

# *Fifth Graders Help to Solve an Interpersonal Problem*

SYLVIA BEHART SHUGRUE

"I hate Joan," written on a wall of the school building served to involve a group of fifth-grade children in a sequence of discussions, in planning and evaluation. The experience, according to Sylvia Behart Shugrue, Denver, Colorado, gave the children new insights into behavior and helped them to change their attitudes toward a rejected member of their group.

IT HAD BEEN EVIDENT for a long time that Joan was an unwanted member of the fifth grade. Children avoided her, teased or quarrelled with her. Sociometric tests which were made recurrently to determine grouping, showed that Joan had not been chosen at any time by any child during a two year period.

Joan was overweight, disheveled in appearance and dirty. In general, she took little interest in school work. Her papers were untidy and often incomplete. Yet a Kuhlmann-Anderson Test indicated that she had better than average ability.

The teacher felt that she had failed to help Joan relate to other children. At a mountain picnic which took place two days before Joan's problem claimed the attention of the group, Joan sat by the teacher at lunch. She failed to join the other children either at the campfire or in games.

The following note forced the teacher to seek the help of the group.

May 21, 1951

Dear teacher,

A girl came into my store and told

me that some words had been scratched on the lavatory wall and that my daughter's name was signed to them. The words said, "I hate Joan." Of course, I scolded Betty and she said she didn't know anything about it. Betty feels bad and wants me to write this note to see if there is any way of getting the writing off the wall. Thank you.

(Signed by Betty's mother.)

## **A Group Studies Its Behavior**

Fortunately, Joan was absent the morning the note arrived. The teacher asked the girls into the hall for a discussion. The girls arranged themselves in a circle and the following discussion occurred:

Teacher: We have a little problem to solve about the writing on the wall in the girl's lavatory.

Child: I didn't do it.

Child: Neither did I.

Child: Maybe it was Roberta. It looks like her handwriting but she isn't here.

Teacher: How long has the writing been there?

Child: Since last week.

Teacher: Oh, I didn't know that. I have known for a long time that no one in the room likes Joan, but I just didn't know what to do about it.

Child: I like her sometimes.

Child: I play with her once in a while.

Teacher: But I think it is pretty plain that Joan has no friends in the room.

What does she do that you don't like?

Child: She chews gum.

Child: And sucks her thumb. That is what is so disgusting.

Child: And she eats all the time, and she hits us.

Child: When two of us are talking, she comes up and says, "What did you say?"

Teacher: Do you tease her?

Child: The boys do, too.

Child: She corners me in the lavatory and won't let me go.

Child: She snatches my comb and combs her own hair with it.

Child: And her hair is dirty, too.

Child: The boys say Joan has cooties.

Child: I play with her but when I have to leave she gets mad and says, "You don't like me."

Teacher: Why do you think Joan acts this way?

Child: I don't know.

Child: I think she likes attention.

Teacher: I think she does, too. Don't we all like to get attention? I do. What do you think Joan could do to make you like her?

Child: She could stop chewing all the time and poking everyone.

Child: She could stop sucking her thumb.

Child: Well, I guess she could at least stop chewing. I think it might be

hard for her to stop sucking her thumb.

Teacher: Lots of times people eat because they are not very happy. Or even suck their thumbs.

Child: Yes, sort of sit around and just eat all the time. They don't have anything better to do.

Teacher: I think that is why Joan sucks her thumb. But you couldn't help her to break the habit by telling her about it. You might be able to help her feel happier. That might eventually help her to stop sucking her thumb. Can you think of some way you could help Joan feel better?

Child: We could stop hitting for her in Dodge Ball.

Child: And let her have a big part in a play once in a while.

Child: Yes, and we could stop saying when she is up at bat, "Here comes another out."

Teacher: You kids have your mothers to help you choose what to wear and how to fix your hair. I don't believe that Joan does.

Child: No. Joan's mother has a job in the daytime and one at night, too. Joan and her brother sometimes sleep in the house all night alone.

Teacher: Her mother must work very hard. She makes Joan's clothes.

Child: Her clothes are all right. They're as cute as some of ours.

Child: She is too fat. Maybe we could help her to reduce.

Teacher: Her mother does work hard. Maybe she doesn't have the time to spend on Joan. Have you ever been to her house?

Child: I have. Gee, you should have seen it. Cups and food all over the floor, and paper, too.

Child: Joan has to wash all the dishes. Her brother is supposed to help her. But when it is time to do anything, he gets lost.

Child: Her mother blames Joan for everything. She was almost late to come to the picnic because she had to clean the house before she could go.

Teacher: A while back you kids were small and your mothers helped you do a lot of things. Now you can do things for yourselves. You know, little girls learn how to be little girls from other little girls and grown-up women. Do you think you could help Joan to become a more likeable little girl?

Child: I could show her how to fix her hair.

Child: So could I. (Many girls volunteer.)

Teacher: I thought of suggesting to Joan something about her hair. I didn't know how to do it. Maybe if she washes it some night, I could cut it the next day.

Child: You don't need to do that. She just had a permanent.

Child: I could show her how to fix it. (Many volunteer.)

Child: Let Paula.

Teacher: Would your mother let you?

Paula: Yes. Once when Joan was at my house, she said, "I wish I was as pretty as you are," and I said, "You can be. Just watch your colors and match them."

Child: We could get her some berets and a comb.

Child: Maybe she would like some berets and then she wouldn't be swinging her hair around all the time.

Teacher: Well, now, we'll just have to find a way to do all of this so she won't know we've discussed it.

Child: You just can't come right out with it, you sort of have to go around it in a circle.

The discussion terminated with the decisions that Paula would help Joan to fix her hair. The children would choose Joan for important roles in plays and they would not single her out for elimination in Dodge Ball games. One child further suggested that, since the boys also teased Joan, the next thing to do was to include the boys in their plans.

### A Positive Approach Is Made

The boys responded to a discussion of Joan's problem in much the same way as the girls. They were sympathetic and willing to help. One new idea was introduced. It had taken Joan a long time to get the way she was and it would probably take a long time for her to change. Many times she might appear to be the same or worse. But the group must keep on with the plan it had drawn up and not get mad or discouraged.

When Joan returned to school in the afternoon, the girls made efforts to include her in conversations and to see that she had a desirable job working on the papier mâché exhibits. Paula made arrangements to help Joan with her hair and another child asked Joan to go to the movies the following Saturday. Joan began to look puzzled as the afternoon work went on. The teacher sent her on an errand.

Teacher: Look, boys and girls, you are laying this on too thick. Joan is getting suspicious.

Child: She asked Paula why the kids were being so nice to her and Paula said, "I guess they are just in a good humor."

Teacher: That was quick thinking. Well, take it easy! A little at a time!

On May 23rd, the teacher made the following observations: Girls chose Joan for main part in a play. A boy chose her to wash the boards. Joan then volunteered to clean the ledges. She did both jobs with care. Joan was nominated to accompany a sixth grade child to a luncheon honoring two visiting German children. The children decided that Joan wouldn't feel comfortable and that forcing her into a difficult situation was not the way to help Joan feel better. They voted for another child.

### Time Is Needed for Change

During discussions which took place between May 25th and May 28th, the children made the following observations: Joan smiles more than she did. She is not sucking her thumb as much as before. She has more things to do. She is better at ball. Joan gets her work done and wrote a good letter. She was suspicious at first, but that was because we were too nice to her. Now she doesn't suspect.

The evaluation which took place May 29th, indicated that children were beginning to see the relationship between Joan's behavior and their own. They were also beginning to see that time was needed to change behavior.

Child: Joan is better at ball.

Teacher: Why do you think she has improved?

Child: Before she didn't care. Now she does.

Child: We give her more chances to dodge.

Child: Yes, but she was mean today.

Child: I noticed that, too.

Teacher: Remember! We said it would take a while for Joan to change and we would have to be patient.

Child: How long should it take? It's been over a week!

Child: Longer than that.

Teacher: Much longer.

On May 31st, a group of fifth grade children from another school came to see the papier mâché exhibits that had been completed and to go to a nearby park for a picnic lunch. Joan walked to the picnic with Paula and two girls from the visiting school. She ate her lunch with this group and played in the games.

June 6th was the last day on which the teacher discussed the case of Joan with the children. As expressed by the children, Joan felt better, she smiled more and teased less. She had more things to occupy her time. Joan paid more attention to school activities and "got to go with kids." She walked home with other children.

In giving reasons for her past behavior, one child said, "Before, nobody talked to her so she tried to talk to kids, even to fight them."

In general, much tension had left the total group and several other rejected children were responding to the warmth of the situation by volunteering ideas and participating in activities.

School closed June 7th and the teacher will not continue her work with this group the following year. The children may or may not continue in this project of helping group rela-

tions, but the insights gained into causes of behavior and how to effect changes in behavior will probably be permanent. In a letter to the teacher telling what she had learned during the year, one child wrote, "I learned what to do about Joan and other children like her."

Working for the solution of this interpersonal problem seemed to follow a sequence. The children first examined their feelings about Joan. They analyzed what Joan did to incite these feelings. Then they sought causes for Joan's behavior. This developed a picture of Joan's troubled home life and increased their sympathy for Joan. Thus motivated, they planned possible ways to help Joan feel better in school. The plans called for changing their own behavior toward Joan.

The recurrent discussions increased their perception of how one person's behavior affects that of another and also gave the children some conception of the length of time necessary to effect change.

Although the teacher never discovered who wrote on the lavatory wall, she learned that children can understand behavior. They can accept and understand their roles in a group and work constructively to improve the personality of the membership. The teacher also learned that by accepting children as they are, she could set the stage for children to accept each other. As an adult, she could not solve their interpersonal problems, but she could help to create an atmosphere in which children, with guidance, could work successfully for solutions.

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## *A School Council Aids Learning*

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This article shows how a student council, initiated and conducted by elementary school pupils, served as a better aid for learning. Thorsten R. Carlson is associate professor of education and principal of the Campus Laboratory School, and Edwena M. Moore is assistant professor of education and supervisor of the fourth grade of the Campus Laboratory School, San Diego State College, California.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS have proved that children can effectively structure and direct their own school government. The staff of the Campus Laboratory School, San Diego State College, because of their belief that real pupil control "originates with the children themselves," decided to en-

courage the re-development of student government and management of school affairs. The principle was unanimously accepted that the initiation should come from the children. Any indications of initiative or interest on the part of the children were to be earnestly encouraged and nurtured.

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