

THE CLASSROOM TEACHER AND THE EMOTIONAL PROBLEMS OF CHILDREN

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Increasingly it is being accepted that the classroom teacher is responsible for more than the academic development of the child. Education now tries to supply the physical needs of the pupil as well, since it has been recognized that a child handicapped by a temporary or permanent physical disability is also handicapped in academic learning.

In comparison with the physically handicapped, relatively little has been done in the classroom for the emotionally disturbed or handicapped pupil. But it is just as true, perhaps even more true, that the academic progress of the child is affected by his emotions and feelings.

Many teachers have become quite skilled in detecting signs of emotional disturbances in children who should be referred for special treatment. This is well and good, since early treatment is desirable. But emotional disturbance is a matter of degree, and there are many less serious problems, or beginning problems, which cannot be treated by the limited number of psychiatrists and psychologists available. And there are the more or less normal or temporary emotional disturbances of the so-called "average" child. The teacher has a responsibility in these cases, so that emotional development will continue normally.

Little has been done to help the teacher meet this responsibility and opportunity. There has been much discussion of the problem, but not of how to handle it, except through referral of serious cases. More than this is necessary. The teacher must acquire and be able to put into practice the attitudes and techniques of good mental hygiene.

As a background for dealing with emotional maladjustment, it is essential that the teacher understand what the emotionally disturbed child is like. She must understand that the emotionally maladjusted child is not a malingerer; that his maladjustment is not a willful or consciously developed condition; that the physical complaints so common to his condition are not imaginary; and that such physical symptoms may take many forms, ranging from headaches and stomach upsets to functional blindness, deafness, or muteness, as well as hostility and overaggressiveness.

Because of the physical symptoms, it is important that a physical examination be given to check for organic disease. If no physical basis for complaint is found, an emotional disturbance is probably present.

With a general understanding of emotional disturbances, what can the teacher do for the emotional needs of the child? Without being a psychologist or a psychiatrist, how can she

handle emotionally disturbed children, or the temporary emotional upsets of the average child?

First, there are several "don'ts." Since the emotionally disturbed child is not a malingerer, he should not be treated as such. Since his maladjustment is not willful, don't condemn him. It does no good to tell him to use his will power, to "snap out of it"; he would if he could. Since his pains and physical complaints are real, not imaginary, don't try to argue him out of them.

Since he is not a weakling or a coward, he should not be blamed or censored as if he had committed a crime. Don't diagnose or label or classify the emotionally maladjusted child as abnormal, neurotic, or "a mental case." Don't talk about the child in his presence, to his parents or anyone else. He should be treated as a human being who has feelings.

But the teacher should be able to do more than to avoid these mistaken attitudes. She should be able to do something positive to foster the adjustment of the child. It is not necessary to have extensive training in mental hygiene to be helpful. Nor is it necessary to have a detailed, complete case history, to know all the facts about the background, development, and home life of each child. There are certain basic, fundamental attitudes and techniques which teachers can cultivate that are applicable to all situations involving emotional expression.

ATTITUDES TO CULTIVATE

1. The most essential element in handling emotional disturbances is that there be real understanding and acceptance of the child as he is, with his negative attitude, hostility and aggression, destructiveness, etc. These are his natural expressions under the circumstances. Realizing this the teacher must avoid condemnation, criticism, and moralizing.

It is not necessary that the exact cause of the behavior be known; it is enough to know that it is natural under certain conditions. The test of the ability of a teacher to handle emotional disturbances constructively is whether or not she can accept such negative, hostile emotions and resulting behavior as natural.

The most important need of the child is to be understood and accepted, to be able to share his thoughts, without fear, suspicion, or defensiveness. The maladjusted child feels aggressive because he feels threatened. He actually is threatened by others, usually the adults in his environment, when they criticize, condemn, exhort, or shame him. He needs to feel understood, to feel that someone accepts him as he is for what he is, with all his faults, to feel that someone knows how he feels. To be able to put oneself in the place of another helps in understanding that other person. It is in this way that sympathy develops, which leads to the ability to understand the other person.

2. If one really understands the emotionally disturbed child, and accepts his negative, hostile behavior as natural under the circumstances, the next step is to realize that

emotions, once stirred up, need to be expressed or released. This may seem contrary to the attitude of many teachers, who feel that negative behavior and emotions must be controlled. If the child cannot control his emotions, such teachers attempt to suppress him. But the emotions continue to exist and to cause emotional maladjustment in the child.

Contrary to general opinion, the freedom to express the emotions of hostility and hatred does not result in an increase of such negative emotions and behavior after the initial period following such freedom. It rather allows the negative emotions to drain themselves off, so that the more positive, constructive emotions and behavior have a chance to show themselves. Discipline and punishment are not the answers to negative emotions and behavior. Expression rather than suppression or repression is necessary.

This does not mean that the child should be allowed to be physically aggressive or assaultive or destructive. There must be limits set to prevent injury to other children and adults and prevent damage to property. But while destructive behavior is prohibited when it injures others, there is no limit to the expression of destructive and aggressive thoughts and feelings, and, if possible, to the expression of such behavior on substitute objects, such as rubber toys, especially dolls representing the individuals towards whom the child feels aggressive or resentful.

ENCOURAGE VERBALIZATION

Verbalization of feelings and emotions is to be encouraged, and accepted without surprise or shock. It is important that the teacher really be able to accept such feelings without actually condemning or judging the child in her thoughts. Children are acutely aware of our feelings and sense if they are really being understood and accepted, or if we are only pretending to do so.

These are the basic, fundamental attitudes and techniques to be sought by the classroom teacher. Further study will reveal methods and techniques of developing an understanding of the child, of encouraging the expression of his emotions, and of helping him handle them constructively. The teacher who wishes to provide the best emotional environment for her pupils, and who feels that the emotional development of pupils is at least as important as their academic progress will want to learn more about the problem.