

What's Right with Parents?

Rather than regarding parents as a necessary nuisance, both teachers and pupils can learn much by looking at the positive contributions they can make in enriching the school experiences of girls and boys.

NOT LONG AGO Nancy, a young teacher in training, said to me, "What's *wrong* with parents, anyway? My older sister teaches school and so does my aunt. Both of them have problem parents. For years I've always wanted to become a teacher but now I'm beginning to wonder. It's all right to talk about the compensations of service but just what are they, other than a pay check which is hard to stretch?"

"My sister Nell teaches kindergarten," Nancy continued. "She says some of her youngsters are nearly always tardy—five, ten or even fifteen minutes late. Somehow, their mothers don't seem to realize the importance of punctuality. Then a few mothers have asked Nell if she doesn't think the children should have some reading at the kindergarten level. Two are secretly trying to teach reading to their own children at home. Isn't it a shame? They don't seem to realize that in doing this they are just catering to their own vanity. In their desire to have their children make a good show-

ing in front of the others, they resort to parlor tricks before the youngsters are really mature and have enough foundation for reading.

"Aunt Emily has a fourth grade. She tries to plan a very nice balance between study skills and original work. She says she wants to integrate the two types because she feels both are important. The youngsters in her room this year are unusually creative but just one mother has caused a lot of trouble by telling some of the other parents that not enough time is being spent on the three R's. All this in spite of the fact that results of standardized tests show excellent progress in the skills areas. That mother just makes me sick! She lives in our block and we know her well. If she were the mother of a pupil of mine, I think I'd be tempted to ask her why she doesn't ever stay at home!"

Luckily for me, the building bell rang just then! Nancy's individual conference with me necessarily came to an abrupt end. I say "luckily" because Nancy was in no mood at that time to listen to explanations of any kind and certainly I needed time to marshal my thoughts so as to help her in the situation.

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A Positive Approach

The group conference of all student teachers that afternoon offered a fine opportunity to initiate a discussion on "What's *Right* with Parents?"

Two brief anecdotes started our thinking in a positive direction. Some years before, following a death in the family, I had returned direct to work from the train which brought me home. As I stepped into the classroom that dreary winter morning, it seemed impossible for me to face the demands of the coming day. On my desk lay a brief little note, accidentally placed on top of the accumulated pile of mail and necessary book-and-paper work connected with teaching. The note simply said:

"I wonder if the children will think to tell you how much they missed you during the five days you were away. We mothers surely heard about it! It wasn't that things didn't go well; they did! But, just the same, I think you should know you were truly missed."

The signature was that of a mother of five, one of the busiest mothers in town. She held an outside newspaper job as well as attending to the duties of a teeming household. I could visualize her, pushing the empty dishes on the breakfast table aside so she could take time to dash off a note while "the five" scampered hither and yon, struggling into winter wraps and perhaps searching for a lost mitten. The day, to me, was no longer drab! By a simple little act, one parent had caused a burst of sunshine!

Some time later, the University of Wyoming Elementary School at Laramie started a program of self-evaluation by sending letters to 100 former

graduates of the school asking them to state very frankly (pro and con, signed or unsigned) their current opinions of their early school program. The concluding statement of one former pupil was especially warm and gratifying: "Our early school program made us, as children, happy to know that our teachers and our parents were not mere acquaintances, but good friends."

Pooling Our Ideas

Following my description of these two incidents, each teacher in training was asked to pause and think back over her own earlier school days. One by one, a hazy recollection brightened into the memory of a thoughtful act performed for the good of the school by her own, or a neighborhood, mother or father. Evidences of parental attempts to grow in understanding of child behavior were abundant also.

Kathleen stepped to the chalkboard to make a hastily written general summary as the anecdotes came tumbling forth, faster and faster. In double-column form, she listed the points under two headings.

How Some Parents We Know Helped Our Schools:

- Made friendly visits at times other than special occasions.
- Showed a sympathetic, yet unbiased, interest in our school progress.
- Furnished cars for some of our school journeys.
- Furnished materials (such as house plants, cookies, etc.) to make school a happy, pleasant place.
- Encouraged us to make practical application at home of items we learned at school.

- Gave personal services (such as hobby talks, experiments and demonstrations in the classroom, and assistance during health clinics).

- Encouraged us to share travel experiences with our classmates.

- Made gifts of helpful teaching materials (such as old books and magazines).

- Helped us interpret impartially school policies which puzzled us.

- Discouraged loose criticism of the schools.

- Encouraged us to invite our teachers to visit our homes.

- Welcomed parent-teacher conferences.

- Helped new teachers find comfortable living quarters.

- Helped new teachers get acquainted in the community.

- Actively sponsored needed bond issues.

- Served on cooperative curriculum planning committees.

- Helped promote recreational activities which brought children, parents and teachers together.

How Some Parents We Know Sought Self-Growth:

- Participated actively in PTA work.

- Consistently read books and articles on child development.

- Served on public panels or forums which featured school problems.

- Listened to radio programs sponsored by local schools.

Characteristic or Atypical?

When Kathleen had finished making the summary, the results seemed to some of the girls to be rather staggering. In spite of this, Nancy protested, "Are we not talking about the

exceptions, rather than the rule? We have just volunteered isolated anecdotes about the occasional parent, haven't we?"

"Perhaps," I replied, "but would you care to see some more objective data on the subject?" I placed in front of her a pamphlet issued by the Bureau of Educational Research and Service at the University of Wyoming. It was entitled, *Existing Home and School Relationship Practices at the Elementary Level* and described an investigation made by the present writer a few years ago.

Representatives of 238 public school systems, from small villages to large cities scattered throughout the 48 states, responded to a questionnaire about local home and school relationships. One phase of the study dealt entirely with "special services rendered by parents to the school program." Tabulation of the results for this phase showed that parents were generously supporting their schools with extra time and work. All parents? Of course not; but a sufficient number of parents were active within the various systems to warrant inclusion by many of the school representatives in their reports.

The 14 "special services" most commonly rendered by parents (ranked in order of the greatest frequency of mention by the school systems) were: (1) furnishing cars for excursions; (2) talking on special-interest subjects to child groups; (3) showing personal films or slides to child groups; (4) planning recreational activities; (5) helping new teachers find living accommodations; (6) serving part-time in school lunchrooms; (7) helping supervise play groups; (8) helping new teachers get acquainted in the com-

munity; (9) making new school equipment; (10) serving on curriculum planning committees; (11) repairing old school equipment; (12) demonstrating experiments to child groups; (13) serving part-time in the school library; and (14) serving part-time in the school office.

Of the 238 school systems reporting, as many as 181 reported the first service mentioned; as few as nine reported the fourteenth service. Such range of mention is great but the fact remains that many parents are willing to sacri-

fice much time to render services to their schools. In more than a few systems, parents do not have the opportunity or the school encouragement necessary for participation in some of these services. If they did, doubtless the number of schools reporting parent participation would be far greater.

Susan re-read aloud the chalkboard title of our discussion, "What's Right with Parents?" Then she summed it up briefly, "A good bit!" Even Nancy agreed!



Enthusiastically received . . .

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