

A Center for the Guidance of Parents and Children in a Small Community

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"But we don't get the people who really need it," said the president of a parent education group.

"It's the people who come, who already understand their children," lamented another member of the group.

"It seems that it is always those who need parent education the most who never show up," suggested another parent who always attended. The general opinion was that certain parents neither realize that knowledge is necessary for successful rearing of children nor are they willing to avail themselves of it.

The parents of Castle Hill, a small community of 500 people, have disproved the contention of many members of parent education groups. At Castle Hill those who most need help in living happily with their children attend a guidance center regularly. The Castle Hill Center for Guidance of Parents and Children is open one afternoon each week.¹ One room is made available in the school for consultation and one as a play room for the children who are brought to the Center. The Center not only serves the immediate community, but two neighboring cities and surrounding townships avail themselves of the counseling facilities.

Why do parents come so readily to the Center with their problems? There are a number of reasons, the most compelling one being that their needs are being adequately met.

"I don't know what I would do without the Center," stated one mother, "but I find I need to go every week to keep growing in my understanding of how to live harmoniously with my children."

"I just feel I have to get away from it all and come to the Center to get a new view each week," is the parting remark of a mother as she leaves. The parents of the community rejected the type of parent

¹ Today there are a total of four Centers in the Waterloo-Cedar Falls area incorporated as a nonprofit organization called "Iowa Community Centers for the Guidance of Parents and Children."

education to which they had been accustomed as being so general in nature that they had not been able to make application to specific problems of specific children.

"I go to the child study meetings and listen to speakers but nothing happens."

"It is never clear what I should do."

"It seems that anything I try never works and I can't find out why," commented a number of the parents while other parents nodded their agreement. Even though conventional parent education was rejected they did not know what attack would better meet their situation. However, they were convinced they needed some type of help.

In a number of meetings lasting over a period of two months, various phases of guiding the child to a better interpersonal relationship with parents, teachers and other children was discussed with small groups of parents. As they gained insight a plan for an organization began to be formulated. The first step in setting up the Center was the election of a Board of Directors. The Board established policies, arranged with the education officials for space in the school, and petitioned the College, located nearby, to release a staff member to serve as child psychologist and counselor for the Center. Two college girls after attending counseling sessions at the center became so interested they volunteered their services. One keeps the essential data of each case history. The other works with the children in the game room or on the playground when the Center is open. Her observation of a child is valuable and is presented when the parent is counseled. The parents, counselor, teachers and student assistant meet in the consultation room.

The procedure for each case generally follows the pattern below: The initial interview with the parent to obtain the essential data of the case is held before the group of parents. The student assistant records the information as the counselor structures the interview. Time could be saved by having the initial interview by some one other than the counselor if more personnel were available. However, the procedure has proved to be very satisfactory. The case is then scheduled for consultation. At the first counseling session the parent is asked to relate in detail the nature of the problem. The counselor structures the consultation to make certain that some essential points are brought out:

1. The genesis of the problem.

2. The interpersonal relationship of the child with peers and adults at school and in the neighborhood.

3. The interpersonal relationship of the child and each parent and each of the other children in the family.

4. Method of control.

5. Nature of the child's attempt to adjust in the home, the school, the neighborhood and in the community.

6. The siblings and order of birth.

The next step in the consultation is fundamental to an adequate working relationship with the parent. The other parents present ask questions to clarify points. Some make comments relative to similar problems to which they may have found a working solution. "I had the same trouble with Jimmy. He never seemed to do anything right. The more I corrected him the worse he got until I was desperate. One day I happened to praise him before his father. The change in Jimmy for a short time was . . . well it was . . . surprising. I couldn't help feel the reason was that I had built on his strong point rather than bringing out his weak points."

"Do you think perhaps you keep after your child too much?"

"Maybe he never hears a good word said about him?"

Thus, possible causes are enumerated openly, producing an atmosphere of working and thinking through the whole problem together. By this approach the parents sometimes obtain an insight into the causes of the problem and the part they play even before the child is interviewed. Usually, although not always, in such cases an interview of the sibling verifies the parents' erudition.

The parents leave the room when the siblings come for interview. This phase of the counseling session is concise and pithy. Observation during the interview is relied upon to a great extent. The manner in which the children act when they come in for interview and during the interview is often more meaningful than what they say. A careful observation is made of the way the children come into the room and sit down, who responds first, who talks the most, who talks and about what when the children are free to structure their own conversation, and the manner in which they leave the consultation room.

Patty's destructiveness brought the mother to the Center. When Patty, age 11, Fred, age 10, and June, age 8, came into the room, Fred came quickly and sat down looking directly at the counselor. Patty and June followed slowly. One girl sat on each side of the boy, Patty

scowling and looking at her toes, June grinning and with eyes dancing. Fred spoke up first always, expressed himself at every turn. Patty sometimes looked up at the counselor as if to speak, but remained silent. June merely grinned and looked from her brother to the counselor. When asked, "Who does your mother and father love the best?" "Oh! they love all of us," answered Fred quickly, sitting up straighter in his chair with a satisfied expression. Patty frowned, looked at her feet, then stared vacantly into space. June looked at her brother and grinned slyly. When they left the counseling room, Fred left first, quickly and confidently. Patty followed her brother and sister. Thus, through analytical observation their interpersonal relationship is discerned. The discussion with the children centers around their family, school and neighborhood relationships. Actual misbehavior, at least during the first consultation, is never discussed unless the child enters upon it himself. After the children have gone back to their play groups and the parents have returned, the parents are encouraged to speculate upon what the causes for the child's behavior may be. The other parents participate in this phase of the "thinking through" of the problem. The role of the counselor consists of pointing out, interpreting, supplying data, and leading toward insight and understanding as to the cause of the child's dysfunction, always working toward an analytical rather than impulsive approach to the child's behavior.

Once the cause of the dysfunction is isolated the counselor plays a more direct role. Specific suggestions are made to the parents as to changes in the parent-child relationship that must be made to enable the child to work out his adjustment to the society in which he lives. With the child, the chief method is helping the child understand his behavior through disclosure (2).

None of the cases counseled during the year that the Center has been open is considered discharged. However, in all cases the parents and children are on the way to the establishment of an adequate and stable relationship. The extent and speed with which the child's approach and outlook changes definitely for the better and the problems or symptoms disappear are in inverse proportion to the parent's ability and willingness to bring about changes in the family relationship. Sometimes this happens after one counseling session. A mother came to the Center with Tammy, age 5, and Jimmy, age 3. The mother was unable to control Tammy. She cried and had tantrums when

she couldn't have her own way. She did not eat, except when forced by withholding dessert or privileges. The doctor prescribed pills to build her up. The two children fought constantly. The mother interfered in the conflicts. Tammy was spanked or sent to her room, parents thus taking sides in the conflict. A struggle for power between mother and the child developed over clothes to be worn to school. The grandparents interfered with the parents in control of the children. When the children came for interview Jimmy followed Tammy into the room and pulled his chair up beside her. There was no indication of antagonism between the children. They liked both parents equally well. "I try to be good," was the only comment made by Tammy regarding her relationship with her mother. The counselor assured her he was certain that was true.

The mother, it developed, was a perfectionist who felt that nothing would go right or be done right unless she had a hand in it. By imposing her will on Tammy in every minor detail, she was making it impossible to be effective when it was necessary to take a firm stand. The line of communication between parent and child was non-existent, merely a superiority-inferiority type of relationship. It was recommended that the children be permitted to settle their differences without parental refereeing and interference. Tammy should be permitted to have choices and to plan with the mother. Issues should not be made of minor things, that is, in situations where it makes very little difference what course is followed. Logical consequences should be used instead of punishment. The grandparents were to be informed of the confusing effects upon children of attempted controls by too many adults and invited to attend the counseling sessions at the Center.

The mother returned to the next counseling session relaxed and pleased. Everything was working out beautifully. The children quarreled and fought less, now that the mother stayed out of it. Tammy was permitted to select the clothes she wore to school, and was using good judgment since one cold day when she wore clothing that was too light to school. The mother had said nothing, but Tammy now wears clothes appropriate for the weather and often accepts suggestions from the mother. Tammy was permitted to help her mother bake cookies. Ordinarily, the mother stated, she would have closely supervised and bossed the whole procedure, with the resulting struggle for power between Tammy and her mother. As it was, the mother went along with Tammy's way of doing things even to the coloring

of the frosting which was unappetizing in appearance. The pride with which Tammy served her creations at dinner made the mother realize how much it meant to the child to use her initiative. It also made her realize the effect praise for a job well done had on Tammy's behavior. "I am getting over the feeling that I have to engineer everything," the mother stated at the Center some time later, "and it's making life easier."

The Castle Hill Center does not confine its activities to the counseling sessions alone. The parents have felt they needed an interpretation of, and an insight into, the cultural changes and their implications to parenthood. One evening each month is devoted to the development of broader and more general understandings. The subject for discussion is presented by the director in a twenty to thirty minute talk. This serves as a frame of reference and presents various viewpoints, pertaining to the particular subject. The parents then ask questions, present their viewpoints and carry on the discussion with the director acting as leader. Some of the topics discussed thus far serve as illustrations:

- Responsibility—Scaled to Size
- Our Responsibility to Other People's Children
- What Is Intelligence?
- How to Resolve Conflicts
- A Wife and Mother in a Changing World
- Learning to Recognize Our Intolerances Toward Children

The Castle Hill Center for Guidance of Parents and Children is unique in several ways. In the first place it has no budget. All workers volunteer their services. Some of the parents contributed toward the purchase of books that circulate (1). They also contributed to a small revolving fund. The fund is used to purchase inexpensive pamphlets and materials which are sold at cost. As far as the writer knows, this is the only Center of this type outside of large metropolitan areas. In metropolitan areas, the participants in group counseling, as described above, probably have few or no contacts, except at the Center.

What effect would intimate acquaintanceship have upon the operation of the Center? Would parents be reluctant to discuss their problems before neighbors they knew well? Such acquaintanceship has been an asset rather than a liability. Many parents who had no real friends in the neighborhood have made contacts, the Center having

given them a feeling of belongingness. By way of illustration: Mrs. M. stated her problem in a high, emotionally charged voice, almost hysterical at times. She and her husband had adopted Betty, a neglected child, age two. Betty was emaciated and malnourished, scarcely able to walk. "I wanted someone to love," said the mother. However, the parents in their eagerness to produce a superior product pampered Betty on the one hand, tried teaching her at home, and showered her with material things. On the other hand, they punished her severely, frequently spanking. The school officials informed the parents, after Betty had attended kindergarten only a few weeks, that they could not keep her in school. The officials referred the parents to a clinic which informed the parents, after a psychological examination (presumably with standardized instruments), that Betty was mentally defective and possibly would have to be committed to an institution. The frantic mother then redoubled her efforts to teach the child at home. Inappropriate methods, punishments and pressures, brought Betty to kindergarten the following fall, no more ready than she had been the previous year. Again the question arose as to whether Betty could stay in a "normal" kindergarten. "I have come for help," the mother concluded.

The parents now understood Mrs. M's hostility to some of them and her coldness and lack of friendly neighborliness. A worried distraught parent can't be a good neighbor, any more than an emotionally disturbed child can adjust adequately to his school society. The result has been an establishment of empathy and a development of feelings of more security and adequacy on the part of the parents. Others, whose conflict with their neighbors had led to a complete break-down of interpersonal relationships, have gained insight into what they contributed to the conflict and what they can do to resolve the conflict.

What happened to Betty? Betty's case was handled with the same procedure as other cases. After observation and interview of the child, the parents were assured that there was no concrete evidence of the child's mental deficiency. In fact, there was evidence to the contrary. The teacher was as receptive to counseling as were the parents. After several counseling sessions with teacher and parents together and separately and with continued attendance at the Center for the mother, Betty is well on the way to adequate adjustment in school. She now participates in group activities, is learning to express herself during sharing time, draws and paints using various media, and is friendlier

and happier. In many ways she is beginning to exhibit readiness for reading and numbers.

The breach now existing in the interpersonal relationship between parents and teachers is vividly exposed, with almost each parent that is counseled. Although on the surface there appears to be grounds for recrimination, both parties are often victims of circumstances over which they have no control or lack skills to control. Here is a case in point. The kindergarten teacher referred Mac for counseling. Mac was hostile and surly. Revenge was his goal and in its execution he formed a small gang of children, whom he incited to hurl insulting epithets at the other children. He hit the children, using his fists, and often armed himself with convenient objects in the room. Sometimes he came to school equipped with a bolt or other metal objects he had picked up. Mac expressed a hostility toward his brother, two years his senior, toward his parents, and particularly his father. His father used physical punishment as a means of control. "I feel like doing the same to him after he spansks me," scowled Mac.

The parents blamed the school for the difficulty Mac was having in adjusting to his school society. The parents settled the two boys' conflicts at home and coached Mac's interpersonal relations with his peers generally. Spanking was the means of control and the counselor was lectured by the father on the virtues of physical punishment as a means of control. "No one resents just punishment for a wrong he has done. If I saw my boy pick up an object to strike another child I would spank him," the father concluded. The different interpersonal adjustments Mac was forced to make at home as compared to school and with his contacts outside of home and school were disturbing to him. Whereas at home the superiority-inferiority type of relationship existed, at school Mac was treated as an equal by his adults. It is understandable that he was not able to adjust adequately to two irreconcilably opposite and simultaneously existing environments. The teachers and his peers became the objects for the repression and spankings he was subjected to at home. Without any hope of bringing about any immediate change in the parents, the teacher with the help of the counselor, worked out ways to win the child and through counseling to redirect his goals.

Except in a few cases misunderstandings between school and parent have been reconciled by intensive, persistent and continuous counseling. Although the time needed to effect changes in parents and re-

sulting changes in children's behavior by the method described is much less than with other methods, it is not superficial. The length of time necessary to obtain results is largely governed by the nature of the parent rather than the nature of the disorder. A mother who had been counseled for a number of sessions continued to attend the Center meetings. A gradual improvement of interpersonal relationships and in the child's behavior could be detected. After more than eight months she remarked, "It wasn't until you counseled Mrs. B's case the last two times that I realized how domineering and autocratic I have been with my family." From that date accelerated change in the child's behavior with more adequate adjustment was readily discernible.

A community center for guidance of parents and children is a moving force in providing more relaxed and objective attitudes toward children's behavior by parents who participate. Many parents, they observe, are having the same problems as they; therefore, it is not due to any personal inadequacy and thus there is no reflection on their integrity. New insights are discovered through listening to other similar but quite different cases. Further, parent's reports of success and solutions to interpersonal conflicts serve as sources of information as well as a means to bolster morale.

There are concomitant outcomes of a center for the guidance of parents and children in a small community other than those resulting from the counseling of parents and children *per se*. A feeling of empathic appreciation of one's neighbor, who has labored under tensions due to breakdown of interpersonal relationships within the family, is developed more easily and adequately. The parent begins to take an analytical rather than an impulsive approach toward a neighbor's behavior; that is, a searching for causes. There naturally follows a more analytical approach to the behavior of the children in the neighborhood. In other words, the parents begin to have a sense of responsibility toward children other than their own.

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