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Educating Parents and Teachers for Intelligent Use and Support of Good Preschools*

by

Sadye A. Young

There is obvious need for change in attitudes regarding services of the preschool to parents and to children. This involves breaking the established pattern of responding to preschool services primarily from the standpoint of need for a place to put the child. This is the mere “sitter-service concept.” However, since attitudes often persist because of the tendency in human nature for man to think what he wants to think it is difficult to determine just how to bring about change in thinking regarding nature of preschools.

Oftentimes, there is inconsistency in beliefs and actions. Parents may have high regard for a program with excellent standards, and, after enrolling their child, fail in support of school policies and prove negligent so far as attendance at Parent-Teacher-Association or Home-School Association meetings are concerned. There is the problem of bringing about change for consistency in belief and actions.

Attendance at and in other ways participating in and supporting the Home-School Association are extremely important.

Few schools of the area involved in this project have PTA or Home-School Associations that receive one hundred per cent attendance and support. Parents appear to have the attitude that once a child is accepted into a school he is the school’s child to educate; do what it can with him; or he is the teacher’s problem; or he is the school’s responsibility from 8:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon or 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. or 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Some pay their fees and drop their responsibilities at this point. Some fail to pay the nominal fees, and their small children must be dropped, because without finances the schools cannot operate. These failures are not seen at meetings involving parents after enrolling children. A few dedicated and intelligently responsible adults, because of their interest in their children and involvement in the educative process, never fail in their duties to children and the education institutions which our laboratory schools are.

Superior program patterns which are understood, approved and accepted because they meet the satisfaction of parents of children enrolled in these programs will do the most for strengthening our communities’ efforts toward preschool programs. Satisfaction and understanding must persist if parents are to become and remain sup-

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*This study is from Chapters 4 and 5 of the author's article on “Parent-Education Coupled With Teacher-Competence at the Preschool Level: The keys to Readiness for the New Emphasis on Early Elementary Education.”
porters of programs. Children and their parents gain. As a program grows and becomes firmly established, it must continue to determine ways of using the group influence on individual members who are indifferent and negligent of their attendance at and support of Home-School Association.

Effects of Schools of Thought on Parents' Childrearing Practices

Prior to the 1920's advice on child-rearing centered around close affectionate ties to offspring. The serious student of child behavior and development is aware that the 1920's were characterized as a period in which mothers sought some escape from the close, demanding ties of child-rearing. Influenced by John B. Watson's conditioning and Holt's Care and Feeding of Infants,¹ the trend of the day became directed toward the so-called objective handling of infants: early toilet-training which most frequently was rigid and severe, bottle-feeding rather than breast-feeding, less lap-holding and leaving the baby alone in his crib most of his waking time. Some mothers were glad and welcomed this escape. Kessen and Mandler in The Child use John Watson's classical views in their Perspectives in Psychology and from the following summary we now see how absurd some of the reasoning is.

There is a sensible way of treating children. Treat them as though they were young adults. Dress them, bathe them with care and circumspection. Let your behavior always be objective and kindly firm. Never hug and kiss them, never let them sit on your lap. If you must, kiss them once on the forehead when they say good night. Shake hands with them in the morning. Give them a pat on the head if they have made an extraordinarily good job of a difficult task. Try it out. In a week's time you will find how easy it is to be perfectly objective with your child and at the same time kindly. You will be utterly ashamed of the mawkish, sentimental way you have been handling it. . . .²

Studies further point up the fact that the four-hour feeding schedule which a great many young mothers follow religiously today was started in 1900 when three tiny infants observed at a Chicago hospital were given barium and the discovery was made that their stomachs emptied only at the end of a 4-hour interval. Despite this small sampling mothers have loyally followed these publicized results for feeding schedules.

Wise doctors have tried to correct rigid schedules for which mothers are responsible due to unwittingly following ideas and suggestions without equivocation. Dr. Anderson Aldrich of Mayo is

recognized for having rectified mothers' extreme views and reactions to feeding, toilet-training, naps and cuddling by proposing more respectful ways of fulfilling children's needs. The regimen became known as "self-demand." Mothers were known to become more relaxed in their job of child care, and babies and children themselves appeared less pressured.

But the effect of this period in terms of relaxed, smooth functioning was not long-lived.

Following Watson, as Kessen and Mandler trace development of ideas about children, two other great thinkers—Freud and Piaget—made great inroads in child study and advanced ideas. Freud studied the effects of the first six to eight years of the child's life, and Piaget considered the child's knowledge. Their provocative contributions stand today to continually provide us with avenues of study of the child.3

**Permissiveness**

With the ushering in of Dr. Benjamin Spock's "Bible" following World War II, women generally, and mothers in particular, were again thrown into a period of disequilibrium in childrearing practices. This by no means was due to advice published by Dr. Spock, but it was due to woman's own misrepresentation of Dr. Spock's concept of "Permissiveness." Such misrepresentation continues to plague us today.

Lay individuals found Dr. Spock's materials easy to read, understandable, and reassuring. But the great tendency was from the beginning, and is now, for the average reader to distort the concept of permissiveness to embrace indulgence, turning deaf ears and blind eyes to harmful and destructive behavior even on the part of small children.

Today, many parents refuse to scold, reprimand, or discipline their children in the presence of others, no matter how justified this action might be. The alert child, whose behavior is demeaning, learns quite early that he will not be reprimanded publicly. Perhaps, he is not reprimanded at all. Often it is this undisciplined youngster who later faces difficulty in disciplining himself. He has not learned necessary restraint.

Frequently, this is the alert child needing challenge and teaching to prevent misdirected energies and abilities. Children can be unkind to each other and disrespectful of individual rights as well as authority if not brought up to observe the amenities of social conduct from the beginnings of their socialization within the family.

Frequently, situations exist in which the unusually bright child shows tendencies to destroy property belonging to other children. The potential leader engages his peers in rough and abusive activities.

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3Ibid., pp. 245-297.
Children occasionally playing host to a destructive visiting child are sometimes quite unaware of designs of destruction upon their possessions. It is sometimes too late to prevent damage or complete mutilation of a toy or piece of play equipment when children being so exploited realized what has happened. Behavior of this nature was observed both at school and in home environments.

Only in rare instances were five-year-olds (children of kindergarten age) observed to have such intense destructive feelings. The children in early grades of school, however, showed marked tendencies. Boys showed a greater tendency to be jealous and destructive than girls. Seriousness of offense increased with age.

It is interesting to note that children did not necessarily lack play equipment to be envious and destructive of property belonging to other children. Usually when they destroyed that which belonged to another, their own possessions were guarded and kept in good repair. In a few instances children destroyed their own belongings first and proceeded to do the same to what some other child owned.

Case I

An eight-year-old (3rd grader) had boasted that his parents were buying him a tent from Sears Roebuck "as large as the front porch to their house," when he observed a five-year-old being helped by his mother to build a small tent for play in the five-year-old's back yard.

Unfortunately for the eight-year-old the Sears Roebuck tent never materialized. As the summer progressed the homemade pup tent weathered rain and wind. A game of "ghosts" leading to the five-year-old's tent as a place of hide-out provided a good opportunity for the child now turned nine years old to crash into the pup tent and smash it to the ground. This he did without remorse. He summed up the "accident" by saying "when ghosts have blankets over them, they can't see. I didn't know where I was." The nine-year-old knew what he was doing. Perhaps not exactly why. The mother of the five-year-old was aware of the need for destruction. The mother of the nine-year-old offered no sympathy to the five-year-old or guidance to her nine-year-old, nor any effort toward restitution.

Case II

A seven-year-old had been given a sixty-five dollar English blue bike for Christmas. The mother, a young widow with three children, had felt that the sacrifice to get the bike as a Christmas present might be necessary at this specific time in the child's life, and she pinched pennies to provide it.

She dissolved into tears when she came upon her young son with red paint, hammer, screwdriver and pliers, and the new bike completely disassembled and smeared with paint. Five older elementary grade school boys huddled and looking on scrambled to their feet as she approached. They immediately chorused out "We told him to change it and give it a paint job, but we didn't know he was going to do it."
All of them had bicycles, and although not new this Christmas, they were good bicycles. And they still had theirs. The seven-year-old, in following their suggestion had so destroyed his own bicycle with hammering parts that it was beyond repair. And there were not sufficient funds for another, even if he should have had a replacement. Hearts were sad. I can’t say that there was much of a constructive nature for this youngster to learn from such an experience. There was agony in the experience for both the mother and the child. Several months later, however, the mother’s brother, while vacationing with the youngster, made a gift of a new bicycle to him. This one he guards tenaciously.

The following questions need to be resolved by both parents and teachers regarding the trusting child. He intelligently enough protects himself against open animosity, even if it means avoiding sources of trouble when he is aware of this. But he seems blind to the motives of those who, under the guise of helpers and advisors, cause him to ruin or lose what he has. He is too easily exploited, yet he must learn to observe, to recognize deceit, and to avoid being hurt and having his property abused and his rights invaded.

What can he do to defend his rights and remove the need for adult intervention?

What can be done for the exploiters? The alert and crafty?

Destructive grade school children were alert academically, conversed brilliantly, showed considerable imagination. But many were under-achievers, from broken homes; had grown up with playmates much older than themselves knowing little of a peer group; changed frequently from school to school.

As is recalled, the most distorted views of permissiveness in attitude, and permissiveness in behavior toward youngsters dominated the treatment during the formative years of those preschool children (in the late 1940’s and early 1950’s) who are now our crop of teenagers and young adults. The implication might well be that the vandalistic tendencies possessed by some could have their roots in this early handling by adults.

The vandalism which persists in adolescence and young adulthood in our time—rearing up to show its ugly head in smashing, knifing, and ripping costly home furnishings as aftermaths of unchaperoned parties; the setting of fires, and otherwise destroying of private property at our beaches and resort towns; the benign forms of destruction within our college dormitories like careless cigarette-burned furniture—involves more than a normal adolescent revolt.

We are today caught in the difficult and painful task of getting ourselves out of the childrearing mess into which our own interpretations of ideas and movements have got us.
CASES

Exploiting the Responsible Child

It is not uncommon today for adults to exploit the responsible, good-mannered, easy-going child.

One family in their pretext of "not saddling their teenage daughter with the responsibility of the three-and-a-half year-old preschool child in the family," persists in telephoning for a neighbor's six-year-old son to come and "play" with the three-and-a-half-year old. The "play" puts restraints on the normal desires for activity of the six-year-old whose interests lead him into a somewhat different world of activities. Yet, his good manners, and obedience to adults generally, therefore, to those in the three-and-a-half-year old's family in particular, make him "respectfully silent" as he "supervises" the younger child's play. Meanwhile, the six-year-old wants to be with his peers.

In this household there are three adults and one teenage girl. The mother of the six-year-old has four small children (including the six-year-old) under eight years of age. This mother states that she is very much aware of her own children's individual growth needs. She does not restrict the play interests and activities of the two older siblings at home by encumbering them with supervision of the younger siblings. She feels that these adults must be aware of their unfair requests.

Most adults are aware of the consequences of too early and too much responsibility placed on children who have not had time to live fully their own childhood. They have had to become so-called "parent-substitutes" for siblings in the home. "Playing" with smaller children for other families can be done at the expense of the older child's freedom for play: freedom for simply being a child.

In the case cited the mother feels this intrusion upon her child's rights and privacy quite keenly, and regards it as her responsibility to explain the possible ill-effects on the child to the neighbor. She states that the selfishness and inconsiderate attitude prevailing in this case are encountered in similar situations by other parents. Problems of this nature are created by adults, not the children. The child is the victim. How does one handle such exploitation and maintain good human relations in the community? This is one area where adult communications often break down.

Adult leaders, both parents and teachers, might assume some responsibility in the treatment of this and similar community problems. Through the Home-School Association meetings, objective discussion, with illustrative cases to illuminate the problem, parents could be made to stop and look at what is happening. Discussions of this nature should make parents aware that this is a common problem. It causes many mothers tremendous anxiety. This anxiety springs up as a result of conflict between wanting to maintain good relations with one's neighbors, and wanting "freedom from too early responsibility" for our children. It is important that they live fully each stage of development as children.
There will be periods in the child's life when services to others should be encouraged. This, of course, is in interest of developing a spirit of contribution to community. He learns certain lessons regarding acting voluntarily for others, sharing, creative cooperation, and forgetting oneself in doing for others. The first steps will be tedious ones and should begin in his home first, then spread out to embrace other areas.

**Lagging Peer Influence on Acceptable Codes of Behavior**

Once children were good arbiters for the standards of behavior of each other. Families with several children offered, among other advantages, the advantages of children of varied ages playing and working together. Where families were small, this opportunity was sought through association with kinfolk—cousins, nephews, nieces. Ultimately, such contacts were possible with other children from surrounding areas.

There is great value to be derived from contacts with children of one's own age, with children younger than oneself, and with children older than oneself. For example, one gets to "boss" and lead children younger than himself, to function on a basis of "equality" with those his own age, and to be "bossed" and follow the leadership of the child older than he. This makes learning to lead, to be a good follower and also to contribute in an equalitarian fashion, seem easy and natural.

Today, this normal sequential pattern of learning to get along with one's peers seldom exists.

Society sets great store by the aggressive, talkative individual. His aggression may spread in other directions. Self-control and modest behavior are frequently misinterpreted as cowardice. Too many adults indulge youngsters in types of behavior which no longer are simple forms of self-expression and means of becoming intelligently self-assertive. The behavior is frequently calculated to destroy toys or materials and to hurt other children or other people. Frequently, it goes without correction.

The cases within this report reflect alert minds and active children. But an evident need exists for more concern for the direction which the behavior of children will take. Parents have obligations to their children. Many can be made more confident in abilities to teach, chastise, even punish, without doing irreparable damage to the psyche of their sensitive youngsters. Active participation in Home-School Association should help to establish this security and confidence in their ability to deal effectively with their children.

Where parents were most active in programs of the school it was they who planned exclusively the content of the meeting. This was not always entirely desirable. While active participation is the goal sought, the average busy parent does not know a specific school's
program objectives well enough—what is involved in the execution of program plans in order to realize the objectives to assume complete control at school. Parents must be apprised of these by cognitive, involved, dedicated teachers. Scheduled parent-teacher meetings and homeroom meetings, for example, cannot blindly be turned over to officers of the Parent-Teacher Association or Home-School Association to conduct at will. These are adults who get into the school situation perhaps once per month, and whose program ideas will most commonly center around bringing in resource persons whether or not this relates to tasks or problems at hand. Moving in the direction of achievement of objectives can become obscured by engaging in unrelated activities, however interesting they may be.

While the contributions of consultants and other resource persons have their place in the program, considerably more time needs to be spent with teachers’ holding discussions with individual parents, or mother and father together, about their children. All too little of this is now being done in our schools.

Homeroom meetings should be planned regularly in order to:

1. Let parents know where their children are.
2. Suggest help for individual children.
3. Permit parent-officers to help select resource persons (related to needs of parent-education and enlightenment) and discuss these services for future changes, recommendations, approval, et cetera with administrative personnel of the school.

With the multiplicity of problems encountered in raising our children today, general meetings should be planned more and more to make attack on problem areas involved in childrearing and teaching of our children. The initial meetings of a term might set directions for the year: amplify objectives, set forth requirements of parents, responsibilities of teachers, and responsibilities of students, aides, volunteers and other persons who in any way participate in the program. This general pattern applies for preschool and for the early grades.

Subsequent meetings about each child with his parents should be planned to run throughout the year concurrently with general meetings (or in some consistent pattern). “The best interests of children are served when the home and the school are working harmoniously toward common goals.”

Sample Content of One Home-School Association
Meeting in a Local School on Love and Qualities of a Good Teacher,
January, 1965

The theme of the major speech to teachers and parents was “Giving Teaching the Dimensions of Art.”

Assembled parents were told that the good teacher (parent or teacher in the classroom) must strive to make joy of the task of teaching and in so doing learn the enjoyments of life itself through dedication. Teaching and loving are interwoven. Children need love, want it, and are ready to give much love. Loving children, expressing it, and saying it, should come easy. The unforgettable teacher knows this and demonstrates it. Some children are not easy to love. But a teacher’s grace makes him or her, if truly good as teacher and guide, love each individual child. Knowledge which one possesses must be balanced with virtue, and humility; refinement with faith and large-ness of spirit; patience with justice of view, gentleness and compas-sion; and one’s good sense and conscience must guide the affairs of each day. There is no such thing as being absolutely sure in the task of teaching. We must be aware that there are new ways each day of looking at old lessons. Regimentation is undesirable! Beware of indoctrination! And above all look carefully and long at what the term “well-adjusted” means. This begins to apply at preschool level and extends into all the later years of teaching, but particularly to the grades.

These things each of us must learn as parents—the first teachers of our children, and teachers in our schools—we must learn how to be still, to catch the sense of wonder, and the quality of deep concentra-tion so commonly observable on the part of children. Through this sense of wonder should come the abilities to perceive and to accept.

Goodness is character building. The spirit of the good teacher inspires children toward strengthened character formation. Poor qualities on the part of some individuals in the role of teacher are: a false set of values, emotional immaturity, lack of ability to accept responsibility and the common tendency toward the isolationist syn-drome—that is, their tendency to believe that home and school can be kept in separate niches. Home is home and school is “job” and home and job must remain separate. This cannot be done.

The task of teaching at any level is demanding, sacrificial, and often strikes with awe the person destined to be the truly great teacher (the would-be good parent included). If you have this depth of love and dedication or sense of involvement, you feel it and know it. Don’t be discouraged!—Dare to do good! Then act! There can never be another you!

As previously mentioned, not only were preschool homeroom meetings observed, but also selected first, second, and third grade homeroom meetings. This was done to determine types of activities common at these levels, and to decide if evidence points out that kindergarten experiences observed are preparing for these challenges. The following are two recordings from my notes of meetings with parents of six and seven-year-olds with teachers. Notes describe objectives and activities.

On February 14, 1965, a teacher of First Grade talked to the assembled parents about the need for self-control on the part of
children. She stated that she wanted "self-discipline of a nature which gives ample opportunity for all children, especially those less talkative, to contribute. They have ideas but many need more time for organizing their ideas, for thinking before they speak. They need time for coming up with answers. And these of whom I speak are quite able to do so, and commonly make significant contributions," she said.

Many children become withdrawn because they are "stampeded," so to speak, by those very vocal children in the group. Being extremely overt and talkative does not necessarily mean having done the thinking, or being curious as we want our children to be in order to express their thoughts. The teacher can go "yakety-yak" so much and for so long a period of time that the children are "squelched." The undesirability of this was stressed as it relates to child growth in expressiveness and expansiveness of thought.

What can we say for kindergarten or pre-kindergarten situations relating to this same idea? This is a type of protection needed by some children.

In grade two of this school, the teacher gave parents folders containing samples of the children's individual work for the first semester, 1964-1965. Distribution of these materials was followed by a private talk to each parent about his child's strengths and weaknesses. Parents were given the copies of the standardized tests—reading and arithmetic—taken recently (for first semester) by the children. This was for study of test results.

This teacher then discussed briefly activities now being engaged in by children in second grade both in the new mathematics and new emphases in reading. She gave illustrations of types of materials which would be covered during the remainder of the second grade period, and highlighted those which would be re-emphasized in the early period of grade three as well as introducing new learning materials to which the children would be exposed. A few suggested methods were given which might be used by parents in helping their children at home in specific learnings. The following are examples of new mathematics activities being engaged in at the second grade level:

Sets and sub-sets
Additive Action or Joining Action
Separating Action
Ordinals
Multiplication symbols
Tallying
Number sequences—Number systems
Arrangements with lines—Segments and intersecting of lines
Finding patterns in numerals
Polygons

Closed curves, interior and exterior of curves and betweenness for curves.

Illustrative materials by Scott, Foresman and Company were distributed so that parents through services of the Home-School Association might keep abreast of sources and kinds of new materials available for use in our schools.

Children and Homework

While some parents are being told that they must observe a "hands-off policy" where their children's lessons are concerned, particularly "homework," other parents in different school situations are not only being admonished to be aware of what the child's curriculum experiences are at school, but to hear children go through their "homework." In so doing, the parent to whom the child recites can call his errors to his attention, and encourage the child to check and make corrections for himself, thus reinforcing learnings through careful attention to points and review of what has been done.

The preschool child can begin this sort of learning-sharing-social relationship with his parents by checking his creative art work for tidiness. Tidiness or sloppiness and habits of order or disorganization once formed carry over into later life. Neat work, whatever its nature, can be a source of pride, and can be expected early on the part of children. Neatness can range from no erasures or a minimum of erasures, to realistic, tidily executed coloring of cats, dogs, or other familiar animals and familiar objects; coloring of clothes of boys and girls; or coloring within the outlined areas of circles, squares, triangles, and other geometric shapes. As they learn about colors and management of some of their own movements, children learn also about forms and shapes of objects.

As their interest indicates a readiness for lettering, it is desirable to teach correct form in order to avoid the need for later unlearning an acquired poor habit. This should not be regarded as rigid or harsh training for the child of kindergarten age. This follows the same principle of adults' avoiding "baby talk," poor grammar, corrupted forms of speech, and profane language in order to prevent the child's establishing such patterns through imitating his elders.

The Teacher in the Preschool Setting

How natural the nursery school teacher can be is important. Preschool children are alert enough to know things appear all right if one is natural or strange if one is affected in his behavior. Many respond with baffled expressions in their eyes when stories are overdramatized. Speak naturally. Teach naturally. You do not need a special voice to read or tell a story or in other ways amuse or help children entertain themselves. Be yourself.
As far as other reading materials are concerned children are alert enough at two years of age to "appreciate" the rhyme and beat of poetry, and although most educators deplore some forms of rote learning, poetry, naturally, must be remembered by individuals at ages when they wish to recall and repeat verse. The young child who has poetry read to him or spoken to him with the meaning enveloped in good lines learns and recites it effortlessly. When he is a preschool child he does it for the rhythm. When older, stories and poetry, aside from their beauty, may be selected for the lessons they teach: history, grammar, amusement and also the memory testing which they provide.

Every teacher needs to prepare himself with the intuition of love, and move with vigor, intensive interest, and enthusiasm into teaching our young.

Men need more and more to become teachers in the preschools. We might attain more in terms of the kind of peaceful, happy family situation with the masculine strength and influence as both overture and undertone making school seem right for the continued nurturing of small children. Mother is only one parent. Father is equally important in the family constellation. Women are teachers but so are men. Men make excellent preschool teachers and administrators and are a common sight in some universities. We wish to encourage more of this because of the masculine model provided and its positive effect upon children.

Teaching in the Kindergarten

Just as the teacher in the school grades and the college subscribes to planning both daily lessons and long-range units to give her broad perspective, so the kindergarten teacher needs to plan. This she does so that experiences are not haphazard and learnings "hit-or-miss."

In order to have feelings of confidence that she is presenting materials along lines suitable for the kindergarten level, the teacher wants some sort of guides.

Excellent resource materials for the teacher, and work materials for the kindergarten children are available (as many teachers already know) in My Weekly Reader Surprise (Zip Puzzle-Test Materials for the children plus Teacher’s Edition K).5

Generally, the teacher has basic information relative to what the five-year-old is like developmentally—the developmental tasks which he has come through, and which he now faces as a five-year-old if he is to continually master self and cope effectively with challenges of his environment. She, perhaps, wants most to know how to protect him against pressures both from parents and in the school situation,

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not being pushed, but being wisely permitted to set his own learning pace and pattern of mastery.

Freedom from too much pressure is a vital element in a kindergarten environment. Freedom from pressure makes it possible for the kindergartner to enjoy each new experience and to learn from it. Severe disturbances could result if too much pressure to learn were applied to the immature preschool children.

Many kindergarten teachers are concerned with current pressure to push more academic achievement down through the school levels. The teachers’ concern is prompted by an acute awareness of the dangers of pressures that interfere with developmental needs of young children. (See: “Assault Upon the Young,” Childhood Education, January, 1965, p. 248.) Teachers know that too much of the wrong kind of pressure can result in child reactions of fear, hostility, fatigue, discouragement, or other emotional or behavioral symptoms.

The current concern for school achievement may be a reflection of the pressures for achievement felt today in our society. Adults have an increasing responsibility to understand children and to protect them from too much pressure. The teachers of our kindergartens must be ready to answer three important questions: (1) What are the best learning experiences for kindergartners? (2) What constitutes pressure at the kindergarten level? and (3) What is learning and what is pressure for each individual child?

Kindergarten teachers are alert to the problem. To insure the best education for kindergartners, teachers follow tested principles of kindergarten education such as:

1. Knowledge of the needs and abilities of kindergartners.
2. Comprehensive data about each child.
3. Alertness to evidence of each child’s readiness for learning.
4. Consistent standards of behavior for all children.
5. Rapport with and genuine concern for children.
6. Experiences that stimulate each child to learn in his own way.\(^6\)

Each successive weekly edition of My Weekly Reader Surprise, according to this writer’s observation, offers carefully selected materials for teachers to use in helping kindergartners learn without pressure.

The Idea Shops “A Teacher’s Defense Against Pressure in kindergarten” should become a part of the permanent file of every kindergarten teacher.

A teacher’s defense against pressure in kindergarten is her professional understanding of 5-year-olds and her personal concern for their welfare. A kindergarten teacher can

\(^6\)Ibid., Vol. 7, Issue 20.
offset pressures many times by explaining to parents and interested people how and why kindergarten experiences are based on the children’s development and maturity.

Needs of children—Teachers know that children have certain basic needs such as those for:

- Belonging
- Love, affection
- Freedom from fear
- Freedom from guilt

Understanding, Knowledge
Achievement
Sharing
Economic security

Abilities of kindergartners—Teachers use the characteristics of kindergartners as a basis for learning experiences. The following lists a few of a kindergartner’s characteristics:

- Is active, curious, eager; readily shows fatigue
- Uses language for communication
- Can see relationships between things
- Wants to achieve, fears failure
- Is aware of the world around him
- Practices acquired skills
- Shows increase in perceptual abilities
- Tends to go to pieces under pressure

Personal data—Before a kindergarten program can be planned, teachers must discover each child’s level of development such as:

- Emotional: behavior, stability, independence
- Physical: growth, illnesses, disabilities
- Social: family, use of amenities, other schools
- Intellectual: language facility, thinking ability, knowledge, experiences, travels, books in home

Evidence of readiness—Children give clues to their readiness for learning such as:

- Questions: “What time does the clock say?”
- Protests: “No, I want to do it myself!”
- Persistence: Jane tries nine times to tie her shoe.
- Social Interaction: “I want to be first.” Or, “Jim, it’s your turn now.”
- Interests: Jerry who paints the same jet each day, and Tom who chooses different activities each day.
Standards of behavior—Teachers set consistent standards of behavior so that children will know how to act. The same behavior is expected of all the children. Before each new experience, the expected behavior is discussed with the children.

Child-teacher relationships—Teachers know that children can relax and learn with teachers who are affectionate, understanding, patient, even-tempered, receptive, outgoing and happy.

Kindergarten experiences—A kindergarten teacher must be aware of the knowledge and abilities of each child if the child's experiences in kindergarten are to help him learn without pressure.  

As a teacher notes the items listed under “Evidences of Readiness” given by Singleton she, of course, will be cognizant of the fact that some children of less than five years of age question, protest, persist, show high level social interaction and interests which must be satisfied for that particular preschooler in order to meet his growth needs. This, of course, means recognizing individual differences.

Setting and maintaining standards of behavior for the group also carries with it the idea of firmness, flexibility, but insistence that rules must be followed and established limits respected.

When children know what is expected, they relax, comply because they understand outcomes, and learn because they are happy. Too much freedom can create stress also.

Unless we strive for excellent organization and direction we can have complete deterioration of program because of large sections of time daily misused under the guise of “free play.”

The Ideal Teacher

The ideal teacher for preschool children is there watching and guarding. She is unobtrusive; she shows humility while being knowledgeable; she knows that her duty is to serve helplessness—the needs of children. She is open-minded and shows great respect for human beings. Her respect for children is demonstrated most of all through the virtues of patience and love.

At the pre-kindergarten level perhaps more so than ever again the young child needs and thrives on overt expressions of love. This kind of love for the child has perhaps been best described as “mothering.” This particular quality, discovered some decades ago as essential to the general physical well-being of babies, and to their ability to thrive emotionally, is a quality which some adults do not possess. It can spring genuinely uninhibited from that adult who has empathy, and who is overtly expressive enough to utilize this quality in the care and guidance of little children.

Some preschool teachers, aides, volunteer workers and an occasional parent lack this quality. This is perhaps one of the most significant qualities deserving to be sought in teaching staff and volunteer aides for our deprived children and especially the very young.

Observation of the little gestures and the little helps given when comfort, reassurance, and simply a little extra help or attention are needed will reveal this quality of mothering at the preschool level. Observations were made of the frequency with which tears of the homestick were dried (or tears needing attention), noses wiped (or a child gently directed to wipe his own), bumps and bruises brushed when reassurance in this manner was needing, or shoe laces tied (or a child guided in the process), all of which are the adult’s expression of affection (not coddling children). Some need (perhaps, being over-ired, sleepy, in a hurry—too busy to notice) may make a child who is ordinarily competent to do these things for himself suffer some relapses.

Sometimes children indicate need for other physical contact with the teacher which assures them of being loved. Observations were made on occasions when a child moved closer to the teacher’s side or knee and the teacher responded to the child. Observations were made of children nudging others in attempts to make their physical contacts with the teacher. Checks were made for the teacher’s almost unconscious enveloping or gentle cuddling of some small child with that “always available arm” as her eyes, voice and conscious attention remain on story-reading, or as she kept her attention directed toward whatever function was being performed.

Observation was made of irritable children—how often an irritable child in a tantrum was held firmly, though lovingly, and respectfully in a tight clasp until he could calm himself gradually and revert to normal behavior—how else a temper tantrum might have been logically handled, with a child understood and accepted in spite of undesirable behavior—what conditions seemingly prompted outbreaks of temper.

Observation was made also for evidence of reassurance that a child would master some specific skill usually with few words spoken to him, for smiles from the teacher over obvious achievements, and for evidences of boosting morale by a pat on the back.

All too often there was lack of this kind of concern and involvement. Teaching positions are held but devoted application of time and ingenuity to growth needs is woefully lacking. There are yet too few trusting, self-other-oriented (opposed to self-centered) individuals, with desirable temperaments and specialized training employed in most preschools studied.

Respect for Privacy

At the preschool level there will be children with patterns of behavior reflecting more complex sides of their nature. Since we know
this, teachers as well as all other staff members who work in any capacity with the child should be mature, competent people. They should be of unquestionable integrity. Responsibilities to the job and especially responsibilities to the children should be clearly defined. This is especially true where work aides, volunteer workers and student observers are concerned. The confidences of parents and the privacy of the children should not be violated.

Note the following case:

A young family, recently settled in the city, had placed their five-year-old child in a preschool. Both mother and father were professional people, although the mother had not yet gone into employment in the new city when this case was recorded.

The five-year-old did not talk at school. He made weird sounds, grunting sometimes to indicate his needs. He was rebellious, destructive in contacts with other children and with things. Few facts about his home life or factual bases for his problem, were available but considerable conjecturing was done. His “case” was discussed freely.

The child’s teachers turned out to be lay teachers—none with degrees of any kind except the directress. The aide, who spent considerable time with the child, was a young mother now enrolled part-time as a college student. None of the staff had specialized training in nursery school education, or early childhood education or child development and family relations. They talked freely about all affairs of the school.

In short time the case was discussed outside the school, over back fences and bridge tables, no doubt exaggerated because the parents were professional people.

Then the whispers began outside—“he talked for me today”—from the aide to whom, presumably, he had said his first word.

Our children’s problems must not be exposed needlessly and carelessly. The privacy of families should never be violated. Children are entrusted to our care. They deserve respect. Competent teachers know this!

What we know about the child, we keep in the same manner as the physician treats the private cases of his patients or as the priest treats the confessions of his confessors. That one is dealing with human personalities should be a constant reminder of this and dictate desirable restraint.

Parents and other interested observers (other than observers meeting course requirements through visiting preschools) are frequently encouraged to make unannounced visits to school to observe. There is considerable merit in this activity if it is done without one’s presence being known by the teacher or one’s offspring. This of course can only be accomplished through observation booths. The object is to observe one’s child under circumstances which provide
a more objective picture of his functioning in such an environment. Good teacher functioning is worthy of observation also.

In one situation, when the director invited parents and all interested adults to “observe” at specified hours during the week, the teachers in the school literally “flew the coop” when they knew that observers were around. Children were left totally unsupervised, sometimes with students on the scene whose assignments were obviously to observe and record, not to participate. Children in this situation took advantage of the teachers’ long absences from their classrooms. Chaos resulted, and college students appeared confused about whether they should “interfere” in order to protect children and prevent accidents. Usually they did forget their roles as detached observers to restore order from chaos, but were obviously disturbed about over-stepping even while finding it sensible to become involved.

These were not emergencies removing teachers from the scenes. It became a pattern. Supervision appeared to be of no concern. It was almost always lacking.

The Home-School Association meetings for an entire year in one school were entirely social hours for the parents. The parent serving as hostess for each meeting tried to outdo the former one in terms of games and other forms of recreation and entertainment. Considerable emphasis was placed on refreshments. No fathers ever attended except those holding offices. Not a single meeting for the entire year centered around discussion of the school as a significant training center for children and adults involved in it. No opportunities during the entire year were provided for regularly planned individual conferences with parents. This phase was entirely unorganized. A few parents sought opportunities to question and to talk about their child or children without invitation or encouragement from the teachers.

The general attitude appeared to be that there was no need for the emphasis to be anything other than it was. Parents appeared to enjoy each other in social interchange.

Teachers must recognize their varying areas of responsibility: (a) to set realistic, well-planned and attainable program objectives; (b) to care for and protect the children (always providing sufficient supervision); (c) keep parents aware of the nature of experiences children are having; (d) suggest specific ways in which efforts may be supplemented at home; (e) seek to know specific ways in which the school may build upon what parents are doing with and for the child at home; (f) serve as professional spokesmen keeping parents abreast of current concepts and information relating specifically to the level of development of their children.