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THE MENTAL HEALTH APPROACH
with
PREADOLESCENTS

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

During the past fifteen years as a sixth and seventh grade teacher, I have become increasingly aware of the problems of preadolescent children. The girls in particular, who mature at a faster rate than the boys, seem to have the greater difficulty in making satisfactory adjustments.

With this fact in mind I have set up the following problem for myself in an effort to clarify it in my own mind and analyze it in an effort to determine what can be done to help these youngsters: How can I as a sixth grade teacher help my children to cope more successfully with the problems of preadolescence which they face, and to make better adjustments to their physical, mental, social, and emotional growth?

Since the problem is a universal one, and since modern educators, both national and international, are recognizing the fact that learning is complex and involves the development of the potentials of the whole individual and an integration of the personality, a good sound mental health program in the schools can be the basis for maximum growth in all areas of development.

The following quotations reflect some of the present-day thinking with respect to the role of the school, the teacher, and the mental health program.

One of the unique features of American schools is the willingness of their classroom teachers to look upon students as individuals. Because each individual has specific needs and problems, schools feel a responsibility to minister to these needs and to help in the solution of those problems. They recognize that their obligation includes far more than the mere teaching of subject-matter. Schools are preparing children to live in America and to assume their full share of responsibility for the perpetuation of the democratic ideal. This implies that boys and girls must be helped to develop healthy bodies, educated minds, and self-disciplined, self-reliant, and socially-minded personalities. They must be helped to adjust to happy and successful living. ¹

The school can contribute fully to the healthy personality of its pupils only if teachers genuinely like and accept children, like the teaching relationship, and are equipped to guide and support the young as they grow and learn. ²

For those who have recognized that learning is complex, that attitudes and ways of life are learned along with knowledge and skills, the mental hygiene approach has provided a firmer grasp on the wholeness of the person--physical, emotional, social, intellectual, spiritual--and a new conception of the integration of the personality. ³

¹"Health in Schools," Twentieth Yearbook (Washington, D. C.: American Association of School Administrators, revised ed. 1951) p. 11.

²"A Healthy Personality for Every Child," A Fact-Finding Digest (Washington, D. C.: Health Publications Institute, Incorporated, 1951) p. 120.

³"A Healthy Personality for Every Child," A Fact-Finding Digest (Washington, D. C.: Health Publications Institute, 1951) p. 104.

Mental hygiene is the condition which results when the factors for growth are favorable for reasonably achieving maximum potentials. Physical, mental, and emotional growth and all aspects of development are involved, not only as they contribute singly but as they become integrated into a unified whole which characterizes individual behavior. Stated in still simpler terms, good mental health occurs when all aspects of growth are given proper encouragement and facilitation for progressing toward maximum levels. Poor mental hygiene occurs when the influences for maximum growth are not present. Such a definition is practical only to a certain point. It assumes a normal inheritance and a normal environmental encouragement. Some children as we well-know may reach their maximum potentials and yet not achieve a satisfactory mental hygiene status. Let us suppose that such a child may be unusually short. Shortness of stature may be his congenital heritage. Thus he achieves his growth potential in this phase of development but because other children are so much bigger he may feel inferior and finally insecure and rebellious. This child, then, demonstrates an unsatisfactory mental hygiene condition. Treatment involves for him not an "enriching" of the environment but help in solving the problem of adjusting to his limitations. In a sense the problem of limitations and of helping individuals to adjust to them is what is most often referred to as mental hygiene activity. It should be regarded, however, as a secondary, rather than a primary, responsibility of those working in this field. The assumption is twofold: (1) that for many individuals all the teacher and parent need do is provide the best facilities for all kinds of growth and development; (2) that those whose environmental stimuli are limited or hindering need a special type of guidance and help pointed directly toward the development of attitudes and adjustments to these attitudes.

In spite of the fact that parents are scarcely ever critical of schools that fail to function in this area of well-being, it is a legitimate responsibility of the school. This requires training which enables all teachers to direct growth in such a way as to avoid aggravation of simple problems present throughout the developmental pattern of all children, to give each child with more complex problems the opportunity to resolve his conflicts, to adjust to the group, and to provide satisfactory experiences and socially desirable relationships with other children. 4

⁴Cecil V. Millard, Child Growth and Development in the Elementary School Years (Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1951) pp. 448-449.

Since a basic aim in education today is to develop the potentialities of each individual child to the greatest possible degree in every area, it is very important for every sincere, conscientious teacher with this goal in mind to provide a healthful, happy, pleasant and friendly atmosphere conducive to good learning situations. It is essential that each child develop a feeling of belonging to the group, of responsibility toward it, and a knowledge that he is a worthwhile, contributing, respected, and an accepted member of it.

With this aim in mind this paper attempts to offer some definite concrete helps and suggestions for getting the school year off to a good beginning and maintaining an atmosphere conducive to good learning in the classroom at all times.