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ABSTRACT

Parents and teachers are the chief mediators of effective influences in child development and what happens to them happens to the child, directly or indirectly. Pressures on parents and teachers become pressures on the child. Attempting to remediate a child's deficiencies without focusing upon the societal forces that contributed to their development is to deal with such problems out of context. Some pressures upon parents and teachers that have potential for pressure on the child include parent-grandparents conflicts, parent-parent conflicts, parent-teacher conflicts, parent's relationship with child's peers, technological advancements such as TV, increased lay interest in educational and psychological research findings and educational philosophies, and greater interest in early formal education. These factors may lead to undue pressure on the child and contribute to emotional disturbances, motor disturbances, cognitive interferences, physiological disturbances and behavioral disorders. (ED)

Pressures On Young Children

I am aware of the fact that a topic as broad as pressures, in these times, cannot adequately be treated in so short a time as we have alloted to us. Neither can we bear the pressure of an hour-and-a-half paper on pressures. Such is the state of life with pressures today. Therefore, I shall limit my discussion to a brief consideration of the context of pressures in present-day American Society by pointing out some sources from which pressures are derived for adults as well as children and listing some consequences of stressful pressure upon the child's behavior. My thesis is that parents and teachers are the chief mediators of effective influences in child development and that what happens to them happens to the child, directly or indirectly. What, then, is happening to parents and teachers today? What pressures do adults in general encounter today and how do they cope with them?

By no stretch of the imagination can we say that we are living in a safe, consistent, and secure world--qualities of the environment that we insist are minimal requirements for the wholesome development of any child. On the contrary, large percentages of families are broken, migrant, and under otherwise economic stress. They are faced with unemployment, under employment, shifts in employment requiring re-training for new and still uncertain jobs. When survival needs at the creature level are somewhat relieved, they can afford, emotionally, to be concerned with the issues of war and peace and the politics governing their existence. Those who are somewhat more fortunate are nonetheless plaqued by uncertainties related to employment. Witness what is now happening to highly trained specialists who are being let out of defense-related, industrial, or governmental jobs! In search of employment they, too, must sacrifice residential stability for a

mobile life without deep roots or relationships. We are a society on the move and frequently without well-defined destinations. To add to this unsettled state of economic affairs, housing shortages, decaying cities, turmoil in the schools, drug abuse, rising crime rates are concerns that occupy a large proportion of our thinking hours. It is the rule rather than the exception that both parents will be working and that child care will also be a central problem. For the short time given to reading the newspaper, an interest is generated in Vietnam, the Paris peace talks, activities of legislators and office seekers, and perhaps the Bangladesh.

This, then, is the flavor of pressures upon adults--upon parents and teachers who still remain the chief source of security for a growing child. Therefore, only within the context of the larger society can we properly view, understand and deal with the problems of children. I reject the attempt to deal with such problems out of context, attempting to remediate the child's deficiencies without focusing upon the societal forces that brought them about. Working always <u>on</u> the child not <u>with</u> him, or working to modify <u>him</u> instead of the forces that created his undesirable or unsatisfactory behavior is a misplacement of effort and inevitably leads to disappointing results.

Since the pressures upon parents and teachers can be expected to be translated into various forms of pressures upon children, let us look at several interpersonal relationships, home and school aspirations, as well as technological advancements that have potential for pressure on the child.

<u>Parent-grandparent conflicts</u>. It is not uncommon for parents and grandparents to differ seriously in the child-rearing practices. It is also not uncommon for working mothers to rely upon grandmothers as baby-sitters. Conflict in child-rearing attitudes stemming from a generation-gap, then, can be a source of pressure for the child who must adapt himself to one set of

rules by the mother and to another set by the grandmother each day over a long period of time.

Parent-parent conflicts. Mom says "no" dad says "yes". How well do we know the pressure of this conflict and its consequences of (1) manipulation in playing one parent against the other or (2) feelings of self-doubt and insecurity.

Parent-teacher conflicts. Parents and teachers get different views of a child. The child-at-home is different in many respects from the child-at-school. These differences are magnified by discrepancies between the values, demands, evaluation of behavior and management practices of the home and school. Homework assignments may provide a vehicle through which these discrepant attitudes are revealed and the child is caught in the cross fire of parent-teacher conflicts. Moreover, teachers frequently feel abused by parents, by administrators, and by an unappreciative society. An article by Kathryn Doddridge (9) in The American Music Teacher, for example, expresses a feeling that parents use music teachers as baby-sitters, not giving proper support to the child's study of music. I daresay this attitude is further extended to the dance teacher and the art teacher. Thus the child bears the brunt of negative feelings growing out of cross purposes.

Parent relationship with his child's peers. The quality of relationship between a parent and his child's peers is seldom discussed in child development literature. However, it is a significant relationship in that it provides the parent an opportunity to see and appreciate a child, like his own, without feeling responsible for the child's shortcomings and immaturities. Under these conditions, the shortcomings may not be seen at all. The appreciation is reciprocal because the other child is free from the scrutiny of his own responsible mother and can now see that not all mothers are nagging like his own. You

see the seductive nature of this parent-peer relationship. It provides a real pressure on the parent's child when he is asked, "Why can't you be like Bobby? He's such a fine chap. His mother must be very proud of him." Somehow, the child decides (even if he doesn't say it), "She doesn't like me; she likes Bobby." Moreover, the seeds of disruption of the children's friendship has been planted because children do not respond favorably to the pressure that suggests that they exchange their own personalitites for those of others. Examples of pressures arising out of the cross fire of interpersonal relationships can be multiplied but let us consider a few pressures arising out of technological advancements.

We have indicated that adults are pressured in many ways by advancing technology-through job displacement but also through increased availability and improvement of consumer goods. Not just a TV, but a color TV becomes a necessity. Consequently, children experience the demands that TV makes on their time, their emotions, and their vision. Few children can tear themselves away from TV programs to take a nap. Moreover, the sleep they take is frequently disturbed by feelings aroused while viewing TV. Although contradictory results are reported in the research literature (Endsley and Osborne, 10) regarding the ill effects of TV on the behavior of children in general, there is agreement that some children have exhibited disturbed behavior directly related to television. Bandura (1) concluded from his study that viewing aggressive films reduces the child's inhibitions against acting aggressively and helps shape the form of his expression of agression. Recently, Osborn and Endsley (20) of the University of Georgia studied the emotional responsivity of four- and five-year-olders to violence in TV stories by using the GSR technique. This technique provides an index to emotional response by detecting slight changes in the electrical conduction of the skin. Osborn and

Endsley selected tapes from the Saturday morning children's programs involving human and cartoon characters in violent and nonviolent stories. They found that human violence stories were more "scary" than cartoon violence, but nonviolent cartoons were like best. Parents reported some after-film difficulties such as some sleep disturbances and not wishing to have stories read which spoke of aggression. Other investigators have reported increased eye blinking, respiration, heart rate, and gastric motility.

Aside from emotional pressures of televiewing there are pressures to buy various and sundry gadgets, cereals, and toys. However, in fairness to TV, it must be said that there are many pro-TV findings in research literature; especially regarding educational programs like the popular Sesame Street. But even this program has had some adverse criticism. Most investigators will concede the fact that TV has enriched children's vocabularies with words like "detergent", "satellite" and "astronaut." There is no doubt that the appearance of words like these in the language of young children has played a tremendous role in promoting prematurely the formal education of young children. Technology has provided the teaching machines, and the teaching materials and programs. Why not start Johnny early? For many children this early pressure to read before sufficient readiness has been attained, has resulted in a pervasive dislike of school and all academic tasks.

Still another, though indirect, source of pressure on young children is the increased interest of parents in the research findings on raising the I.Q. and the popularization of these findings through the news media. Everybody is reading about Piaget and cognitive development; about critical periods of development and the effects of sensory deprivation; about behavior modification and compensatory education; about the achievement motive and deceptively simple methods of raising the I.Q.; about the early years during which the larger

percentages of intelligence are acquired. This mass dissemination of over-simplified research findings with their significant implications for child development, teaching, and learning has initiated a rash or precipitous experimentation by professionals and laymen alike.

The philosophies of child rearing, referred to as permissive and authoritarian are confusing to both parent and teacher. Frequently, their conception of permissiveness is to see nothing, do nothing, say nothing lest you infringe upon the rights of a child to be an individual, stifle his creativity and inhibit the growth of his personality. Nothing could be wilder than this invitation to anarchy and insecurity! Children need standards, boundaries sympathetically and firmly imposed but flexible enough to permit growth towards independence. Making choices is hard enough for mature adults. It is impossible for a young child without guidance.

In like manner, authority is caricatured to mean complete repression and subjugation. In this climate, a child ceases to try to think for himself. He merely waits to be told. Not long ago, a kindergartener told me that she goes to the "no-no" school. I had not heard it put this way before, but I knew exactly what she meant. She goes to a school where every impulse, every joy, every reaching-out-to-discover is met with a resoudning "no-no."

The philosophy of John Dewey is misrepresented by the practice of keeping everybody busy hammering and nailing, "buying and selling", cooking and cleaning, often according to no purpose or plan--learning by doing. Because there are parents and teachers whose very natures rebel against any type of disorder, they embrace without criticism the Montessori method in toto. On the other hand, because the concept of teaching the "whole child" is difficult to implement, it is quite a relief now for some professionals to be able to delimit the goals of education to that of fostering and promoting cognitive development,

leaving attitudes and values to be taught by some other agency or relegating them to the "catch-as-catch-can" category. (5)

Such confusion in philosophical orientation can only result in conflict and confusion for the child. This superficiality of understanding makes a complicated concept appear simple. Hence, we rush into the applications research findings before the researchers themselves are sure that their findings are applicable. For example, widespread use of behavior modification techniques have not been found to be the golden key to unlock the mystery of getting children to do what you want them to do, largely because there are other variables to be considered than merely giving immediately what the trainer considers to be a reward.

Perhaps the greatest impact of the research in child development has been on pre-school education. Beth Wellman, decades ago, published findings which indicated the value of nursery school experience, but only in the 60's and 70's was there a real thrust toward providing this experience for large numbers of children--particularly children of low socioeconomic status. It had been generally held that a child grows best at home during his early years if his home can provide space, play equipment, age mates, and the time of an understanding parent. For those children not so blessed, a good nursery school or day care center would certainly enhance his development. However, James Hymes akes exception to the sufficiency of the home environment even for four- and five-year-olds by saying "home along, even the best home, with its space, its resources, its time does not satisfy and fulfill older children...and it no longer meets all the needs of fours and fives." When the general public reads the convincing argument of an authority like Hymes on pre-primary education, the pressure will be on to get every four- and five-year-old in school irrespective of his home resources. It must be pointed out, however, that Hymes

qualifies his statement with the requirement of a good pre-primary school and does not endorse an academic orientation.

This brings us to the issue of academic vs. developmentally oriented kindergartens. Goodlad (11) insists that pressures to learn may be blocks to learning. Arthur Combs (7) explodes the myth of competition as preparation for living in a competitive society and as a motivation toward achievement or toward a product of high quality. Grossman (12) deplores the academic grind for the three-year-old. He recalls for us the fact that there is a neurological basis for the child's preference for kinesthetic and tactile experiences and that the pressure of premature emphasis on specific skills may have deleterious effects on the child's attitude toward learning in general. Alice Keliher (17) admits that we do push our children sometimes with ill consequences. But I think that Annie Butler's (6) article in Childhood Education, titled, "Hurry! Hurry! Why?", is most revealing. She states:

> "Beginning formalized teaching at an earlier age is misinterpreted as assuring that the desired learning will occur with greater efficiency and comprehension...pushing the child to learn skills before he is ready rejects his right to grow in his own way, to take the time he needs...In the final analysis, children exercise control over their own learning... If the classroom is rife with pressures, the teacher's purposes may be of no value (no matter how worthy the purpose); children may respons to fear, distrust, and pressure toward conformity...In the rush to master content, the joy, adventure and sense of accomplishment which come from finding out something (which may or may not be new to anyone else) may be lost.Children must feel a challenge to learn before they can hurry. Our attempts to hurry them in kindergarten theaten their acceptance of this challenge. So why hurry?"

Jenkins (16) asks "what price pressurs? When pressures are extreme, they are stressful and they may result in:

(1) emotional disturbances such as anger, fear, anxiety depression, guilt and feelings of rejection.

(2) motor disturbances such as tension, tremors, facial tics and speech disturbances

(3) cognitive interferences such as memory lapses, perceptual inaccuracies, poor judgment and defensive thinking

(4) physiological disturbances such as psychosomatic ailments including allergies, headaches, and gastro-intestinal upsets.

(5) behavioral disorders such as lying, stealing, destruction of property and materials, aggressive assaults and other forms of alienation from our value system.

Why then? Can we have a pressure-free environment? What with all the pollution! Let us stretch the meaning of pollution a bit to have it include all those unwarranted ambitions, demands, restrictions, denials, and schedules that make it impossible for a child to breathe the fresh air of relaxation, self-awareness, joy, contentment, and self-esteem so necessary to a healthy selfhood.

There is no possibility of growing up without some pressures toward acceptable standards of performance; nor can a child be free of frustraitons inherent in his own immaturity and limitations. Nevertheless, he will meet enough of these in his naturalistic life in an adult world, to take care of all the virtues that may be derived from pressures to succeed or to behave competently. Instead of continuing to raise the ceiling of achievement to unreachable heights, may we not assess the child's development level and place his goals accordingly. The principle of individual differences allowed that some children will be able to absorb more pressure than others. I agree with Hartup (13) that the question is not whether there should be pressure or no pressure, but how much? When? and how?

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