

Maintenance of Mental Health

4. THE SCHOOL YEARS

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Teachers, all too often, know too little about the children with whom they work. There are many reasons for this. Their classes are often too large for them to feel really acquainted with each child. They are under pressure to prepare their students for the next class, for the next examination, and they feel that their own advancement depends in large measure on their success in doing this. Their training has emphasized subject matter, and method in presenting subject matter. This subject matter is organized by authorities who often themselves know too little about children and about how they learn. Yet the teacher must meet its requirements and must try to get the children to meet them.

Teachers live too much alone with their classes, their papers, their co-workers. They have little opportunity, or they fail to make opportunity, to become acquainted with others who know their own children, such as the children's parents, doctors and social workers, or to have a real life of their own outside of school.

Thus, because of all these omissions and pressures, teachers continue in the custom of teaching *at* children instead of living *with* them and helping them to learn.

How do children learn? Children are constantly learning. They learn through every experience, significant or trivial, in the classroom or outside it. They learn from what they make of each experience, what meaning they find in it. They learn from doing, experimenting, trying things out. They learn through mastering facts, through reasoning, through meeting requirements, through overcoming difficulties, through fun and free play, and through taking

a part in home life, school life, group life, community life. They learn from all their relationships with other people, young and old, good or bad. They learn through their bodies and their emotions as well as their minds. And all the time that they are learning, they are growing up as persons in the world.

A teacher describes a child as "dull", unable to learn. It is true that some children are born with very little capacity for learning, and these children need a special kind of care. But there are many others who are labelled "dull" who are not dull. John may be a person who matures more slowly than his classmates. All he needs is more time, and more confidence from his teachers and his parents so that, at his own pace, he will learn well and grow up well. When he is forced along with the others he becomes confused and discouraged and after a while gives up trying to learn. Mary, who seems "bright", is failing in her school work and the teacher punishes her for being "lazy". But Mary's father has lost his job and her mother is ill from overwork and worry. Her father and mother, driven by anxiety, must each blame something or someone for their poverty and their trouble, and they blame each other, and there is much friction and unhappiness at home. Mary lives in the midst of this, wonders whether the family is breaking up, and is so burdened with this inner anxiety that she is unable to free her good mind for her school work. Peter, from his earliest childhood on, has been expected by a stern ambitious father to meet standards that are much too "grown up" for him, and for every failure on his part he is punished. He tries, and fails, and tries, and fails. At last

* After Miss Taylor's retirement from teaching, in 1949, she went to Germany as Chairman of the Education and Child Care Institute conducted by the American Unitarian Service Committee in collaboration with the German Social Work Organization, Arbeiter Wohlfahrt. The Report on this venture, compiled by her, may be borrowed from the N.A.M.H. Library, 39 Queen Anne Street, London, W.1.—EDITOR.

he becomes convinced that he is no good—a failure. This overwhelming sense that “I am a failure” prostrates him in school. In school, too, are standards and requirements. He has within him the capacity to meet school standards, but, because of his father’s attitude, because he feels that no matter how hard he tries he cannot please his father, he gives up trying. But he has to try his powers somewhere. He has to feel that he can succeed somewhere. So he bullies and fights younger boys outside of school, and though he is punished for it, he nevertheless feels a bit of pride in conquering.

In each of these three cases neither the parents nor the teachers are aware of what is going on inside the child. If they care about children they are troubled about John, Mary and Peter, but they have not realized that these three children need something they are not getting. They are struggling alone with their problems, trying to solve them, in the only ways they know, and naturally are often going down the wrong road, a road that may lead them only into more problems, more confusion, as they grow older.

They need understanding from adults. They need love and trust in them, no matter what they do or what they fail to do. They need to be helped to face their experiences in ways that will bring them confidence and hope. They need to be believed in as human beings.

These are only three typical instances. Any one who works with children can think of many more. Lying, cheating, stealing, destroying things, setting fires, breaking rules habitually, hurting others—all these kinds of behaviour often are due to inner fears, inner conflicts of feeling, beyond the child’s conscious power to control or understand.

The very quiet child, anxiously conscientious, lonely and withdrawn among others, may be called “good” and “easy” by a teacher. Yet such children at times are troubled children, children with fears and inner insecurity, trying alone to solve their problems in ways that limit their growth or that hurt their chances of becoming free and well-balanced persons. It has been said that “a problem child is really a child trying, in the only ways he can, to solve a problem.”

In the last twenty years or more, much has been learned about what goes on inside children, and about the emotional causes of failure in learning or of troublesome behaviour. Children must learn to live by the laws of family life, of school life, and of the community life. They must experience discipline when they behave in ways that hurt the society in which they live.

This is essential to their growing up as persons and citizens. But rules and discipline must be thought of in relation to what children at each age from infancy on are able to live up to, and to begin to understand. The children must be helped to learn that rules are there because they help people to learn to live together, and that the important thing is to learn how to live and how to develop one’s own inner powers and resources, and how to live together in a good society, whether that society is the family, the playground, the school, the nation, or the world of mankind. Rules and learning and discipline thus become the servants of this purpose and not ends in themselves.

This truth children can grow to understand, with help and interpretation from adults. And as children grow in these ways, with this kind of understanding and with experiences which help to clarify it, they develop within them capacities for self-discipline and self-direction, and a sense of active membership in society.

We can learn so much from children themselves! They love to explore things, facts, ideas, for themselves. They love to plan something together, to put the plan into action, to discover why it worked or did not work, to take a fresh start on an improved plan or a new plan.

They try out leadership, competition, co-operation. This zest, enjoyment in living, self-motivation, and active group relationship out of which they learn for themselves, needs to be brought into the whole education process, along with wise guidance from adults, steady and freeing influence from adults, and understanding of the significance of the emotions (feelings) in each child’s life.

It is along such ways that the young can be enabled to grow up in real mental health and empowered to give their best to society. How can we help?

Could teachers, parents, doctors, and social workers—all who are concerned with children—sit down together more often in small groups, sharing what they know about children, sharing their unanswered questions about them, bringing in persons wherever they can be found who can help them to understand children better?

Could there be discussions in such groups of what obstructs good human relations at any age, and of what frees people for good human relations? And could such learning be put into practice wherever such people live and work, in school teaching staffs, social welfare organizations, families, community life?

Do teachers realize that sometimes their own personal difficulties, anxieties, unsolved problems—no matter how they may try to conceal them—affect harmfully the learning, the behaviour, the inner security of the children with whom they work. In other words, that the teachers' own mental health plays a very important part in that of the children under their care. How can teachers help themselves and be helped in this?

How could more of what is known about children's growth and development, about the emotional backgrounds of their behaviour and their learning, be brought into the education of teachers? For in this way a teacher comes to realize that he is teaching primarily not subjects, but children, and that the subject matter is only one of the ways through which children may be helped to develop.

And what of the other ways? How can a school be made into a living community, where

each child and each teacher is an active, interested member, where there is a will to make a good life together, and mutual respect and friendship and confidence?

In what ways can the individual teacher come to know his own children better and thus to help them better? Through becoming better acquainted with their parents? Through realizing that there is much to learn about what lies beneath a child's behaviour, and trying to learn for himself some of these basic facts about growth and development and possible causes underlying certain kinds of behaviour? Through creating a simple, warm relationship with children which makes them feel that the teacher is not merely an instructor and an agent of the law, but also a friend to whom one may talk as person to person now and then, who will not condemn or brush aside one's clumsy efforts or one's confused behaviour, but who stands by ready to help one as best he can?

The Mental Health Services in 1948

Last year, for the first time, mental health was included in the Report of the Ministry of Health but not in that of the Chief Medical Officer to the Ministry. This year it is included in both, the administrative report covering the period for the year ending March 31st, 1949, and the medical report, that for the year ending December 31st, 1948.*

The Chief Medical Officer begins his section with a useful survey of the development and practice of psychiatry in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; present-day problems are then briefly noted, including the supply of mental nurses (at the end of 1948 it was estimated that 8,000 female and 3,000 male recruits were needed), the use of physical treatment, psychopathology, out-patient treatment and psychiatric social work.

The increasing use of mental hospitals by voluntary patients has strained accommodation to the uttermost and direct admissions have risen from 39,223 in 1947 to 45,659 in 1948: in 1928, when certification was necessary in all cases the comparable figure was only 20,774. It is suggested that there are three

main reasons for this increase: (1) that treatment is more effective; (2) that patients seek treatment at an earlier stage; (3) that the type of patient entering hospital has changed. The more rapid turnover does not, therefore, represent an equivalent increase in the percentage of the population under care (at a given moment in 1948, 3·41 per 1,000 as compared with 3·57 in 1930).

In this section of the Report, half a page only is devoted to mental deficiency which gives, we venture to suggest, an unduly optimistic impression of the present position in regard to it. Perhaps next year, however, we may look forward to a fuller discussion of the problems involved in considering this "cinderella of psychiatry" and its far reaching ramifications.

Another noteworthy omission in the Report is the absence of any reference to psychiatric community care in the section dealing with "Care and After-Care of Persons suffering from Illness".

Turning to the administrative report, we find the Mental Health Services dealt with in the fourth section of the chapter on the National

* *H.M. Stationery Office, 7s. 6d.*