Parents: Unused Allies in Guidance

ORRIN G. THOMPSON

Orrin G. Thompson, superintendent of the Elgin, Illinois, public schools, does not suggest that parents have been a forgotten factor in the guidance of adolescents in terms of working with the school; rather, there is a wealth of parent talent in this field which is not being fully utilized. He indicates, too, that in the correction of a child's adjustment problems, a starting point for the school is that of helping parents with their tensions and disturbances.

How late should Mary stay out during school nights?

Under what conditions should David have the family car?

How much time should Jane spend on homework?

What is a reasonable weekly allowance for Jerry?

Isn't Judith participating in too many outside activities?

Am I a failure as a parent?

These are among the countless problems which tend to baffle the parents of adolescent boys and girls. Well-meaning parents find themselves unable to cope with the changing pattern of values which accompanies the transition from childhood to youth. The school, as the professional educational agency of the community, must create opportunities for working closely with parents during this difficult, if not perplexing, period.

Awareness Motivates a Program

The advent of the community-school concept has placed the teacher in a dual role—as a teacher of children and as a teacher of adults. Teachers, in general, have little background or training to give them competence in working effectively in the area of adult relationships. Yet, many school systems have come to recognize the need for effective working relationships with parents. As a result of this awareness, various procedures have been set in motion. The following examples from the Elgin, Illinois, schools reflect some of the typical procedures employed.

For the past several years a pre-school workshop has been held during the week preceding the opening of school in the fall. Both teachers and parents have participated in the planning. Programs have included psychologists, guidance specialists, and recognized authorities on child development—with parents acting as panel members or interrogators. Each such occasion is accompanied by a social hour wherein teachers and parents become better acquainted. Since school is not yet in session, there is occasion for free and open discussion without alluding to specific cases or children. A general meeting of this nature, under proper direction, should serve as the forerunner to subsequent meetings dealing more specifically with individual problems.

Parents Come to School

During the second month of school a Parents' Night is held. Because of the

high percentage of parents in attendance, it has become necessary to rotate three groups in this manner: Group I, auditorium program; Group II, refreshments in cafeteria; and Group III, individual conferences with teachers. Although the time for individual interviews is limited, it does permit teacher and parent to become better acquainted. The rapport established between these two forces in the environment of every child pays rich dividends when particular problems do arise. Once the lines of communication are opened, the mutual fears and suspicions of the parent-teacher relationship tend to diminish.

A council of freshmen parents has been organized this year with two purposes in mind: to help parents of freshmen gain a better understanding of the operations and objectives of the high school; and to provide an opportunity for parents to get together and discuss the problems common to adolescents. The steering committee is composed of a parent representing each homeroom and the respective homeroom advisor. It has been proposed that a series of informal meetings be planned to include such topics as boy-girl relationships, homework, family responsibilities, and extra-curricular activities.

Parents gain competence as counselors for their adolescent sons and daughters as they increase their understanding of the work their children engage in at school. They are prone to visualize all schools in terms of the schools which they attended. Many are unaware of the advancements that have been made in the field of child psychology, in instructional processes, in curriculum organization, and in resources now available. So, in addition to the foregoing activities, further attempts have been made to solidify the parent-teacher partnership by special bulletins and letters to parents, through an annual open house and exhibit, through social activities as Mothers' Teas, Dad's-Daughter's B..nquets, and the like.

A Filmstrip Helps Solve a Problem

A promising type of experiment was carried out by the Health Department of the Elgin schools during the past few months. As an outgrowth of an over-all effort to strengthen curriculum offerings in the field of family living at the junior high school level, the staff wished to use the Oregon film, "Human Growth." [This is the film presenting the development and growth of human beings from conception to physical maturity which is described in a preceding article, pages 519-524.]

However, the subject of sex education is still an area in which parents are extremely shy and sensitive. In fact, there is a conviction that only a small minority of parents are willing or capable of providing adequate guidance as the problems of boy-girl relationships evolve.

The problem was presented to the PTA Council. It was their suggestion that all PTA officers and committee chairmen be invited to a preview of the film. More than 200 responded to the invitation. A spirited discussion followed the preview with these generalizations forthcoming: students have a readiness for the film, but many parents do not; as many parents as possible should see the film; and when both parents and their children have seen the film, a point of departure has been established for discussion and counseling.

A Clinical Approach to Inadequacies

When children present adjustment problems in school or at home, a more highly specialized approach to the problem must be made. In 1946 a new department was established in the schools of Elgin which became known as the Child Study Department. It was the outgrowth of a felt need for a service that specialized in the adjustment problems of children. The department now includes a psychologist, two counselors for the socially maladjusted, four nurses, three speech correctionists, teachers for all types of atypical children, and a psychiatric consultant.

An increasing number of children are referred to the department by parents. A large portion of time is spent by the psychologist and counselors on problems of personal adjustment involving parents. Since it is generally true that the child who exhibits personality disturbances at school comes from a home in which there are tensions of one kind or another, it is imperative that a school staff include specialists who are capable of applying therapeutic measures to parents as well as children.

Help for the Conscientious

Well-meaning but untrained parents, who are concerned with the problems of adolescents, often resort to the promotion of arbitrary curfew laws and similar rule-of-thumb procedures before taking into consideration the nature of boys and girls at this confusing age. A functional understanding of child development and the relation of the child's development to home and school resources are clearly necessary. Similarly, the value of constructive programs of guidance, recreation, and counseling must be recognized as a logical service of the schools for adults as well as for children.

In the parent's personal adjustment, the activities he carries out in connection with his daily work and leisure-time activities play a part. If either or both generate insecurity or inadequacy, the personal adjustment of the parent will be transmitted to the child. Here, again, the teacher or the counselor may play a significant role. He can serve as advisor to parents interested in discussion groups, evening courses, hobby clubs, or special activities. All the resources of the school, if properly utilized, could do much to enrich the lives of the parents. Faculty members, with proper training, can become the discussion leaders for parent education programs. Teachers trained in human development and mental hygiene can assist with specialized services in the field of adjustment for adults and children.

A Three-Point Perspective

Administrators who are faced with budgetary problems and teacher shortages and teachers who are already overburdened may well raise some very real questions in relation to these suggestions. It is quite clear, however, that classroom teachers alone, working independently of all other environmental forces, cannot meet the guidance needs of boys and girls with any great measure of effectiveness. The importance and influence of the parent in the development of every child must be given its proper emphasis. When we put all these things together, the responsibility of the school takes on a new perspective.

(Continued on page 540)

The basic skills needed are clearly formulated and taught specifically through appropriate group activities. The language habits include language, literature, number, music, and rhythm. Other kinds of skills include such items as sweeping, dusting, scrubbing a floor, making beds, carrying dishes on a tray, pouring liquids from a pitcher, and table setting, as well as those used in sports. As a child improves, he gains in status and general approval.

Personal and social habits are learned in part through clearly understood routines having concrete requirements for lavatory, bathing, eating, etc. Particularly interesting is the use of group voting on each individual's progress as a "Good Helper." Children quickly learn the specific things they can do to obtain the approval of their peers. By the time they are ready for the academic level they have learned many of life's most important knowledges, attitudes, and skills. This program, planned for a twenty-four-hour per day contact with children, has obvious implications for use with similar children in other types of schools.

Earning a Living

At the academic level the focus of leading programs over the country is upon economic and social self-sufficiency. An analysis is made of the community to determine what jobs are available to these people after they have been trained. These job outlets will differ among various rural and urban communities and even between the different sections of a city. When these outlets have been determined, the skills specific to each are taught directly within the schools. During the latter part of their training the students are employed part-time, and any inadequacies revealed are remedied. Employment representatives work especially with these young people to guide them into appropriate work, and to facilitate any needed retraining.

A certain amount of academic learning is essential to them. By delaying formal reading until a mental age of eight, these children are enabled to progress steadily and successfully until they will leave school at the end of compulsory attendance. By this time they have usually reached about a fourth or fifth grade reading ability, their customary ceiling. Some school boards, as in New York City, have recognized the need for those particular children to have assistance continued to an age older than sixteen.

The content of their reading, arithmetic, language development, and other academic skills grows directly out of their occupational experiences. Materials dealing with the jobs they are learning are written for them to read. They learn the arithmetic necessary to handling money—both their own finances as well as money in their jobs. They write the kind of things required by their jobs and their daily living. These children whose chronological and social ages are so far in advance of their mental age are given content which, though simple, is appropriate and interesting to them. They are not fed on the pabulum of primers.

The records as yet are incomplete, but the improvement of morale, the reduction of truancy, the changed attitudes of parents, and the increased number of these young people gainfully employed indicate that these programs are moving in the right direction.

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(Continued from page 538)

- All teaching personnel would profit by training in the understanding of human relationships, including both children and parents
- Schools must take the initiative and provide leadership in all those activities which will help parents gain competence in guidance
- Greater provision must be made for such specialized services as children and parents need in solving their adjustment problems.

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