

# An Adlerian Preschool

*Susan K. McKelvie*

“Susan McKelvie, you have a good school here!”

We all like to remember the things which confirm our own positive feelings about ourselves and our endeavors. The above statement made by one of the four-year-olds during that first year of our Adlerian Preschool does just that for me. At one time or another most of us, I suppose, have thought or dreamed about starting something of our own in which we could try all of the ideas about which we felt strongly. For almost two years now, I have had the opportunity of working at my dream: my own preschool.

The whole dream-become-reality began two years earlier in a small room filled with people observing a family education session. It was there that I met Molly Thorn; both of us were observer-participants in the counseling that day. As our acquaintance and friendship grew, so grew our enthusiasm for the idea of starting a school based upon the principles we had been hearing in those family education sessions. We both were excited about the ideas of Alfred Adler via Rudolf Dreikurs: we had seen them work not only for the families in the education centers, but also for the problems we had encountered in our work as classroom teachers. How fantastic it would be to establish our own educational setting and put into practice all of these pragmatic ideas!

Our first step was an announcement of our idea in the newsletter of the Individual Psychology Association of Greater Washington, D. C. We talked to everyone we knew (contacted parent study groups, teachers, and counselors), asking the question, “would parents be interested in being part of a preschool where the ideas and techniques propounded by Rudolf Dreikurs would be used?” The answer was a resounding “yes”; and work was begun.

Our second step was to meet with all interested parties and to decide as a group what needed to be done. Out of these first meetings came a statement which served (and which still serves) as a declaration of our purpose:

The purpose of this endeavor is to establish a school setting in which young children and the adults working with these young children can experience and learn the art of democratic living. Emphasis will be placed on an open, democratic atmosphere in which children and adults will have the opportunity to experience the consequences of both social and cognitive actions.

Three things were clear to us at this point. First, our school should be a cooperative; that is, a school where parents, children, and teacher share together in the planning, decision-making, working, and learning. Second, family

education should be an integral part of the whole process. Third, the book *Children: The Challenge* (Dreikurs and Soltz, 1964) should serve as the basis for interactions between the adults and the children. Further, we wanted to establish a setting where there were no experts or "professionals," who would set everything up and then invite everyone to "see how it is done." Rather, we wanted a setting where everyone would enjoy equal rights, respect, and opportunity, and where everyone would be encouraged to contribute and participate in every aspect of the school.

We now felt armed with ideas and mutual feelings of how it should be, and the process of realizing it all began. We spent the most frustrating months of our existence finding a place to have the school. We exhausted all of the usual locations: libraries, recreation centers, community buildings, empty classrooms in public schools, and we even considered the large basement of an interested (and courageous) friend. Finally, about eight weeks before the school was scheduled to open, we secured confirmation from a church on the use of several of their rooms. The space would be available to us in the afternoon, four days a week. Even more fantastic! They would be willing to let us use all of the equipment belonging to their already-in-process, morning nursery school. It was a real break for us; and as these things do, it came to be through a friend who knew the pastor's wife, who in turn knew about the Dreikurs study groups, because they had been held previously in the church. The pastor's wife was intrigued with the ideas and anxious to learn more . . . and so it went. We had a place and were ready to open our doors.

The first year was a marvelous combination of the optimism and light-headedness which comes with pursuing a dream and the pitfalls of trying too hard to meet our expectations and to be perfect. We struggled mightily with the throes of wanting so badly to be the best school ever. I think now, looking back at our beginnings, that I would caution anyone involved in a similar endeavor against that old familiar "striving for superiority" which can be so defeating and confining. Perhaps one of the greatest lessons that came out of that year was the real meaning of the "courage to be imperfect," and the liberation and growth which it permits.

The children grew and grew that year. We learned the patience that is necessary in order to convince children that we really do have faith in them; that we really do think they can handle their own affairs; and that we really do think they can do many, many things for themselves and for each other. We also learned the importance of the time spent on the development of necessary skills, the training for useful behavior, and the exploration of alternative ways to solve problems. We asked the children for their help in the problems that emerged, and they told us: children who disrupt snack time should be asked to leave the room until they can behave; children who fight in the classroom can just as well finish their fight in the hall; we can tell if someone has washed their

hands by smelling his or her hands for the soap; one can walk away from a bully; we can all just walk out of a room if we don't want to watch someone else misbehave; and you can find out how to put on your snow boots by watching and asking a friend who already knows.

The adults grew and grew, too; and I realize now that what we are doing with adults in our school is every bit as exciting and marvelous as what we are doing with the children. It would be so much easier in many ways to have the parents leave their children at the door and pick them up two and a half hours later. We would never have to deal with the parent-child hassles which occur between every normal mother and child. I am certain that the parents must feel the same way at times--particularly when their child is hanging on their leg, throwing a tantrum, or punching another child: all while the parents go about their business of being teacher-assistant for the day. The uniqueness of our Adlerian school is demonstrated in the cooperative learning experiences provided for everyone involved: children, adults, and teacher. What a great experience it is for a parent to see his or her child's behavior turn from useless attention-getting to useful cooperation, and to be an active participant in the techniques which propelled that change! For the parent to be able to take the new knowledge and the resulting improved-relationship home with him is even greater!

We spend a good deal of time with parent education. Before becoming a member of our school, we encourage parents to take a Dreikurs study group. For those parents who have not done so, we arrange for an on-going group usually led by other parents. In short, every parent is at least familiar with *Children: The Challenge* (Dreikurs and Soltz, 1964); and they are aware that we employ the methods and philosophy of that book in our school.

Our monthly meetings are spent talking about school: our successes, problems, and questions--what worked, what didn't work, and why. Molly's function in the group is that of counselor-consultant. She attends our monthly meetings, visits school regularly, and is available for consultation with parents and myself at any time. She and I also conduct two parent-teacher conferences each year: one in the fall and one in the spring. The objectivity and skills which she is able to bring to any situation has proven to be invaluable.

In addition to the Dreikurs study groups and the consultation that Molly provides, we try to have at least one of our monthly meetings at the Family Education Center which is maintained and staffed by the Individual Psychology Association. We are anxious for our families to become familiar with the family counseling format and techniques, hoping they will become interested in having their own family counseled. Currently, we are encouraging our members to bring their families for counseling at our regular monthly meetings. I envision a family education center becoming an integral part of the school and providing the "ultimate" in parent education for our family members.

A very important part of our parent education takes place during school when the parents are there as teacher-assistants. Each parent signs up for approximately two days a month, and each day I have two parents assisting me. We work toward a feeling that for any given day there are simply three adults present at school equally able and responsible for whatever may happen. In other words, the three of us share the responsibility, the work, and the fun: there is no authority figure, no one who judges what is the right or wrong way to handle a situation, and no one to see if you acted the way "Dreikurs said that you should." There is, however, an honest exchange of opinions and an eager questioning as to why something worked or didn't work. If there seems to be a common problem or question, everyone is asked for input, suggestions, and encouragement. It is absolutely marvelous what can happen when a whole group of adults cooperatively decides that a problem should be solved, or that they should focus upon the strengths of a certain child!

Parent involvement is the real key to the success and good feeling of our venture. We run our school much like Dreikurs suggests we should run our families. Our monthly meetings are very much like family council meetings. Our chairpersonship is rotated; jobs that need to be done are announced, and people are asked what they might like to do. (If no one volunteers, the job doesn't get done that month.) Any problems or questions that arise with certain children and/or adults are brought before the group, and decisions are reached through consensus. We have found without question that people are much more willing and cooperative if they have a part in the decisions that govern the group to which they belong.

It is exciting to see and feel the friendship that develops within the group during the year--not just between the adults, but between the adults and children as well. This friendship seems to spill over into the neighborhoods and communities from which the members come. We talk about and sense a steadily broadening feeling of responsibility, social concern, and encouragement. I find myself beginning to understand the meaning of what Manfred Sonstegard has advocated for such a long time: the therapeutic community. In our case, the therapeutic community is a group of people willing to encourage and teach each other, because they are beginning to know how to do so.

In a final effort to convey a more complete picture of the atmosphere toward which we work in our school, I would like to share with you two of our parent handouts. I give these handouts to each family at the beginning of the school year. They express my personal convictions in the area of adult-child relationships and represent a "combining" of not only Adler and Dreikurs, but of Jean Piaget's work in the area of developing intelligence.

## **Teacher Convictions**

1. The role of the teacher is not one of giving ready-made knowledge to our children. Rather, by guiding their experiences, the teacher attempts to help each child construct his own knowledge through his own reasoning. The primary goal becomes to teach thinking.

2. Social interaction among children is of great importance. The cooperation among children is as important as the child's cooperation with adults. In moving to new knowledge, other children at similar cognitive levels can often be more helpful to a child than an adult.

3. Adults are not the source of all truth and all morality. Therefore, our classroom will not stress obedience, but rather autonomy and cooperation. It is in the practicing of judgments and the experiencing of consequences with other children that a child learns. This is his/her right, and it must be preserved.

4. Children should be encouraged to express exactly what they experience and exactly what they believe. A positive self-image cannot be fostered if we do not stop and ask children what they honestly think. It is a falsehood to teach children that the "correct" answer always comes from an adult's head.

5. We need to instill in children the courage to ask their own questions and to try their own answers. I would rather a child come up with one honest question of his/her own, than to answer correctly ten of mine.

6. It is important that we allow children to move from one stage to another of being "wrong," instead of expecting them to reason logically like an adult. This is important, because wrong notions usually contain a certain amount of correctness. Every child has some knowledge about whatever we try to teach them, and their knowledge always contains some elements of truth. The "wrongs" or mistakes are marvelous things, for they provide the impetus and the reason to search further. The child needs time to question, to search, to be curious, and to try out answers: all vital parts of the active construction of an ever developing intelligence. Again, this is a child's right; we do him a disservice by trying to hand out "right" answers.

7. Children should be encouraged to engage in active participation for reasons of enjoyment, of their own initiative and curiosity, or simply of a job that needs to be done--not for reasons of pleasing the teacher, of being "best," or of being "good."

8. I am not interested in teaching children to read, to write, or to count to ten. I am interested in and fascinated by helping children to learn to think. I do not mean to imply that the skills of reading, writing, and counting are unimportant. Of course they are to be learned, but they should be treated as tools in the service of intelligent living, not as goals in themselves. Rather than try to teach specific rules, skills, and bits of information in the hope that they will be remembered and applied to other situations, I prefer to work on the very framework in which skills have a reason for being. If a child can think, if he knows he can think and has the courage to do so, skills will of necessity become the tools which he needs, and his own thinking will tell him so.

9. "An educator's most important task--one might almost say his holy duty--is to see to it that no child is discouraged at school, and that a child who

enters school already discouraged regains his confidence in himself through his school and his teacher.” (Adler, 1930) The most important thing we can give a child--or any person for that matter--is courage to meet and deal with the tasks of living.

## Guidelines For Parents

First, I would like to recommend something to each of you that I have been doing this last week: that is, re-read *Children: The Challenge*. It is a good refresher and will help to get us on the same wavelength. For those of you who do not have a copy or who haven't read the book, let me know, and we'll get a copy for you. Again, we strongly urge you to take part in a parent study group if you haven't already done so.

Second, there are a few general suggestions which may be helpful to us as we begin putting Dreikurs' principles into action here at school:

A. Always look for the positive aspect of every situation, of each child, and of each other. Assume that things will go well, and very often they do just that. In an “uncomfortable” situation, beware of over-concern; don't feel as if you must do something. Doing nothing works marvels sometimes. In general, try not to over-react; a matter-of-fact attitude is always appropriate. Don't worry about making mistakes, or “doing it as Dreikurs would.” Mistakes (if that's what we must call them) are opportunities for learning. After all, how does creative growth occur if not through the “courage to be imperfect?”

B. Try to let children work out things for themselves--cognitively as well as socially. We need to remember that it is a child's right to have the opportunity to learn from his own actions. We must not deprive him of that opportunity. A helping hand, an honest suggestion, a leading question, or an attempt to redirect: all are good ways to let children experience alternatives and to facilitate their acquisition of new ways of thinking and acting. The key is to watch for patterns. We need to remember that we are all human. An occasional show of aggression, a plea for help, tears, or an “I'll show you who's boss”: all are part of life and learning. It is when they become a pattern--a consistent way through which one deals with the world--that we need to be especially alert for clues as to a mistaken goal and for ways to help each other find more useful ways of operating.

C. The most important thing we can remember is that a misbehaving child is a discouraged child. We need to be always alert for ways to encourage the children and each other. Pick up strengths and hold on for dear life! Remember, too, the less attention a child gets when he disturbs, the more he needs when he is cooperative.

D. As teacher in this school, I am not the final authority or the expert. Because of my training and experience, however, I am the one member of the group who has agreed to be responsible for the day-to-day continuity of the

school operation. I see my role as one of making and carrying through long range goals, of constructing a framework, so to speak, from which a daily schedule, activities, and a school atmosphere will emerge. I see my role as one of facilitator of growth--both for the group of children and for the group of adults with whom I work. I need your help to make this school work; I'm not even going to attempt to do it all myself. I need your feedback regarding the things you like or dislike, the things you don't understand, and the things you would like to see occur or stop. I need your ideas, your special interests, your talents, your creativity, your presence, and your friendship. By sharing what we all have with each other--children and adults alike--we can come up with nothing but good things! I look forward to another year of our Adlerian Pre-school with eagerness and pleasure.

#### REFERENCES

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