

# FOCUS ON EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN

## FACILITATING EDUCATIONAL PROGRESS BY IMPROVING PARENT CONFERENCES

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### PARENT TRAINING AND COUNSELING

Parents have been recognized as viable forces in the educational development of their children, but often the acknowledgment of their influence has been negative. Parents have been used as convenient scapegoats for the lack of success, rather than as facilitators for successful accomplishment, on the part of their children. Parents have not been able to escape the heredity vs. environment issue that is prominent in psychological literature. They are vilified or deified by proponents of either side of the issue depending upon the performance of their children.

In a success-oriented society such as the North American community, the excitement accompanying the birth of a child quickly can turn to dismay if the child is born handicapped. As Wolfensberger and Kurtz (1969) point out.

The rearing of children is one of the most significant and demanding tasks most of us confront in our lifetime. Yet, paradoxically, this is a task for which the average citizen has received little or no formal preparation. Even when the child has an unimpaired growth potential, and even where parents are highly intelligent, well-educated, and possessed of abundant material resources, child rearing is typically fraught with error, and frequently marked by failure. How much more problematic the situation becomes when the child is handicapped! (pp. 517-518)

The parental reactions of mourning, denial, guilt, rejection, shame, and frustration as discussed by various authors (Buscaglia, 1971; Love, 1970; Ross, 1964) are neither unexpected nor surprising. The gap between the real situation and the ideal that was expected is frequently so large that initial efforts to cope with the handicapping situation necessitate outside help. Yet, where to turn for assistance can be perplexing. The family doctor, a minister, a psychologist, a psychiatrist, and a social worker represent some of the helping professionals that parents initially may come in contact with upon the discovery that their child is exceptional. As the child becomes older, other professionals may become involved in providing guidance for parents such as physical therapists, nurses, occupational therapists, speech therapists, audiologists, and school personnel, depending upon the nature of the handicap. It is conceivable that parents may be involved with a number of professional aides at the same period of time, all recommending various treatment procedures. In some cases the parents are faced with essentially no service when they reside far from large communities, while in other instances they may be overwhelmed by a panorama of services.

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It is not the purpose of this paper to focus on the services or programs provided for parents by the various service personnel listed above, but rather to focus on programs for parents more clearly related to the educational environment.

Basically, there are two types of conferences that involve teachers and parents—information-sharing conferences, and problem-solving conferences. These are differentiated more by the stated purpose for the conference than by the actual content. In other words, the teacher and parents who come together to share information may find that a problem exists which can best be resolved by mutual action. On the other hand, a conference may be called by either the parents or teacher in which the successful resolution of a problem involves a program of information sharing. In either case the success or failure of the conference rests largely with the teacher, her preparation for the conferences and her techniques for problem solving.

It would be desirable if all teachers had the personal characteristics of "accurate empathy, nonpossessive warmth and therapeutic genuineness" which Truax and Wargo (1966) associate with successful psychotherapists. While one recognizes these traits in a teacher and appreciates them, the behavioral components which compose the traits may be difficult to teach. On the other hand, there are organizational procedures, techniques and basic principles that teachers can follow which will enhance the parent-teacher relationship and facilitate both types of conferences.

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## INFORMATION-SHARING CONFERENCES

Under the general category of information-sharing conferences are the parent-teacher contacts that include an intake conference, an initial conference and group meetings. The rapport that is established in these contacts sets the stage for the quality of further interactions.

Beginning teachers often feel a great deal of uneasiness about parent conferences. "What if the parent questions what I'm doing for her child?" "What do I do with a crying parent, an angry parent, or one that is resentful of having to attend the session?" Parents, on the other hand, often come to the conferences with similar feelings. They recognize that the teacher holds in her hands strong consequences which can be used for or against the child. Because the teacher is professional, she should be the one to set the tone for the conference, structuring the context and placing the parent at ease.

### Intake and Initial Conferences

The intake conference and the initial conference may be the same in many instances. In some school districts, the special education teacher has not been included in the intake conference. Her first contact is with the child when he appears in her classroom. This is unfortunate. When the decision is made for the child to be admitted to a special education program, both parents and teacher would be able to benefit from face-to-face contact. The teacher would be able to see the parents' concern and hear the condition of placement. The parents would be able to visit with the teacher and learn something of the educational objectives for the class.

Duncan and Fitzgerald (1969) investigated the effects of establishing a parent-counselor relationship prior to the child's entrance into junior high school and looked at such variables as (1) average daily attendance, (2) schedule changes, (3) dropouts, (4) disciplinary referrals, (5) grade point average, (6) overt parental interest and (7) communication between parent and child. Duncan and Fitzgerald found that the early contact group showed significantly greater parental contact with the school, better attendance, higher grade point average, lower dropout rate, and fewer disciplinary referrals than the group who did not have conferences prior to school.

If the teacher is making the initial contact, it is important for her to have in mind an outline of the kind of information she would like to have to help her work with the child and his parents (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

**Initial Interview Guide: Getting a Picture of the Child**

- A. Present Status
  - 1. Age
  - 2. Sex
  - 3. Grade; class; last year's teacher's name
- B. Physical appearance and history
  - 1. General impression made by child
  - 2. Obvious physical strengths and limitations
  - 3. General mannerisms, appearance, etc.
- C. Educational Status
  - 1. Present school achievement; kind of work; any samples of work
  - 2. Promotions; accelerations, retardations; causes
  - 3. Relations with individual teachers—present and past
  - 4. Books, etc. used in last educational setting
  - 5. Tests, individual or group, types of measures used
- D. Personal Traits
  - 1. Personality—general statement
  - 2. Attitudes toward home, friends, self, family, other students, school
  - 3. Hobbies, play life, leisure time activities
  - 4. Educational and vocational goals
  - 5. Marked likes and dislikes—foods, toys, TV programs, etc.
- E. Home and Family
  - 1. Individuals in the home
  - 2. Socioeconomic level
  - 3. Relation with home—favorite brothers/sisters, parent/other relative
  - 4. Regular chores; pets, etc.
  - 5. Home cooperation
  - 6. Record at social agencies
- F. Work Experience
  - 1. Part-time jobs (summer, after school)
  - 2. Attitude toward work, etc.
- G. Additional Information Needed
  - 1. Sending school
  - 2. Outside agencies
  - 3. Private sources, doctor, mental health center, etc. (need release forms)
  - 4. Health information

Not all of the information needs to be covered verbally. Some of it can be obtained by observation. There is nothing wrong with taking notes during the conference. Other professionals do, and it will show the parents that the teacher considers the information valuable in her work with the child.

Any information regarding physical limitations of the child which would suggest preferential seating or special materials or activities should be noted. Special attention should be paid to past educational experiences of the child, i.e., former teacher reports and observation, any special testing, samples of work, etc. Hobbies, preferred activities, likes and dislikes may furnish the teacher with clues as to potential reinforcers in the classroom, as well as planning programs between school and home. As one explores the family constellations, it is important to find out if there is a language other than English spoken in the home and to what extent it is spoken. If a second language is the predominant language in the home, it could have a pronounced effect on any standardized testing that had been carried out. Questions about socioeconomic level of the family may center around books, magazines, newspapers, radio and TV available to the child and family rather than the level of income. In this instance, the teacher is interested in the supplementary materials available for learning and how the family spends their money rather than the quantity of money available.

Since these conferences are considered information-sharing conferences, the teacher should be prepared to share information that she has available with the parents. Many teachers have found it valuable to prepare a handbook for parents, to be given to parents at the initial meeting. Usually the handbook will include the teacher's name, persons to contact concerning special problems, and a description of the class. The goals and objectives for the students help the parent understand *what* the teacher is trying to accomplish. A description of the structure of the classroom helps the parents understand *how* the teacher is going to accomplish her objectives. Any special procedures should be explained, such as time-out procedures, study carrels, lunch or dismissal that is contingent upon successful completion of work, etc. The fewer surprises that parents have in store for them during the year, the more productive later conferences can be.

Some teachers have found it valuable to include in the handbook sections on tips to parents, activities or management practices. Included might be a suggested list of books which parents might find helpful, such as *Parents Are Teachers* (Becker, 1971); *How To Parent* (Dodson, 1970); *Living with Children: New Methods for Parents & Teachers*

(Patterson & Gullion, 1968); and *You Can Help Your Child Improve Study & Homework Behaviors* (Zifferblatt, 1970). How detailed these sections will be is dependent upon the teacher's knowledge of the parents of the children in her classroom.

The handbook may be very inclusive (general school policies, special community agencies, vacations, dates of regularly scheduled meetings, dates of PTA meetings, special release forms for information and field trips, etc.) or merely a brief description covering the high points. At the very least, it does place something in the parents' hands that demonstrates the teacher's willingness to share as well as receive information.

### Grade-Reporting Conferences

Many school districts require conferences at the elementary school level to discuss pupil progress. Usually the time allotment for this type of conference is relatively short, often twenty to thirty minutes. Because of the time limits set for a progress-reporting conference, it is of utmost importance for the teacher to be well prepared. It is seldom the proper time for a problem-solving conference. If a problem-solving conference is indicated, schedule it for a later date, when time is available to explore possible strategies for dealing with the problem.

In preparing for a grade-reporting conference, the teacher should briefly review the period from the past conference to the present one for which she is preparing. Look over the records, graphs, and samples of work that have been accumulated. Select with care specific examples of the child's work to illustrate points that need to be made during the conference. A folder of all the child's work (while of interest to parents) is probably too much for the parents to assimilate in a short conference and may detract from the specific points that the teacher wants to make.

Generally it is best to show areas of growth first and then areas where additional concentration must take place. If one starts with deficiencies, the parents may never "hear" the areas of progress. As the deficient areas are brought up in the conference by the teacher, she should present the plan she has for remediation, i.e., "I'm going to try Julie on the 'Language Master' for the next two weeks to see if it will help her spelling." Secondly, when social behaviors are isolated as target areas it is important to describe them in behavioral terms followed by the intervention program the teacher has prepared. For instance, instead of saying, "Jimmy is out of his seat all of the time," the teacher might say, "Jimmy is out of his seat on

the average of ten times an hour. I'm going to show him the graph that I'm keeping and see if he can't try to reduce the number of times during this next week." The behavioral statements provide the parents with specific knowledge and some assurance that the teacher is doing her job in a thoughtful, scientific manner. It may be wise at this point to set a date for a later conference to be conducted by phone or in person. Parents will appreciate some indication in the near future of whether the program outlined by the teacher is successful.

During the grade-reporting conference, it is desirable to elicit from the parents any questions that they would like answered about academic progress. Since special education classes are usually smaller than ordinary ones, there should be more opportunity to provide these parents with a greater amount of information. Daily or weekly progress reports may be helpful. These will be discussed in greater detail in the section on problem-solving conferences.

### Group Conferences

During the course of the school year, school personnel have information which can be shared best with parents in a group setting. These meetings should not be construed as group therapy sessions but to impart specific information to parents. Topics for these meetings might include:

1. An orientation to special education.
2. Special testing programs.
3. An explanation of Adjunctive Therapies (physical and occupational therapy, speech therapy, psychological or psychiatric services, social work services, nursing services, etc.).
4. Occupational information (for older children).
5. Behavioral management techniques.
6. Christmas suggestions for special education children.
7. Summer programs available for special education children.
8. Recreational activities, etc.

These meetings should be informative, and some type of handout material should be made available to parents. Usually parents do not come to a meeting prepared to take notes; therefore, having available handouts, pencils, etc. will enhance the possibility of getting the information in the parents' hands.

Probably the best public relations program the school community has at its disposal is a well organized and professionally conducted program of information-sharing conferences. Parents will view them as a joint effort involving the significant adults in their children's lives,

established for the sole purpose of facilitating the education growth of their children. Through careful planning the teacher can make information-sharing conferences an event that the adults look forward to, and these conferences can serve as a firm foundation for conferences which may be regarded as problem-solving.

### PROBLEM-SOLVING CONFERENCES

Problem-solving conferences can be an exciting cooperative venture between parents and professionals. Although both sets of individuals may approach the meeting with trepidation, the teacher can do a great deal to set the tone for a productive meeting or series of meetings. There are a number of considerations for the teacher to keep in mind in the successful resolution of what may be considered a problem situation. Some of the points that she might consider are (1) the location of the problem, (2) problem identification and pre-planning, (3) the timing of conferences, (4) the data needs of the parent, (5) the reinforcement needs of parents, and (6) the provision for a demonstration of techniques.

#### Who Has the Problem?

If one adheres to an environmentalist point of view which implies that the environment controls the behavior of an individual, then it is conceivable that the behavior emitted by the child in the classroom may be different than his behavior at home. Parents sometimes are surprised that their son, who will not pick up his clothes at home, offered to straighten the chairs in the classroom. The teacher who has a problem settling the class to practice for the all-school program is often pleased to see the event go smoothly. Therefore, when the teacher perceives a problem of either social or academic behavior, she should not assume that the same problem occurs in the home. When the teacher informs the parents that their child is acting out in the classroom, one should not be surprised if the parents regard the deviant behavior as the teacher's problem—because essentially it is.

When a behavioral problem occurs at school which the teacher has not been able to successfully cope with using traditional methods, the purpose of a parent-teacher conference may be to define the type and magnitude of the problem and to solicit help from the parents in the solution of the problem. It would be incorrect to assume that the behavior occurs with equal magnitude across environments or that it is caused by the parents. The teacher should be prepared to describe the problem with concrete data, to solicit suggestions from the parents for

control techniques, and to outline a program that may require parental support or involvement.

### Problem Identification and Pre-planning

Often during the course of the school year there are a select number of students who display excesses or deficits of behavior and who have not responded to conventional approaches of behavior modification. In addition, quite often each of the pupils has a number of behaviors which need specific attention.

If the parents are to be involved in an intervention program, the following steps should facilitate the conference:

1. Select the behaviors that are of concern by listing a number of observable behaviors or having the child select his own targets (Kroth, 1972).
2. Define the behaviors in observable terms so that they can be accurately measured.
3. Rank the behaviors according to priority. It is usually advantageous to rank academic behaviors ahead of social behaviors, because the successful modification of a deficiency in academics will often alleviate excessive social behaviors.
4. From the priority ranked list of behaviors, put a P (for parent) next to those you want to work on with the parents and a T (for teacher) next to those you feel you need to work on alone.
5. Keep an accurate record of the frequency, percent, duration or rate of occurrence of the selected behavior(s) for a week.
6. Graph the data which have been collected to have a visual record to present to the parents.
7. Prepare an outline of a plan for intervention of what you are to do and what the parents are to do. This plan, of course, is subject to change depending upon what the parents can do or are willing to do.

The care that is taken by the teacher in identifying the problems that she feels are solvable through joint action can reduce the amount of random activity surrounding the parent-teacher conference. The specificity of the behavior in terms of frequency, etc., and the preparation of a graphic presentation indicates to the parents that the teacher has taken a methodical approach to the problem and, therefore, the foundation is established for a systematic remediation program.

### Timing Conferences

The parents of exceptional children, particularly those whose children have been identified as emotionally disturbed or learning disabled, often have had conferences

with school personnel dealing with problematic situations. In some instances, the major contacts between educators and parents have been traumatic. In order to set the stage for a positive working relationship, holding conferences prior to entry as suggested by Duncan and Fitzgerald (1969) seems desirable.

The timing of conferences can be crucial to the working relationship between parents and educator. If the teacher is attempting to work with the parents on a specific behavior, it is usually desirable to have regularly scheduled conferences as close as a week apart. The first or second conference can be used to identify the specific target or behavior and to develop techniques for measuring the behavior. When a baseline has been established, the teacher can begin to develop, with the parents' input, the type of consequences that will be effective to change the behavior. The regularly scheduled conferences provide the teacher with opportunities for careful monitoring of the procedures and give the teacher an opportunity to reinforce the parents at regularly scheduled intervals (fixed interval schedule) which should insure the building of the new behavior on the part of both child and parent. As the new behavior becomes established, the teacher and parent may schedule conferences further apart.

Another advantage of having regularly scheduled conferences is to eliminate the "crisis conference." From a behavioral point of view, holding a conference immediately following a crisis may reinforce crisis type behavior on the part of the pupil. In a classroom at the Children's Rehabilitation Unit (CRU) at the University of Kansas, a particular boy was being sent home on the average of once every two weeks for extremely disruptive behavior. There was usually a conference with the parents to discuss the event and to make plans to deal with the behavior. On occasion, both parents and teacher expressed dissatisfaction with the conferences. It was decided to hold regularly scheduled conferences instead of scheduling around an event. During these conferences, methods for handling excessive behavior at school and at home were discussed. Because children in the classroom were programmed for high degrees of success, both academically and socially, most of the discussions in the conferences centered around how well the boy was doing and the improvement (shown graphically) that he was making from day to day. The conferences became more pleasant and profitable. It was observed that there were considerably fewer disruptive episodes that resulted in the boy's being sent home before the end of the day. The parents and the teacher became a team with a common goal, and the boy could no longer enjoy the occurrences of parents and

teacher in conflict. A greater consistency between management procedures at home and school resulted in a greater consistency in productive behavior at school during the ensuing months.

Another consideration in the timing of the conferences should be the time of day for the conference. If the purpose of the conference is merely to share data and consider slight modification procedures, then an open-ended time slot may hinder that objective. One set of parents tended to take every conference as an opportunity to discuss the other children in the family as well as the boy in the special class. While a discussion of the family dynamics was deemed desirable, the proper time for this was considered to be at a regularly scheduled group meeting of parents which was conducted by a social worker. In order to facilitate the data-sharing conference, it was decided to hold the conference thirty minutes before school began in the morning. The father needed to go on to work, and the teacher needed to go to class. Business was conducted in a precise and orderly fashion, and both teacher and parents were pleased with the progress.

One should consider the potentially positive effects of setting a limit on the number of conferences in a series. Various therapists have experimented with setting temporary termination dates to increase the pressure on the patient to take over his own management (Alexander & Selesnick, 1966; Shlien, Mosak, & Dreikurs, 1962). In establishing a rationale for the structure Shlien, Mosak, & Dreikurs (1962) say:

In essence, the theory is that time limits place the emphasis where it belongs; on quality and process, rather than on quantity. Times does not heal because it cannot, only activity can heal; and the more activity, the shorter time required. This theory holds that limits, in effect, increase energy, choice, wisdom, and courage, and so they heighten the essential process while they reduce the largely unessential time. (p. 31)

#### Parents Need Data

Teachers sometimes comment on the ineffectiveness of report cards as behavior change agents. They point out the similarity of the grade point average from one marking period to the next.

One of the problems with the use of grade cards as modifiers is the long time span between the issuances of the reporting forms. In a sense, this strategy of reporting to parents may be considered as a fixed interval of reinforcement. In an attempt to alter the observed pattern of behavior associated with traditional home-school reports, various investigators have experimented with daily report card systems (Edlund, 1969; Fuller, 1971; Kroth, Whelan, and Stables, 1970; Simonson, 1972).

Edlund (1969) described, in some detail, procedures for setting up a daily home-school communication list. Usually the teacher and parents establish in a conference a set number of social and academic behaviors to be communicated on a daily basis. They establish the nature of the symbols (percentages, check marks, Smiling Sams, letter grades) that will be recorded on a form, signed by the teacher, and conveyed by the child. In order to insure that the cards are received at home, a system (phone calls or consequences) is established to ensure that the card is brought home. At this point, teacher and parents usually agree on some reward system to be administered at home for improved performances at school.

When the school personnel informs parents of a problem relating to an excess or deficit of behavior on their child's part, some action will probably take place. This is often true even when teachers tell the parents not to concern themselves with the particular problem. For example, in the early grades, parents may be informed that their child is having problems with reading and at the same time are instructed not to do anything about it. Rare are the parents who can ignore a problem involving their child. When a problem area has been pinpointed, it is often far better to include the parents in plans for remediation. In the daily data system, they are provided with an active role. They can become a positive reinforcer for the child's growth. They have a specific plan of action and a key role, whereas if they are left alone they may punish the child or require long hours of nonproductive study time.

Edlund (1969) points out that "it is far more effective to arrange for teachers and parents to become directly involved in managing the child's behavioral learning progress than to simply tell them how behavior is learned" (p. 127). In order to effect change in the classroom, though, parents need data. They cannot rely on the child's verbal report.

### Parents Need Reinforcement

Improved study habits, academic behavior, and social behavior on the part of the child are usually contingent upon reinforcement from parents. The parents must alter their schedule in such a way to insure that consistent rewards follow improved behavior. What guarantees that the parents will continue to maintain these new behavioral patterns after the initial program has been laid out?

Edlund (1969) states, "When a teacher or a parent rewards a child's desirable behavior, and that behavior is maintained, the teacher or the parent is, in turn, rewarded" (p. 127). While it is possible that behavioral change on the

part of the child will be rewarding enough to maintain the reorganized patterns of behavior by parents, it is also a distinct possibility that the parents will revert to old familiar patterns of behavior when it appears that their problem has been solved. Adults have reinforcing events in their own world which may be incompatible with dispensing rewards to their child and providing the structure that is indicated. The cocktail hour, the bridge club, TV programs, or a good book may compete with listening to a child read, watching a child's graph go up, and providing milk and cookies after study time. In fact, the reordering of priorities may occur quite quickly as the child shows progress.

The teacher is probably well advised to provide some sort of systematic reinforcement to parents for successfully carrying out a planned program. The most common forms of providing reinforcement are letters and phone calls. However, some innovative teachers take the common approaches and make them unusual. One of the teachers in the Curriculum of Positive Emphasis (COPE) project in the Lincoln, Nebraska Public Schools had a child in a class for behaviorally disturbed children who successfully completed a difficult project. Rather than send a note or call the parents herself, she took the boy to the principal's office with the completed project and asked the principal to call the mother and inform the mother of her son's accomplishment. This procedure was extremely reinforcing to the parents, the child, and the administration. It also served to establish a different relationship between school and home. Often the contacts between school administrators and the parents of children who exhibit behavioral disorders have been precipitated by a crisis. As a result, calls to parents by school personnel may set up negative expectations on the part of parents.

Most parents never receive any personal communication from school other than notices of PTA meetings, quarterly report cards, occasional notices of pending failure or broken rules (smoking, tardiness, etc.) or a call from the nurse if the child is absent. The provision of data such as that mentioned earlier somewhat alleviates the communication void, but it does not solve the need for reinforcement for carrying out a planned program. Nielsen (1972) conducted a study to examine the effects of positive reinforcement on parents of behaviorally disturbed children. Twenty-three students and their parents were selected for the investigation. These children were divided into four groups. The parents of two of the groups were provided with academic activities in spelling and math to aid their children. The parents of the other two groups were provided with recommended games to improve their

children's social behavior. One set of parents in each major group (academic and social) was reinforced periodically by notes, phone calls, and home visits for their children's academic achievement or for playing games with their children. Daily recording of scores in spelling and math and the pre and post scores on the Peterson and Quay Modified Behavior Checklist were used as measuring instruments. The pupils' teachers were the sources for the academic data and the behavioral ratings, and they were uninformed as to which of the parents were being reinforced.

The results of the study were as follows:

1. All six of the children whose parents were reinforced for playing games had improved behavioral rating scores, while only two of the five whose parents were not reinforced improved.
2. All six of the children whose parents were reinforced for academic assistance showed gain in both academic areas with the exception of one child who gained in spelling and maintained his math average. By contrast, only one child in the nonreinforced group improved in both spelling and math. One child decreased in both areas, while the other four children showed an increase in one area and a decrease in the other or maintained the same level.

Nielsen (1972) concluded that:

When targets are clearly specified and the parents are reinforced for working with their children, change takes place. It is not enough merely to identify a deficit and assume that parents will alter their methods of assisting their children at home. Parents, like children, need specific instruction and reinforcement for carrying out these planned programs. Furthermore, the present study indicates that notifying parents of their child's deficits and the failing to provide feedback may actually increase academic and behavioral problems. (p. 36)

To say that parents "ought to want" to change is an irrational idea. Learning to be a reinforcing parent is hard work. As such, it is necessary to provide parents with praise, letters, approval, and other signs of recognition for improved performance. Being a parent, like being a teacher, is a lonely profession. Approval for another significant adult can be highly rewarding.

#### Parents May Need a Demonstration

One does not learn to be a teacher by reading a book or by attending a series of lectures. Although a teacher can pick up some valuable ideas through these methods, usually the teacher is required to go through some form of internship. First there is the observation of children, then the observation of a master teacher, then teaching under supervision and finally the opportunity to teach alone.

Obviously, during this process there is a certain amount of modeling behavior. When situations arise, the cadet teacher tends to try to respond as she saw the master teacher respond.

Parents, on the other hand, do not have the benefits of an internship. Even if they use their own parents as models, the advent of an exceptional child leaves them somewhat unprepared. Therapists with various philosophical orientations have advocated the use of parents in the treatment of children and have included them in the therapy sessions (Guernsey, 1969). In some instances the parents act as passive observers, while, in other instances, therapists encourage the parent to take over the role of "teacher" under guidance.

Guernsey (1969) reported a technique called *filial therapy* in which groups of parents of exceptional children are taught to conduct play sessions through a series of meetings. The beginning sessions are somewhat didactic, leading to an observation of other parents working with their children; then the parents conduct a play session with a child under supervision before they attempt the same procedures at home. The second stage involves having the parents use the techniques at home while having weekly discussion sessions with the group leaders. The final stage is concerned with phasing the parents out of the original parents group as their children reach levels of competence and obtain feelings of confidence.

A similar strategy of taking parents through a step-by-step procedure was used by Russo (1964), except that the skills which the parents learned were based on a behavior modification orientation rather than the Rogerian client-centered orientation. Through a shaping process, the mother observed the therapist interacting with her child; then a three-way interaction evolved, and finally the therapist began to withdraw from active participation in the sessions. A brief conference was held after each session to discuss the progress of the behavioral therapy, and an opportunity was provided for the therapist to reinforce the parent immediately for appropriate behavior.

Straughan (1964) reported a similar study in which the mother observed a therapist working with her child and was then phased into the therapist's role. The mother was reinforced for appropriate behavioral responses and inappropriate responses were ignored. Only five sessions were needed to bring about change in the mother-child relationship.

Not all parents need to go through the process described, and yet the opportunity for providing such a training session should be available to parents. The



following case study reported by Simpson (1971) illustrates the point:

A six year old boy, F, was referred to the CRU for a comprehensive evaluation to determine his functional levels and educational placement possibilities. Along with specific recommendations for educational placement and program, a behavior modification program was recommended to be carried out in the home by the parents to deal with F's negativism. F was described as "headstrong" and "set in his ways."

Negative behavior was operationally defined, and an event-recording procedure was employed to measure the target daily. The procedures were to be carried out in the home. The baseline data was found to be fairly stable, although slightly ascending, with a median occurrence of 23 events a day (see Figure 2). Basic learning theory procedures were explained to the parents, and a two-point program was agreed upon. The parents were to ignore oppositional behavior while rewarding cooperative behavior, and they were to isolate F for 5 minutes following each instance of oppositional behavior.

Oppositional behavior increased for the first two days of the modification program, and the mother reported that F was "uncontrollable." It became almost impossible physically to place F in the time-out room; and while he was there, he was destructive. F and his mother returned to the CRU and a telecoaching device was used whereby the mother wore an ear plug attached to a transistor radio. The teacher stood on one side of a one-way mirror and told the mother specifically when to reinforce, ignore and implement time-out procedures. After a single session, the mother implemented the procedure at home; and the median number of oppositional incidents was reduced to two.

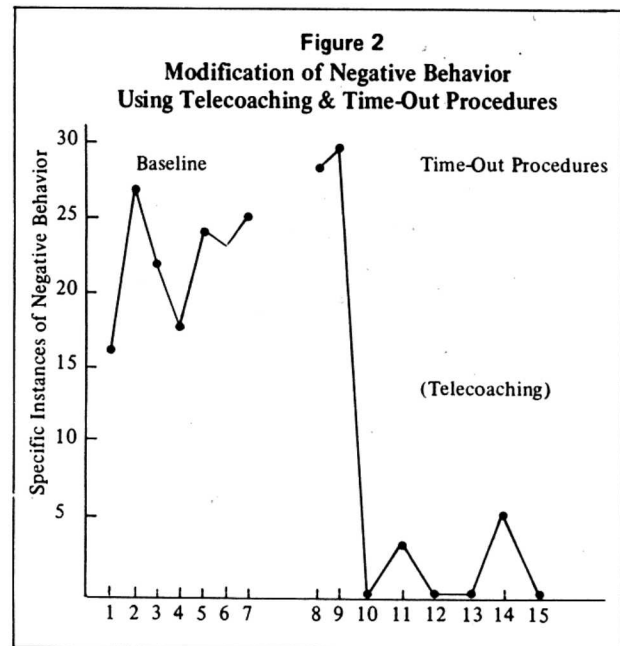
A follow-up conference with the mother a year later indicated that F was maintaining appropriate behavior and that the mother felt comfortable with the procedures, using them when needed.

Fortunately, in the preceding case, the mother called the teacher immediately to let her know the process was not working. One wonders how often parents leave the training session, try out the recommendations at home, find them ineffective, drop them without informing the teacher, and allow the teacher to think that the program was highly effective and to be recommended to the next set of parents.

Sometimes the language which is so familiar to the teacher is unfamiliar to parents. Instructions that seem clear are misinterpreted. The writer remembers one instance in which a parent was told to pinpoint a target and return with a graph a week later. The parent came back with a graph with seven pins stuck on it. Perhaps a demonstration of the instructions would have helped.

### Summary

The education of exceptional children is an exciting task. The teacher who accepts this responsibility should be



well trained in programming for the special needs of her children and knowledgeable in special techniques for modifying behaviors. One area of her training that is sometimes neglected is the acquisition of specialized knowledge pertaining to working with parents.

Parents must be recognized as a powerful force in the success of any education program for children. Through their joint efforts, parents have been influential in gaining national, state, and local legislation in support of special education. Individually, they have contributed to or hindered the progress of their children in the classroom. Teachers who have recognized that parents are educators have found that well-planned conferences serve to facilitate the educational process.

Of the two major types of conferences outlined above, information-sharing conferences are the backbone of the home-school relationships. Initial efforts to establish a procedure for sharing knowledge sets the stage for further problem-solving situations. Teachers who are open about what goes on in their classroom and who share their techniques for change with parents will find it easier to gain information from parents that will help in the education of children. Parents have a right to know what the teacher knows about their children, and the teacher has an obligation to prepare the information in a manner that

insures understanding. If this relationship is properly established, then problem-solving conferences become less traumatic and may be regarded as a joint effort rather than a conflict between what is and what should be in the eyes of the perceiver.

1. It is important in problem-solving conferences to decide who has the problem. Does the discrepancy between the "real" and "ideal" exist both in the classroom and the home, or is it strictly a school problem in which the parents' assistance is requested?
2. The teacher's skill in defining the problem in behavioral terms and preparing information to communicate to parents demonstrates the professional level of the teacher.
3. The teacher needs to consider the timing of the conferences. When conferences are held, the number and the length of the conferences play a part in the success or failure of the problem-solving process.
4. If parents are to become actively involved in the solution of a problem that is school based, then they need data to respond to in order to carry out their part of the program. Plans should be made to supply them with information or feedback from the classroom systematically.
5. Parents need to be reinforced for carrying out a home-school program. Although the area of parents programs has scarcely been researched, the evidence that exists suggests it is very important and should not be neglected.
6. To assume that parents understand their part of the problem-solving venture after a brief conference may be to assume too much. Occasionally, it is helpful to "walk parents through" a process. We all learn by having products and activities demonstrated to us. Industry considers it good salesmanship to show how a process works and education should consider the importance of using demonstrations when working with parents.

The education of children is a full-time job. To neglect the home environment and the influential effects of parents is unprofessional. The assumption that parents do not care is unwarranted. The successful special education teacher is "special" because she uses all resources available to facilitate the educational progress of her children.

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# RESOURCE MATERIALS

*Avaril Wedemeyer and Joyce Cejka*

## DUSO

Developing Understanding of Self and Others is a kit of activities and materials designed to help children grow emotionally and socially. Duso is intended for use by the regular classroom teacher in the kindergarten and the primary grades. It is based on the premise that every child, in the process of growing up, is confronted with normal developmental problems. If he is to be an effective learner and is to further mature into an adequate person with a feeling of self-worth, he must successfully solve these problems.

The DUSO kit which can be carried out with a minimum of preparation provides such a program of experiences and materials.

The total program is organized around eight major unit themes.

- Understanding and Accepting Self
- Understanding Feelings
- Understanding Others
- Understanding Independence
- Understanding Goals and Purposeful Behavior
- Understanding Mastery, Competence and Resourcefulness
- Understanding Emotional Maturity
- Understanding Choices and Consequences

The activities of the program have been designed to achieve three basic goals—learning more words for feeling; learning that feelings, goals and behavior are dynamically related; and learning to talk more freely about feelings, goals and behavior. The activities include role playing, puppetry, group discussion, problem situations, supplementary reading suggestions, music, and art. The children's interest in the program is maintained over a long period of use.

The cost of the complete kit (DUSO D-1R) with 21 seven inch records is \$85.00. The cost of the kit containing

five cassettes is also \$85.00. Component parts may be ordered separately. For further information, contact:

American Guidance Service, Inc.  
 Publisher's Building  
 Circle Pines, Minnesota 55014

## GOLDMAN-LYNCH SOUND AND SYMBOLS DEVELOPMENT KIT

This program is designed to stimulate the production of speech sounds and the recognition of associated visual symbols. Used with children ages 4½-9, it is appropriate in either an individual or group setting. The development kit may be used in speech therapy or speech improvement programs, for early phonics training, and as an introduction to reading.

The program consists of 64 lessons—30-40 minutes each, which vary according to individual group needs. The Goldman-Lynch Sound and Symbols Development Kit is based on the concept that an awareness of speech sounds can best be developed in children through a combination of visual and auditory stimulation. The activities teach children to recognize both visual symbols in a modified alphabet and their associated auditory counterparts. The program also assists youngsters to understand and use the sounds of language in their various relationships in words, sentences, and conceptual speech.

Additional skills and areas include:

1. Auditory and visual discrimination and memory training.
2. Integration of sounds into words and sentences.
3. Building a vocabulary that is common to most reading programs.
4. Language order training (the order of sounds, syllables, words and sentences).
5. Phonic attack skills training.

The cost of the complete Goldman-Lynch Kit is \$117.00. The Goldman-Lynch Workbook not included in the kit is \$1.50. An optional cassette player also not included in kit is \$19.50.

For additional information, contact:

American Guidance Service, Inc.  
 Publishers' Building  
 Circle Pines, Minnesota 55014.

# CLASSROOM FORUM

*Edited by Austin J. Connolly, University of Missouri*

## PROBLEM 22

*I am a new special education teacher. Both my building principal and my curriculum supervisor are urging me to make effective use of community resources. Where and how do I start?*

Since you did not indicate the type or level of the exceptional children in your class, it is difficult to provide a specific response. Therefore, the discussion that follows will be sufficiently general to be applicable in most classroom situations.

The effective use of any resource is predicated on the quality of teacher planning. The teacher should identify *what* she wants to accomplish, *why* she wants to accomplish it, *how* she wants to accomplish it, and lastly, *when* it is to be accomplished. Armed with such information, the teacher is in a good position to communicate her needs and ideas to others.

Any teacher interested in mobilizing community resources must first recognize that it is highly unlikely that they will come to her—although it sometimes happens. Generally, the teacher must take the initiative and make the needs of her class known. In doing so, she will need to exercise good judgment and gain administrative approval when needed.

In making requests the teacher should be as specific as possible when articulating what is needed, what would be involved, and how and when the resource would be used. Generally, teachers will be gratified by the response of most parents, community leaders, service organizations, etc. to requests that reflect careful planning. It is also imperative that the teacher keep the requests consistent with the capability of the resource to provide them.

Let us assume that the teacher is getting ready to conduct a unit on simple home maintenance. A review of her unit plans might indicate the possible use of many

resources not commonly found in the classroom. It may be specific materials or a need for supportive personnel who could demonstrate and explain simple repairs, painting techniques, etc. Once she has identified her needs, the teacher should consider the possible sources within the community, i.e., hardware stores, fix-it shops, grandfathers, parents, etc. Armed with this planning, the teacher should now go to the administrator and seek approval for the community requests she would like to make. Once approved, a note might be sent home with her pupils indicating that a unit will be starting soon on home maintenance. In the note the teacher should indicate the things which are needed, how they will be used, and whether they are to be loaned for the duration of the unit or permanently donated.

Unfortunately, teachers frequently confine the use of community resources to field trips and visiting speakers. However, the possible use of other resources is almost limitless. For instance, you may wish to identify community volunteers to initiate and maintain hobby groups within your class. You might conduct "observation time" walks within the neighborhood similar to your "language time" experiences. You and your class might decide to reverse the procedure and become a resource to the community in such efforts as ecology drives, assisting the elderly, etc.

As your administrators suggested, the community can serve as a valuable extension to your classroom.

## PROBLEM 24

*My class consists of a young educable retarded children, ages 6 to 9. Our daily routine is frequently interrupted by mothers who drop in unexpectd and uninvited. How can I discourage this without squelching their interest?*

All readers are invited to send their solutions to Problem 24. The February 1973 issue will summarize contributions by readers. Complimentary subscriptions will be awarded each month for the best solutions. Send your response to the Editorial Offices, *FOCUS ON EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN*, 6635 East Villanova Place, Denver, Colorado 80222.