

## *Young Homemakers and Extension*

**Learning is not viewed as a means of improving  
performance in the young homemaker's  
most important role**

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LEARNING for use in everyday living has been one of the basic tenets of American education for over a hundred years. Implicit in this idea has been the thought that people want to know how to perform as well as they can those various duties which they, individually, are charged with doing. In the vocational fields the responsibilities are prescribed with some degree of definiteness. In the area of personal life the various roles of father, mother, homemaker, wife, husband, and citizen have much more ambiguous performance requirements and have been influenced by models of the individual, by the friendly or unfriendly persuasion of the community, and by knowledge.

The application of knowledge to family living, especially in young families, has been of particular concern for a number of reasons. First, in the broad sweep of rapid change which requires movement of labor resources, young families no longer continue to live in the geographic area of the root family. Mobility has enabled many young families to improve their economic position, but the improvement has been accompanied by increased responsibilities for young homemakers since they may no longer rely on emergency help or advice from relatives. It is true that the young homemaker has many more services available than her grandmother had, if she has income to purchase them. But so far, no one has devised a care service for young children that can substitute for a grandmother, a sister, or an aunt in relieving the tension of responsibility for the young mother.

A second concern about the application of knowledge to family

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living is related to how the family can contribute most usefully to the development of individuals who have the flexibility, the self-reliance, and the reasonability to live in a world which can change dramatically in one generation. In a world of slower change, the system of modeling after parents in rearing children produced some lag of social development, but such lags could be ameliorated by the general society system or by the fact that the last generation model was not terribly outdated. Families were able to learn a little at a time and do some testing before adopting or rejecting a change.

The third related facet of the problem is that several researchers have shown that the family's influence on the individual is forever. The first years of life have been shown to be plastic but to a large degree permanent in shaping the personality. For these reasons learning for a young homemaker becomes highly significant if she is to contribute to her optimum ability in the development of youngsters who can orient themselves to their world. The total number of young homemakers in the United States is increasing and will continue to increase, and the rate of change in the environment in which the family lives is rapid.

This paper will explore facets of the young homemaker's participation in learning activities. Much of this information comes from a study of young home demonstration club members and non-club members in Indiana. Particular emphasis will be focused on characteristics of young homemakers and their problems and needs. Challenges to Extension will be outlined from this background.

#### CHARACTERISTICS OF YOUNG HOMEMAKERS

Any endeavor to identify generally similar characteristics of young homemakers ends almost where it began, namely, that they are alike in being young and in being homemakers. Even the term "young" breaks down when a 22-year-old describes a 27-year-old as an "older woman." However, young homemakers may be described as two groups, teens to early twenties and mid-twenties to thirties. A few live on farms, some reside in rural non-farm areas, but many are urban residents. Over half of the young women are married by the age of 20. One-third to a half of all the youthful marriages (bride less than 18 years of age) involved premarital pregnancies.<sup>2</sup>

Young families tend to collect around or in medium-sized and

<sup>1</sup> Robert D. Hess and Allison Davis, *Achievement During Adolescence and Adulthood* (Washington: U. S. Office of Education, 1963).

<sup>2</sup> Lee G. Burchinal, "Research on Young Marriage: Implications for Family Life Education," *The Family Life Coordinator*, IX (September-December, 1960).

large cities. Characteristic of the suburban areas are those housing developments containing the \$9,000 to \$11,000 homes; those developments in which the \$12,000 to \$16,000 homes are built; and similar compartments up the economic ladder. Young homemakers are usually found in greater numbers in the lower priced developments. Some young families live in the rural non-farm areas. Education varies as does income. The range of education for 269 young homemakers from three counties of Indiana included in a study<sup>3</sup> was from the sixth grade to a Master's degree. Although the median amount of education was a high school education, there was a wide range in the competencies of young women in the simple skills of reading and writing.

Young women in their teens and early twenties, as one might assume, have been married a shorter time and have a shorter period of residence in the community. Results from the Indiana study of differences between the less than thirty-year-old home demonstration club members and non-members illustrate that attitudes toward organized groups in the community vary and that social confidence of the young women varies between the groups. For example, comparisons on the following seven characteristics were significantly in favor of the member:<sup>4</sup>

1. The member was more frequently a church member than the non-member was.
2. The member tended to belong to more than one organization more frequently than the non-member did.
3. Her mother belonged to an organization more frequently than did the mother of the non-member.
4. Her mother was more frequently a member of the home demonstration club than was the mother of the non-member.
5. The member liked school as an age peer activity more frequently than did the non-member.
6. Her husband belonged to an organization more frequently than did the husband of the non-member.
7. She had belonged to organizations as a youth more frequently than had the non-member.

Another comparison favored the member also (but differences were not significant):<sup>5</sup> Members described themselves in terms of positive traits in relating to others, such as "like people," "meet people easily," "get along well," more frequently than non-members did.

<sup>3</sup>Eva L. Goble, "The Participation of Young Homemakers in Group Learning Activities" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1964).

<sup>4</sup>Differences were significant at the .05 level of confidence.

<sup>5</sup>Probability of this difference was between .05 and .10.

There was strong support for the idea that the young homemaker non-member may feel unsure of her role in relating to organizations but that this lack of certainty may be a continuation of her earlier experience (rather than the result of moving from an age-graded peer group to an adult group). In addition, her mother's model of behavior in relating to organized groups had not tended to influence the non-member in the direction of belonging to an organization. Her husband did not influence her in the direction of organizational membership either.

### *Problems and Needs*

Several studies have pointed out the needs of young homemakers for knowledge in the areas of general household management, developing skills in household processes, understanding the development of children, the decision-making process, how to manage money, effective use of time, and how family members can effectively relate to one another and to the community. Yet, of 269 Indiana young homemakers, 46 per cent of the home demonstration club members and 50 per cent of the non-members indicated they were well satisfied with their performance in the particular role they chose as most important among the choices given them of wife, mother, or homemaker. Of those who indicated dissatisfaction with their performance in the role chosen as most important, only 9.8 per cent of the members and 6 per cent of the non-members mentioned learning as a means of improvement.<sup>6</sup>

This information raises a number of questions. For instance, do approximately fifty per cent of the young women lack goals or aspirations about improving their performance in the role they chose as most important? The evidence from this study indicates that they do lack such aspirations. Conjectures could be made that they have reached a plateau of management and have not been motivated to try to reach another level. The possibility exists that they really have no knowledge about another level or do not see the rewards as worthy of the effort. The model set by the mother of the young homemaker may inhibit aspirations if "being like mother" were the goal.

Do the young homemakers who were not satisfied with their performances in their ranked role view their competence as something one does or something one is? The most frequent reply in the Indiana study as to how a young homemaker would improve her performance was in the area of self-discipline. She would improve

<sup>6</sup> Goble, *op. cit.*

her performance by "trying harder," "being more patient," "being less cross with the children."

Is the young homemaker with the least experience largely engaged in a practice period of using the knowledge which she already has but has not had time to integrate into a dependable skill or process? Although no evidence bears on this point, generalizations in the learning situations indicate that practice periods for learning are needed before a skill or process is mastered. One might assume that the same theory holds true of managing a new household or bathing a new baby.

Have the young homemakers failed to recognize the uses of knowledge in solving the problems of everyday living? The evidence from these data indicate that neither the young members of the home demonstration club nor non-members are strongly aware of learning as a means of improvement in the role they chose as most important (and in which they were dissatisfied with their performance). Although the evidence indicating recognition of learning as a means of improving performance in a role was not present in either members or non-members in this study to any degree, the possibility exists that they would have recognized the value of learning if the question had been in terms of specific problems they were experiencing.

With reference to participation in learning groups, one problem of the young homemaker is that she feels her husband, mother, and close friends doubt the usefulness of what is learned. In other words, women who belong to such groups have motives other than that of learning useful subject matter. Since these opinions were her own opinions rather than those of the persons close to her, it would appear that they actually reflect her own views.

In light of this way of viewing the usefulness of what might be learned, it is not surprising that young homemakers likewise believed that the members of their close reference group (husband, mother, friend) disapproved to a substantial degree of their participation in such clubs or group activities. The projected disapproval was most marked in relation to the husband's attitude.

This evidence bears out the results of a study by Weiss. He reported that adults view learning by adults as an escape from responsibilities or as an activity for adults who lack important work to do. Since such activities are self-centered, the family interprets participation in learning as a luxury for the individual rather than a contribution to the family.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Edward H. Weiss, "What Adults Really Think About Adult Education," paper given before the Annual Conference, Adult Education Association, Cincinnati, Ohio, November 9, 1958.

Sperry and Garner report sources of information and services about child care used by 239 young mothers with a first child under three years of age.<sup>8</sup> Sources named more than fifty each were, in descending order, doctor, mother, own experience, reading material, mothers-in-law, instinct or common sense, and other relatives. Mothers who were under twenty years of age named their mothers-in-law most frequently as sources of information, and mothers who had attended college named reading materials as the most frequently used source. However, the single source of information mentioned as most helpful in the Sperry-Garner study was mothers (first place) and doctors, second. This study reports the responses to all questions concerning needed information, but that study or discussion groups were most frequently mentioned as a desirable source of help.

Obstacles to group learning mentioned by 269 Indiana young homemakers were lack of knowledge of programs in which they may participate, responsibility for care of children, interference with husbands' work schedules, lack of groups of appropriate composition, lack of groups located in the community, lack of confidence in their own group skills, belief that programs are designed for older women, fear or dislike of organizational commitments, and lack of an invitation to participate.

#### THE CHALLENGE

Despite the myriad difficulties cited in involving young homemakers in learning activities, bright spots do appear. By far the majority of young homemakers want to rear their children successfully. They would be highly motivated to do whatever they know how to do to achieve this result. The basic problem in catching their interest is helping them to make the connection between performing successfully those everyday tasks and their long-time goal. In a program about household procedure directed to young homemakers in Indiana, the most consistent reply to appear on evaluation sheets was the statement, "I now see the importance of what I am doing."

Of the 108 young women of the home demonstration club sample cited earlier, 70 per cent mentioned learning as one of the benefits of belonging to a club. Other benefits were also mentioned. Few people participate in a group for one reason only. For 43.5

<sup>8</sup> Irwin V. Sperry and Kate B. Garner, *Information and Services Obtained and Desired by Parents of Young Children*, North Carolina Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin No. 149 (Greensboro: Woman's College, University of North Carolina, February, 1962).

per cent of those who were club members, the home demonstration club was the sole organization other than church in which they participated.

Members and non-members in the Indiana study were asked what they would like to learn about if they could choose whatever they wished. In replying, a significantly higher number of non-members said "nothing" or "can't think of anything." Although this difference could mean lack of learning goals, it could also mean lack of exposure to what might be learned. Areas in which interest was expressed is shown in Table 1.

Two persistent problems appear as young families move from state to state and from rural to urban areas: (1) The home demonstration program is called by different names in different states (the migrant may lose her association with the program because she cannot re-identify it); and (2) the program is identified frequently by those rural and urban people who do know about it as a pro-

*Table 1.* Choices of what young homemakers would like to learn according to home demonstration club members and non-members who know of the organization but have not been asked to join.

What young homemakers would like to learn about	Members		Non-members who know of organization	
	Number	Per cent*	Number	Per cent*
Food	19	10.21	8	7.0
Clothing	23	12.3	10	8.8
Furnishing, decoration	18	9.67	6	5.3
Household processes	9	4.83	2	1.7
Children, family living	18	9.67	7	6.1
Housing	4	2.15	..	..
Budgets	7	3.76	3	2.6
Community and government	10	5.37	12	10.6
Personal appearance	2	1.07	1	.8
Personal development, special interests	30	16.1	16	14.1
Landscaping	9	4.83	..	..
Vocation	8	4.3	..	..
Health	2	1.07	4	3.5
General homemaking	5	2.63	4	3.5
Nothing, can't think of anything	22	11.7	40	35.3
Total replies	186	99.76	113	99.3
Total women	108	..	78	..

\*Percentage in terms of total replies.

gram for rural people or simply as an activity of the locality. Consequently, young homemakers do not consider the possibility that such educational activities may exist in an urban area.

The challenges to the Cooperative Extension Service are many if young families are to be reached with information:

1. Young homemakers need help in making connections between available knowledge and the problems of everyday living. Such connections can be made more effective through programs designed to deal with specific problems of young families rather than general approaches from which the learner must adapt information.

2. Young women who continue to reside in or near their home communities presently have the best opportunity of belonging to a home demonstration group if such action has been a family pattern. Much more attention will be required of program managers for young women who migrate to a community if they are to have a similar opportunity, particularly if the migrants vary from the norms of the community.

3. Young homemakers who migrate to urban areas do not have knowledge of homemaking programs. Even though they may have known of the home demonstration program "back home," they do not recognize the possibility of a similar program in the new area.

4. Young homemakers in urban areas are, to a large degree, neighborhood bound. Neighborhood groups offer a greater possibility of extending information to them than groups formed from a wider community. The traditional system of training leaders on a county basis appears to require modification if it is to operate successfully for a great number of young homemakers.

5. Experienced home demonstration club leaders may find it necessary to enlarge their view about their responsibility for extending information to the entire community rather than to a particular membership.

6. If young homemakers are to participate in learning groups in sizable numbers, all Extension personnel may be required to inform the young husbands and wives about the purposes of the program. The activity of informing young husbands of the uses of the program would be particularly helpful if done by the men of the staff.

7. Innovation will be required by all Extension personnel in introducing knowledge for young families through existing groups, formation of new groups, through local markets and services, in publications, and mass media.

THERE'S A WAY to do it better . . . find it.—THOMAS A. EDISON.