

Adult Education and Family Life

Part II

**To serve everyone will require a lifetime of learning
in order to deal realistically
with people existing at many levels of living**

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THE SCOPE of family life education is so vast that we cannot make any appraisal of its total effect, but must make our estimates on the basis of three indications. The first is the widespread and growing acceptance of family life education by the general public. Let us hope that this popularity is deserved. The second is the tangible evidence of accomplishment which is constantly presented to those who work directly with families. The third is the evidence of many evaluative studies which define the progress being made in particular activities. We may hope that this accomplishment and this research reflect general practice.

The purpose of this article is to explore some of the effects of family life education and to suggest lines for future development. Part I of this article was concerned with influences on family life education and previous and present efforts in approaching the subject.¹

Inertia and ignorance are the chief adversaries of family life education but there are more active opponents. From all sides we hear voices saying that family life education is either unnecessary or damaging. Max Lerner, in *America As a Civilization*, says "it is evident that in no other culture has there been so pervasive a cul-

¹ Cyril O. Houle, "Adult Education and Family Life—Part I," *Journal of Cooperative Extension*, I (Fall, 1963), 133-40.

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atural anxiety about the rearing of children.”² He goes on at some length about the “over-concentration on the child.” This anxiety, he says, arises fundamentally out of the changing nature of our culture but it is constantly reinforced by the ceaseless admonitions of some economists and others that people ought to know more about family life. This same point was made, somewhat less elegantly, by the woman who said she attended so many parent education groups that she no longer had time for her children.

The central case against family life education is excellently put by one pair of authors who argue that

happy marriages probably result from unplanned and uncontrolled interactions and are . . . almost accidental. They result from adjustment without insight. . . . We cannot say that such adjustments are not more important than those formed consciously and with insight. A great range of adjustments to social situations take place automatically. . . . The most relaxed marriages are probably those in which thinking is least often necessary.³

One of the most extraordinary things about this argument is that it comes toward the end of Waller and Hill’s book on *The Family*, most of which deals with the importance of understanding family relations. Perhaps the statement is taken too much out of context, but in subsequent pages the authors express very clearly their icy disdain for much of the work now going on in family life education.

While many people hold the view which Waller and Hill have stated, it does not conform to my own experience. Families do rely on what happens naturally for most of their adjustment, but I cannot conceive that they should be told to rely on it completely. Theoretically, there can be ideal marriages in which there is never any need for the conscious seeking of insight, but I have never seen one.

Family life education can create the kind of anxiety to which Lerner refers, but this result tends to happen under a special set of circumstances. When an individual is subjected to many brief educative exposures, none of sufficient duration to permit full exploration and many apparently contradictory, he is indeed likely to become anxious or disturbed. He seeks authority, but the authorities disagree. The solution to the problem of fragmented approaches lies, however, not in abandoning education, but in making it better. If a firmer and more coherent way of viewing the family as a whole is now emerging, and if this view can be used as an inte-

² Max Lerner, *America As a Civilization* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), p. 562.

³ Willard Waller and Reuben Hill, *The Family* (New York: The Dryden Press, 1951), p. 568.

grating conception for our various activities, we shall be far more effective and positive than we have been in the past.

IMPROVING FAMILY LIFE EDUCATION

Each of us will have his own ideas about how family life education may be improved. My own study of the field has brought me to five major conclusions which suggest lines of future development.

The first is that *we have been more successful in conveying facts, skills, and solutions than we have in building well-rounded conceptions*. This result has been brought about by two main causes: (1) Until recently, we have not had an operational way of viewing the whole family; therefore, we have been able to relate our specific teaching only very generally to family improvement. As we moved away from particulars, we have, in fact, tended to rely heavily on vague terms and emotional appeals. (2) The nature of methods which have been used for family life education has placed emphasis on specifics. The mass media are suitable chiefly for making immediate points, and are the major vehicle by which families are reached.

More than that, we have tended to use the problem approach, basing our work rather directly on those points at which people feel the need for specific help. This approach is, of course, an excellent one but only if the immediate problem is used as a way of moving on to deeper understandings. Otherwise, we keep helping people to solve their practical problems, one by one, without ever doing the really educational job of helping them achieve the deeper understanding which will permit them to solve their own problems or, indeed, knowing how to live in such a way that the problems do not occur.

What we need are more sustained and integrated contacts with individual families in some sequential activity which is itself built around a firm conception of the nature of family life and how it may be improved. If people have a central and coherent structure of ideas about family life, they will be able to make all the constant adjustments which are required in our changing society. They will also be better equipped to continue their self-education through the mass media, because they will be far more receptive and understanding about what they see, read, and hear. Each of us is selective in using any of the means of mass communication; we read or watch the things which have an interest for us. One who is sensitized by having a real conception of the nature of the American

family will be greatly aided in selecting, evaluating, and absorbing the constant flow of information from many sources.

My second conclusion is that *we have been more successful in reaching the upper and middle classes than we have in reaching the lower class*. Beneath the levels of society which we are accustomed to serving, there lies the great substratum of our population. We often call this group "low-income families" because we need some convenient way of referring to them and perhaps because economists have convinced us that income is the chief determinant of social level. Actually the people in this group constitute a whole separate sub-culture in our society. They lack education, they often do not belong to stable social groupings, they are not strongly influenced by modern methods of mass communication, their horizons are limited to their immediate geographic environment, and they make no plans. As Davis and Havighurst have shown,⁴ conceptions of family life and methods of bringing up children in the lower class differ radically from the familiar patterns of the middle class. Van Bortel has confirmed this fundamental difference, so far as the women of the family are concerned, by comparing lower-class and middle-class homemakers with respect to their concepts, practices, and attitudes.⁵

We have become increasingly aware of these low-income families in both urban and rural life, as recent emphasis on such programs as Rural Area Development makes clear. Such efforts exemplify the interest and concern which many people, both in government and out, feel about the need to perfect our democracy by increasing the quality of living of those most deprived of the good things of life.

When we designate this group as "low-income families," there is a tendency to believe that their problems can be solved merely by raising their income. To hold this view is to doubt the power of habit. These people have always lived in a certain way; their values and the way they behave are the products of custom which has been reinforced both within their families and within their restricted society. Havighurst and Orr have conducted research on how adult educational agencies may serve the varied levels of our population. From their many case studies, let me select two, noting the significant fact that *both families have the same annual income*.

⁴W. Allison Davis and Robert J. Havighurst, *Father of the Man* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1947).

⁵Dorothy Grey van Bortel, *Homemaking: Concepts, Practices, and Attitudes in Two Social Class Groups* (unpublished doctoral dissertation, The University of Chicago, 1954).

Mr. and Mrs. Agard . . . grew up on relatively small midwest farms. Both sought a college education. Mrs. Agard attended college for one year. With the help of the G.I. bill, Mr. Agard was able to complete college with a major in Business Administration. After graduation he entered a large business firm as an executive trainee, and now has the position of a department head. The Agards and their three children live in a six-room ranch-style home in a new suburban development. Their home is tastefully furnished. Their leisure hours are filled with family activities, once-a-week gatherings with friends (visiting, ping-pong, occasional cards), TV, reading (principally historical novels and magazines—*Time*, *Post*, *Reader's Digest*), weekend trips to family farms, and once or twice a summer, attendance at the outdoor theatre (musical comedy productions).

Mrs. Black . . . dreams of living in just such a home as the Agards, "with a nice yard where the two children can play." Her husband works at the stockyards, a night-shift job. The Blacks live in a small four-room apartment in one of the near-slum areas of the city. It is dark and dingy in appearance. Mr. Black quit school at the end of the tenth grade, and since then has worked at several different jobs. Mrs. Black is a high school graduate. The Blacks say that they have very little leisure. Their favorite activity is hunting and fishing and about once a month they spend a day at it. TV occupies the major part of their spare time. It is not unusual for them to have their television on all day long. Both like to read. Mr. Black prefers 25¢ paperback editions of Westerns and mysteries. Mrs. Black's favorite magazines are *Confidential* and *True Story*.⁶

The life patterns of these two families are very different. Please note, however, that the Blacks, far from being in the lowest ranks of our population, actually are slightly above average. Mrs. Black, for example, has had more schooling than the national norm and her husband is only slightly below it. If we examined the life patterns customarily found in the lowest tenth of our population, we might find far greater differences between a family at that level and the Blacks than we found between the Blacks and the Agards.

If we hold fast to our vision of serving all of the people, we have a lifetime of work ahead of us in learning how to deal realistically with the people who exist at each of the many levels which lie below the range of the population which we customarily serve.

A third conclusion is that *we have far too few people professionally engaged in family life education*. The case, briefly put, is this: (1) Even in our established services, we are not reaching all

⁶ Reported in Robert J. Havighurst and Betty Orr, *Adult Education and Adult Needs* (Chicago: Center for the Study of Liberal Education for Adults, 1956), p. 63.

the people we should; (2) we need to expand and extend the scope of the services provided; (3) in particular, the needs of lower-class, low-income people require new approaches and highly intensive work, often on an individual basis; and (4) we need to develop integrated and comprehensive activities, which are time-consuming.

It will take a great many years to work out a program which is even minimally satisfactory. Let me suggest a parallel. In the middle of the last century, most adults in this country were illiterate. Only a very small percentage of the people could be said to be minimally educated. The men and women who developed our common schools had a vision of a time when all mankind could have the benefits of the kind of advanced education which only a very few of their contemporaries shared. We have not yet achieved their ideal, but, because that ideal existed, we have for more than a century been moving toward universal education. We must establish the comparable ideal of family life education for everyone, and we must move as resolutely toward it as they did.

Number four conclusion is that *we have been more successful in reaching women than in reaching the whole family*. There has been a marked feminization of the family and those engaged in family life education have probably helped to bring this change about. When de Tocqueville wrote on the American family 125 years ago, he dealt entirely with fathers and sons; mothers and daughters are not mentioned in his chapter. In 1834, Theodore Dwight published a book entitled *The Father's Book, or Suggestions for the Government and Instruction of Young Children on Principles Appropriate to a Christian Country*. It is a book of some 200 pages and nowhere does it refer to the fact that mothers have an important role in the government and instruction of young children. Now, perhaps there has not been as much real change as these illustrations would imply. As a man, I have a dark suspicion that women always have been the dominant force in the home. The only difference may be that men used to write the books and now women do.

Whatever the real situation, however, family life education is now largely directed toward the woman in the family. It is women who take the courses and attend the clubs. More than that, the magazines and other mass media so specifically label most family life education as being intended for women that no self-respecting male would be caught dead reading them. Let me not overdo this point, however. A great deal of the information in the mass media is not restricted to the women's section or the women's hour, and some of it probably gets through to the men.

The solution of the problem—if any solution is needed—seems to be the provision of education designed to help couples learn together how to cope with those developmental tasks which they share in common. Pre-marital courses, conferences which deal with marital problems, classes for expectant parents—these three are illustrations. The farm and home development program, designed to help families know how to plan for the future in terms of their resources, is an exact case in point. So are some of the long-range planning activities which Extension is now carrying forward.

There are, to be sure, some trends in Extension which seem to be running very strongly against an integrated approach and which may therefore lead to greater separation. Among them are the urbanization of the subject matter, and the increasing size of the staff which often means that organizational problems prevent smooth and easy integration.

Lifelong Learning

A final conclusion is that we have not given adequate attention to the importance of lifelong learning as a concept around which family activities may center. Most of the family's traditional social functions have been destroyed. Almost 125 years ago, de Tocqueville made it clear that "in America, the family, in the Roman and aristocratic signification of the word, does not exist."⁷ The clan, with all its deep traditions and its great authority over its members, is no more. The family used to be a productive economic unit, in which the cooperative work of all of the members was essential; today it is, for the most part, a consuming unit, and the only time that it acts together economically occurs when it plans its major purchases. Father and son do relatively little work together; neither do mother and daughter.

The necessary labor of our frontier days was often hard and demanding and dull—all of us try very hard to avoid it. But shared work brought values to those who shared it, and the long hours spent together had their result in a kind of family unity which has relatively few counterparts today. There is a vacuum of activity at the very heart of the family.

As a society, we cannot go back to the ways of the past, for all of the reasons which all of us know so well. What we have to find is the modern equivalent for the work which the productive family unit used to do together and the values which were derived from

⁷ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: New American Library, 1956), p. 228.

that work. How this is to be done is not clear but we may usefully speculate about desirable approaches.

Togetherness For one thing, most people now have a rather low opinion of activity which is pursued only for the sake of "togetherness." When mother and dad, in a spurt of conscientiousness, set up some activity "so that the whole family can be together," they frequently find that the children view the whole business with suspicion, not to say rebelliousness. "Isn't this wonderful," the parents keep repeating, each time more loudly. The final result is open conflict, sullen resignation, or, if good sense prevails, the abandonment of the whole plan. I have seen this course of events occur in a good many homes, including my own.

A happy family, to paraphrase an old saying, is not a group of people constantly looking at each other but a group of people looking outward in the same direction. If a family is to have a strong central core of activities which it shares together, those activities must possess what I might call "content." They must be continuous, not spasmodic; they must begin early in the life of the family, not late; but most important of all, they must consist of things which need to be done or are desired for their own sake. The ancient Greeks warned us against trying to aim directly at happiness. If they had thought of it, they would have said the same thing about "togetherness." Both are by-products of activities which are pursued for their own sake.

If a family is not an economically productive unit, with the members mutually dependent on one another, where is the "content" to be found. To this question many answers are advanced. Among them are shared religious experience, recreation, community activities, planning, do-it-yourself projects, and hobbies. We would all agree with all of them as parts of a well-balanced life. But, as an admittedly prejudiced observer, let me add one more: education.

Education In 1848, Miss Harriet Martineau published a book called *Household Education*.⁸ She was a vigorous and forthright woman fighting for a place in the sun in those anti-feminine days, and her ideas about home life were typically unconventional. A home, she said, should be a place where all members were constantly learning together. She demonstrated the fact that people could keep on learning to a very advanced age, and, indeed, it was her idea that if people did not keep their minds active by applying them to study, they would lose their very capacity to learn, a point

⁸ Harriet Martineau, *Household Education* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1848).

which modern psychology amply confirms. She felt therefore that every family should constantly be engaged in both formal and informal cooperative ventures, the purpose of which is to broaden the knowledge and heighten the understanding of everyone concerned. Begin, she said, with the things with which the children are immediately interested; join your interest with theirs; and proceed together upon the absorbing adventure of a shared experience in learning.

Miss Martineau's book has been little heeded by the world. The library copy at The University of Chicago has been checked out just once in the last 30 years. But a number of the happy families I know act as though they had read it and taken its advice. A busy dean, his wife, and son have been reading and discussing books together for more than 10 years. An architect, his wife, and their two children—both under the age of 12—are in the midst of an ambitious project in which they are studying the Civil War, with trips to battlegrounds providing the focus for reading and discussion. A carpenter and his family find time each day to read and talk about a chapter in the *Bible*. One family of four goes off to an evening school together once a week, mother and daughter to a class in ceramics, father and son to the woodworking shop. This kind of adult education is impossible to define or to categorize, and we seldom find it represented in formal statistics. Perhaps, however, it is more widespread than we think.

A family learning together is a family which has established one means of maintaining its unity and harmony, a means which is thoroughly consistent with our modern ideals of democratic living. A child who learns with his parent is very likely to have both a sense of companionship with his mother and father and a respect for the process of learning which will endure in his own later life. Parent education should not just be parents studying about children; it should also be parents studying with children.

CONCLUSION

It has become the fashion of late to draw a melancholy portrait of the modern family. The listing of its ills seems never to end. But I would agree with Aaron L. Rutledge that "the great family upheaval of today is not the Armageddon, but rather the travail of a new family in the process of being born—potentially a healthier family than the world has known."⁹

⁹ Aaron L. Rutledge, "Evidences of Strength in the Modern Family," *Journal of Home Economics*, XLVIII (May, 1956), 326.