Youngsters Learn Social Skills

CAROLINE TRYON

THE RELATIONSHIPS between persons who play, work or live together in a group will, after a short period of interaction, become patterned. This is as true of children's groups, beyond a certain minimum age, as it is of adult groups. If we look behind this pattern in children's groups for the causes of any particular pattern we find that the known factors can be classified into three major areas. First, *developmental processes themselves will influence the nature of the interrelationships.* Any group of six-year-olds will show certain characteristic patterns that are different from those of nine-year-olds and the latter patterns in turn will differ from those of the typical fifteen-year-olds. Second, *the expectancies and pressures of the surrounding social world, and to some extent the physical world, will shape the pattern of the group.* Finally, *each individual in the group, each with his own unique set of needs, desires, aspirations, and ways of satisfying these will influence the group dynamics.* These three areas of causation will be briefly considered here.

Developmental Processes Shape Patterns of Relationship

It is often useful to regard development in terms of stages if we remember at the same time that development is a continuous process. When children enter kindergarten or first grade, the majority are in the later years of one phase of social development. One characteristic of children at this level is that they rarely carry on a group project for any period of time without the assistance of an older person. While certain children will often be observed playing or working near particular children, a great part of their interaction will not be truly collaborative. Much of this play or work will still be "parallel." Two or three or four children will be engaged in the same activity such as wheeling doll buggies or driving apple-box trucks. Each, however, is living an independent fantasy that is not dependent on what one or another of the others does.

Typical of this period is an observation made by the writer. Two first-grade boys piled chairs and blankets on a davenport and announced they had an airplane. One crawled into this structure at one end and became the pilot, making sounds like a motor and movements to turn an imaginary steering wheel. The other boy crawled in the other end, hung over the back of the davenport and made sounds like a machine gun with appropriate movements, announcing he was a bombardier. For approximately four minutes this ship sailed through imaginary space. Then the bombardier looked up, saw the underside of the superstructure of blankets and chairs and said, "This is my house" and hurried off to get some housekeeping equipment. The front half of the ship sailed on; the pilot, continuing the responsibility of being the engine, added those of bombardier quite undisturbed by the loss of his crew. In this episode we see the beginning of real collaboration in the building of the plane and in the brief period of cooperation as a crew. But we also see the strong persistence of the independent fantasy play through which children explore the adult world and clarify their relationships to it. *Perhaps where we err most frequently in our dealings with children in groups at the first-grade level is in insisting on group and sub-group behavior that is still beyond their readiness.*

Adults Condition Young Children's Values

The teacher in the kindergarten, first and

The bewildering phases of child growth as they affect group living are gaining in understanding by adults. Caroline Tryon, School of Education, University of Chicago, traces some of these patterns from the stage of the moppet in preschool who finds satisfaction in isolated play, through the "battle of the sexes" era usually found in the elementary level, on to the adolescent area where cooperative enterprise is generally the rule. Mrs. Tryon suggests that new social skills be learned at each level if children are to emerge into confident and intelligent members of an adult society.

second grade is an enormously important person in shaping the kinds of social experiences a child will have with his peers in later life. In a sense the teacher's relationship with the children could be thought of as a bridge over which the children pass to the next stage of social interaction. For most children in these earliest school years it is more important to have the friendship, attention and good-will of the teacher than that of the children or of a particular child. They have come out of a family group where their strongest attachments, their affection and admiration is centered in the parents. When they come to school, identification with the teacher as a substitute for the parents will be the typical pattern. Her set of standards and values will become theirs. The children she regards with approval, they will regard similarly. Behaviors she disapproves, they will tend to disapprove. The teacher brings to the classroom her own standards, her system of values and purposes, or interprets those of the school, with regard to achievement and "discipline." In the early primary years the children evaluate each other as good and bad with regard to these standards.

The teacher also brings her own life story which will make the emotional acceptance of some children's behavior difficult and that of others easy. She may find herself irritated or offended at the habits, cleanliness and language of children of the deprived lower social-economic groups. She may find herself unconsciously approving and rewarding with friendship and privileges those children who come from homes with standards and mores similar to her own. Further, the unique adjustments each individual has had to make may creep into the teacher's relationships with individual children.

One teacher discussing these problems told the story of her life briefly. She had lost both parents early in high school. Getting an education in order to be a teacher became a consuming goal. She worked to earn her living, and studied to achieve scholarships during high school, teachers college and later university years. In analyzing her relationships with children during her first years of teaching she reported a recognition of a strong tendency to reward the children who were striving for top rank in the academic areas, often at great cost to their more fully rounded development. These insights brought changes in her relationships with children and a greater satisfaction in professional service. Another teacher reported a prolonged period of tomboyishness during childhood and adolescence in a family group that consisted of a younger sister who was very feminine like the mother, and a father who wanted a boy and whom she strove to please. She felt she had never had her share of the mother's affection. As she became aware of this patterning in her own emotional life she saw that she had accepted more freely and approved more readily the rowdy little boys and the tomboyish girls.

These relationships between teacher and children are important at most levels of social development, but they are infinitely more important at the early primary level. *Children at this time become marked for certain kinds of roles in their peer group which can, and often do, persist a lifetime.* In other words, at kindergarten and first-grade levels there is already some structure in the relationship pattern among the children. There are children who are chosen frequently as friends or companions, others who are chosen for classroom or play responsibilities, others are named because they clown or stimulate fun, others who are almost completely ignored, and others who are actively rejected. *These roles are, however, more labile, more subject to change, than they will ever be again, and the wise teacher can influence those changes as she recognizes the need.*

Group Action Emerges

Our current evidence points to the second grade as a year of transition in most children's groups. Probably most important in this transition is the development by the children of a code of values or standards that differs in varying degrees from those of teachers and parents. The little boy who said to his mother when he was called from outdoor play at the bedtime hour, "Just say 'it is time to come in.' Don't say 'it's time to come in and take your bath' " had recognized a new social order in his world. His play group was moving adults and their standards over to the periphery of their social organization.

The writer has discussed with a few first-grade teachers their first experience of moving on to second grade for a second year with the same group. These teachers reported a common experience of bafflement, of frus-

tration, of hurt feelings as some once well-behaved, friendly children began to exclude the teacher, sometimes to disregard her wishes or regulations, sometimes to evidence satisfaction at her public reproval of them. It was with considerable relief that these teachers came to regard these changes as symptoms of important growth in the children rather than as signs of their own professional failure and sought ways of assisting children to make the transition.

It is at this time in development that we see a certain portion of a classroom group busily engaged in learning certain skills such as jumping rope, hop-scotch, playing marbles, the rules of various games of tag. They also begin to improvise games, making up their own rules and seeing to it that the group members abide by them. One little girl remarked with a sigh as she studied with mixed satisfaction and regret her set of trading cards, "I wish I could take these to school today, but it just isn't the season for trading cards". There is less and less of the individual fantasy play. *Toward the end of second grade genuine group action, a true society, has emerged in which the rules are created or assimilated by the group, in which common goals and purposes are recognized, in which collaborative group activity can persist over a long period of time.*

Each Sex Has Its Own Code

One of the changes that takes place at this time is the more clearly divergent patterns of behavior in boy and girl groups. In the area of games and skills certain ones are taken over by boys, such as wrestling, standard ball games, marbles; others become the province of the girls, such as rope-skipping, hop-scotch; others are shared. As children progress through the next few years of late childhood there is an increased tendency to regard with disapproval the invasion of the other sex's territory in this matter of skilled games. If we seek for other differences between the sexes, we find that the two groups are operating more definitely on different value systems. The boys admire physical prowess, willingness to fight, some resistance to adult demands and pressures. On the other hand, girls approve behaviors that are more typically thought of as feminine such as good grooming and beauty, gracious good manners and amiability. *As children try to learn these new codes and to abide by them their efforts will manifest themselves in social behaviors and attitudes that reflect the codes.* The fact that the girls' value system in the peer group more nearly coincides with that of the majority of women teachers will tend to bring girls into disfavor less frequently than boys.

Adolescents Need New Skills

During the pubescent cycle new codes and roles evolve which demand the mastery of new skills and behaviors if boys and girls are to maintain satisfactory status in their peer group. These all center around two major developmental tasks which face the pubescent boy and girl. *One of these is the reestablishing of heterosexual social relations, and the other is the achieving of emotional independence of adults.* New skills are demanded on many fronts: new games and dance skills that can be shared by both sexes, new skills in grooming, and in common social practices such as conversing. At the same time boys and girls are less ready for the help that adults can give since they are struggling to free themselves of emotional dependence on adults.

As children emerge into the less emotionally charged atmosphere of late adolescence and young adulthood we see another change. Here we find them exploring the standards and values, the roles and skills of the adult world, selecting and trying to assimilate some pattern of these that will furnish a permanent philosophy of life, an appropriate vocation, and a desirable mate.

Adult Expectancies and Pressures Play a Role

The teacher creates to a large extent the social climate of the classroom. We have discussed some aspects of this above in connection with the early primary level. Almost any observer who has watched children in their classrooms and on the playground will report wide differences in the amount of tension evidenced by the classroom groups. After watching a highly autocratic teacher hold a first-grade group to absolute silence and apathetic efforts at industry for two hours, this observer followed the group to the playground. At the outside door half of the group slapped, kicked or pushed the other

half of the group. The other half cringed, dodged and ran away. A few stood up to a knock down drag out fight. This apparently went on day after day. Young children are most likely to take out these aggressions built up under too rigid or too coercive classroom environments on their own classmates.

Older children, with their much more highly organized society, are more likely to find more organized channels through which to express their hostility. Sometimes they select a scapegoat. Sometimes a war with another gang will clear the air in one's own gang. Sometimes destruction or defacing of property serves as an outlet. Sometimes devious methods of annoying adults suffice. The random expression of hostility most often found in the younger children is destructive to the morale of the group. The variety of expressions more often used by older children will preserve and may even raise morale.

The teacher may herself be caught up in a pattern that coerces her to use methods and pressures with which she is not in sympathy. Parents may demand certain kinds of educational practice that must inevitably produce tension in the children. The philosophy of the school or school system may be one which would prevent evperiences in group living that are conducive to good patterns of interrelationship. Various tensions such as those which arise out of racial, ethnic, or religious differences in a neighborhood may be reflected in the interrelationship patterns of children in school. Speeded up time schedules, lack of space for play and activity are other factors producing tension. The extent of the array of external pressures on classroom groups is by no means fully explored. *But the basic principle that many of these pressures beget tensions and that these tensions in turn find expression in hostile behavior is well established.*

Each Child Has His Own Motivational Patterns

At the age of four, or five, or six each child comes to his first day of school with a personality well formed. He has had many vivid, important experiences that have shaped his feelings and emotions, have trained him to certain characteristic ways of meeting successes and failures. Each was also a unique human being at birth with potentialities for certain ways of developing. Each child then is a dynamic factor in shaping the pattern of group interrelationships; and each child in turn is affected by the group dynamics.

It is only as we study the life stories of these children that we see how each seeks to fulfill some of his aspirations and needs. Some children early seek and achieve a prominent place in the group out of feelings of insecurity or affectional deprivation; others find themselves in prominent places because of their spontaneous good humor, enthusiasm and capacity for warmth and friendliness. Others may come filled with hostility and resentment toward a world that has so far mistreated them. Each child then is a complex human being even at this early age. *Our task as teachers is to understand each individual as well as we can so that the individual may contribute to the enrichment of the group and so that the group may contribute to his needs.*

PLAY ALONG WITH GROWTH

(Continued from page 324)

to learn. The same is true with respect to the many other skills that are useful for work or play in everyday life and that can be of great value for work or for recreation in adult years. Moreover, it appears in connection with many of these skills that the chances become very small that a person who has not learned them as a youngster will learn them as an adult.

Help When the Child Is Ready

At first glance the principle of developmental revision of habits and the principle of anticipation may seem to be contradictory. Actually, they complement each other. It would require more research than yet has been done to show the full practical implications—and limitations—of these principles. But enough is known to suggest that much of the time and effort spent in trying to produce changes that are out of season with the child's growth might better be spent in helping him to acquire skills that not only are seasonable but also will have future value.

Copyright © 1946 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.