

## What Happens to the FIVE-YEAR-OLDS?

Are five-year-olds the "forgotten children" in today's crowded schools? Many communities find they are unable to provide an organized program for children at this impressionable age; or, if they do, the groups may be too large for an effective program; or the children may be on shifts or a half-day schedule. Any of these arrangements seem to indicate deprivation for these children and leave much to be desired.

**D**URING 1953 over 3,000,000 babies were born in the United States—babies who know nothing of the culture, ideals or government of this great nation. The early years in the lives of these children are of great importance in determining the kind of citizens they will become.

Young children need love, understanding and security. They need space to play and grow. They need rich, challenging experiences. The social scene today has caused those who recognize the values of education for the young child to point to the great need for nursery schools and kindergartens. States have enacted laws concerning such schools. Yet, the manner in which the laws are implemented and the character of many of these schools reveal the fact that a large number of five-year-old children are not receiving the education due them in this democracy.

Much has been written about the problems confronting the schools in providing for the increased number of young children. Practices such as

shortened sessions are being accepted as emergency measures. Too frequently there has been a tendency for us to rationalize that these makeshift arrangements are acceptable rather than to evaluate the services in terms of the effect upon children. This is especially true regarding the provision of educational facilities for young children.

To face the problem realistically, these questions need to be answered in terms of actual practice. Are schools available for young children? What are the conditions and practices prevailing in the existing schools?

### Are Nursery Schools and Kindergartens Available in the United States?

*Public schools.* Only 43 per cent of the children in the five-year age group as shown in the 1953 statistics, have

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In today's crowded schools are materials available to young children for building, making and doing?

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the opportunity to attend kindergarten. While all but one of the states have some type of legislation relating to the education of children under six, only nineteen have authorized the use of state funds for this age group.<sup>1</sup> The legislative provisions seem to give considerable status to nursery schools and kindergartens. Much, however, remains to be done.

As far as implementing these laws is concerned, *The Statistics of State School Systems 1949-50* indicates<sup>2</sup> that during the year only 4.1 per cent of the

elementary school enrollment was in kindergarten. The Council of State Governments indicated in 1949 that only six states reported kindergarten enrollment totaling 10 per cent of the total enrollment in kindergarten through grade eight. Five states with more than 10.0 per cent of elementary enrollments in the kindergarten are listed: Michigan 15.1 per cent, Connecticut 13.9 per cent, Maine 11.4 per cent, New Jersey 11.4 per cent, California 10.1 per cent. A considerable number of states reported no, or practically no, enrollment in public kindergartens.<sup>3</sup> It is likely that this small number may be even less today inas-

<sup>1</sup> *Status of Kindergartens in the U. S. A.* Washington: Office of Education, 1954. (Mimeographed.)

<sup>2</sup> *Biennial Survey of Education: 1948-50. Statistics of State School Systems*, Chapter 2, 46. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1952.

<sup>3</sup> *The Forty-Eight State School Systems*, p. 34. Chicago: The Council of State Governments, 1949.

Are time and space adequate for dramatic play?



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much as some kindergarten units are being closed in order that space may be used for additional first grades.

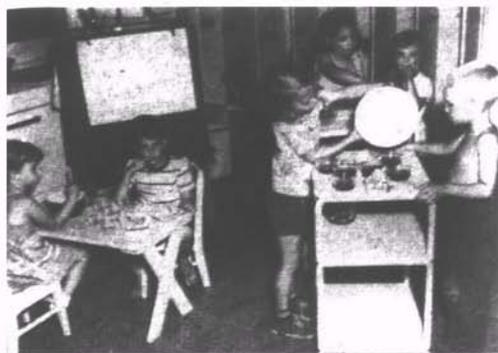
*Private schools.* As a result of the growing need and the inadequate provision made by public schools, the private pre-schools have experienced rapid growth. This rapid expansion raises questions as to the types of schools, quality of programs, and the preparation of the teachers. While many private schools maintain excellent facilities, a good teacher-pupil ratio, and employ well-trained teachers, there are many centers that do not maintain standards necessary for the well-being of children. Many of these services may be detrimental, although they may seem to fill a need in the care of young children.

In order to safeguard all children

who are enrolled in the private schools a few states have enacted legislation requiring state registration of such schools. The number of states providing such safeguards is small. The need for such protection, however, is great. In one state, a committee composed of private school directors, as well as representatives of state agencies and the public schools, is at work. The plan is one of cooperative action rather than coercion.

### Why Schools for Younger Children Have Not Increased

One survey of opinion as to why the number of public kindergartens has not increased indicated that people do not seem to know much about their educational value and that little effort has been made to inform them—yet,



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**Can time and space be used for planning, mixing, enjoying the day's dessert?**

the results of research emphasize the importance of these early years.

Since their value is not thoroughly understood by citizens, reasons for curtailment of the program of kindergartens are projected, many of which are not valid. Citizens value grades 1-12 and consider providing for them as their first obligation. Within these grades they are concerned with mounting enrollments, the need for increasing numbers of teachers, the extension of space needed and the amount of money necessary for the growth. When these problems are allowed to absorb so much time and energy, it is easy for the general public, as well as school people, in considering the needs of young children to drift into an attitude of "holding the line" and of apologizing for the needs instead of launching out on a program of positive action.

Seemingly, curtailment in this area of the school program is the solution often reached, usually with an indication that the situation is only temporary. It must be remembered, however, that for the child this is the only

year he will be five years old. The feelings, values and tensions established during this year tend to become permanent. Some state laws regarding age entrance permit many children to enter first grade at five years. The traditional first grade program, however, is not planned primarily to meet the needs of these children. As a result many of these children are spending additional years in the elementary school and in many cases are developing negative attitudes. The situation seems to indicate that it would be more economical, both financially and in terms of human values, to provide a kindergarten program appropriate to the level of development of the five-year-old.

### **What Are the Schools Like?**

In the schools that are available a variety of makeshift arrangements have appeared. While these may appear to be expedient a closer look reveals that such arrangements fall far short of meeting the actual needs of children. In the "1953-55 Plan of Action for Children," The Association for Childhood Education International included recommended standards for place and space.<sup>4</sup> What does the application of these standards reveal in analyzing some of the practices today?

#### ***As to the Size of the Group***

The ACEI recommended maximum group size per teacher follows: Nursery School (teacher and assistant)—15 children; kindergarten—20 children. A look at kindergarten enrollments today indicates that this recommenda-

<sup>4</sup>"The 1953-55 ACEI Plan of Action for Children." Washington: Association for Childhood Education International, 1953.

tion is frequently ignored. Often as many as 30 to 35 or even more children are in one group. And to further expedite matters, one teacher may be required to teach two groups—35 in the morning and 35 in the afternoon. These double sessions mean not only a shortened kindergarten day, but they also mean “double children” for the teacher. With an enrollment of seventy pupils it is exceedingly difficult for the teacher to know the individual child and to observe, plan and provide for his needs. Research emphasizes the importance of proper guidance in the child’s early years, and yet the large numbers deprive the child of much of the guidance which the teacher is trained to give but which he lacks time and opportunity to provide.

Then, too, a very important aspect of the problem is the effect of large groups upon the individual child. The ability to participate in groups develops slowly. Research indicates that while the kindergarten child likes to play with other children, he is still very much of an individual. He can participate in larger group activities if such activities are well supervised, but he gets along better in small groups of five or six children.<sup>5</sup> Large enrollments make it difficult for the teacher to provide for the small group activity appropriate for the five-year-old.

Close cooperation with parents and a program of parent education have long been recognized as important aspects of nursery school and kindergarten programs. In actual practice, however, the kindergarten teacher has

<sup>5</sup> Gladys C. Jenkins, *et al.*, *These Are Your Children*, p. 93. Chicago: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1953.

little time for parent conferences and home visits. It is overwhelming to think of working with 70 five-year-olds daily and then attempting to have conferences with seventy sets of parents or to visit in seventy homes. Such comments as “Children need parents who understand,” and “Parents don’t understand the school program,” are common. Here in the kindergarten, where this need could be met, the children are crowded in and this service becomes almost impossible.

### As to Space

The ACEI standards indicate that space requirements vary in relation to many factors in each situation. Per nursery school child suggested minimums are 50 sq. ft. floor space; per kindergarten child 40 sq. ft. floor space. In one county a survey was made of the size of 24 kindergarten rooms. One room had dimensions of 9x25 feet (225 square feet). The size most often listed was approximately 25x34 feet or 850 square feet. On the basis of enrollment only seven out of the twenty-four rooms had adequate space for carrying on a variety of activities suit-

Are wheel toys available—and yard space in which to use them?

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able or desirable for the development of young children.

The costs of classrooms are high. Rooms a few feet smaller save considerable money and make possible more classrooms. But in a small room teachers are often forced to resort to the type of kindergarten program that keeps children seated most of the session, engaged in quiet activities, rather than those more appropriate to the needs of the growing child.

#### *As to Teachers*

And what about the nursery school-kindergarten teachers? Not only is the supply limited but many teachers, rather than attempt to teach large numbers of children in double sessions, are transferring to other areas. Others have left this area of the school program because in many localities the question is raised annually as to whether or not the kindergarten will be retained. Students in teacher education hesitate to enter this field in the face of such a situation. And yet, young children need teachers who enjoy teaching, who continue to study, who believe in the ability of children to grow and learn and develop, in their own way, and who lead rich personal lives.

Yes, the children under six have a right to adequate space, understanding teachers and challenging experiences. The small number of nursery schools



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**Have today's crowded schools the large playground equipment so much needed by growing energetic children?**

and kindergartens and the makeshift arrangements existing today are not adequate provisions for the young citizens of the United States. Solutions for the present emergency need to be evaluated in terms of the needs of children. Only a mere beginning has been made on the broad program of education for young children to which their needs and the needs of society so clearly point. The schools must be creative in utilizing the present resources and in developing others in the service of children.



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