

The Importance of People

Column Editor: Arthur W. Foshay

Contributor: Edward T. Clark

Parents Deserve Protection

AMERICA's parents are the targets of an ever-increasing promotional barrage to the effect that they should acquire books, records and machines with which they can teach their children to read, can raise their IQs, or, at the very least, can get them "ahead" in school. Parents deserve protection from this blatant exploitation of their natural concern for their children's achievement. They also need help in evaluating the many impressive claims being made for home teaching materials.

Most of the do-it-at-home material being offered to parents relates to school achievement and is probably harmless. Consider, however, the following, culled from a brochure for a set of phonograph records:

"Is Your Child Getting the Utmost
Out of Life? . . .

Thru these scientific phonograph records

Your CHILD WILL ACQUIRE . . .
Self Confidence, A Magnetic Personality,
A Retentive Memory, A Love for Learning."

This "most modern method can bring to *your child* all of these advantages through the use of specialized phonograph recordings made to impress the subconscious mind!"

Few of the claims found in this survey are as extravagant as those made for the

"Invisible Psychologist," the "unseen man whose voice speaks to you in the night." Some subtly transform the IQ into a parental status symbol. Soft-sell advertisements in leading magazines imply a causal relationship between an encyclopedia in the home and a child's IQ.

Symbols and Concerns

A much cruder exploitation of parental concern was observed in the local supermarkets. Alongside the banners calling attention to the Weekend Specials, others proclaimed: "Your Child's IQ Is a Challenge to You." Those parents who met the challenge obtained the first volume of a children's encyclopedia at a "give-away" price. A host of federal, state and municipal inspectors would probably descend on the premises were this type of chicanery practiced on labels.

If the encyclopedia approach to IQ-raising is too space- or time-consuming, parents are offered a do-it-yourself manual, authored by a high school teacher, which promises results in thirty days. Indeed, in some areas, purchase of the book was unnecessary since an enterprising newspaper serialized it. Parents obtained such penetrating psychological insights as, a "student should accept the fact that he is going to be nervous when taking the test; scarcely anyone feels

otherwise." Another suggestion which "will be of help in adding to your child's IQ score" is the injunction that before the test "the child should check to see that the pencil he is to use has been sharpened."

The parents of preschool children are not overlooked by the enterprising manufacturer of a line of educational toys, who asks, "Is your home culturally deprived?" Parents are told that "Home is a spontaneous setting for extending a child's intuition." The income level of the "culturally deprived" home the manufacturer is concerned with can be gleaned from the following: "Playrooms must be planned intelligently by parents who care."

The promotional material for another program asserts, "Educators all over the country lately have been stressing the importance of 'pre-school conditioning' in the home." But, if the child is too old for "pre-conditioning," these records will "give him a big advantage in his class if he's 5 or 6." This brochure also reproduces part of a newspaper clipping of a Council for Basic Education report on "30 years of misguided instruction in reading by many schools and the majority of textbooks."

It may be time to go back to McGuffey's Readers, Herbert Mitgang observed in the *New York Times*, after examining a series of home teaching records, which he characterized as a "triumph of design and packaging over straightforward facts presented simply."¹

One promotional gambit for home reading improvement materials is that since children are not taught phonics in school, parents should undertake this task at home. Indeed, back in 1955, Rudolf Flesch told parents, "Your child's trouble with reading comes solely from

the fact that in school he has been taught word guessing instead of reading."² Parents learned that home instruction is the "most speedy and efficient method of teaching there is,"³ and those who used Flesch's do-it-at-home procedures were instructed to inform their child ". . . this is *certain* to work. Convince him that as soon as he has taken this medicine, he will be cured."⁴ Imagine the alacrity with which the nation's physicians and federal authorities would move were comparable assertions made regarding the efficacy of some home medical treatment.

One record set is recommended to parents as providing "a fresh start in reading to children who are not learning under 'progressive' teaching methods," and is described as "university tested and proved." But a tremendous difference exists between the experimental use of these records for forty-three twenty-minute phonic sessions over a period of fifteen weeks in a classroom setting and a harassed parent and child in front of a record player for several hours each day. The parents of several retarded readers have told the writer that their efforts at home instruction with the help of a phonic record set were unsuccessful.

The psychiatrist, Hyman S. Lippman,⁵ identified the basic limitation of parental tutoring:

In general, parents are not effective in tutoring their children in reading. They are usually impatient with careless errors and annoyed when the child repeats a mistake which had just been corrected. Much of this

¹ *Why Johnny Can't Read*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1955. p. 99.

² *Ibid.*, p. 101.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

⁴ *Treatment of the Child in Emotional Conflict*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1962. p. 191.

¹ *New York Times*, July 8, 1962.

irritation results from their anxiety about the child's ability to learn.

And Now—Teaching Machines

Full-page advertisements with king-size claims urge parents to purchase teaching machines for home use. One company informs parents, "Now you can help your son or daughter achieve better grades . . . quickly, easily, just like playing a game." A photograph of four teenagers fairly bursting out of their seats, enthusiastically raising their hands in what appears to be a classroom, enlivens this pitch.

Lest parents doubt a child's capacity to profit from this "automated, programmed device for self-test and review," they are assured that "each review test is scientifically planned to assist every child to raise his marks regardless of his present level in his class." All this for less than \$10.00, including the choice of three complete review courses "absolutely free."

The promoters of another self-tutoring device are equally enthusiastic. A full-page advertisement asks, "Does *your child* need help in any of these subjects?" This teaching machine is not only less expensive, it is also less time consuming; 15 minutes a day will do the trick. And it's not work either—it will make "learning fun for your youngster."

Here, again, parents need not be apprehensive about their child's capacity to benefit from "one of the greatest educational developments of our time—the teaching machine method." The child "need not be gifted or particularly interested in the subject." Prepared by a "21-member Board of Education," these courses are only \$4.95 each.

A teaching machine designed for use by the entire family is now available.

Its cost is higher—\$25.00—but the programs are more versatile and range from "time telling" to "introductory statistics." A brochure depicts Father "brushing up on his high school Spanish," while Mother is shown as being able, after a little practice, to entertain the family with her new skills on the piano. Sister's "two weeks of spare time lessons" in steno-speed can transform her from a "typist into a secretary and add \$750 to \$1,500 a year to her earnings." Comparable gains can be made in school subjects by fast and slow learners alike. The former "learn more," while the latter become "faster learners."

A welcome initial step for both parents and educators has been the publication of the *Parents Guide to Teaching Machines and Programed Instruction*, which advises that before purchasing a teaching machine for home use, parents should consult their child's teacher or guidance counselor, who "is in the best position to know whether or not the particular program you are interested in may help your youngster, for they know the objectives of the school." ⁶ This advice is good, as far as it goes.

Do not we, as educators, have a responsibility to provide parents, whether or not they come to school, with the facts they need for evaluating do-it-at-home teaching materials? Should we not campaign for the curbing of the more blatant claims being made, so that the nation's school children will be protected from educational nostrums administered at home by well-intentioned but ill-informed parents?

—EDWARD T. CLARK, *Associate Professor of Education, Psychology Department, St. John's University, Jamaica, New York.*

⁶ Center for Programed Instruction, Inc., New York, New York, 1962.

Copyright © 1963 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.