Psychosomatic Illness and Emotional Needs

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This article describes an effort to help teachers gain greater insight into the emotional problems of young people. Robert S. Fleming is professor of education, University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

IF TEACHERS could know the innermost thoughts of many of their students, they would likely discover that often children are “crying from within.” The concerns of some children are so great that they are likely to sit in class rooms brooding, thinking and worrying about the problems, anxieties, fears, tensions and frustrations which are so real to them. As teachers engage in their teaching of “subjects,” many children are victims of emotional problems. If these frustrations in children continue, and if the teacher strives to fulfill his academic objectives only, observable evidences of tension sometimes arise in the form of symptoms of physical illness.

Flanders Dunnbar has said, “A child may become ill because he is unhappy or bewildered.”¹ This suggests the need for careful consideration of illness and its relation to behavior.

Understanding Emotional Needs

For years there has been a growing emphasis upon understanding the nature of emotional needs. The work of Prescott, Murray, Frank, Hymes, Baruch, and Raths has led to extensive research and interest in the meaning and the characteristics of emotional needs. One finds numerous lists of emotional needs throughout educational literature. Raths’ classification of needs includes the following:

The need for belonging
The need for love and affection
The need for achievement
The need for economic security
The need for freedom from fear
The need for freedom from guilt
The need for sharing
The need for understanding.

The needs theory developed by Raths and his associates also indicates that there are four possible consequences of unfulfilled emotional needs. This hypothesis is based in part on Dollard’s Frustration-Aggression Theory. Raths believed that as emotional needs are unfulfilled four major frustrations might develop. They are:

The individual becomes extremely aggressive
The individual becomes submissive
The individual tends to withdraw from his group and to isolate himself
The individual becomes physically ill
Combination of these four.

The relationship between unfulfilled needs and illness was the basis of a re-


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cent investigation. Today one finds many evidences of a growing interest in an understanding of psychosomatic illness. James Halliday describes the psychosomatic condition as bodily disorder whose nature can be understood only when emotional disturbances are investigated in relation to physical disturbances. This new field has great implications for education.

**AN EXPLORATORY STUDY**

In order to study the nature of psychosomatic illness and its relationship to the emotional needs of children, the working hypothesis was formulated that as teachers attempt to meet the emotional needs of children, psychosomatic manifestations become less frequent and less acute. The study was thought of as one of helping teachers to identify and to meet the emotional needs of children as a means of reducing certain forms of physical illness. The study began with the identification of thirty-eight children in an elementary school in a metropolitan area who had a previous history of illness. In fact, the children were first identified from existing health records in the office of the school nurse.

An in-service teacher education program was planned which was to help teachers determine ways of working with children with psychosomatic illness. The in-service program consisted of frequent conferences to help teachers become sensitive to the eight emotional needs and their implications for working with children. A series of human relations films were used. When teachers were brought together to talk about their purposes it was not at all unusual to find them on the defensive. Over and over again teachers wanted to be told what to do with children showing psychosomatic symptoms. Through the use of films and other impersonal media teachers were helped to focus their attention upon emotional needs.

The study was an exploratory, experimental one in which there was a comparison of a "before" and "after" nature. An Experimental Group and a **Comparison Group** were set up in order to be able to draw some conclusions concerning the effects of the in-service program on the health of children in the Experimental Group. It was assumed that teachers in the Experimental Group would work with their children in a manner quite different from the way the teachers in the Comparison Group worked.

The Experimental Group was composed of a group of twenty-six children whereas the Comparison Group consisted of twelve children. The twenty-six children in the Experimental Group were represented by nine teachers in the in-service program. The children in the study had such physical difficulties as: stomach upsets, allergies, metabolic difficulties, upper respiratory infections, kidney difficulties, "accident prone" children, "nervous children," and children with frequent headaches. Care was taken to make sure that there were children in both the Experimental Group and the Comparison Group who had such physical difficulties.

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mental and the Comparison Group representing various difficulties. Also, consideration was given to factors of sex, age, grade, and variety of psychosomatic disturbances.

All children in the study, Experimental and Comparison, were examined by a medical doctor at the beginning of the study and at the end of the study. In addition, the teacher, school nurse, and the investigator kept a close check on the children and prepared extensive records on their health during the experimental period. The nurse and the doctor were available throughout the study to observe the children and to make necessary records. The crux of the design of this investigation lay in the effectiveness of the in-service program which was to be developed.

Tests To Determine Needs

As an aid in determining unfulfilled needs, a Needs Test was given. The Wishing Well was used for grades 1, 2, and 3 and Self-Portrait was given in grades 4, 5, and 6. These tests were thought of as sources of data which were to be used with all other available data. This was of great importance since specific therapy for specific needs was thought to be required. After the Needs Tests were given and the teachers had an opportunity to pool these results with all other available information concerning each child, a special program was designed for each person in the Experimental Group. This "tailor-made" program was thought of as an attempt to meet the child's unfulfilled emotional needs. That is to say, the specific suggestions were made in a setting in which the interest of the child, the work of the group, the materials available, and the setting of the school in its community were taken into account. Such a plan was to be used as a basis for planning with the teachers the ways in which they might extend and apply the basic concepts of meeting emotional needs of children.

The teachers in this investigation sought opportunities to work with children in a manner which would free them, which would make them secure, which would help them like school, which would help them recognize success, which would help them work on things for which they saw purpose, which would give them opportunities to see more clearly what they were doing in school, which would help them become better participants in their group. Such activities are often very simple activities for teachers to use in working with children. The point seemed to become one of teachers relating themselves to children in a manner characterized by purposeful activity in a friendly, relaxed setting. Such a method of relating oneself to children is of tremendous importance in maintaining the emotional security of boys and girls.

A few examples of the things a teacher did for a child who had a need for achievement were:

Provided an opportunity for him to list on the board the things that he had accomplished.
Provided an opportunity for him to learn some skill in art or music which he shared with other people in the group.

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* Ibid.

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Congratulated him on his contributions to the class planning.

Complimented him on his accomplishments of the day.

Had him keep a folder with samples of work which would help him recognize growth.

Numerous other activities were thought of and were carried through, but this list suggests some of the ways in which the teacher attempted to meet this boy’s need for achievement.

Use of Suggestions

The importance of such suggestions as these seem to lie in their consistent use. Each suggestion was not necessarily used daily and yet it was pointed out how important it is for teachers to work with children consistently day after day. If one were to analyze the kinds of things which teachers did most frequently in meeting the emotional needs of children, they would likely fall under such ideas as: teachers did listen to children, they did relate the work the children were doing to things they could do, they helped children save face with their group, they worked in a calm, relaxed manner, they tended to avoid tension, they analyzed the situations which were difficult, they made special provision for certain individuals to extend their work, they were often careful to explain to children what was to be done, what was expected, details of situations. They gave individuals opportunities to do many things. They overlooked trivial situations which made for anxiety, worry, frustration.

The teachers in this study did not produce a formula for teaching. Neither did each teacher in the study employ the same procedures for any particular situation. One would not expect all teachers to work in a common way. Yet the common element in the work of the teachers in the Experimental Group seemed to represent a sincere effort on the part of all to help each child function consistently and continuously in a free, relaxed manner. The dynamics of this process comes, not by any one plan or group of plans which teachers employed, but through the consistent use of the underlying philosophy which has been described. That is to say, a child having a need for achievement must experience success many times a day, day in and day out, over a long period of time in order for frustrations caused by a lack of feeling of success to disappear. One of the most crucial characteristics of the needs approach seems to be the consistent nature of its application. One cannot help children overcome psychosomatic difficulties by trying to meet emotional needs unless he is willing to view the process as a long term one.

The very nature of the psychosomatic manifestations makes it impossible for one to study thoroughly a child with psychosomatic symptoms unless he attempts to consider all aspects of his day by day life. Psychosomatic therapy is not a simple procedure in which one takes “a pill for a pain.” Instead, the identification and fulfillment of emotional needs is an intricate and a complex procedure. This calls for detailed information concerning the child, his background, his physical symptoms, the onset of the difficulty and the relationship or factors associated with the difficulty. Such information is of vital importance in helping the teacher plan the design for beginning her work to
meet the needs of an individual child.

A summary of the progress of each child was important as a means of measuring the results of the study and of testing the underlying hypothesis. This included health, relationship with other children, attendance, general well-being and a daily log kept by the teacher.

Findings of the Study

The intensity of the psychosomatic syndrome was described by the physician at the beginning and at the end of the exploratory period. The physician did not know which children composed the "Experimental Group" and which ones were in the "Comparison Group." In summarizing, 96.1% of the children in the Experimental Group showed significant improvement, whereas 50% of the children in the Comparison Group showed significant improvement. This comparison in improvement was judged by the medical doctor. According to the doctor's records, a consideration of emotional factors should be given major emphasis in working with all children in the two groups.

In terms of frequency, 80.8% of the Experimental Group were having symptoms, daily, or several times a day, at the beginning of the investigation, while at the close of the period 84.7% of the children in this group had symptoms described by parents and teachers as occurring occasionally. This gain was not true in the Comparison Group, since 41.6% of the children in this group continued to have symptoms daily.

Records of school attendance were kept for all children in the study. These records consisted only of absences due to illness. A comparison of the monthly attendance records of the children was made with the record of the same period during the previous year. An analysis of the data shows that significant improvement in school attendance was made in the Experimental Group with a gain of 49.7% in attendance during the 1949 school year over the same period during 1948. The reverse was true in the Comparison Group. The Comparison Group had a loss of 40.9% in attendance for 1949 over 1948. This may be stated more specifically by saying that during 1948 the Experimental Group was absent 91 days during 1948 and 128 days in 1949.

Thus, it is shown that as teachers become sensitive to the nature of emotional needs, and as they attempt to meet specific needs of an individual child having psychosomatic manifestations, significant improvement in the child's health takes place. This occurs in terms of a reduction in both intensity and frequency of illness and makes for improved school attendance.

And so it seems that the teachers of America have the potential ability of working with boys and girls in a manner which contributes to the meeting of their needs and hence to the improvement of many health problems.