



## *Parental Attitudes and Methods Affect Pre-School Children*

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Preliminary findings are here reported in a two-year study of identification in young children, in an attempt to determine what methods of child-rearing produce the greatest and the least identification with their parents.

**E**ducators have long recognized that the success of their efforts to facilitate the intellectual and emotional development of a child depends to a considerable extent on what that child is like when he first enters school. Some children appear to be eminently "teachable" from kindergarten on, while others seem to resist the best efforts of the school system to obtain their interest and cooperation in the educative process.

It is possible, of course, that the "teachable" children are born that way.

It seems more likely, however, on the basis of present-day thinking, that the readiness for learning which the child has when he begins school is a product of many interacting factors: native ability is one of them, undoubtedly, but the things the parents have tried to teach the child and the methods they have employed in their training should also have a profound influence.

What makes a child receptive to being taught? First of all, he must be able to accept the values of the adult society about the worth-whileness of

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what is being taught; in addition, he must be able to develop a positive relationship with the teacher. It has been claimed that both these abilities are products of the process called "identification." That is, theory says that if a child identifies thoroughly with his parents by the time he is five years old, he will automatically incorporate many of their values as his own. Furthermore, he will be able to *transfer* identification: that is, having achieved a relationship of strong identification with his parents, he will be more able to do so with his teacher, and will thus be motivated to accept *her* values as his own. Presumably, if this last step occurs, he is a teachable child.

Of course, many other elements are involved in equipping a child with optimal attitudes toward learning, but the process of identification of the child with his parents during the pre-school years should be of central importance. For this reason (as well as because of interest in the problem for its own sake!) the Laboratory of Human Development<sup>1</sup> has undertaken a two-year study of identification in young children, attempting to determine what methods of child-rearing produce the greatest and the least identification of children with their parents.

It is not possible at the present time to report findings on the central prob-

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<sup>1</sup> The Laboratory of Human Development is an organization in the Graduate School of Education at Harvard. It is devoted to the study of personality development in children, and is headed by Dr. R. R. Sears and Dr. J. W. M. Whiting.

lem of the study. The data are currently being analyzed. The readers may be interested, however, in a description of the kinds of information which have been sought, and of the methods of gathering the information. A few preliminary findings which have emerged as by-products of the main analysis can also be reported here.

### **Interviews with Mothers**

The group selected for study were 379 families in a suburb of Boston. Only families where both parents were present in the home were included. An effort was made to include families with a wide range of occupational and educational backgrounds.

Information on parental attitudes and child-rearing techniques was obtained through detailed interviews with each of the mothers in the group studied. While most of the families had other children besides the one in kindergarten, the mother was asked to focus her attention on the kindergarten child, and to describe her philosophy of training and the methods she had used in his up-bringing since the time he was born. Following is an outline of some of the major topics which were discussed:

Parental handling of major behavior areas:

- Weaning, feeding problems
- Toilet training
- Sex training
- Aggression control
- Dependency and independency
- Training for neatness, quietness, manners.
- Techniques of discipline:
  - Physical punishment
  - Withdrawal of privileges

Praise  
Reward  
Reasoning  
Isolation  
Withdrawal of love.

Agents of child-care and child-training:

Participation of mother  
of father  
of other relatives  
of maids and sitters.

Inter-relationships of family members:

Division of responsibility between  
husband and wife

Affectional warmth, demonstrativeness

Was the child "wanted" by both  
parents?

Mother's satisfaction with the  
mother role.

From the interviews with mothers, then, the research workers have learned a great deal about the experiences each child has had in his home environment. The next problem was to measure in some way the level of identification with adult figures which each child had achieved. Information on this question was obtained by teachers and by Laboratory staff members observing the children in kindergarten. The teachers rated each child on a number of traits (such as the amount of "adult-like," responsible behavior he showed) on the basis of their knowledge of the way the child behaved in kindergarten. The staff members conducted a number of projective tests sessions with each child. The child was given a doll house to play with, and was asked to tell a story about the people in the house—what they did, how they felt. A record was made of which doll the child preferred

to use as the main character in acting out his imaginary stories, on the assumption that the use of a parent's role in fantasy is part of the process of identifying with the parent. In addition, the child was told the beginning of several stories, and was then asked to tell how the story would end. Some of the stories were concerned with the usual kind of "naughty" behavior for which a child is likely to be corrected at home. For example, the child is told a story about a little boy (or girl, if the child is a girl) who wants to sharpen a pencil, and sees a knife on the kitchen table. He tries to use the knife, and accidentally drops it, and it makes a cut on the kitchen floor. The story-teller, who has been acting out the story with dolls in the doll house, then gives the boy-doll to the child, and says: "And what do you suppose happens now?"

The purpose of these stories was to find out whether the child had accepted adult values to the extent of taking responsibility for an act of this kind and trying to put it right in some way, or whether he would simply try to hide it from his parents in order to avoid unpleasant consequences. The assumption was that the highly identified child would have incorporated adult values as his own, and that the story-endings which he told would reflect this fact.

The analysis of the study's findings involves comparing the attitudes and techniques of parents with their children's level of identification with adult figures, as revealed in their play and their every-day activities at kindergarten. This comparison is now being undertaken, and its results will be pub-

lished later. Some results of a more descriptive nature are now available.

### Parents' Expectations Differ

From the standpoint of understanding the backgrounds of children who arrive at kindergarten to begin their school careers, educators may be interested in some of the differences in the home experiences which have laid the foundation for their reaction to school. One clue to the differences between boys and girls in their behavior in kindergarten may lie in the different ways parents treat children, depending on whether the child is a boy or girl. Judging from mothers' reports, boys are allowed to show more aggression than are girls: indeed, mothers very often encourage their sons to fight back when there are arguments with other children, while girls are more likely to be told to come home and leave the other children alone if trouble develops. Within the home, boys are allowed (perhaps expected) to indulge in more displays of temper toward their parents, although not very much of this sort of behavior is permitted in either boys or girls. On the other hand, boys are spanked considerably more often than girls—at the age of five, the boys in the group studied were spanked on the average about every two weeks, while for the girls, the average was more nearly once a month. Mothers

appear to discipline their girls in other ways: for example, by showing coldness and turning away from them until acceptable behavior is forthcoming. Mothers also appear to set somewhat higher standards for girls than for boys when it comes to manners and neatness.

While the relationships between techniques of discipline and a child's behavior are not yet clear, it appears likely from preliminary findings that the techniques employed with boys are more likely to produce aggressive behavior in them and little sense of guilt, while those employed with girls are the sort which lead to the development of conscience.

Interesting differences are also found in the child-training practices of parents with different socio-economic backgrounds. Parents from the professional and entrepreneurial groups (who, in general, have a fairly high level of education) report themselves to be more permissive with their children in most spheres of life. They spank their children less, are not so strict about noise, or taking care of property, and permit the child somewhat greater freedom in the expression of temper and other sorts of "un-social" behavior.

The final report of the study will also include a description of the ways parents bring up only children, as compared with oldest children, youngest children, and middle children.



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