

# Helping Our Children Grow

MAUDE BURCHFIELD

This article describes a cooperative enterprise carried out in Elizabethton, Tennessee. An assumption was made that parents are interested in working with the school faculty and administration in improving the school program. This concept of cooperative work was followed and parents participated effectively and vigorously. *Helping Our Children Grow* is the title of the bulletin which they developed in cooperation with the school. Parents have varied interests and abilities which, if used, can have important implications for curriculum research.

ON A hot day in late August a small group of parents, a principal, superintendent and supervisor met in Elizabethton, Tennessee, to discuss plans for a better educational program for the Harold McCormick Elementary School. A questionnaire was prepared by the group to identify what the parents expected from the school.

More than a hundred parents and teachers at the first open meeting responded to this questionnaire. A summary of their replies showed that all of them wanted to understand the child better and to help him grow. Parents and teachers felt a need to work together for character training, healthful living and the development of important skills. To attain these goals, faculty study groups, parent study groups and PTA programs were planned and continued for a two year period. The cooperative project included: the director of the local county health department who worked with the group on problems concerning a child and his environment; the supervisor who secured films and reading material and planned activities for the

group; a reporter from the local newspaper who published regular accounts of the project; and representatives from a local state college who conducted studies on the citizen child and on the meaning of education.

Visits and conferences were encouraged. When parents visited in the classroom they became acquainted with the teacher, observed the learning process and learned the status of their child. When teachers visited in the homes of their children they learned the educational facilities and socioeconomic status of the family. Then, as a result of parent-teacher-child conferences, relationships, understandings, appreciations and expectations improved. One mother became interested in collecting reading material on understanding the behavior of boys and girls, another listed the materials which had been collected, while another prepared a reading room for patrons at school.

Through their reading, parents and teachers became interested in the needs of children and decided that a study of emotional needs was a logical next

step in understanding and helping their children. At the beginning of their study, a supervisor and a principal gave a brief review of Raths' list of emotional needs.<sup>1</sup> They mentioned the need for belonging, the need for achievement, the need for economic security, the need for freedom from fear, the need for love and affection, the need for freedom from guilt, the need for self respect, and the need for understanding. The parents listed ways of meeting each of the eight needs. Their suggestions for meeting the need for belonging, for example, may well illustrate their work:

1. Make your child feel that he is an important person in the family. Reward him with your approval for his contributions in the areas of work, worship and recreation.

2. Maintain a firm but kindly attitude toward your child when you correct him. Be sure that he knows that he still has your affection, even though you disapprove strongly of what he has done.

3. Let your child share in family decisions according to his age and ability.

4. Respect your child's personal property.

5. Encourage him to share his possessions.

6. Help your child grow up. The emotionally immature child is rarely accepted by other children.

7. Let your child's personality grow. The popular child is somewhat aggressive, and he is usually happy and friendly.

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8. If you always take your child's part, he will be unable to learn to accept small defeats and unfairness as a part of living. Help him learn not to sulk or feel sorry for himself. The child who plays fairly is usually liked.

9. Help build up your child's belief in himself. Each time he succeeds in developing a skill, his ability to succeed at other things is strengthened.

10. Boys need a place where they can gather, where no one will interfere. Parents can see that there are safe, constructive activities for "the gang."

11. Don't let business or pleasure form a barrier between you and your child. Be sure he feels included in the family life.

12. Be sure your child knows you are glad he is a boy (or she is a girl) and help him to be glad. If you have a boy and he knows you want a girl, make it clear you do not want a girl *instead* of him.<sup>2</sup>

In sharing the lists, parents were impressed with the difference in children even in the same family. The differences were evidenced in many manifestations of the same unmet need and in the various reactions to treatment for that unfulfilled need.

### **Parents and Teachers Study Child Growth**

A representative from the University of Tennessee served as consultant.

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<sup>1</sup>Louis F. Raths. *An Application to Education of the Needs Theory*. Bronxville, New York: Modern Education Service, 1949.

<sup>2</sup>Parent Study Group. *Helping Our Children Grow*. Elizabethton: Folsom Printing Co., 1952. p. 25.

He helped guide the parents and teachers as they joined forces to study the emotional needs of children, ways of recognizing these, and ways of meeting them. A questionnaire was prepared to secure additional information about child behavior. The information was to be used as a basis for determining the extent to which children's needs are met. Other aids for the identification of child behavior recommended by the consultant were: the continuation of home-school visitation, the observation of a child's activities, the knowledge of the characteristic reactions of the child's age group, more frequent parent-teacher-child conferences, and the application of the needs tests. Through the identification of behavior some unmet needs were determined.

The study revealed that twelve percent lacked self confidence, sixteen percent feared new experiences, and ten percent were easily discouraged. Thirteen percent of the parents felt their standards for their children were too high. A close correlation was found between the way the parents had analyzed the fears, worries and behavior of their children and the way the children had identified their own problems through the use of the needs test, "A Story About Me,"<sup>3</sup> and "The Wishing Well."<sup>4</sup> For the 300 boys and girls tested, the foremost needs revealed were those for *freedom from guilt*, for *achievement*, and for *freedom from fear*. The needs for economic se-

curity and for love and affection were less evident.

To help children with their problems, parents and teachers studied ways for understanding and helping children with each particular need. Parent meetings were held once a week at school. Teacher meetings, for a study of needs, were held at regular intervals and were attended by representatives from the parent group. Both groups listed successful techniques to be used in working with children on their various needs. These lists became lengthy as people shared ideas from hearing lectures, analyzing films, reading and discussing a wealth of material, and thinking of their own experiences. The ideas were put on the chalkboard, discussed and recorded. Lists were prepared for each of the needs. The attendance for the 69 meetings varied from 7 to 190 with an average attendance of 48. The average time spent in each meeting was approximately two hours. There was growing enthusiasm within the parent group.

At one of the sessions a mother said, "The experience of studying emotional needs has meant so much to us as parents that we should have the results of it in permanent form to be used as a reference and to share with others." As committees met in the homes and worked on different parts of the bulletin, they decided that there should be sections for pre-school children and for adolescents. Parents of these two groups then prepared the needed material. Charts and diagrams were drafted and illustrations prepared that clearly and effectively expressed the ideas that each child should be free of adult anxieties and pressures,

<sup>3</sup>"A Story About Me." A test written by Mrs. Ethel Piper. Knoxville City Schools, Knoxville, Tennessee, 1950.

<sup>4</sup>"The Wishing Well." Columbus, Ohio: Bureau of Educational Research, Ohio State University, 1945.

that each reveals his unmet needs when others listen to him and observe him, that the process of meeting needs is a continuous endeavor, and that adults should expect of a child only what he is capable of doing at his stage of development. Such concepts seemed to be the major ones which parents acquired.

A committee of parents organized the material into a booklet containing three parts. The first section gave some developmental characteristics of early childhood, middle childhood, later childhood and early adolescence.

Emphasis was placed on (1) physical development, showing growth patterns for each age; (2) development of intellectual skills, showing some special and scholastic skills for each age; (3) development of security, showing some stages of emotional maturity which children of each age are capable of attaining. The second part of the bulletin showed the symptomatic behaviors, or manifestations of unmet needs, described in the Needs Theory.<sup>5</sup> These behavioral manifestations are aggression, submission, withdrawal and psychosomatic illness. For this section one list of behaviors was prepared for each symptom. Emphasis was given the need for observation of any one of these behavior patterns appearing in excess. The third section of the bulletin contains definite suggestions for meeting each emotional need. The interest of the planning committee was contagious and reached many people who gave valuable suggestions as to format, design for the cover, and as to the title.

<sup>5</sup> Louis E. Raths. *An Application to Education of the Needs Theory*. Bronxville. New York: Modern Education Service, 1949.

Members of the Elizabethton Board of Education examined and approved the material. They appropriated funds for the printing of the booklet so that it might be made available to all parents and teachers in their city.

### Distribution and Use of the Booklet

During the summer parents planned the distribution of the booklet to parents of other schools in Elizabethton. A room mother for each classroom assumed responsibility for delivering a bulletin to the home of each of the parents previously assigned to her. In this bulletin parents could recognize their own children in the charts or in the lists of manifestations of growth and development. The parents eagerly studied the helpful suggestions given in the material. Copies of the booklet were delivered to libraries in local schools and churches. Doctors, nurses, dentists, baby sitters, policemen and the juvenile judge have secured and used the booklet in their efforts to achieve a better understanding of children. Developed by local people, this booklet seemed to be of great interest and help to many local groups and individuals.

The publication has been used as a basis for many study groups throughout the city and area. Parents who participated in the study conducted parent education programs in other city and county schools. In one school for six afternoons, each teacher, using the booklet as a guide, discussed with school patrons the developmental tasks, characteristic reactions and special needs of a particular age group. In 34 states, individuals who are inter-

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ested in child growth and development have requested and received from the principal several copies of the bulletin to be used in national, state and local organizations and institutions for a similar research study. It has been used as reference material in college and university classes, by state and regional supervisors to enrich their programs, and by principals for child study projects. At their request copies were sent to directors of special education, curriculum coordinators, superintendents, speech therapists, truant officers, visiting teachers, members of school boards and members of public relations committees. Teachers of public and private schools have received and used the publication in their in-service training programs.

Teachers who participated in this

study believe that parents have a definite responsibility in planning and carrying out the school program. They encourage parent visitation in the classroom and seek parent aid in the development of learning activities. They secure the help of the parents in identifying the needs of each child and in helping solve his problems. We feel that the kind of participation by teachers, parents and other citizens which characterized this research study, under the guidance of the consultant from the University of Tennessee, has resulted in a unique contribution to the better understanding of children's growth. We believe it will be extremely helpful to all persons in child development and that it will serve to further work in this area by parents, teachers and children.

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