

The Importance of People

Column Editor: Peggy Brogan

My Special Friend

"You taught me to have fun even if I do what you like to do. You've tried to like what I like.

"You also have entered me into your daily fights.

"We have turned out a lot of paper dolls in our time, haven't we?

"You are a real and true friend."

CYNTHIA Y.

ELEVEN-YEAR-OLD Cynthia has found a friend, not her first friend or her only friend, but in Cynthia's words, her special friend. Cynthia's grownups can feel good about this. Whatever their system at home or school for evaluating Cynthia's progress or evaluating their progress in helping her, they can see, in her simply stated words, a sign of progress of crucial importance both to Cynthia and her democratic society. For to find a friend, a special friend to explore living with, is to take an all-important step in seeing the world through the eyes of other people.

This finding a friend does not come easily or suddenly. What a difficult time our youngest elementary school children have when they first come to school and discover that other children share the same bicycle and blocks and teacher. "My stuffs and junks are busted to hell," rages Billy from the clay table where he left his clay pieces to dry. Tuckie's offer to "beat up whoever did it" is some consolation to Billy, but these six-year-olds need to live longer in a world of people before

they can look at others in terms beyond "what they do to or for me."

Our intermediate grade children have lived longer and, if things have gone well with them, the importance of peers as threats or rivals, or even as people who "do nice things for me," begins to fade as the importance of interactive friendship takes over. And how hard the children work at this job of making friends! Mary Meade and Jeanne just have to play on the same team together. They can't exactly explain to their gym teacher how having to play on opposite teams takes all the point out of the game—makes each girl confused and not able to help her own team win when she wants her best friend's team to win too.

Virginia and Patsy work during school and after school on their group study when they can be on the same committee. When they have to work on separate committees, their time outside of committee work must be spent on things *they* can share, not on school assignments that keep them apart when they need so much to be together.

David and Ben and Johnny build a special hide-out in the park. They draw a map showing the route to their hide-out, using symbols understood only by themselves.

June and Peggy wear one another's dresses. "There is no dress as pretty as June's jumper," thinks Peggy, echoing the thoughts of June, who feels, "I

wish my mother would get me a pretty dress like this red one of Peggy's that I am wearing."

And what a time for learning is this time of deepening friendships! Ted reads mostly about Indians, following an interest that has been his own for well over a year, until Hugh enters importantly into his world as a friend. Now newspaper articles and books about outer space seem to pull Ted to them, and he reads as he has never read before. "Say, Hugh, did you read about the English pilot getting killed when he tried to break through the sound barrier?" is typical of Ted's early morning dash to Hugh with latest information when he first gets to school. And the thirty minutes spent together exploring their now common world of outer space, gives evidence of the kind of growth that can come when school schedules and friendly help encourage children in their peer relationships.

Ingrid and Patsy don't come when the group gathers to discuss some important plan. As younger children they came quite easily because it made them feel good to please their teacher and they knew she wanted them all together at planning time. Now, with heads bent low over some plan of their own, they are learning something about planning which they could not have learned as younger children, which they cannot now learn from the whole group. They are learning to plan so that each can say what Cynthia so simply stated—"You taught me to have fun even if I do what you like to do." Their teacher knows that right now they can give to one another something that no one else can give them.

It is often difficult for grownups to help children in the learnings just described. We have already lived through our days of learning how to relate to people, and our world today is im-

portantly shaped by those early learnings. If we were lucky in terms of opportunities provided by our then important grownups, we now know how to have friends of the same as well as the opposite sex, friends who are older and friends who are younger, friends who see the world as we do and friends who see it differently. It is difficult therefore to see the world through the eyes of our children who are just beginning to learn interpersonal relationships.

And unintentionally we make it so hard for them. Without regard to friendships involved, we provide swimming pools where only some children can swim, dancing schools where only some children can dance, first teams and high groups that only some children can join, systems of grades and awards that make some children stand off from others. We devise systems of grouping where friendship is ruled out as a legitimate basis for "belonging," and in other ways enforce classroom procedures which make it necessary for our children to carry on their necessary friendly peer relationships in times and places out of school.

The importance of people is highlighted with new meaning in today's shrunken world, where the hostile feelings of people who do not feel important or who feel that only their group is important, can take on the power of our technological age and force themselves on people anywhere on earth. Children must not be stopped anywhere along the line in their growth in interpersonal relationships. They must of necessity get past the stage of "me and mine." And important in this uninterrupted growth, is the finding of a special friend—a doorway to an expanding world of "we and our."

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