

professional development: a family affair

Anne H. Rideout

The "important others" in the lives of Extension agents are sometimes like the members of the proverbial shoemaker's family, who were always without shoes. We forget to include them in the things that are so much a part of our professional commitment.

As educators, we should be continuing learners in a never-ending quest for knowledge.¹ But do we give thought to making those most important to us, especially our families, a part of this growth? How often do we return from meetings excited and self-renewed, but too tired, busy, or preoccupied to share the experience with our families?

A Nonfamily Activity?

Professional development has been viewed as a nonfamily activity, something reserved for us only, and separate and distinct from family togetherness activities. Is it any wonder that such development may be seen as competition by those important to us?

An excellent example of isolating self-development was the process called sensitivity training which reached a peak of popularity in the 1960s. Unfortunately, many of those human relations activities, in a sense, programmed their participants for failure. The revelations and insights that took place within the small world of the "T-Group" caused many of those involved to want to change. But when the people returned to the outside world, much of the elation and many of the resolved changes were short-lived. Why?

In describing their experience to others, participants often would say: "It's impossible to describe." "You really have to experience it to understand it." Such comments evoked feelings of mystique about the T-Group process, an experience from which others felt forever excluded. The comments also caused anguish in many households when families realized that strangers had met deep needs for a person that the family had failed to meet. The professional group leaders had given no thought to involving families in

Anne H. Rideout: Professor and Assistant Director of Extension for Home Economics, University of Massachusetts—Amherst.

the process and little attention to preparing their participants to translate their growth experience to the outside world. This lack of preparation not only resulted in family discord, but also denied the participant an outside support that might have reinforced the individual's effort to change.

Unique Solution

Several years ago, my husband and I found two very demanding careers were limiting our time together. We both were eager to participate in professional development opportunities, but we realized this would decrease our time together even more. The logical alternative seemed to be to seek, as often as possible, growth opportunities we could share. We registered for the same noncredit course, so when one couldn't be present (as often happens when you're in Extension), the other could attend and share the content. Since we're both in administration, we looked for seminars, workshops, or courses on management and leadership that we could attend together. We emphasized those where the content of the course might not easily be communicated to someone outside of the class.

The result was what author Lois Pratt calls an "energized family." This term refers to the sheer energy or exchange that occurs between family members who interact a great deal, the stimulation that comes from interacting with outside groups, the generation of ideas and problem-solving effort that results from family interaction and the freeing of people to develop themselves.² This type of relationship is effective both in the sense that it develops individual members and provides the backing and resources necessary to support this development.

Results

We've been excited to find that the sharing of professional development opportunities:

- Enriches the growth experience. There's someone with whom you can relive the experience.
- Increases the quality of interpersonal interaction. Rather than talking about people and problems, you're stimulated to explore ideas together.
- Strengthens the bond of communication. You're communicating from a common experience, with a common foundation for discussion.
- Expands understanding. Each of us is the sum total of our experiences. When some of these experiences are shared, understanding becomes easier.

- Provides a chance to practice what's learned, thereby reinforcing it.
- Simplifies communication. A shorthand based on a common experience develops. For example, Maslow becomes the shorthand for an entire concept, which need not be explained.
- Provides theory and content you both understand, which can be used to analyze problems.

Concentrate on Quality

In Extension, a profession which makes many demands on the time of its employees, we have to concentrate on the QUALITY of our interaction with our families and others who are important to us. Sharing professional development opportunities is one way of doing this.

We need to make a point of including our important people in our growth experiences. We need to examine conferences we attend and see if there are sessions that might interest our families, not just arrange "tours" to occupy them while we participate in professional meetings. If they can't participate, we need to make a conscious effort to set aside time to discuss the topic, the things that excited or interested us and *why*, and to share our feelings. The results will far exceed the effort!

In Extension, our biggest business is "growing" people. Let's not forget to include those closest to us.

Footnotes

1. Harold Swanson, "Are Extension Workers Professionals?" *Journal of Extension* (January-February, 1975), 19.
2. Lois Pratt, *Family Structure and Effective Health Behavior* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1976), p. 4.