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The Parents' Role in Education

by SYLVIA D. NELL

NO SOUND EDUCATOR today subscribes to the outworn dogma that "Parents are biologically necessary but educationally superfluous." The school, although the most important agency for education, is yet regarded as only one part of the "total situation" in which the home, the gang or age group and the community play important roles.

From the revolutionary study of Freud and others has come the recognition of the tremendously important role played by parents in the education and development of children. Particularly is this so in the early years when many of the foundations of human personality are laid. A recent pamphlet published by the British Ministry of Education opened with the following acknowledgement of the function and responsibility of the parent as an educator: "The first school of every child is his home, his mother his first teacher. The education which he has received on his hearth remains with him for the rest of his life, because early influences, as a rule, make the most permanent of all impressions."

It has also become increasingly clear that the school child is influenced by experiences outside school, as well as those in school. These out-of-school experiences may supplement or complement school experiences, or may act to neutralise or negate their effects. One simple example is that of speech habits. No matter how much a school may encourage good speech habits, if the family laughs at the child's attempts to speak well, the school is fighting a losing battle.

Increasing numbers of parents and teachers realise that you can't educate part of the child at school and another part of the child at home and adult young people capable of adjusting in a rapidly changing and complex world co-operation between home and school is essential. In fact Dr. James Henning said in Johannesburg recently that if a child grew up in an environment where the home and school were not co-operative, but antagonistic, the child would be exposed to similar strains and conflicts as those of a broken home, because he was being educated in "a broken environment".

What then is the duty of the parent in regard to his child's education? First, parents must recognise that education starts at birth. When the child comes to school at the age of 5 or 6, he has already acquired from the home and family its language, many of its standards and values, its attitudes and prejudices.

The family, psychologically speaking, is both a filter and a bridge for the child. The family and the home should act as the base of security, from which the child can launch out into the more impersonal world of a school community. The first essential therefore is love, genuine, unstinted, undemanding love to develop the child's sense of security and of personal worth. If the child gets this acceptance and love he is assured of the world's goodness. He moves towards life and people and not away from or against them. The child accepts the adult world and its authority, and identifies himself with his parents and their values. The child who is denied this love, is the prey to so much anger, grief and frustration that he turns to the negative emotions of rejection and hate. In fact, he turns against himself and the world.

The early social environment of the child gives him the first picture of himself as a person. It may tell him he is bad and worthless, or it may delude him with the idea that he is supreme. It may convey to him the knowledge that he is loved and worth-while and able to make a success of life. Harshness and scolding, on the other hand may give him such an impression of his own badness that he may gain the idea that goodness is something unattainable for him. A child will only be prepared to play his part and assume responsibility as a member of society if he feels he has something to contribute. Too great discouragement in childhood makes the adolescent or adult prone to contract out of a responsible role. He may compensate by withdrawal from life's situations or by compensatory aggressive behaviour. Professor Stott found that the delinquent often suffers from a deep sense of worthlessness. An objective self-image and positive self-evaluation unconsciously perceived by the child result from loving and accepting par-

ents. A satisfactory environment provides the basis for a personality that can achieve and fully realise itself and grow to its full potential. But any unrealistic or distorted self-image, whether inflated or depressed, may lead to unsocial responses to life and to false human relationships.

In his early years, the child learns, not only about himself, and his parents and family, but about the others who people his world. In a multi-racial society like South Africa parents must teach their children by example from their earliest days, to accept and respect the diversity of the world they live in — its different peoples, different languages, different customs, and different ideas. Parents must be self aware and self critical, because attitudes, like religion, are "caught and not taught". It is useless for parents to urge their children to treat people with respect and consideration unless they themselves do so, nor is it wise to give our children the impression that our culture represents the acme of human development, and whatever our system today embodies is good, and whatever is unlike ours is bad. Family loyalty and group loyalty are learnt in the home, and this must be the base for a wider acceptance of belonging. The home must create not only respect for human beings, their rights and dignity, it must build a solidarity between all the people of South Africa and all mankind. These attitudes cannot be grafted on by a process of teaching facts. They must permeate the whole atmosphere in which a child grows and develops.

Some homes, some societies, some systems of education consciously aim at indoctrinating the minds of children and adolescents in a way that results in continuing hostility towards other people. Others without realising the full consequences inculcate the idea of superiority of race, religion and culture. If a child has been frozen in the certainties that there is only one good religion, language or group, what chance has a teacher of helping that child to grow towards real maturity as a person and as a South Africa? Parents should not create barriers that will hamper the teacher's work of educating.

Another basic condition of the healthy growth of the child as a person is "room to grow" as a unique person in terms of his own unique gifts and needs, first in the home, and then at school. Every child must from his early years have what Hemming calls "sufficient elbow room for the uniqueness of individuality to manifest itself", The child must be helped at home as at school to make the adaption to new demands in terms of his own personality and endowments and in terms of his own maturation. Parents and teachers who expect children to perform as the mythical average child does, are failing to meet the unique needs of the child. There are no average children, there are only unique children. That is something teachers and even parents sometimes forget. Children want the opportunity to be themselves and they object to too much moulding.

Wise parents from the time the child asks questions and want to know about the world in which he lives will encourage natural curiosity about people and the world. Nor should they encourage children to accept facts and information the easy way. Children should be taught to analyse, to question and to measure from their own experience, even if it is limited, what they are told by adults, or learn from books. The main purpose of all education is to learn to reason and to think. Parents can do a great deal towards developing this faculty by discussion and argument.

When the child enters school, a new partnership is founded in the great task of educating the child. The school is the major agency for accomplishing the goals of a community. It is the school that must pass on the complex of skills, techniques, and knowledge which are our cultural heritage and necessary for our continuance. Parents and teachers become partners and they recognise as members of the firm, the churches, the leaders of recreation and youth movements, Doctors and other social agencies. Parents and teachers must concern themselves with the total community in which their children may either live warped and stunted lives or develop naturally and grow to their highest potential stature as human beings.

If parents want their children to get the best out of school they must show that they value and respect learning and they must inculcate respect for the school and the teacher. The Americans, who greatly value education and who have a gift for slogans, have declared that a parent must "never let your child be taught by a stranger". By this they meant that every parent should make a friend of his child's school teacher. There must be effective co-operation between parents and teachers in problems of mutual concern. There is ample experimental evidence to show that a tea-

cher can work more effectively if she knows what the child is experiencing at home and out of school. There is also evidence that prerequisite to effective co-operation between teachers and parents is an understanding of child development and behaviour.

Parents and teachers have different but supplementary tasks. Parents know their children more intimately, with the full knowledge of the pattern of previous growth. The teacher has the special knowledge of the nature and development of children and can observe and handle the child with much more detachment and objectivity than the parent. The parent can do a great deal in building up the teacher's knowledge of the child in his home and the community in which the family lives and the kinds of experience which the pupils are having out of school.

Many progressive schools have Parent-Teacher associations especially designed to make a more coherent world for the child at school.

Wise parents join these associations and play their part in the business of the school. Parents are given an insight into new methods and objectives in education and are helped in the difficult business of bringing up their school children in a world very different from the world they grew up in. There are so many ways in which the P.T.A. co-operates: Fund-raising, which in the Transvaal raises many hundreds of thousands of pounds, is only one. Parents are helping to organise exhibitions of art, ballet, books, lectures, demonstrations, discussion forums, to enrich the cultural life of the children.

The most important function of the P.T.A. is its educational work for parents. The need for parent education in a world which throws more responsibility on parents than ever, is urgent. Responsibilities, which in former times were shared by other community agencies — the church, the extended family — (grandparents, uncles, aunts and neighbours) — have now to be met alone and P.T.A. can meet a notable cultural lag in our present day society.

The greater part of the *good P*.T.A.'s work is educational, dealing with problems of child development in the form of lectures, forums, discussions about problems of discipline, sex education, health, and adolescence. Parents find new ways of dealing with the problems of child rearing, and most important, they realise, they are not alone in their perplexity and thus are relieved of much of their anxiety, feelings of guilt, and inadequacy, and they gain new confidence and skills in handling their children.

The parent teaches his child many of the skills he will require in adult life by his own activities. The child learns about citizenship and civic responsibility from his parents' discussions and involvement in the community or national affairs — he learns of his cultural and religious heritage by his own parents' attachment to and identification with the values of that heritage. The home remains the first laboratory of democracy in which democratic values and responsibilities are learnt and lived. Socrates more than 2000 years ago pointed out that the young reflect what they see and echo what they hear. Their standards are formed by the society in which they live.

In the sphere of the education of their children the parents must assume their responsibilities at every level. They must select and vote for the best school committees and school boards and serve on them if they can serve. They must make themselves familiar with text books and syllabuses and see that they do, in fact, place before their children that which they believe to be best for them. If they are not satisfied it is their duty as citizens, as taxpayers, as well as parents to bring their objections forcibly to the relevant authorities. They must watch restrictive legislation in Provincial Councils or Parliament that may affect the quality of our education and limit the freedom of conscience of teachers and of parents. Parents, as taxpayers and citizens must be concerned not only with the quality of the home as the child's first school, but with all the institutions which today in times of crisis are necessary to sustain, safeguard and supplement the home — our schools, churches, youth organisations, health recreation and welfare services.

Parents, teachers and citizens must unite in South Africa to create an environment, an educative society, which will inculcate respect for the intrinsic value of human personality, a recognition of the worth of a human because he is a human, and for the preservation of the freedom, justice and compassion, which must be the bases of our nation.