

"Are Children **CRUEL?**"

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COPING with hostile forces is a problem area in America today. Knowing this, a two-member team in a Middle School Level I setting with nine- to eleven-year-old students formulated a project which would focus the students' attention on their own behavior patterns in a hostile situation.

Children, too, need experience in coping with behavior that is different and in recognizing their own feelings in this situation. An important element of the social science series we adopted was the student's confrontation with a sample of behavior. This sample, then, became a stimulus for inquiry. Using the real thing, the live representation of the behavior we wish to demonstrate, speaks far louder than words we say. Keeping this in mind, we set up our experiment to: (a) see if a star, through disruptive behavior, would call forth hostile reactions from the children; (b) try to get children to recognize these hostile reactions; and (c) work toward an evaluation of this behavior.

The materials used in this social science experiment were: the social science text series put out by Science Research Associates; various sociograms; tape recorders; video tapes; cameras; slides; and stenographers.

The selection of the child was based on the cumulative record of the child, the teachers' opinion of the child, and the results of

several sociograms. Before the program was initiated, the following people were consulted: The Director of the Campus School; the Assistant Directors of the Campus School; the Guidance Counselor; and the parents of the child. After discussing the aim and goal of the project with these people, we called in the child. The entire project was explained to the child and he was asked to cooperate.

We started a unit on friendly and unfriendly behavior. During this unit, for a two-week period, the experiment was conducted. In the first week the child would be involved in disruptive behavior. The disruption would go gradually from an insignificant incident into one of larger proportion. While this was going on, various equipment was used to evaluate the incidents and reactions of the first week. Thus the pupils saw or heard exactly how they had reacted to one of their fellow peers.

We were not so much concerned with changing the behavior of the children as we were concerned with showing them that there were many ways to cope with "different" behavior. One such incident, for example, took place on a Thursday during the first week. This was a discussion period in which playground activities and classroom parties were topics. The majority of the class with the exception of the star was in favor of

playing tackle football, for example. Tom, who was the star, was an avid football player and one of the best athletes in the school. Tom's opinion was that tackle football should be stopped. This called forth hostile reactions not only from the boys but also from the girls who apparently also had an interest in football.

Unpopular Behavior

Some of the comments made by the students during that class discussion against Tom were: "He doesn't belong to this school"; "He should be kicked out of school." A few students raised hands as if to hit the star. Most of the pupils rose as one against the star, thus showing that Tom held the unpopular opinion. The following week, this incident, which had been taped, was played back to them. The children had a chance to hear what they themselves had said during that discussion.

After playing back the tape recording, we asked the children to express their feelings about the star. Some students said they were mad at him, that they were ready to kill him, that they thought of him as being an outcast. Many of them were very surprised at the star's opinion of football. Some thought that he was sick. A few said that they thought he was a sissy. Several said they might have teased him. And last, a few students said that they were ready to fight him because of his stand on football. While talking about their opinions of Tom, the students were questioned as to ways of understanding a person holding an unpopular opinion. Some methods of coping with unpopular behavior are teasing him, fighting him, or ostracizing

him from the class. The children thought, argued, discussed, and came up with alternative forms of behavior in this situation.

To evaluate our experiment we would first have to go back and restate the three objectives: (a) see if the star through disruptive behavior would call forth hostile reactions from the children; (b) try to get children to recognize these hostile reactions; and (c) work toward evaluation of this behavior.

In regard to the first objective, three of the incidents, those on Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, did successfully call forth hostile reactions. The first two incidents elicited little or no reaction.

The second objective was accomplished, to a certain extent, through the use of slides and videotaping in which the students saw and heard themselves. The children did seem to see their own unfriendly responses, but at this point complete understanding has not taken place.

Our third goal will be an ongoing one. Already in small groups the students are talking about friendly and unfriendly behavior and the ways to cope with it. They openly say hostility is one way to deal with someone who is unpopular. In the continuing small group sessions, we hope to lead the students to see alternatives in their relationships with their peers. These small group discussions will center around the pupils' problems and will be followed by large group discussions giving these problems and needs further consideration.

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