

The Blind Child

in the Regular Classroom

Many schools today are accepting the challenge of educating a blind child in the regular classroom along with the sighted group.

FIVE-year-old Jimmy jumped out of the car, said good-bye to his mother and started to run in the direction of the school. He tripped on the first step but did not fall because he was holding my hand, trying to drag me along as I stopped for a moment to talk with his mother.

This was Jimmy's first day at school, and he was entering it with all the enthusiasm and anticipation of childhood. I made my conversation short and went along with him. He found the door, opened it and, half-walking, half-running, still holding my hand, made his way to the kindergarten door which was the first on the right. Jimmy knew where it was. He had already been there one day to see the room, after the children had been dismissed. Today the door was open and the youngsters were nearly all there.

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They were sitting on a bench taking turns at showing the other children things they had brought from home. Miss Jones, the teacher, greeted Jimmy as he stood in the doorway. He hesitated for a moment, then dropped my hand and went with her to join the other youngsters on the bright window seat.

As soon as the "show and tell" was over, Miss Jones suggested that the children find the toys they wanted for the play period. Jimmy knew immediately that he wanted the cars, because he had found them last week but had not had time to play with them. He had known for a whole week that as soon as he got to school, he would start by playing with those cars. He made his way across the room bumping into a table en route, and found the cars. He knew that they were to the left of the door as you came in. He put them on the floor and began to play. Little Michael, who had been asked to be Jimmy's friend for the day (this is done whenever a child comes to school for the first time), got a truck and began to push it beside Jimmy. Both youngsters played alone—Jimmy, because he did not know who was beside him, and Michael, because he did not know quite what to say to Jimmy. Jimmy was blind and Michael

knew this, but was not sure how he could be of most help. Seconds later Jimmy found the blocks and busied himself piling them in the truck while Michael, still feeling some responsibility for his new friend, began making a block wall near by. I said, "Jimmy, Michael is beside you and he is making a wall with the blocks." Immediately Jimmy replied, "Come on, Michael, and play with my blocks, too." The ice was broken and a smile spread over Michael's face as he moved closer to his new friend to help him put blocks in the truck.

I watched the youngsters go about their different activities. Soon Miss Jones showed them how to play a skipping game. Jimmy joined in, skipping around and around the tables, occasionally bumping into the edge of one. At snack time Jimmy got his own milk with a minimum of assistance. Although he needed help on this first day, because he was unfamiliar with these new surroundings, it would not be easy to distinguish him from the other children. He does the same things—runs, jumps, hops and plays. He likes the occasional wrestling match, too. At the end of the morning he goes happily home to recount his experiences to his mother.

This first adventure in public school with other children of his age, but with adequate provision for individual differences, is an important accomplishment in the life of this little boy. Jimmy's limitation happens to be more obvious and more limiting than those of some of the other youngsters. But, except for the fact that he is blind, there is little real difference between him and any other five-year-old. He has the same interests, desires and feelings.

This is only the first milestone in Jimmy's life. At times the going will be hard and the trail rough. There will be

many bumps and falls along the way, but with the help, security and understanding given him by his family and his teachers, Jimmy will be able to withstand the knocks and will achieve his aim, that of being a whole person, accepted, loved and wanted as he is, with his limitations and his potential.

Accepting the Blind Child

Today an increasing number of administrators and teachers are accepting the challenge of educating a blind child in the regular classroom along with the sighted group. When confronted with the question, "Will you accept a blind child in your school?" many school officials express the belief that their educational program is not geared to handle this type of exceptional youngster. However, after some consideration many administrators have agreed, not without misgivings, to accept a visually handicapped child on a trial basis. In working with this type of exceptional child, principals and teachers are discovering that his similarities to the average are much greater than his differences; and that educational methods do not need to be changed, but can be adapted to meet his individual needs.

Identifying the Blind Child: A child is considered "educationally blind" when his vision is so limited that he has to receive the major part of his education through senses other than sight. This includes children with no vision, those with ability to see light and dark, and those able to distinguish large objects at close range, but unable to read any kind of regular or large size printed material.

Characteristics of the Blind Child: The child who is visually handicapped, will, by reason of his limitation, have developed his other senses to their maximum. At an early age he will recognize persons by their voices or their footsteps. He will

be aware of all the sounds around him, and will use these as an aid to finding his way about. He will use his sense of touch constantly to identify objects and to find places and things about him. The senses of smell and taste will prove useful to him in many instances when a seeing person might substitute the sense of sight.

Factors To Be Considered in Placing a Blind Child in a Regular Classroom: Administrators, in deciding whether or not a blind child could benefit from the regular educational programs, will need to consider the following questions:

1. Is the child reasonably well developed socially, emotionally, intellectually and physically, and thus able to take the competition of the regular school?

2. Is this the type of program the parents really want for their youngster? Are they willing to help both the child and the school to provide the best kind of experiences for him and for the group?

3. Can the cooperation of an agency for the blind be secured to aid in providing a resource person to work with the child and the school, and to provide the necessary materials which will enable him to function adequately in the regular group?

4. Is the school, which is considering placement for the blind child, willing to accept this challenge, at least on an experimental basis?

If these questions can be answered in a reasonably positive way, steps may then be taken toward actual placement of the youngster in a group.

What Methods Are Helpful?

If a blind child is to attend the public school in his neighborhood it is assumed that he will start in the kindergarten at the age of five or six. It is advisable to place him in a group which is slightly younger than he is, chronologically, since

in some respects this may give him an advantage, thus making the competition easier for him. The teacher who will have this youngster should have consented to his placement in her group, and should be willing to help him just as she will help all the other children. Initially she may have many reservations—Can she assist this child adequately? Will he be more likely to get hurt? Will the other youngsters accept him? These are normal questions which can be worked out if the teacher's basic attitude is one of acceptance and desire to meet the challenge which this new situation offers.

The basic methods of helping the exceptional youngster become a part of the group will be similar to those used with all children. He needs to be given a feeling of security and acceptance. He needs to be helped to participate in and enjoy new experiences, but at the same time to be free to grow and develop in his own best way thus making his unique contribution to the group, to the school, and later to the community and to society. To achieve this goal the teacher must: (a) help the blind child become acquainted with his physical surroundings; (b) develop with the other youngsters some techniques for clarifying situations for him; (c) help him participate in group experiences in ways which are satisfying to him.

Methods of Helping the Blind Child Become Acquainted with His Physical Surroundings: Before the first day of school the handicapped youngster should visit his new classroom at a time when the other children are not present. This will give him an opportunity to learn the physical layout of the room and to find where some of the equipment is located. The teacher should show him the room and the toys by starting at the door and following along the wall, encouraging

him to identify things as he goes along. He will be able to recognize most of the equipment as soon as he touches it, but there will be some items which may be unfamiliar to him, such as the easel, bulletin board or drinking fountain. He should have an opportunity to look these over fairly carefully so that he will recognize them the next time he sees them. After he has seen all the objects along the walls, he will want to explore the rest of the room by himself, finding the tables, chairs and other equipment. He knows that the blocks, tables, chairs and various toys will not necessarily be in the same place each day, but they will not be a hazard to him since he learned at an early age to exercise some caution. It would be helpful to the youngster to have a place for his coat and other belongings at the end of the row or one from the end, so he can locate them easily. On this first visit he should be shown the outdoor play space and given an opportunity to locate some stationary objects which he can use as landmarks for orienting himself the next time he comes.

During his first few days at school, the blind child will need some help in finding materials and toys. The teacher can give this by telling him their exact location in relation to objects with which he is familiar. For example, the teacher might say, "The train is at the left of the drinking fountain." If she happens to be close to the desired toy, she might say, "The train is over here." This would enable the youngster to walk directly to it.

The group and the teacher will have to help the handicapped child locate the position of block structures or other projects which might be damaged by his running into them. A pupil might say, as he sees the blind child approaching a structure, "Jimmy, we are building a

block house here." This will be all that is needed, since, if Jimmy understands what is going on, he will be careful not to damage it.

In any kindergarten room there are toys, blocks and other materials on the floor. At first glance these may seem hazardous for the sightless child. He will learn quickly to expect them there and will use some caution in getting about. However, he will bump into them or trip over them just as the other children do, but it is not likely that he will get more than his share of bruised elbows and skinned knees.

Methods of Helping the Other Youngsters Clarify Situations for the Blind Child: Young children are fairly quick to accept new situations and the presence of a blind child in the group will probably not be disturbing to them. If the teacher deals with the handicap in a matter-of-fact, accepting way, the youngsters will do the same. They will, however, need to have some understanding of the situation. Whether or not the teacher tells the group that the child is blind before he enters will depend on the age and maturity of the youngsters in the group. If the children seem fairly mature it is probably advisable to tell them that the new little boy who is coming does not see with his eyes, but that he sees in many other ways. The teacher might then point out that he sees with his hands by touching things, with his ears by listening for different sounds, and so on. If the children ask questions, these should be answered honestly in simple language. If the youngsters have not been told that the new little boy is blind, before he arrives, they can be told when he arrives or when someone asks a question about his difference. (If the youngster is in first grade or above, his blindness should be discussed with the class

before he comes to school.) In answering questions relating to this handicap, the teacher should emphasize the positive, describing the things he can do rather than those he cannot. The youngster himself will often be able to answer these questions, since his parents will probably have given him some techniques for dealing with this subject.

When children understand the youngster's limitation (at their own level), they will be able to help him to be a participating member of the group. Most of the time this will not involve any extra effort on their part, but there will be occasions when they can help to clarify situations for him. The teacher can give them a few techniques for doing this and they can find other means of their own. For example, the teacher should explain to them that there will be times when they need to tell the blind child what they are doing if they want him to know. "I am building a boat with the blocks." "We are making a toy farm here." If they want to show him a toy or interesting object they have brought from home, they must put it in his hand. If they approach him, they need to speak in order for him to know who they are. If they are playing a circle game and he gets out of the circle, a child who is near him might take his hand and bring him back. If they are running in a straight line or to a designated spot, it would be helpful if some child would take his hand and run with him, or go to the desired spot and say, "Run over here."

Care must be taken by the teacher to see that the youngsters do not give too much help to their handicapped friend. He is capable of doing most things for himself, and like all persons he wants to maintain his independence. If he receives an undue amount of attention, he might become dependent, thus accepting assist-

ance which he really does not require. This over-dependence would probably prevent him from making his best contribution to the group, and would prevent the group from benefiting from his membership in it. The teacher must also watch to see that the same child does not always help the limited youngster. One pupil may, for reasons of his own, attach himself to the exceptional child. This could prevent both youngsters from becoming contributing group members.

Methods of Helping the Blind Child Participate in Group Experiences in Ways Which Are Meaningful to Him: Although the blind child must be allowed to maintain his independence by receiving a minimum of assistance, there will be many instances when a word or act will make an experience more meaningful for him. He should be given plenty of opportunity to utilize his other senses. The whole group can benefit from this, and thus many experiences can be made more meaningful for all the children. If a group of children is participating in a visual activity such as watching the teacher unwrapping a package and holding up the contents, a brief description of these actions and of the article being displayed will enable the visually limited youngster to enjoy what otherwise would be a meaningless activity. If some children are setting up an aquarium or terrarium, it would be helpful to let the blind child handle the grass, plants, shells, stones and various other objects before these are put into the tank. When the group goes on a trip, all of the youngsters should be encouraged to use all their senses. They will look, of course; they will touch when they can; but they may need to be helped to listen for identifying sounds and to smell different odors. When the children are looking, the teacher might describe what they see.

There will be times when activities are going on which seem to have little meaning for a blind child. However, in some instances adaptations can be made so that the experience will have value for him. One six-year-old learned to operate the slide projector and she showed the slides to the other children. A five-year-old turned the pages of a large picture book while the teacher described the pictures. Sometimes there will be work going on in which the blind child really cannot participate. In this case he will have to be helped to find another type of occupation. The teacher should not be disturbed by this, as throughout his life there will be occasions when a handicapped person is unable to participate in the same way as his peers. If he can be helped to accept this fact gradually, in situations in which he feels secure and knows he is wanted, his real limitation will never come as a shock to him at some later time. On the more positive side, there will be activities in which he can really excel; and he should be given

a chance to have this satisfaction, too. In a game of "Blind Man's Buff" or some other game where the object is to identify children by their voices, he will do well, because this is one of the things at which he has had so much practice. By playing these games the rest of the children get some idea of his actual limitation. These activities should be carried out in the same way as they would be in any kindergarten or primary class. No verbal conclusions should be drawn by the teacher. The youngsters may notice their companion's adeptness and may comment on it, but this is as far as it should go.

By enrolling a blind child in a regular public school, educators are helping both the child and the group to become more understanding and more accepting of individual differences. Each child participating in such an experience will be more likely to have greater respect for the limitations and potentials of others, and the blind child, in turn, will be helped to take his place in a seeing world.

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