

Parent Education

Those who intervene in the life of an individual should be sensitive to the impact of resultant changes on that person's life

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What do we know enough about to teach parents? On the assumption that the cycle of dependency and failure among low-income families can be broken by reducing the amount of failure experienced by children in early schooling, a parent education project was undertaken aimed at helping mothers prepare children for school. The approach has been to help mothers more fully understand and more effectively fulfill the role of educator to their children. This undertaking is described and evaluated.

MANY OF US have known for a long time that parent education must come to grips with itself. Conferences at Minnesota¹ and Cornell² held in 1958 raised a number of critical issues which demand honest reflection and study, not only by people in parent education programs, but by research workers in related social science disciplines of child development, family sociology, social psychology and communication, educational psychology, and others. By assembling social science research evidence relevant to parent education Brim³ has laid down a clear challenge. As he delineates gaps in our knowledge, unfounded assumptions underlying much early parent education work, and principal deterrents to program evaluation, we are stimulated to consider how to meet some of his objections.

We are especially interested in two aspects of Brim's analysis.

¹Armin Grams, *Parent Education and the Behavioral Sciences* (Washington, D.C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1960).

²*Mental Health Education: A Critique* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Mental Health, Inc., 1960).

³Orville G. Brim, Jr., *Education for Child Rearing* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1959).

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The first is the question of the aims of parent education, and the second is the question of content. What we intend to describe here is a project in which our aim is deliberately focused and limited. We are not crusading to improve the mental health of the inner city community where we work. We are trying to help the residents develop a specific kind of human competence. Before it is possible, however, to develop a program for competence, we must deal with the problem of content. What do we know enough about to teach parents? Relevant here is the choice that Maccoby and his associates at Stanford made a few years ago when a communication study required them to prepare a pamphlet offering substantive child-rearing advice to parents. They ultimately chose toilet training. We chose preparing a child for school.

FOUNDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

In our opinion, a child's experience in the first few school years is crucial to his later school life. This early experience becomes the foundation for future achievement and represents a principal developmental need. The need to achieve and thus gain approval from the school as a significant agency of his world is of basic importance to the child. Failure brings censure and disapproval which can increase the likelihood of further failure. Evidence from the study of school dropouts indicates that the failure cycle begins early. It is now possible to identify the dropout student as early as the end of the third grade. Not only is failure in school cumulative, but clinical literature suggests that the impact of such failure is deleterious to the self-concept and to general personality development.

The dependency characteristic of many inner city people, added to school failure and frustration, presents a combination which is highly resistant to change. Such a combination too often overwhelms disadvantaged people caught in its crossfire. We decided to try to intervene at the point of the child's school experience. Such intervention is based on the assumption that the cycle of dependency and failure among people in low-income families can be broken by reducing the amount of failure experienced by their children in the first four years of school. Our principal method was to provide experiences which might help slum children overcome significant disadvantages which they bring to the typical public school.

Clausen and Williams specify these disadvantages by saying that . . . most economically and socially deprived segments of the population send to school many children who are (a) unmotivated toward educational opportunities, (b) disadvantaged in vocabulary and in acquaintance with the phenomena that make up the bulk of the substantive materials pre-

... to the child in the class room, and (c) disapproved of by their teachers because of the offensiveness of much of their speech and deportment to middle-class morality.⁴

In this project we try to do something about each of these characteristics through two parallel programs. We are providing a pre-school group experience for children and concurrent educational group experiences for the mothers. Our target areas for the children's group are points "b" and "c" above. We provide these children with appropriate middle class models of personality and communication through contact with the group leaders (head teacher, graduate assistant, undergraduate students). The children are given opportunities to experience directly the motor and sensory qualities and characteristics of many different materials. Although we work with barely adequate equipment, our pre-school program is not greatly divergent from those introduced in other inner city settings such as the Great Cities project. *What may be unique in our experiment is the program for mothers.*

Focus on Parents

Our work with the mothers is aimed at all three problems which Clausen and Williams delineate. Our approach is to help each mother more fully understand and more effectively fulfill the role of educator to her child. Our principal procedure is to enhance the child's likelihood of success in the primary grades by helping the mother prepare him for school.

We are attempting to help parents achieve successful role performance in four areas which we believe may facilitate a child's academic success:

1. To provide a child with a sense of trust in others, a sense of security in family and community, and feelings of personal worth, well-being, and adequacy.
2. To provide a child with an adequate repertory of social skills so that he can profit from group learning experiences.
3. To provide ongoing readiness for learning by means of direct and indirect intellectual stimulation and cultivation of areas of talent.
4. To provide the child with opportunity to acquire a positive attitude toward the schools and the learning process.

We are trying to change or improve present parent role perfor-

⁴John A. Clausen and Judith R. Williams, "Sociological Correlates of Child Behavior," in Harold W. Stevenson (ed.) *Child Psychology*, 62nd Yearbook N.S.S.E. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 82.

mance in these four areas in a variety of ways. One important assumption underlies our plan and directs much of our thinking in this project: The parent must be seen as the vital agent in the education of the young child, because his influence on the child in the pre-school and elementary school years is so very strong. It follows that any program aimed at enriching the child's experiential background must provide prior parallel experiences for the parent so as to minimize experiential dissonance between parent and child. To broaden the base and extend the horizons for the child without doing the same for the parent is likely to prove educationally uneconomical and psychologically unsound. It may unduly increase the distance between parent and child and create defensiveness and wasteful antagonism toward efforts made on behalf of the child, toward people making the efforts, and even toward the child himself because of his new knowledge and changed status. It is a practical necessity for those who intervene in the life of an individual to be sensitive to the impact of resultant changes upon that person's family. This would seem especially true where intervention alleviates disadvantages in a child without much affecting those of his family.

To reiterate, parents are the most important agents in the education of the pre-school child. We are seeking a way to put parent influence firmly on the side of successful achievement and the development of competence, while minimizing the risk of reinforcing long-existing negative parent attitudes toward the schools, teachers, and learning. Because their interest in and concern about the child's learning experiences are decisive in the education process, parents need help in playing the teacher role. Logically this help should be given parents when their children are in the formative pre-school years.

Fortunately, the role of teacher involves kinds of behavior which all parents can learn. It is likely that a parent can perform the teacher role without fully understanding how some of his own instrumental acts support and encourage the process of learning in the child. For example, we can explain to a parent that the child's school success hinges on his ability to read. We can suggest that the parent acquaint the child early with books and reading, with libraries and story hours. We can stress the benefits of beginning in the early pre-school years to sing, tell stories, and read aloud to the child. Our first goal must be to persuade the parent that his performance does in fact facilitate the child's learning. It may be impossible or undesirable at this time to work for parent understanding of the underlying process. We do not seek blind, mechanical acceptance in the parent. Nor do we believe that parents with a thorough

and sophisticated understanding of the process cannot function adequately in this role. Our contention is only that thorough understanding of the developmental and learning processes is not required of the parent who wishes to help in the education of his child.

We further believe that teaching parents to function more adequately in the teacher role is to provide them with still another competence and with the increased sense of self-esteem which accompanies personal growth. We believe that with training of this order parents acquire skills which they can and will apply with their youngsters at other educational levels. It appears that parent education which helps parents help themselves holds promise for breaking into the cycle of dependency and failure.

FIRST YEAR'S WORK

With whom are we working? This project involves 9 mothers and 14 children, all of whom, when the work began, resided in the large housing project near downtown Detroit. We started work in October, 1963. In the eight succeeding months one mother discontinued and was replaced by one other who had earlier expressed interest but was unable to attend because of family complications. It is possible here only to describe what existed at the outset and to comment in passing on important changes in some of the persons who participated. All of the original mothers, ages 18 to 25, were Aid to Dependent Children recipients. Since we hoped to affect their child-rearing practices before these were deeply set, we selected mothers whose oldest children were three to four years old and who would agree to attend the weekly morning sessions along with their children. Of a possible 300 families approximately 30 met our specifications. To these the experience was offered until we had accepted a group of 14 children.

The average age of the mothers was 23 years. Average education was 11.5 years. Four were high school graduates. Although most indicated that their parents had very limited education, one reported a mother with two years of college. The majority of our young mothers were born in the South and moved to Detroit as children. We are aware that our group may be atypical since their motives for participation may differentiate them from other young mothers in the area. Their fairly high education level, for example, may be a selective factor. These factors will have to be controlled when we come to identify differences between our children and others in their school classes.

With what staff? Our team includes a trained pre-school teacher, a volunteer, a group worker on the staff of a social agency, and a

child psychologist from the Merrill-Palmer faculty. Backing up the team from the faculty are a specialist in early childhood education, a social worker, and the leader of our program in Family and Society. One graduate student and two undergraduate students have assisted with both the children's and the parents' groups.

Where and with what? The project authorities gave us two large basement recreation rooms in which to work. The area around the project is being razed and is bleak in spite of rebuilding in progress. A new junior high school adjacent to a very old elementary school typifies the startling contrasts in the surrounding neighborhood.

We began our first days with a portable record player, some newsprint, and a collection of crayons and pencils for the children's room. Our gradually acquired hand-me-downs from Merrill-Palmer were subsequently replaced by simple but specially designed equipment. Ours is an "instant" nursery school which must be assembled from the basement storeroom each Wednesday morning and stored away at noon until the next Wednesday.

Some of our equipment was made by the mothers, some in faculty workshops, and some by students in their homes. Probably our most individual piece is the *papier-mâché* horse which the mothers made. Making a horse for the children was the means that our social group worker used to introduce us to one another. This project gave us some noteworthy teaching opportunities.

Program

With what kind of a program? Our original plans called for a relatively straightforward program of pre-school experiences for the children, and parent education for the mothers. We hoped that some mothers would assist the head teacher in the children's group each time while the other mothers remained with the social worker and psychologist to discuss the parent's role in the education of the child. Some of these plans have materialized. Others had to be abandoned as we learned more about the persons with whom we were working.

The program for the children grew as materials became available and as our children, who tended to be over-controlled, became acquainted with the play area and more relaxed in their use of materials. The children appeared to us at first as "too good." They looked at things but did not touch them. They asked permission to use toys and seemed to expect us to change our minds and deny, at the last minute, the privilege we had just granted. They were tentative and uncertain, expecting to be given and to obey orders. Observing mother-child interaction taught us that the mothers had developed

silent signals enabling them to communicate with few words. Rarely were complete sentences used. Single words, even sounds, often sufficed to convey what mother wanted and the children were quick to comply. In a room across the hall from the playroom, each mother was alert to and quickly upset by any sign of noise or crying from her child. Several times, before we could intervene, one or another mother would enter the playroom and silence her child. It did not take us long to realize that we could not use the mothers as assistants in the play group. Several months passed before the mothers could believe and accept the fact that we wished their children to have expressive freedom in the play group. They seemed particularly fearful that we would judge them to be unfit mothers if their children were noisy and active in the play group.

Once mother and child alike learned that this was a place where self-expression was not only tolerated but encouraged, the children were eager to come each Wednesday morning and the mothers lost some of their defensiveness. Even so, the play group and mothers met once a week for two months before we were able to move fully into our planned program. We were coming to appreciate the need for unusual patience in the face of slow or withheld response in our mothers and children, especially during the early stages of the work.

Our program in preschool was aimed at teaching the children social skills useful in school learning situations, at encouraging self-expression and creative use of materials, at reading to the children, and encouraging problem solving involving spatial relations, physical force, and motor control.

In order to build some positive associations to school and teaching, we purposely designated our room and the program for the children as "school," and we tried as much as possible to call our head teacher "teacher." The mothers now report that the children's tears flow if a family cannot attend on Wednesday morning. One mother has reported trouble getting her child to sleep nightly except Tuesday. Another says that on Wednesday morning her child literally pulls her out of bed. (Since the mothers' reticence to rise in the morning was a problem in our work, we wish that more of our children had been so aggressive.)

Working with Mothers

Our plans for working with the mothers were as straightforward as those for working with the children. Several unpredicted factors soon forced us to reconsider our strategy. The mothers' tendencies to over-control and to be anxious about unruliness made it neces-

sary to work with them separately from the children. The mother attended erratically. On no day were all of them present. Average attendance was three to four mothers and four or five children. We came to appreciate the possibility that our mothers ordinarily had little reason to leave the refuge of bed to face a consistently dreary world. We tried many unsuccessful devices to improve attendance. Our social worker instituted a "buddy" system to help the mothers assume responsibility for rousing each other. She went from door to door on many mornings. Interest remains apparently spasmodic. A mother and child may attend with some regularity and then be absent for two or three weeks. Aside from the usual sickness we agreed that much of the poor attendance reflected apathy. Several months passed before one of the mothers finally said to us when leaving with her child, "We'll see you next week."

Apathy showed in the mothers' posture and grooming. They seemed unsure whether they should care or even expect any of this to amount to anything. Usually they sat as a group in quiet dejection, waiting for the end of the session, volunteering little information, starting no conversation. Our efforts, when we tried to start a discussion, drew meager participation. It was clear that the discussion method often employed with other parent groups was inappropriate, not because our mothers lacked interest but because they were afraid. Since their subsistence is somewhat conditional on their performance as mothers, they not only mistrust outsiders but seldom trust one another enough to reveal their child-rearing difficulties. In the first six months only four questions about child-rearing emerged in our casual conversations. During that time we made no attempt to introduce any particular topic. Gradually we were able to demonstrate our interest in helping them to help their children start well in school. Since this objective seemed to make sense to them, we tried to make whatever we did relevant. We found it necessary to be specific about our aims in order to break through the apparent apathy and lack of interest.

New Experiences

Some of our most significant experiences came from efforts to upgrade performance in the four parent-role areas described earlier. Our mothers saw the need to prepare their children for school attendance. We were convinced that the mothers needed to take an increasingly important part in this preparation and that our job was to help them develop appropriate skills and appreciations. We needed to give the mothers information about the experiences their children could expect in school and to combat the mothers' depen-

when at the same time we were trying to do something about the children's. Our program for the mothers gradually became an enrichment program in its own right.

Experience in building a *papier-mâché* riding horse provided our most important teaching opportunity. As the mothers painted with paint and abandon, having themselves finally given up the need to make the horse look real, we talked about the coming holiday and what to give the children. One mother volunteered that she planned to buy coloring books. The climax of the discussion came when a mother realized that her child was unlikely to feel the kind of joy from staying in the lines of a coloring book that she herself felt while freely decorating the riding horse.

One mother who could not afford to buy blocks said that she had painted the letters "A" "B" "C" on cardboard cubes so that her child could learn the alphabet. Apparently her concept of blocks came from picture books where three blocks form a pyramid with bold letters showing. We turned the discussion to the importance of good blocks in imaginative play. A mother finally volunteered, "Then you mean getting the feel of working with things is just as important as learning the ABC's."

It was clear that many of our mothers expected our "school" to help their children learn the alphabet in preparation for kindergarten and felt that knowing the letters is knowing how to read. As we questioned their assumptions we also stressed things that any mother can do to create a good foundation for a child's reading. Much of our subsequent effort has gone into familiarizing the mothers with the world of books and improving their ability to read to their children. On the day when we planned a trip to the library, only three mothers came. The children's librarian explained policies and discussed the library's story hours and movie showings. The response of the mothers was positive, but not enthusiastic, and at the end of the first year two have returned to the children's room, without their children, to charge books. Others have used the Bookmobile. Several mothers took their children to story hour once, only to find the program discontinued for the summer. Seven of the nine mothers have been to the library and now have cards. We started a small children's library of our own with about 25 books. This grows more successful as the mothers see how well their children respond to reading aloud. Some mothers report that children who used to object now like being read to and can look at books for longer periods of time than ever before.

In our effort to help the mothers anticipate and reinforce the pre-school experiences of their children we read children's stories to the

mothers, much as preschool or primary teachers read them to children. We ought to do more of this. As the mothers learned about *I Ran the Zoo* or *Madeline* they were eager to share the stories at home with their children. Books introduced this way to the mothers apparently also circulated among neighboring children.

Field Trip

We believed it of utmost importance that the mothers visit the schools which their children would attend in the fall of this or next year. Our staff made the initial contact with each of the three schools involved, and the principal and the kindergarten teacher at each school invited us to bring the mothers to observe classes and talk about the kindergarten experience. On the appointed morning it rained and only three mothers appeared. The one bright note of the morning was that the first mother to arrive, eager to go, was one who had repeatedly refused to accompany us on our "field trips." Attendance continues to be poor, but the school people have been understanding as we continue to bring in a few mothers at a time. The mothers have seen a group of five-year-olds in the hands of a competent professional and have had the kindergarten program, as well as many of the routine procedures, explained to them. Each time we stop at the office and announce ourselves, we are working toward the important objective of helping the mothers discover that teachers and principals are reasonable, are grateful for the interest of parents, and are eager to be helpful. If, in addition, the mothers can see the school as pleasant and welcoming, we feel that this may rub off on the children.

REMAINING TO BE DONE

We intend to continue with the same families for at least three or four years. During the kindergarten year we can have the children in the play group again, since they can be in afternoon groups at school. This will help to keep the mothers' group intact for a second year. When the children are in grades 1, 2, and 3, we will make every effort to hold the parents. Our plans for working with the families during these ensuing years are incomplete, but we will continue to help mothers supplement the work of the school by playing an increasingly competent part in their children's education. When the present children have completed second or third grade we will compare their progress with that of classmates not in our project. It is our hope that the project will result in finding new information for improved parent education programs.