

Teaching for Commitment

Commitment: a decisive moral choice that involves a person in a definite moral course of action.

AT SOME point in a young person's life, a decision is made by that person as to what kind of life he is to lead; as a productive, law-abiding citizen, or as an antisocial nonentity. This choice may be made in young adulthood, or in adolescence, or in the elementary school years.

Although the decision will be entirely his, there are many factors that will influence this decision. Some of the factors are: the parents and the family life of the person; the neighborhood(s) in which he was reared; the churches and other social organizations; and the schools.

Assuming that these various influences are operating at an optimum level of performance, we might expect our young person to make a wise choice. However, what will be the effect if we concern ourselves here with the socially deprived child? How will these factors ultimately affect the life he will choose for himself?

In most upper-lower and middle class

Paul D. Allen is a teacher in the Mary C. I. Williams Elementary School, Wilmington, Delaware.

families, the parents exert a positive influence on their children. True, we are now beginning to see the effects of unreasonable pressure on these children, yet that is another subject altogether.

The Parents and Family Life

In socially deprived homes, we find the opposite is often the case. Many of these parents seem not to care at all about their children, that is, according to our middle class standards. They may care very deeply, but the concern for their children may manifest itself in various forms.

Many parents are so busy eking out a meager living for themselves and their children, that often the children are left in the care of other children or to fend for themselves.

Many of these homes have no father or male head of the household. If the mother has several children and is unable to work, she must rely on welfare agencies for survival. The overall effect of this on the children, and on their regard for work is an important consideration.

Finally, there is the overwhelming feeling of futility which envelops the parents. This apathy is usually passed on to the children.

It is apparent that very little *positive* influence is being exerted by the family group. I stress the word *positive* because there is a great deal of negative influence working here.

The Neighborhood

Here, too, many negative influences are working on the child. The effect of slum living on children has been discussed at great length. The main point I would stress is that the world encountered by the slum child is exceedingly small. He is not fully aware of the larger, more pleasant world of grass, trees and privacy. His world consists of noise, cement and many, many people in a small area. Due to such overcrowding, he is truly a child of the streets.

Attempts to alleviate these conditions are being made. The neighborhood associations that are springing up in many large cities are magnificent attempts to improve this child's environment. Yet efforts of this type take time.

Churches and Other Social Organizations

We have always had slums. But today's slums are different in several respects from the older ones. Slums of the past were usually inhabited by immigrant groups who maintained a strong family unit. Another difference is one of religion. These immigrant families usually belonged to strong religious groups. Today's slum dweller, although no less religious, usually does not belong to one of the major denominations. The number of store-front churches in such an area will attest to this statement. Perhaps an answer lies in the fact that for reason of color or the inability to speak English, many people do not feel welcome

in the larger, more established churches. Again, attempts to change this situation are being made. The "Inner-City" movement of many urban churches is a step in the right direction. Also, such organizations as the Boy's Club, Girl's Club, or Y.M.C.A. are bringing their programs to the children of these areas.

The Schools

While attempts in these other areas are being made to improve the lives of our socially deprived children, the fact remains that the school is there in the community and that all children must attend school. A reasonable extension of this kind of thinking, then, is that the school will play, or can play a major role in helping the child make the right choices or commitments.

I often wonder if school people realize the impact they have on children's lives, and how much more impact they might have on them.

The school itself can be so vital. It can be a friendly, warm (in both senses of the word), orderly, beautiful place for these children—a haven from the cold, brutal, anxious world outside. The unwillingness of so many of our children to leave at the end of the day underscores this fact.

The teacher is another vital factor. Here we refer to the teacher as a person in constant personal contact with the children. He is the one person who can give the child the dignity, security and recognition he so desperately needs. The teacher is the one, merely by his commitment to these children, who can begin to instill the values and guidelines that these children need to develop.

The teacher will need some guidelines of his own to help him in his tasks. Let us offer a few possibilities that may be

useful in helping a child develop this intangible aspect of commitment.

First of all, the teacher must help the child become aware of the choices available to him. I have previously stated that the child's world is such a small one. School people should do everything within their power to raise the horizon of this child's world. He should be exposed to all types of cultural activities—literature, music, art, theatre, and the dynamics of the greater community in which he lives.

Second, I believe that a visitation program should be set up, in which various people from the neighborhood who have been successful in their work can be brought in to talk with the children. This contact with successful persons could have a great impact on the children. This is not meant to be part of a high school guidance program. This should take place in the late elementary and early junior high school years. It should be a part of the normal classroom activity.

Finally, the teacher should work with the children in developing their ability to see consequences. One of the things I have observed in my children is their inability to see into the future, and to be able to predict outcomes of their present actions. This aspect is evident everywhere—in their behavior on the playground and in the classroom, in their

ability to reason in arithmetic, and in reading situations in which predicting outcomes is used as motivation for reading. This ability to predict outcomes extends into life itself, and we must help the child form basic predictive patterns.

Of course, the hungry child may be well aware of what will happen if he steals the milk from the neighbor's doorstep. Yet the hunger may be so great that he will steal it anyway. We must show the child that there are acceptable alternatives to follow. A kindly neighbor might help out until food is available, or perhaps his family is unaware of surplus food available to them. Perhaps there are small jobs available through which he might supplement the family income. These alternatives must be shown to the child.

We can do much in this respect. Role playing of meaningful situations gives the child an excellent chance to predict outcomes. Reading and the Language Arts also offer many opportunities for predictive activities. Children love to finish stories that the teacher has started. One of the most fascinating classroom experiences I have ever witnessed was one in which a teacher showed the children a film without sound. The children were to write a story about the film as they saw it, including an ending to the story which had not been shown. The results were delightful. It was uncanny how well most of the children grasped the meaning of the film so accurately. More significant, though, was the fact that the alternatives many children presented were quite plausible.

These are some of the ways I believe commitment may be developed in children. It is by no means a complete list, yet I believe it is a step in the direction of helping our child make the right choices.

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