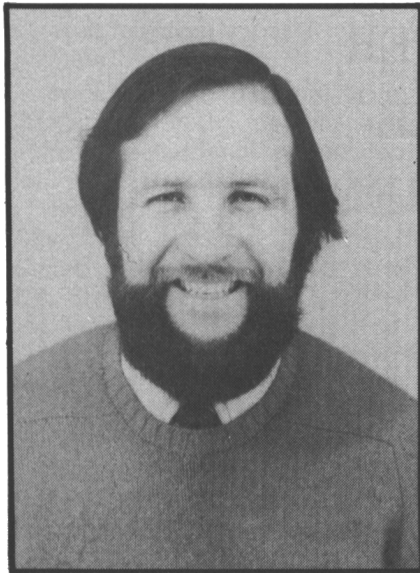


# THE FOSTER CHILD'S EDUCATION:

## *How foster parents can help\**



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The purpose of this paper is to provide one set of perspectives through which parents may wish to examine the ways in which they can assist their child's education. The remarks may apply equally to natural and foster parents, although special consideration will be given to the latter group where necessary. The paper focuses particularly on academic and social survival skills for children at school and the ways parents can extend and support this skill development at home.

### 1. SURVIVAL SKILLS

Apart from the questionable connotation of disaster associated with survival at school, several writers (Adelman and Feshback, 1971;

Greenwood et al., 1974; Hops et al., 1975) have attempted to define those behaviours which children need to display in order to succeed in the school environment. Though expectations may vary depending on age, class level, educational philosophy and so on, and though such a list may seem unnecessarily prescriptive, the skills mentioned below are generally required of children at school.

For children starting school, the following "checklist" is adopted from Adelman & Feshback (1971):

#### a. Survival abilities

- Sight and hearing O.K.
- Eye-hand co-ordination
- Language:
  - listening, understands what is said,
  - speaking clearly, has a working vocabulary, uses sentences, expresses thoughts and feelings, and sees a relationship between written and spoken words.
- Perception — Can discriminate visually and auditorily.

#### b. Work related behaviours

1. Follows simple directions
2. Maintains seatwork attention to complete simple tasks
3. Observes and memorizes
4. Answers questions about a simple story
5. Tells a story from a picture
6. Directs attention towards print or pictures in class
7. Solves simple problems
8. Tolerates failure sufficiently to persist at a task

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\* Based on an address to the Foster Parents Association of Queensland Seminar '78, 28-29 October, 1978.

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9. Makes transition from one activity to another responding to normal classroom routines
10. Carries on with a task over several days
11. Accepts reasonable adult direction without objection or resentment.
12. Works without constant supervision or reminders
13. Can suppress tendency to interrupt others.

Such lists can be adapted for older children in primary and secondary schools. Transition to the secondary school may have its special period of adjustment as children adapt to new routines and academic and social expectations relevant to this phase of their socialization. In recognizing the shortcomings of such lists, it should be acknowledged that as foci they direct our thoughts and child rearing practices to such skills required by children to succeed in schools, whatever the expectations specific to our schools.

Another list, developed for children with severe behavioural difficulties (Taylor, Artuso, & Hewett, 1974), directs our attention to very simple task dimensions which can frequently be overlooked by teachers and parents alike:

- paying attention
- starting
- working
- following task directions

- being right
- being neat
- taking part
- doing what you are told
- getting along with peers
- completing the task

To this list can be added other characteristics such as tolerating failure, persisting, and working independently.

## 2. HOW PARENTS CAN HELP

The idea of “spending time with your children” has not escaped our notice as an enduring parental virtue. Although many parents would query the amount of time spent in child-focused activities, few would quibble over the quality of time spent — both for children and parents. In addition, where substitute parenting is required (as in day care and foster care) the quality of care again is important.

While spending such time with their children, parents can help in a number of ways to facilitate their children’s education both in the pre-school and school age years. Two areas, learning through games and teaching good work habits are briefly explored.

### 2.1 Learning through games

Games can be played in situations such as long drives or at bed time. Their educational relevance can readily be seen in relation to the skills discussed earlier.

#### (a) I spy

Though traditionally played using initial letter names, one can vary the rules, depending on the child’s academic skill level, to practise initial sounds, initial letter names, and final (rhyming) sounds.

For example —

I spy . . . something beginning with (say sound)

I spy . . . something beginning with (letter name)

I spy . . . something rhyming with (last syllable, e.g. — at)

#### (b) I hear

A variation on **I spy**, this game encourages auditory discrimination of sounds in the environment. For example —

I hear with my little ear something (calling — storm-bird)

#### (c) Alphabet chase

Looking for letters on signs, shops, trucks, number plates to complete in sequence. Each player competes to be first through the alphabet. (Honesty is a big factor in this game!)

#### (d) I remember when

A memory game based on family experiences. For example:

I remember when we went to the beach one holiday and we had a picnic on a hill with some friends. Who were they and what was their dog called?

#### (e) Animal, vegetable, mineral

A guessing game which involves classification and logical thinking skills, each player takes turns to think of something (either animal, vegetable or mineral) and other players guess at the answer. Clues such as getting warmer, hot etc. are also involved to shape the direction of guessing.

#### (f) Detective

A guessing game as in (e) where players have to guess the cause of an accident, robbery and so on by asking a series of questions to deduce the correct answer. A variation in scoring is to count the number of questions needed to reach a solution.

#### (g) Word association chains

To encourage vocabulary development, two or more players each take a turn in saying a word which provides a meaningful link to the

preceding word. The meaningful link might be restricted to compound words (e.g. talk-back-up-on-stage-fright-full . . .), to divergent links based on sound rather than spelling alone (e.g. cold-weather-fine-clothes . . . or

-(whether)-sheep-stray . . . or -weather-fair-maiden-century . . . or

-(fair)-clowns-nose-sniff . . . or

-(fare)-bus-driver-pile . . .

There are many opportunities for fun links: e.g. money-counterfeit-two (from counter her feet) Such divergent word linking fosters creative thinking.

#### (h) Car games . . .

Such as spotting out-of-state licence plates, making sentences out of licence plate letters (HIG — How is George?), counting cars by make and by colour, spotting garage or motel signs, encourage various skills in language development, alertness, and incidental reading. A recent publication (Bernard, 1977) deals specifically with car games.

### 2.2 Teaching good work habits

The following are random suggestions for concentrating attention on those work habits necessary for everyday life and specifically applied in the school setting.

#### (a) Starting, persisting at, completing a task

Ensure tasks set for children are reasonable in terms of their ability level, the time needed to complete them, and the time when the request is made. Although tasks will vary in attractiveness and children (and adults) may be renowned procrastinators, getting started is often a difficult phase in tackling a task. Once

a task is under way, its very nature or the increasing proximity to the goal may sustain effort. Task completion may be an unknown joy for many who start and give up, or never start at all. As parents, we can assist by praising children specifically for starting, getting stuck into, hoeing into the job; for sticking at it, hanging in there, persisting, and for rounding it off, cleaning it up, tying it up, completing the task. Although receipt of praise is not necessarily the primary goal of the child's effort, such social attention to his "good works" should transfer to intrinsic value in the task or to the doing of the task itself. We expect the child to develop pride in achievement which enhances his self esteem.

So often, we merely expect children to behave appropriately, and forget to teach them which work skills and values are appropriate. Specific praise helps focus attention on the work skills and values we consider are desirable.

#### **(b) Reasoning, arguing, independent thinking**

Another aspect of child rearing which often perplexes parents confronted by advice from different directions is dealing with children's arguments. Although we may well vary in strictness of application of such routines as "Do as I tell you!" or "Don't argue, do it!" it is important to give children an opportunity (where time permits) to understand that reason and fairmindedness underlie our decisions. That children often challenge our decisions may be an encouraging sign of independent thinking, an indication of their ability to deal with those who would try to

"sell them the Harbour Bridge".

Some young children get the message through to their parents with a well-known A.A. Milne quote. Parent Kanga often fobs off child Roo's requests with "We'll see," to which Roo replies, "You're always seeing, but nothing ever happens!"

#### **(c) Access to appropriate models**

Whilst "Do as I say, not as I do" may attempt to obliterate the effects of poor modelling of parental behaviour, children will often unwittingly model our behaviour — both desirable and undesirable. Consider how we handle frustrations such as when the milk boils over, the toast burns, the puppy wets the carpet, the mower won't start . . . How do children handle similar frustrations when called in from play without warning, a model breaks after gluing, or a toy is lost in the bedroom mess? Children's attitudes and behaviour concerning such work related habits as organization, persistence, coping with frustration, sharing, showing curiosity and so on are frequently modelled from behaviour observed within the family.

#### **(d) Using meaningful reinforcers**

Though psychologists will argue over the theoretical bases for "good" child-rearing techniques, one approach focuses on the use of reinforcements to increase the occurrence of appropriate behaviour. This reward system, though misunderstood by association solely with "payment for good work", varies across a spectrum from tangible reinforcers (food, money, tokens), through

social praise, to the intrinsic value of the task itself (love of learning).

Because such a range of reinforcers are in everyday use, it requires no great effort to harness their potential for improving appropriate work habits. Attention was paid to the use of specific praise in (a) above. This has been dealt with in detail elsewhere (O'Connor, 1978). In addition, allowing access to enjoyable activities such as television viewing, play, and model making, only after the proper completion of such chores as homework, washing up, and bedmaking, can have the effect of ensuring such tasks are competently completed.

#### **(e) Building a positive self concept**

The concept we have of self is based on how we think and feel about ourselves, and how we think others feel about us. This personality dimension is important to focus on because our attitudes and actions probably relate very closely to our daily highs and lows in self esteem.

Each one of us daily receives positive and negative feedback in verbal and non-verbal forms. We receive the feedback from different sectors of life — work/school, home, church, sport, community groups, friends and so on.

Consider the child who has problems at school; these may transfer to home where he also receives negative feedback about his performance. Where can he turn for some positive feedback? Parents and teachers have an important task in developing a balanced self concept in children, providing opportunities for the growth of a positive self image which is strong enough to withstand the occasional,

reasonable onslaught of negative feedback. Too much positive feedback can lead to conceit; too much negative, to defeat.

The self image can be strengthened again by praise specific to the child's activities (e.g. good thinking; great answer, you really thought that tough one out; Fred has sharp eyes, nice going; Good try, you gave that one all you had). As children build up a store of verbal and non verbal (smiles, nod, touch) feedback about their personality strengths in the school setting, so too does their attitude and behaviour toward schoolwork improve. Teachers and parents need to form a closer partnership for strengthening specific work behaviours of children. Though some programs formalize this link, informal comments either orally or in writing can ensure both parties work to strengthen similar abilities. In addition, children should be encouraged themselves to monitor their own behaviour and note improvements.

#### (f) Dealing with feelings underlying actions

Two writers on parenting (Dreikurs 1972; Gordon, 1975) have given a great deal of attention to such an issue, in contrast to the behaviourist stance of dealing only in observable behaviours. Dealing with feelings in child rearing is particularly important as adults tend to react to surface behaviour more readily than the underlying feelings and motives children have in displaying the behaviour. The foster child, in dealing with the unpredictable, transitory nature of placement in a family or group home setting, has additional feelings specific to trusting and committing

himself totally to the foster family situation.

Gordon's Parent Effectiveness Training (1975) provides a very useful guide to achieving better communication with children. He deals with the typical roadblocks to effective communication, focuses on techniques identifying whether the child or parent owns the problem, and suggests some solutions such as active listening and sending "I messages". Dreikurs' Happy Children (1972) discusses the types of behaviours children display in order to "find their place in the group". He pays special attention to children's behaviours ranging from attention-seeking, through power struggle and revenge, to assumed disability. Both books are very readable and helpful in clarifying our understanding of why children behave as they do.

### 3. SCHOOL RESPONSIBILITIES

Supporting foster children at school is not a parental responsibility alone. Foster parent attitudes vary on whether it is wise to alert teachers and principals to the child's foster status, depending primarily on what is known about school personnel attitudes and the child's own feelings in this matter. Where this information is available, unavoidably in the case of children from "homes", teachers have an important responsibility to model positive attitudes towards such children in class and in the playground.

Unfortunately, experience has shown teacher modelling often to have a dileterious effect. Labelling ("Stand up the home children") and implicit special or different treatment (book allowances) have also been reinforced by foster institutions which send children to school in, for example, khaki clothes rather than school uniforms. Both school and home need to co-operate closely

to ensure foster children enjoy as "normal" a school experience as possible.

### 4. SUMMARY

This paper has focused on some specific academic and social survival skills required by children at school. Suggestions have been made for directing parents' attention to approaches they can employ in enhancing the development of these skills. Finally, the need for close home-school co-operation in determining and employing effective strategies to enhance the foster child's educational experience was briefly considered.

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