

Practical Application of Adlerian Principles In a Pre-School Setting

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Alfred Adler once said, "A teacher's 'holy duty' is to see that no child is discouraged at school and that a child who enters school already discouraged, regains his self-confidence through his school and teacher."

This is our goal at the Hockessin Friends Pre-School. We believe that each person is a social being who needs to find his place among his fellow beings as a significant contributing member. We also believe that he constructs his life style during the first five years of his life. Therefore, we must help him develop feelings of confidence and self-reliance at the earliest possible age, in order to enable him to cope throughout his life. We feel that this can best be done through encouragement.

The Hockessin Friends Pre-School was established in 1962 to provide an educational setting in which principles of Adlerian psychology (as presented in the works of Rudolf Dreikurs) could be practiced. The school has grown from one small class, with one teacher, to a present enrollment of eighty, with a staff of six teachers.

Teachers come from a varied background, with education in fields such as nursing, art, sociology, history, and banking. Our most important qualifications are experience and education in use of the principles of Individual Psychology. This has been achieved through study group membership, study group leadership, and counselor training given by the Family Education Center of Delaware, Inc. Teachers have also taken courses in Adlerian methods at the University of Vermont and at the Alfred Adler Institute in Chicago.

In her daily relationship with staff members, and in staff meetings, the head teacher attempts to extend the atmosphere of democracy and the attitudes of encouragement used in the classroom. Her role is to be encouraging, create a feeling of mutual respect, and develop equal participation in the contribution of ideas and physical maintenance of the school. Curriculum is decided upon by the staff each month. Within this rather loose structure each teacher is free to improvise and share ideas with her colleagues. A daily routine is followed but freedom to explore interests supersedes adherence to a rigid schedule.

If you were to visit Hockessin Friends Pre-School on any day you would find essentially the same parents, the same children, the same daily routine, equipment, and curriculum as in any one of thousands of pre-schools across the country. The children are generally from middle class homes with a small percentage of upper class and disadvantaged. All religions, races, and economic classes are welcome. Scholarships are available when needed. Parents come for numerous reasons, ranging from needing a convenient “baby sitter” to “hearing about your wonderful work” and signing up three years in advance. They run the gamut from extreme pampering to disinterested neglect, from refusing to come to conferences to demanding a blow by blow daily report on the child’s activities. At this point, you may be saying to yourself, “What’s so new and different about this?” Let me say emphatically, this is where the sameness stops.

First of all, no child is ever turned away. From the first, each child is accepted as a respected human being. Children with physical, social, or emotional problems are welcomed. As pointed out by Oskar Spiel, we believe that the role of the teacher is to “observe and interpret behavior, establish contact with the child, show understanding and insight regarding the needs of the child and act as a stage director arranging situations to become educationally valuable.” We believe that each minute of the child’s school day can be a learning experience for the teacher as well as the child. In each activity the teacher can interpret behavior. She can, by gathering information, discover a pattern of behavior in each child and work with it during the year in one-to-one relationships or group discussions. She finds that the child who only “sits” as the small merry-go-round turns, is the same child who demands service when playing house, cries at the top of the slide, and is “unable” to put on his coat (long after he has learned). In her important role as an observer she sees that the child who won’t attempt a craft because he can’t do it perfectly is the same child who carries the sand toys for the teacher, and checks to see if she’s looking before hitting his fellow student. On the other hand, the astute observer sees that the child who sizes up the new situation, decides if he’s able, and then acts is the same child who offers help to peers and teacher when he sees that it’s needed and enjoys school because it’s part of life and he’s willing to try it.

Parents and teachers usually underestimate the abilities of pre-school children. This is discouraging to them. To encourage we assume three things:

1. That they are capable, thinking human beings.
2. That after they are told only once they know what is expected of them.
3. That they see the logic in consequences experienced as the natural results of their acts.

The child under five often is looked upon by educators as a rather second class citizen who couldn't possibly understand or survive in such a demanding environment of self-determinism. In assuming that they are capable, thinking human beings we incorporate many of the attitudes used in training older children and adults as described in *Maintaining Sanity in the Classroom, Encouraging Children to Learn*, and as demonstrated in the *Encouragement Workshops* conducted by Walter O'Connell.

The children are introduced to the play area on the first day. There are few rules. As often as possible the child is given opportunities for decision making. He is allowed to choose, to make his own mistakes, and learn from them. He is given opportunities for success experiences. He is shown the teacher's faith in him by statements such as, "I know you can do it," "Try, it doesn't matter if it doesn't come out exactly the same," "You really worked hard at that," "Look at that 'm', Melissa, now I'll always be able to know which papers are yours."

Parents and teachers of preschoolers (in their need to be needed) miss many opportunities for growth by plunging in and helping when "stop, look, and listen" should be the watchword. Usually, the child will solve his own problem or the group will become involved in a constructive manner if we learn to stay out. The teacher intervenes only in matters of actual danger.

Here are some other ways we show preschoolers that we assume that they are capable, thinking individuals. All personal belongings are stored in a "do it yourself" area. After a brief training period children are expected to take care of their storage and dressing. After the children are shown the proper procedure, the care and watering of plants is left to the children. Actual jobs such as running the vacuum cleaner, washing the easel, washing the paint pots, counting children for juice orders, peeling vegetables, wiping tables, pouring juice are all done by the children who volunteer their services. No special acknowledgement is given, other than, "We certainly got finished fast today!" always concentrating on the needs of the situation. The child then feels useful to himself and the group. He cleans his own spills and carries his own messages, permission slips, and equipment to the car.

Craft projects are presented in a manner most conducive to decision making by the child. Possibilities of finished projects are first explored. Materials are laid out on the table. The teacher describes briefly the activity for the day and then says to the children, "You may get your smocks if you'd like to do this." The child chooses the materials he will use. There is no right or wrong way. When he finishes, he writes his name or asks that it be done. He places it in a designated area. If the name is not on it or if it is not in this area, it is not handed out.

Here are some of the ways we assume that they understand the logic of the consequences of their acts: We do not serve juice to people with

unwashed hands. If the child chooses to drink or eat before the group has had silent grace his food is removed. If we take too long to clean up the next activity is missed. If we don't settle down for the story or music, there is not time for them. No one is reminded, coaxed, or "explained to." Everyone knows what is happening and why. They also know they always have a choice about what they will do and a chance to try again next time. We include children in decision making for the whole group by consulting the class about room arrangement, daily program, and field trips. Certain types of misbehavior are discussed by the group but no child is pointed out as "the offender."

Parents are urged to visit the school before registering their children. If we find that the parent is not in agreement with our philosophy, other schools with a more authoritarian, or academic emphasis are suggested. On the evening of the first day of school all parents are invited to an orientation meeting where the basic philosophy of the school, its goals, and methods are discussed. Parents are told of study groups offered by the school and about the function of the Family Education Center. The parents are told about the lending library containing Adlerian literature which is available to them. Fathers are encouraged to visit at any time, attend parent conferences, and are invited to a special "Fathers and Students" night later in the year.

Our parent conferences are held three times a year. The first is a "get acquainted" meeting for the teacher, parent, and child. The second, held in November is a progress report of activity and behavior. During the first days of school a behavior sheet is kept. The heading is "_____ may pursue mistaken goals in the following ways when discouraged." Below is a check list consisting of active and passive misbehavior. During the first months the teacher closely observes behavior and notes evidence of growing social interest. The second record sheet is one of activities. This is divided into (a) Individual, parallel, and group activities. (b) Directed and free play activities. (c) Weeks of the year. This is done so that one can easily follow the progress as evidenced in group participation or independent decision-making.

The teacher is trained to present the child's strength to the parents. She may make suggestions about how we deal with misbehavior at school, depending on the parents' receptiveness. Occasionally, the teacher may meet strong resistance from a parent. In cases such as these we feel it is much more important to keep the child in an encouraging school atmosphere than to give unwanted advice and risk losing him. Any expression of reproach or blame is avoided. Our aim is to provide an atmosphere conducive to honest exchange of information and mutual aid. If a parent desires extra counseling or information he is referred to the Family Education Center or to a parent study group.

I'd like to share a few of my personal experiences in encouragement with you. David was an adorable blonde, blue eyed, dimpled only child "cherub" who came to us when he was just three. He was very special, his mother's "doll." He spoke in a loud shrill baby talk and demanded his own way. One day I could see that the children were very annoyed by this. This is how our conversation went:

T. David, sit here for a minute and see if you can think of something to do about this problem we have. It really seems to bother the boys and girls when you scream at them. (In a minute I went back.)

D. I won't do it any more.

T. I wasn't really interested in having you promise me, David, I thought maybe you could think of something else to do.

D. (After a minute.) I could shut my mouth.

T. That might please some people, but would you be happy with that? Try and see if you could find something where everyone would be happy. (Two or three minutes pass.)

D. (Coming up and whispering in my ear) I could talk softly!

And having decided it for himself, he did just that, most of the time thereafter. He was given the feeling of faith and trust, that the teacher really believed that he could find a solution. Someone really listened to him. There was no superior-inferior relationship of judgment or punishment. David experienced "doing" rather than "being done for."

Jennifer was the third child in a family of three girls and a baby boy. She was important, she thought, only when she could elevate herself or keep others busy by "tattling." A similar procedure to that used with David helped Jennifer grow. Responses like, "What do you think you could do?" and "I'm sure you could take care of that," gave her the respect due a person who is capable of dealing with her fellow students. She soon began to believe this herself and the tattling stopped.

Matthew was diagnosed "hyperactive." His mother left him at the door with, "If he's bad, you have my permission to spank him." He had been asked to leave another pre-school. His constant destruction of property and endless motion had defeated all concerned. During a talk with him one day I said, "I bet it's very hard to do all the things people want you to do." The tears rolled down his cheeks. With a child like this our first move is to point out any positive acts we see, and they are often extremely hard to find. When he put on his coat, a comment such as, "You did that all by yourself," could help start him in a positive direction. A gentle touch as we passed each other let him know he could be "liked." When he came to us he was convinced that he was all "bad," that he only counted when he hurt others. He soon learned what

kind of behavior was acceptable to the group. His negative behavior was ignored by the teachers. He found that he could feel important through being useful. When he realized that there was hope, he began to change.

Diane was a physically handicapped child from a broken home. She was two years and six months when she came to us. Her mother was devoting her life to “making it up to her.” Diane would not speak. Her mother said, “You’ll have to carry her or hold her hand.” We decided to treat her exactly the same as we did the other children. She observed us for two days. Gradually, we led her from activity to activity, including her in the group. Each day there seemed to be a new breakthrough. She realized that the “service” was at an end. First, she began to drink her juice and eat with us. Next, she came to the box for her musical instrument. Then, she came by herself to the craft table. The biggest thrill of all was the day I started out to the playground as she stood, holding her coat, looking pitiful and helpless. As I opened the door and she saw that I was going and she wasn’t ready, a loud word shattered the stillness — the first one we’d heard, “Tuites!”

We feel there are important consequences of this type of program at the preschool level, that affect not only the children but also the community as a whole. Certainly, the first and most important is the realization of our goal of seeing more self-confident, self-reliant children at an age when they are forming concepts about themselves and life that they will hold for many years to come. Problems such as fears, aggressiveness, lying, stealing, shyness, and destructive behavior are all dealt with and show dramatic improvement since the child’s life style has not yet become inflexible or camouflaged by the many safe-guarding devices which individuals use in later years.

There are also important consequences that facilitate a movement toward a more therapeutic type of community.

Parents observing this change of behavior in their children become interested in applying these methods in the home, thus providing the child with more exposure to encouragement.

Parents decide to study further and many eventually teach others these principles in study groups and affiliation with the Family Education Center.

Parents who are taking courses at local colleges relate their success experiences to their professors and, as a result, our teachers are asked to give talks to child development and psychology classes at the college level.

Local high schools send students taking child development classes to observe at our school.

Teachers who hear about our program through nursery-kindergarten associations or the Family Education Center come and observe and begin to implement these methods in their schools.

In conclusion, I would like to offer two recommendations:

First, that concerned groups such as Family Education Centers across the country seriously consider starting pre-schools with programs similar to those discussed in this paper, and

Second, that our research be expanded to include long term follow ups on children, who have had this type of pre-school training, through their primary and secondary school years.

If the results show that the end products are more self-confident, self-reliant, courageous young adults, then our efforts have been worthwhile.

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