

# The Importance of People

Column Editor: Peggy Brogan

## Children and Youth—Learning Something

**T**ERRI moves gently back and forth. Fed and dry, half asleep and half awake, she seems to be part of the mother who rocks her. Terri's mother too seems to be a part of the baby, the baby whom she loves so much. Terri is learning something—learning that it is friendly and warm depending upon others in her world.

Carlos watches anxiously while his mother tucks his baby sister in bed. Then his mother is with him—telling him a favorite story, listening to his plans for tomorrow, pummeling him gently through the blankets. The next time Carlos waits he is not so anxious. He knows his turn will come. Carlos is learning something—learning that because they can foresee the future in terms of past events, for human beings the intervals between happy events need not be filled with anxiety.

Malcolm looks around his nursery school classroom before responding to his teacher's question, "What would you like to do this morning?" "Ride the bike with Butchie," he replies, looking a bit longingly at the sandbox where he had such fun yesterday and also at his new friend Butchie riding by. Malcolm is learning something—learning that even when people ask, "What do you want to do?" human beings somehow find themselves not alone in making their replies—find themselves somehow attached to others whose views they want to consider.

Mandy chooses a bag of peanuts from the variety of tiny individual bags of goodies made available in her nursery school classroom, and sits at the round table holding her bag tightly in her lap. Stephanie offers Mandy popcorn from her "private" bag if Mandy will trade a peanut. Danny makes the same offer from his bag of shell-shaped macaroni, Roger from his bag of salty crackers. With each offer Mandy hesitantly hands out a peanut, and gradually the small red plastic bowl "belonging" to her is "heaped high" with a variety of foods from around the table. Mandy smiles as she eats her food, saying over and over, "I got so many," still holding the remaining peanuts tightly in her bag. Leaving the table, she passes Karina who has not been playing in the kitchen and thus has not been in on the food exchange. But the telltale peanut shells invite her loud cry to no one in particular, "Please! I need a peanut!" Responding to the cry, Mandy presses a peanut in Karina's hand as she goes by, waiting for nothing in exchange. Karina, overcome with sudden response to her plea, takes Mandy's cheeks in her hands and kisses her on each, saying with all the gratitude she feels, "Mandy, I love you." Mandy is learning something—that sharing with other people in her world makes her feel good inside—makes her want to go two steps at a time as she climbs to the roof to play.

Patsy plans a school party for her second grade friends. Her goodies are cut into tiny pieces and carefully arranged on serving plates. The cold drinks are ready to be poured into the tiny cups which Patsy brings especially for the occasion. "And you can have all the second helpings you want," announces Patsy, knowing how frequently the children's requests for seconds must be turned down. With her diminutive cups and goodies, Patsy and her friends are learning something—learning that arithmetic is a skill that works for people—that helps to meet their special needs.

### Even Numbers and Even Teams

"But even numbers don't make even teams," complains Dickie to his physical education teacher, as with knowing eye he glances at the players she has just placed on his team. "It all depends on how many good guys each team has, and even then teams would not be fair. If they were, the games would all end in ties," he continues, hoping she'll understand. Dickie is learning something—learning that mathematics has its limitations—that in the affairs of people eleven does not necessarily equal eleven.

"Dear Jeanne," writes Celinda. "I hate to wash my socks every day. I'll see you after school. Love, Celinda." She carefully folds her letter and puts it in the mail box on the window sill in her fourth grade classroom. Soon "mail" will be delivered and Jeanne will have her letter. Celinda and Jeanne are learning something—learning that human beings can use language to overcome unpleasant distances be-

tween good friends—learning that writing is one way for entering other people's living and inviting them to enter yours.

Mike and Larry and Bob seem not to notice other activities in their classroom as they work in their private corner on a newspaper they plan to duplicate for the class. Practice sheets are torn up and thrown into the wastebasket with force, when an argument arises over whose idea for a column is best. Arms are thrown around one another in mutual satisfaction when an especially pleasing idea is worked out. Mike and Larry and Bob are learning something—learning that problem-solving is not easy when individual human beings decide to work things out in terms of *our* view instead of *my* view—learning that difficulties can be overcome when a self-selected group of peers makes a go of things.

Lynn sits on the edge of her chair, restless and ill at ease in her seventh grade music class. Then the familiar strains of ". . . Someone's in the kitchen with Dinah, someone's in the kitchen I know-ow-ow-ow . . ." is in the air about Lynn, and as she joins in the singing Lynn is no longer in her classroom. She is once again at her summer camp, clasping hands with best friends around a final campfire, promising to never forget. Lynn is learning something—learning that music can provide a way for human beings to overcome time and space barriers—can extend one's world to include people from other times and places.

"I'll bet I can make it to Sally's in three minutes when I get this thing in shape," says Bob as he tinkers with various parts of his hot rod. "Yea?

And supposing she won't talk with you when you do get there," rejoins his friend Chuck, confident that Sally will accept *his* invitation to the dance even if it takes him thirty minutes to get to her house in his jalopy. Bob and Chuck are learning something—learning that Euclidian geometry is inadequate for measuring in a world where distances depend importantly upon the motion of the measurer—be it fast or slow, friendly or hostile.

Jim and three friends sit watching the growing bed of coals in the fire they are tending in the middle of the meadow, talking quietly about how required military service will fit into their plans for studying medicine, law, education. Young children are asleep on all sides, having given up at last to the inviting comfort of their sleeping bags. Mrs. Brown who is in charge of the community's summer recreation program also dozes, knowing that Jim and the others will stay awake to keep the fire going and answer the call of a lonely or frightened child. "It's so interesting," she thinks to herself, "how Jim can be captain of his high school football team in the winter and be such a sensitive friend and helper to these young children in the summer." Jim and his fellow workers are learning something—learning that youngsters in their community depend upon their offerings—that just as during childhood they were safe and contented in a world where they could depend upon others, now they find contentment meeting other children's needs.

—PEGGY BROGAN, *professional staff, Child Education Foundation, 535 E. 84th Street, New York 28, New York.*

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