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Social-Class Influences
on Discipline at School

Inferences drawn from the Textown Study of Adolescence and other research are used to show that influences of family background upon discipline observed among boys and girls at school are modified by relationships with age-mates and with teachers and counselors.

DISCIPLINE, whether it be imposed from without or exercised from within, is what permits human beings to live with one another in groups and in communities. The necessity of setting limits upon "proper conduct" and teaching children to behave as expected leads parents and other persons to "discipline" each new prospective member of society until he or she acquires a measure of "self-discipline," a conscience and an ideal of what one should be like. Put tersely, personal freedom constantly has to be limited by responsibilities to others. Man is human only in so far as he is able to restrain and redirect his impulses, his urge to do what he wants. To be human, his thoughts, feelings and actions have to "fit" within limits shared with other men in time and place. Thus a child is socialized as he matures into an adolescent and becomes an adult.

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But teaching and guidance both are necessary if a boy or a girl is to become a disciplined person. Aside from similarities in general appearance and in our relative helplessness during infancy and childhood, we are born different from one another (except in the case of identical twins). To live together, we have to learn to be alike in a number of ways. Like many other aspects of human behavior, discipline is acquired through learning experiences involving other persons who serve as cultural agents. Usually the first of these learning experiences are with mother, then father and any siblings in the family setting.

Influences of Family Background

Social-class influences upon discipline in schools arise out of the fact that each boy or girl entering a classroom comes equipped with his or her own biology, life history so far, and a pattern of conduct shaped by learning experiences in a family of orientation. Exceptions are few. Even a youngster with a foster family has a surrogate mother and father. Most school people are familiar with social-

class differences in bringing up children. Through teacher education and in-service activities, many have encountered research findings about variations from one life style to another in child-rearing practices (2, 3) and in expectations about the ways in which boys and girls should behave and respond to school people (4). In the course of his years of experience in schools, nearly every teacher, counselor or principal comes to expect somewhat different "discipline problems" when some young people are "from across the track" and others are "from up on the hill."

Along with other students of human behavior (1), we differentiate among several "systems" of behavior which have to be reshaped as boys and girls move from infancy, through childhood and adolescence, to adulthood. American middle-class culture, which represents the way of life the school is expected to teach, demands that four of these behavioral systems be buried, repressed, denied to awareness, and appear only in limited acceptable forms. At the heart of any concern about discipline is the way in which a boy or girl has been taught to manage oral, excretory, sexual, and aggressive behavior.

In general, middle- and lower-class families, whether they be Anglo-, Latin- or Negro-American, tend to differ somewhat in weaning practices, in toilet training, in teaching a child to be a boy or girl, and in training to express or to curb either physical or verbal aggression. As yet we do not know the specific consequences of these variations in child-rearing practices. Nevertheless we do know that some kinds of impulsive behavior which were gratified earlier in a child's life no longer are accepted or approved by parents as he becomes "a big boy" or she learns to be "a big girl."

Let us take aggression as a case in point. Aggressive behavior is acquired and brought into being again and again because the particular response has been learned. For instance, a mother is attempting to feed a squirming, crying baby. She becomes anxious, tense, and holds the baby stiffly. The child somehow senses what the mother feels. The incident is repeated a number of times, perhaps leaving both mother and child exhausted. Grandmother takes the infant, holds her easily, soothes her and quietly feeds the child. When mother is tense, the child finds that what we term a temper tantrum leads to care from comforting grandmother. Thus expressive aggression is learned and remains until the mother can acquire poise—if she ever does.

In a somewhat analogous manner, during later years with other adults and with age-mates, physical and verbal aggression are shaped through two-person and group relationships.

One consequence of the variations in child-rearing practices and value orientations among life styles, which we index by referring to social-class differences, is that children from lower-class backgrounds may be openly aggressive in situations where those from middle-status homes have been taught to act in other ways. Where the child from "across the track" may employ direct physical attack, the one from "up on the hill" often uses subtle verbal forms of aggression. But there are valuable forms of aggressive behavior.

Activity, in which a young person initiates or "does things," is the positive or constructive side of aggression without the hidden hostility which often lies behind physical or verbal attacks when they are not the products of immediate impulses to retaliate.

The other four "systems" of behavior—autonomy, affiliation, achievement, control—depend for their form and content in childhood and adolescence upon the degree to which a boy or girl is an active person. An *aggressive, active person* always can be provided with experiences which teach him or her to act, to conform, or to wait and see what is appropriate in various situations when others are concerned. He or she can become relatively independent instead of dependent upon others. Such a person is in a position to find ways to be accepted as a friend, to learn to value initiative and competency, and to acquire an increasing degree of self-discipline.

Perhaps withdrawal, which often involves denial to awareness or repression of both feelings and meanings, should be of much more concern both to the parent and teacher. Withdrawing behavior is encountered in somewhat different forms when middle-class and lower-class children are compared. Whereas the former usually have been thwarted by parents, the latter often do not trust people outside of the family setting. *A passive, withdrawing person* has blocks to the formation of habits and concepts which tend to inhibit both school and social learning. The lack of learning experiences puts the individual "out of step" and "out of contact" with older people and with peers. Ways of acting acquired at home or with a few significant persons outside are overlearned, and borderline or ineffective functioning, with attendant behavior problems, is one consequence.

But there are other elements within parent-child, and even in teacher-pupil relationships, which would lead one to modify the foregoing generalizations in the case of a particular individual or his family. Only a few can be mentioned. The basic trust in self and in others necessary to be active in a wide range of situations and to conform when necessary depends upon a combination of two factors. They are whether or not the responsible older person can be *supportive rather than manipulative* and *consistent rather than inconsistent* in relationships with a younger person (6). There are many supportive and consistent lower-class mothers and, as one soon learns, many manipulating and inconsistent middle-status parents and others who have an influence on young people.

The dynamics of such behavior can be readily understood. When a girl or boy is overprotected, he or she often is forced to remain dependent; when treated in a different manner each time for the same kind of behavior, the younger person may be forced into either aggressive or withdrawing behavior. Both may appear on different occasions. If a bit of impulsive action is accepted one time and rejected another, if a way of doing things is approved one day and disapproved another, the individual's object world tends to lack meaning. Then the stage is set for combinations of hostile and repressive feelings which make for unpredictable kinds of behavior. More important, there is little opportunity to acquire a sense of identity—"Who I am" along with "What I am doing" and "Where I am going"—necessary for a control system characterized by self-discipline.

Influences of Age-Mate Acceptance

A sense of personal identity may depend, at least in part, upon experiences in age-mate contexts which supplement learning in the family and in school situations. Among one's peers, persons of about the same age, new kinds of relationships, expectations, and ways of behaving have to be learned. Affiliations

with other children begin as soon as a child has the necessary motor coordination and verbal facility to play and to communicate. Relationships in the neighborhood play group and the first grade usually begin without regard to being a boy or girl. During middle childhood, as most elementary school teachers soon learn, same-sex peer groups begin to emerge. In places such as Textown, children from different family backgrounds learn to respect one another. Many lower-class girls and boys are accepted within the in-groups, some of both backgrounds are avoided, and others from both middle- and lower-status homes are isolated or rejected. Then, in the preadolescent era prior to puberty, a fairly large proportion of juveniles experience the intimacy of girl-girl or boy-boy pairs. Here a number of shifts in constant companions seem to facilitate the learning of several kinds of interpersonal competence necessary in human relations.

In general, girls mature somewhat earlier than boys. Along with or even prior to physical development, many of the girls pay a good deal of attention to learning to behave according to expectations set for the female sex-role. When the boys follow, an early adolescent society of both girls and boys begins to emerge. Adolescent peer cultures arise when ways of thinking, feeling and acting are shared by members of an age-grade who accept, or at least recognize, one another. According to studies at Textown (5) and in other places, earlier and later adolescent societies have identifiable peer groups—each with a somewhat different culture shared by its members. Interviews, nomination techniques, and other ways of obtaining data permit the identification of categories in which young people place one another:

Wheels . . . "the active ones," "the top crowd."

Brains . . . "students," "good kids, but they don't know the score."

Outsiders . . . "they get around," "average kids," "not in the crowd."

Mice . . . "quiet ones," "inoffensive kids," "seldom heard."

Outcasts . . . "wild ones," "you don't want to be with them."

In addition, young people (particularly the "wheels") identify some age-mates as "drips" who make one uncomfortable. A few are named as "dopes" who arouse antagonism because they "show up" their peers with parents and teachers.

When a boy or girl is moving from one stage of development and period of learning to another, and he or she begins to be aggressive or withdraws in a manner not observed before, attention should be paid to relationships with age-mates. During the childhood years, affiliation with and acceptance by one's peers become important to most boys and girls. Some youngsters even learn to "fit in" with one group around school, another in the neighborhood, and aspire to become a member of a third clique made up of age-mates whose acceptance they want to gain. Those who are manipulated or overprotected, however, often lack crucial experiences with others about their own age. On the other hand, the ones who lack support and consistent guidance from parents and teachers establish ties with models from whom they acquire a whole new set of hidden feelings and observable behaviors. A young person could be, and often is, a quiet individual at home and a rowdy, aggressive girl or boy with age-mates.

As shifts are made from childhood to adolescence, the age-mate world changes and the whole concept of self and others is modified by the expectations of cross-

sex as well as same-sex relationships. Those who are "left out" of a peer group to which they want to belong are facing an obstacle. The block provides a setting for aggression or for withdrawal to appear in one form or another. On the other hand, among the teen-agers who are accepted among the wheels, the outsiders (who usually find a lot to do together around town outside of school), and the wild ones, there are certain approved ways of behaving. Consequently, some girls and boys have to learn to employ particular kinds of sexual and aggressive behavior along with an attempt to be relatively independent of adults in order to maintain acceptance. Conflicts enter the situation when a young person faces different claims from the home, the age-mates, and the school. Stress under conflicting expectations of one's self and others often sets the stage for either an eruption or a withdrawal from one or more of the contexts of behavior.

Juvenile delinquency, from the point of view of middle-class people, occurs when an individual or a "gang" performs one or more negatively-valued acts. Most juvenile delinquents turn out to be children and adolescents from lower-class families who did not find acceptance among age-mates in the "wheel" or "outsider" peer cultures and who, when avoided in a number of ways, could not reconcile themselves to being a "brain" or a "mouse." A delinquent subculture sets up criteria for gaining status which can be met by boys, and less often by girls, who find themselves unable to compete with age-mates in middle-class dominated institutions such as the school. Affiliation with deviant age-mates, then, equips the youngster to retaliate against adults and peers who make him feel ashamed, inferior, resentful and hostile. There are, of course, delinquents whose

neurotic acts stem from frustration and loneliness as well as from anxiety over masculinity or femininity. The underlying anxiety often may be traced to a lack of suitable learning experiences with persons in the family and with accepting age-mates who have a sense of identity.

On the other hand, the adolescent peer group with its various role assignments usually is the mechanism through which most girls and boys find workable solutions for the dilemma posed by the discontinuity between childhood training and the expectations faced at adulthood. Value standards prevailing in a young person's family often are quite different from those in families of his or her associates. Among the "wheels" and associated "brains" of any dominant peer culture in an age-mate society, there usually are a number of girls and boys from families of lower-middle, upper-lower, and even lower-lower class homes. The adolescent society, supported in many ways by the schools, provides a way for a large number of young people to acquire the kinds of affiliation, autonomy, drive to achieve, and control over one's behavior that are highly valued and which lead to upward mobility.

Influences of School People

By and large, school people are just as concerned about boys and girls from lower-class homes who want to "better themselves" as they are about young people from middle- and the relatively few upper-class families. The very fact that boys and girls come to school provides a setting where young people are removed from family influences, where opportunities arise for relationships with age-mates, and where responses to more impersonal adult authority figures have to be learned. School people put a value upon various combinations of activity,

conformity and passivity, especially in the area of achievement. Where the teacher, counselor or principal expects active achievement, particularly scholastic achievement, however, a lower-status family or a peer group of "outsiders" or "wild ones" may not value classroom performance in the same manner. Again, some girls and boys are caught among conflicting expectations. Invariably, during the later elementary school and high school years, such situations place the kinds of stress upon some young person that evoke either expressive, or physical, or verbal aggression in one form or another. Thus a "discipline problem" arises.

From observation, we know that there are many wise teachers, counselors and principals—some traditional, some modern in their outlook—who recognize a vital factor in coping with objectionable forms of oral, cleanliness, sexual, aggressive, and highly independent behavior. Moreover, they recognize passivity and withdrawal when it seems to block the attainment of autonomy, affiliation with other young people, initiative and competency, as well as an active control or self-discipline. The individuals we have observed usually are able to make a clear distinction between the person being taught and the kinds of behavior with which he or she is responding at that moment. The distinction permits them to accept the young person, something which can be felt by a pupil, and yet disapprove of what the youngster does or says. Here the important step is to separate acceptance-avoidance-rejection of the person *per se* from approval-disapproval (or neutrality) about behavior at that time and in that place. The separation permits the school person to deal with the boy or girl in an intelligent manner, setting up learning experiences which have rich meanings and which usually elicit the kinds of feelings that favor the acquisition of knowledge and skills or of new orientations.

When an older person can reject the kind of person a boy or girl appears to be and yet approve desirable kinds of behavior, or disapprove of the actions of well-liked individuals, the stage is set for the young person to trust and listen to the older one. From what girls and boys say in their interviews and from other kinds of observations, a teacher, counselor or principal who differentiates between the person and his or her behavior is "a fair person" and usually is one who "makes sense." Many children and youth then begin to take over the attitudes and values of older and same-age models, self-disciplining themselves by forms of self-approval and self-disapproval.

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