improve their relationships with their children.

**Can the program for young children be adapted to the family living in the community it serves?**

Since the young child has so much to gain from constructive family relationships, and since there is general agreement that any school program for him should reinforce and supplement home living, it is evident that programs will vary considerably depending on the contributions which homes are able to make. In cities many families have little play space or play equipment for young children. The small apartment may be efficient but it was not planned so that youngsters living in it can run, climb, build or even make the normal amount of noise. Certainly it gives little opportunity to carry out highly imaginative play ideas without constant adult interference. From this point of view, "privileged" children who must constantly keep up with adults or older children

have about as much need for supplementation to the home as do those who live in the deprived sections of the city. Children in the latter areas need many more opportunities to explore size, shape, color, texture, sound; to test out relationships and to solve problems, than are available in their homes. Rural children have more chance to explore, but may lack the stimulation of children and adults outside the immediate family, and so become passive and retiring.

If programs were adapted to the needs of these children one might find a city system providing, for example, not only kindergartens for five-year-olds but, in crowded housing areas, nursery schools for children as young as three. These might well be year-around programs with lunch and nap each day. In less crowded sections, particularly where the school and homes are easily accessible to each other, a shorter program may be more desirable for the younger children.

In some situations professional guidance may be offered to cooperative groups staffed in part by parents. Particularly in small communities in which adequate play space and equipment are available to children in their own back yards, the school may put its emphasis on "demonstration" nursery schools and study groups for parents so that they can more adequately supervise and guide the children. In rural areas, rather than attempt to bring children long distances by bus to consolidated schools, the school may need to find ways to go to the children. For example, a mobile unit might provide a modified nursery school or kindergarten program for a small group of children in

each of several settlements two or three days a week.

**Can the program for young children be planned in the light of their developmental characteristics?**

The young child, to a considerably greater extent than his older brother or sister, is a creature of sheer physical demand. When he has sat too long in one spot, he cannot relieve his tension by twisting and squirming but only by really stretching every large muscle. When he is hungry, he is hungry all over and cannot wait quietly for food to appear. When he is tired, and fatigue comes at more frequent intervals to the young child than to the older one, he is completely unreasonable. His sense of time, his pace, his social capacity, are quite different from those of the older child. The young child remains, at least until five, quite the individual. He ambles through the day, choosing this child and that for his pals, with very little sense of the totality of the group. When there are too many children he becomes confused and uncertain. Thus programs for young children demand small groups, numbering not more than fifteen three-year-olds or twenty four-year-olds, and a relaxed atmosphere.

The young child is an active learner. By and large, his experience if it is to be meaningful needs to be firsthand. He learns not only by looking and listening, but also by feeling, tasting, smelling. He is a thinker, but his logic, because of the limitations of his experience, may not conform to adult ideas. He can, given proper opportunities, work out for himself the answers to many important problems. The environment which this demands is one

which invites free experimentation and one in which materials themselves suggest not the answers, but rather means to finding the answers.

More than he is at later age levels, the child when he is young is at the mercy of his emotions. Lacking the experience and perspective of the older youngster, he is more pushed by his immediate feelings, and more inclined to give them free expression. Happiness, sheer joy in living, comes out in peals of laughter, snatches of song and vigorous, noisy play. Anger, resentment and fear are equally vivid experiences, to which adult responses may contribute constructively or destructively. If the program for young children is to promote mental health, it must recognize that children of this age often do have mean and hateful feelings; that it is much better to acknowledge than to attempt to suppress such feelings; that there are constructive ways in which these feelings may be channeled; and finally, that children who experience such feelings in excess may require professional help beyond the ability of the nursery school or kindergarten teacher.

**Can the program for young children rely on specially trained teachers?**

One may be an excellent teacher of six-, seven- and eight-year-olds and still be quite unprepared for three- or four-year-olds. How to handle an angry three-year-old who bites so that the biter receives constructive help and the bitten one is sufficiently solaced; how to cope with the free-flowing language of the four-year-old in a way which supports his creativity and his sense of importance without encouraging him to obnoxiousness; what to say to the young-

ster whose curious explorations around the water fountain have just caused its overflow; how to allay the anxiety of a three-year-old who has been confronted with a Halloween mask for the first time; how to be serene and unhurried, yet ready to move from one spot to another in a second's time when needed—these are but a few examples of the understandings and skills expected from teachers of young children. It is likely that these cannot be learned from books, but must be developed through actual living with the children. If young children are to be protected from adults who may mean well but are lacking in training and experience, it is apparent that special standards and requirements must be set for those who intend to become their teachers. It is encouraging that in a few instances states are providing for special certification for nursery school and kindergarten teachers, or are giving credit for nursery school experience toward their early childhood teaching certificates.

**Can the school take the consequences of a good program for young children?**

In part this is a question related to

the demands a good program makes. Can the school adjust itself to gradual admissions, to parent participation, to the varied physical and emotional needs of young children, to a program whose worth cannot be measured by paper-and-pencil techniques? The question relates in part to what may happen in a school which does so adjust itself. Such a school acquires a new flexibility; it looks on parents with a new eye; it is likely to see new importance in learning through direct experience; it becomes more concerned with the total living of children. Parents who have grown along with their children will not expect to be treated with less respect or understanding because their youngsters are entering first grade. Children, likewise, will be less apt to retreat; they will have more powerful ideas, be more creative and be more eager to learn when they begin "regular" school.

All of this is no small challenge to school adaptability. It is one which an increasing number of schools are meeting, and which many more will have to tackle, if young children are to have the rich, well-rounded living which is rightfully theirs.

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