

LAY MENTAL HEALTH ACTION IN A COMMUNITY¹

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A significant new influence on the mental well-being of parents in Delaware has developed in the last few years. Ordinary parents of ordinary children are learning effective techniques for training and development. Families are learning that they can live together in harmony, and parents are learning that they can enjoy their children. This new influence has come about without professional participation; a combination of three events had led to it: (a) the formation of a new organization, Associates for Study and Action, in 1963; (b) the publication of a new book, *Children: the challenge* (4) in 1964; (c) the adoption by the National Education Association (NEA) of the principles of the above book, followed by their publication of a film strip to illustrate it, and a condensation of it in pamphlet form (5) in 1965.

ASSOCIATES FOR STUDY AND ACTION

Several years ago Dr. Rudolf Dreikurs was brought to Delaware for lectures and counseling sessions under the auspices of a subcommittee of the Department of Public Instruction studying the social and emotional needs of children in Delaware schools. His visits sparked intense interest in several members of this committee. When its job was completed in 1963, these people worked together to form a continuing organization, the bylaws of which state:

The objective of Associates for Study and Action (ASA) shall be to promote mental health in Delaware through emphasis on the prevention of behavioral problems. We believe that such prevention depends upon the quality of relationships among adults and among children and adults. This group seeks to function as a source for new ideas for existing institutions and agencies devoted to education and the promotion of mental health as well as to serve as a catalyst for action. To prepare themselves to meet the objective, the members recognize the prior need for self-education, to be effected by personal and group study with emphasis on Individual Psychology.

It is important to note that the above objectives stress *prevention* of behavioral problems.

STUDY GROUPS

The publication of *Children: the challenge*, by Rudolf Dreikurs, M.D., and Vicki Soltz, R.N. (4), gave parents a useful textbook. It has taken away the mystery of children's ordinary misbehavior

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and, most importantly, has given parents a basic understanding of what they can do to change the misbehavior into constructive, cooperative behavior. Although based on sound psychological principles, the book is easily comprehended by the average person; the many examples in the book are all drawn from real life and so are readily grasped and related to the reader's experiences.

When the NEA adopted the principles of this book, and produced the film strip and parents' pamphlet (5), they provided program material for local Parent-Teacher Association meetings. Invariably, when an audience sees the film strip and discusses it, many parents want to pursue the subject further, and study groups have formed. Leaders have been drawn initially from the membership of ASA; graduates of a study group are then recruited for leading a group the following year. In the last four years, over 400 parents have participated in this group study and discussion. That means that about 900 human beings have been involved in looking at the direction of their lives.

A typical study group involves about a dozen parents. They discuss the chapters in the text, making sure they understand what is meant by the many Adlerian concepts as presented by Dreikurs and Soltz—inferiority feelings, family constellation, equality, authoritarian vs. democratic milieu, mutual respect, choice, etc. Especially useful to the parents is the new understanding of encouragement vs. discouragement. The knowledge that a misbehaving child is a discouraged child gives impetus to learning the mistaken goals of misbehavior which, in turn, gives the parents definite guideposts for what they can do in their own behavior to change that of the child.

INFLUENCE AND ACTION

Parents learn to cope with many of the fretful aspects of family living. The objective of preventing behavior problems is thus fulfilled. Therapy, per se, is not intended; it is recognized that therapy in depth is a responsibility for professionals. However, the group discussions have frequently been therapeutic; definite changes in goals and interactions have taken place. The group usually becomes a cohesive unit; members bolster and guide each other with resulting group therapy. There is much evidence that this group participation changes the lives of most of the parents and their families.

At the last session of each group, an evaluation questionnaire asks: "In what ways have you found your family living has changed?"

Typical responses are:

My whole attitude has changed; I am far more relaxed with my children (and husband also) and our home is a much happier one.—There is a more harmonious atmosphere in the home; children are cooperating much better; I feel more at ease with them.—I personally have felt more confident and secure in my relations with my girls; my husband has felt there is a great improvement in family harmony, and I agree there has been some.—I'm not quite as demanding; I listen; I don't yell as much; I have not hit my children.—I am better able to cope with the children's fighting; it's easier to get them to do things around the house.—My husband said just last night that he now *enjoys* coming home from work.—The family is happier; we are working together as a unit.

The ASA influences the community in two further ways—through group action and through the example of individual members. (a) Other study groups have been formed to study marriage, using another book by Dreikurs as text (3), and Adlerian fundamentals, using the books edited by the Ansbachers (1, 2). The special problems of teen-agers have been discussed with the young people themselves. A research project is under way to measure the combined effect on a preschool child of parents in a study group and an Adlerian teacher. The ASA has learned that, as a lay organization, we can have little influence on the thinking of the professional educators until such demonstrations (or parental pressures in quantity) are made. (b) Meanwhile, the ASA believes that "planting seeds" is the most important contribution that nonprofessionals can make. Most importantly therefore, our individual members are setting examples of effective purpose and action which are being noticed favorably. For instance, we are now represented in Head Start, in several kindergartens, in an elementary school (the principal and guidance counselor), in medical practice (an obstetrician), and in job situations of many types. In each of these cases, others are noticing and asking: "Why is your action so effective?"

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