

Ulcerville, U.S.A.

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CAN you imagine grade school children in your community with ulcers? Do you register shock and disbelief at this question? Whether you live in suburbia, inner city, or in a rural community, this may well be true. The number of grade school children with such severe nervous tensions that they develop ulcers has increased, according to recent medical reports.

A doctor in a Midwestern state created quite a stir when he reported what appeared to be an alarmingly large number of first through fourth grade children with stomach ulcers. He pointed out that they were victims of a highly competitive, unreasonable, and demanding life in a suburban society. What is there about modern life that is changing childhood, heretofore a time of golden dreams with no seeming worldly cares, into a time of frustrations and apprehension? Is the school alone to blame or is this a responsibility that can also be laid on the doorstep of the home and the community?

It is difficult to pinpoint the problem with regard to placing the blame on a single agency of society today. Modern life has become so complex, with school, the home, and society so closely interwoven as to make

distinction and separation a difficult, if not impossible task.

A School Problem?

Let us examine the school first, as this is a common target for criticism when things do not go well. Indeed, in this situation, we will find that much of the responsibility *can*, with ample justification, be directed here.

Beginning with the kindergarten level, we find that the stepped-up pace of life as we know it today is reflected in this early phase of education. For example, many communities find considerable pressure from parents to force the school to accept children of a very young chronological age. Parents are anxious to enter children in school, possibly because this provides baby-sitting and frees the mother for other interests and activities.

Some feel that earlier entry into school assures more effective learning. This belief is related to what is rapidly developing as a major, if not the only, goal of public education today—entrance into a college or university. It is difficult to conceive of four- and five-year-old children being groomed for Father's alma mater, but such seems to be the

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case even though this thought is not expressed in so many words.

Stepped-Up Kindergarten Program

This pressure, brought on by concern on the part of parents, does not cease after the children enter school. Dissatisfaction is often expressed with the nature of most existing kindergarten programs. These programs presently stress among others (a) adjustment of the individual child to a group situation, (b) development of large motor skills through carefully planned play activities, (c) introduction to directed activities, and (d) the beginning of sensory perception needed for initial reading experiences.

The trend here seems to be to step up the sequence of educational activities such as initial reading skills development as a part of the kindergarten program rather than at the first grade level. While many children admittedly are not ready for them, such activities are extended in blanket fashion to all kindergarten students. It is presumed that this exposure will somehow magically accelerate learning to read.

Unfortunately this kind of pressure on young children often serves to defeat one of the primary functions of a kindergarten program, which is to make for an effective adjustment to school and learning. The defeat of this important purpose by the exertion of pressure to "do well" in school can result in more than poor adjustment on the part of the child. Such pressure has serious implications in terms of the psycho-

logical blocking which may occur and may limit future growth and development in subsequent grades where learning should be taking place. It is sad to note that parents are not the only ones guilty of exerting such pressure. All too often, teachers are as guilty as parents of this attempt to move downward the sequence of learning activities in the mistaken notion that this is a factor in improving instruction.

Good Grades at Any Cost

A second factor or source of pressure that is found more and more to permeate all of the elementary levels as well as high school levels is the emphasis on grades as indicated on report cards. These are accepted as the *indisputable measure of success* or lack of it on the part of students in school. This is the case in spite of all we now know about shortcomings and inconsistencies of most grading systems as crude measures of growth and development. The emphasis here is to "get good grades."

The cost in terms of the disastrous effect this may have on the mental health of students is either underestimated and ignored or completely overlooked. Good grades are regarded with pride, and are often rewarded by parents who may go so far, for example, as to give children a dollar for each "A" on the card. Such a practice develops in students a sense of values whereby good grades mean money, a much wanted bike, or later a car. The net result is that the student does not strive for self-improvement but rather

for the marks on the report card. He knows good grades will bring the rewards and tangible assets he wants and would like to have. Children are realists, and in a situation where the terms are made so graphically and brutally clear to them, they will respond accordingly.

Pressures in High School

When the student enters high school, the pressure is *really* on. He is bombarded from all sides by statements which point out that colleges are overcrowded and that they can accept only top ranking students. Those who cannot enter are doomed to the ignominy of a less than ordinary existence. College entrance has become a status symbol. It looms so large in the eyes of adults that our youth cannot help but be affected by it. The net result is that good grades and hence a better chance at entrance to the college of one's choice, or perhaps more appropriately, Dad's alma mater, is a goal to be attained at all costs. Cheating on examinations, on term papers, etc., becomes a commonplace occurrence. This is borne out in many examples such as those cited.

Are we stressing grades too much? What do these cases say to this pointed question? These are cases taken from the pages of Midwestern metropolitan newspapers. They actually occurred. They are not fictitious.

- *Case 1.* Susan was an "A" student in high school. She studied hard and her grades were high. As the work became progressively more difficult, she found it harder and harder to get "A's." She was caught cheating on an examination and expelled. The impact of this experience on her was traumatic, to say the least. She is presently undergoing psychiatric care.

- *Case 2.* Mary tried to kill herself. She was a tenth grade student in a large suburban school. Last month she received the first "D" in her life. The shock was too much for her. Dying seemed easier to her than the thought of taking a bad grade home.

- *Case 3.* Bob was a senior who had gotten straight "C's" in his last, important year in high school. He never finished the year, never

graduated. He ran away from home because he realized that with grades like this, he would never get into Dad's alma mater, a goal Dad had his heart set on. We know that Bob was unrealistic in running away—but how realistic, how fair was his father?

- *Case 4.* Helen was a bright, conscientious eleventh grader. She was a joy to have in class. She always tried hard and always seemed to do good work. She was encouraged to try even harder, to do even better. She tried to do just that and, being the conscientious girl that she was, worked herself into a nervous breakdown. She did not make straight "A's," but she did make the mental hospital.

A Winning Team or Else!

These statements have been concerned with high school academic achievement or lack of it. This is only one source of difficulty. Another common source is that concerned with extracurricular activities, particularly interscholastic athletics. A winning team is the only criterion for success in this area. There is ample evidence that a positive correlation can be found between coaches' contracts and the won-lost record for a season. Where a coach's team does well, his contract reflects it. Where the team does not do well—this is another story. The coach who builds character is soon, unfortunately, looking for another position. The apprehension of the coach is directly transmitted to the athletes on the team. Sportsmanship becomes an ignored goal in the drive to win and win at any cost. How wholesome, how constructive, how desirable is this? What effects does this highly competitive spirit have on youthful attitudes?

The Social Whirl—Teen-Age Style

Another nonacademic area that presents a major source of pressures on youth is the social life of a school and community. Referred to here are dating practices and efforts of parents to encourage youth to model their activities after adult patterns. Often these practices may not necessarily be appropriate to the needs and interests of youth. This problem has been discussed in many articles.

Cheating, An Accepted Practice

The stress on grades, on passing, on good results at all costs, is not unique to the public schools alone. This is true of colleges and universities in many cases as well. Even here, where more maturity would cause us to expect a more sane approach to grades, we find this is not enough to ensure the absence of such pressure. One case, this among many, occurred in a large university noted for its high standards and rigorous academic program.

The students in some classes openly used crib notes on examinations. The instructors learned to look the other way when this was being done. One conscientious instructor would not conform to this mode of operation. He insisted on complete honesty in his examinations. As a result, he became very unpopular with students. He had his car tires slashed, upholstery ruined, and he received ominous phone calls and notes. As no one could be happy or even function well in a situation like this, he left this institution.

We may ask, why should students resort to such tactics to gain good grades? Part of the cause is undoubtedly the emphasis on grades. Another factor is the conflict of value systems between that of operating a good, honest school program and the contrast of some less honest practices in daily life in society. A student hears his father boast of doing Uncle Sam out of tax money by manipulation or misrepresentation of reports on income tax forms. This may be a common practice. Some persons may joke about it. Yet what does this knowledge do to the child who is taught in school that honesty is the best policy, that patriotism is a highly desirable quality of character? How can we answer the inevitable question in his mind?

The Individual Is Important

In all of these discussions, there is an element of fundamental importance that is lacking and that is a concern for the individual. We say as educators that we take children where they are, accept them as they are, as individuals. We then help them as

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individuals to develop along lines consistent with their unique individual qualities and within a framework of social conditions. In this way, we are being democratic. Yet when we ignore individuality by setting expectations on a mass basis with no variations for the uniqueness of each personality, we are working against a proven principle of education. This is exactly what is happening in many situations.

There are problems like these in many communities, problems that are raising hob with our children, problems that have serious implications for the kinds of attitudes that our youth will develop through their formative school years. The answers to these questions must come, as the questions do, from each situation. Each professional person has a strong sense of moral values and a concept of what is good and what is important in the development of our children and youth into well-adjusted, loyal, and productive citizens. We know, too, how children work, how they grow and develop. Our psychological studies have given us this information though we may tend to ignore it. Constant and searching evaluation of the objectives of the school program in all its aspects is needed. This will help to determine the appropriateness of these educational objectives to what we hold to be important for our country's future and for life today and will help assure a sane and reasonable program in the schools for our children.

Let us recall the words of an educator who lived in a bygone but not forgotten era who said, "What is honored in a country will be cultivated there." The questions may well be asked: What do we honor—and what do we cultivate?

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