DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 126 211 UD 016 182

AUTHOR Comer, James P.
TITLE Child Development: Where Have We Been and Where are We Going with Our Knowledge?
INSTITUTION National Association for the Education of Young Children, Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE Nov 74
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (Washington, D.C. November 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Change Agents; Child Care; *Child Development; *Childhood Needs; Child Psychology; *Child Rearing; Child Welfare; *Cultural Background; Cultural Context; Individual Needs; *Policy Formation; Social Action; *Social Change; Technology

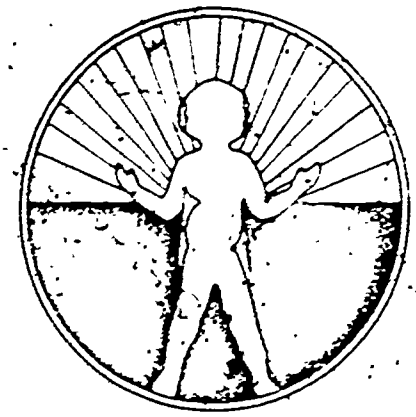
ABSTRACT

The basic issues of child rearing and child development as well as the application of knowledge about child development are addressed in this paper. It is noted that to date children, their families, and their subcultures have been studied and that advice has been given to parents and to teachers about the child's development. Yet it is suggested that the findings concerning the kind of relationship a family needs with institutions and the society in order to be able to rear a child to become a competent and humane adult have been ignored. Because little attention is paid to the relationships between families and society, there is no preparation to look carefully at the kind of institutional and societal changes needed to keep up with changing technology. It is noted that children continue to be reared for the nineteenth century rather than the twentieth, and the impact of technological change has been ignored. One problem has been the fact that the response to change and challenge is to collect new knowledge rather than to apply tried and true knowledge; to be concerned about the intellect rather than the effect and the resultant quality of human relationships. Although some movement towards the implementation of policies that favorably affect the lives of children is noted, there remains a long way to go in developing the kind of interest, knowledge, and organization necessary to affect social policy. (Author/AM)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED126211

One Child Indivisible



U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

J. D. Andrews, Editor

NAEYC Conference Director

UD 016182

The National Association for the Education of Young Children
Washington, D.C.

Child Development: Where Have We Been and Where Are We Going with Our Knowledge?

James P. Comer

James P.
Comer

This morning I would like to share with you my thoughts and concerns about where we have been and where we are going regarding our knowledge about child development and, most important, our *application* of this knowledge. I do not pretend to have an answer to the issues I will raise, but I think they are issues we must all think about.

I was pleased with the theme of this conference, **One Child Indivisible**. I understand this to mean that you would like to think about the whole child. It seems to me that we have paid far too much attention in the past to intellectual development without paying sufficient attention to the spiritual or emotional side of the child's development. A child is a social being and a product of a social milieu that greatly influences the human spirit or psychological state and, in turn, the child's intellectual function. We can't, then, really talk about intellectual development without paying sufficient attention to social or environmental conditions.

Many among us will say, "But we have talked about social conditions." We have indeed, but our discussions and studies have been of limited value. We have tended to study the child "in pieces" which fit our various disciplines, with only a few efforts to look at the whole child as he or she is related to the functioning of our major institutions and the social policies of the larger society. Otherwise more of us would have asked long ago *why* what we already know about social conditions and psychological and intellectual functioning hasn't been adequately applied in the rearing and development of all American children.

ERIC

Recently I had the honor of being interviewed by Dr Milton Senn, former director of the Yale Child Study Center, and a pioneer in the child development and child care field I was very struck by the first question he asked me. and I trust that he will not mind my mentioning it again here. His question What more do we really need to know about child development? Why is it necessary to study and demonstrate the same points over and over in study after study? He pointed out that we already know that maternal care (paternal or some important caretaker) is very important He wondered why we continue to study maternal and family care in monkeys and conduct a number of other studies before we make it possible for most children to have the kind of family care we know is necessary to rear healthy children who will become competent and humane adults

But do we know enough about what it takes to rear healthy children? I was amazed as I sat and listened to our previous speaker, Dr. Burton White, at the amount of agreement we have around the basic issues of childrearing and development. It was also obvious that most of you were in agreement with him regarding what is needed. Because the matter has been covered and there is much agreement, I will not go over it in detail. I will attempt this morning to raise your consciousness about the issue Dr. Senn raised.

Before I address this issue I would like to make it clear that I am not anti-intellectual. I am not opposed to careful, systematic, hard, clean research—where it is necessary and possible. In addition, I am often irritated by those who cry irrelevant or suggest that traditional research methods do not apply to minority or poor children as an excuse for sloppy research. But, on the other hand, researchers can be used. It is a way for government and other responsible leaders to say, "We're doing something. It is a way to divert our attention from social policies which are, at the present time, creating more problems than the helping professions—social work, psychology, psychiatry, education, etc.—can overcome.

Now back to the question, what do we already know? We know that all children must have their basic needs met—food, clothing, shelter, health care. We know that motor development, speech, language, cognitive and/or intellectual development must be stimulated by others, especially parents or meaningful and important others. We know that desirable moral and social development must be carefully cultivated and occurs best in an environment of fair play, with guidance, optimal structure, and freedom. In addition to promoting moral and social develop-

ment, such an environment will give a child a sense of belonging, worth, value, and competence.

Certainly we do not know all there is to know about child development. We will never know all there is to know. Nor do we need to know all there is to know. But we do now know enough about what it takes for a child to become a psychologically healthy and humane adult.

Where have we been? What have we studied? How has it been used? To date we have studied children their families, and their subcultures We have given advice to parents We have talked about the child in school and given advice to teachers But we have ignored our findings about the kind of relationship a family needs with institutions and the society in order to be able to rear a child to become a competent and humane adult. Because we pay little attention to the necessary relationships between families and society, we were not prepared to look carefully at the kind of institutional and societal changes needed to keep up with changing technology. Indeed, it is my impression that we still rear children for the nineteenth century rather than the twentieth century; that we have ignored the impact and demand of technological change.

Let us discuss for a minute the issue of technological change. In a short 70 years we have swept from a horse and buggy society through the automobile age, the airplane age, the jet age, and into the rocket age. The horse and buggy were very close to the technology of the wheel. Today is the first time in the history of the world that children have not grown up to live in a society very much like that of their parents and their parents parents before them. In fact, we cannot even imagine what life and society in the year 2000 will be like. About the only thing we can say with any certainty is that the basic needs of children must be met; that parents and meaningful others must live under conditions which will permit them to stimulate desirable intellectual, social, moral, and psychological development in their children.

Given the task, we are ill-prepared to face the future, for we have not done well in the past—as a society or as professionals (social scientists and social service providers).

Prior to the 1930s, there was outright racial oppression. Families and children were adversely affected by it at a time when we were already moving into the first stage of advanced technological development. Massive immigration from Europe to America had taken place and Black migration from the South to the North was taking place. Our professions did not study or speak to the importance of bringing these groups into the mainstream, of permitting them to experience a sense of belonging, worth, and value so that parents could adequately care for their children.

In the 1940s, we knew (or should have known) that we should

speak to the need to build 'community"—new towns, new services needed to meet the needs of a society changing from a rural agricultural country to an urban, highly-industrialized society. We stood by as government and business, for prejudice and profit, permitted the development of chaotic suburban sprawl which has served to the detriment of all of us. We stood by as high-rise containers were built for the poor—even encouraged it—and stood by again as the most able and most organized people among the poor were moved out when they reached a marginal income level. We failed to point out that this would lead to the frustration and floundering we see in so many such projects today.

In the 1950s and 1960s, we watched the impact of science and automation push the least educated off the job market and prevent many undereducated people from ever entering. Instead of speaking to the nature of the social policies of institutions and systems responsible, we focused on individuals. We spoke of "disadvantaged" and "underprivileged children and families rather than a malfunctioning social system. This led us astray.

Too many helping professions confused privilege with economic condition. A privileged child is not necessarily one from a middle- or upper-income family but one who has a high quality developmental experience. I once worked on a psychiatric ward where the names of the patients read like a *Who's Who in America*. But because the youngsters had been passed from one caretaker to another while their parents pursued their careers, those youngsters were not able to function adequately as young adults and adults.

I am fortunate that I was already an adult during the 1950s and 1960s. In the 1940s and 1950s, there was nobody to feel sorry for me because I was from a low-income family. My parents and my teachers had the same expectations of me as they had of everybody else with the same potential. When I didn't do the job as a patrol boy in the seventh grade, the patrol leader took my belt away. As an "underprivileged child" in the 1960s, I might have been given a "break" and might not have learned a very valuable lesson for life, if you don't perform well, you lose privileges and desirable opportunities.

In the 1950s and 1960s, we looked back at our mistakes—particularly those in the area of race relations—and decided to bus children to integrate schools. We did not develop new towns, income maintenance programs, and a national health program in order to create a national climate of "community" . . . the kind of climate in which we can best rear children.

Our problem has been the fact that our response to change and

challenge has been to collect new knowledge rather than to apply tried and true knowledge; to be concerned about the intellect rather than the affect and the resultant quality of human relationships.

Spurred by Russia's development of Sputnik, we asked, "Why can't John and Jane learn more?" That was a narrow and inadequate response. Helping John and Jane learn more is not the real challenge of today's technological society. Children who are reared well and attend reasonably good schools will learn well. We live in a highly mobile age in which we can have breakfast in California and lunch in New York. We are, as a result, a nation of strangers. Because of sophisticated communications systems, we are the most highly informed people in the history of the world. But now, more than when we lived in isolated areas with little communication, we receive conflicting views and information. Thus, more than helping Jane and John (and Sam and Sally) learn more, we should be helping John, Jane, Sam, and Sally learn to get along better.

We cannot help them by looking at intellectual, moral, and social development as if they were processes limited to a child or a child's family's conceptual capacity. We must pay attention to the fact that the economic and political processes which shape the fortunes and futures of John, Jane, Sam, and Sally's mammas and papas are directly related to the development of these traits and conditions.

Occasionally we social science and social service people do look at the political and economic processes. We often turn away in disgust and anger, preferring to serve people and avoid the "nasty" power and control games. But we do not look closely enough at the games we play. We play control and power games "in the name of the children" so much so that I am sometimes reminded of the history of wars in the name of religion. We continue to train many teachers on well-controlled campuses, away from the real world—to avoid entanglement with "them"—politicians, nonacademic educators, and parents. I am told that it is still possible to become a teacher with less than a year, even a half year, in a real classroom. And even today many trainers of teachers have never been outside of the walls of academe.

We continue to do research by methods approved of at universities because they are "hard" and never ask, "But are they applicable?" On my cynical days, I sometimes compare the static research designs I often see with the measurement of a fan on a feather in a wind tunnel. Social forces are often stronger and faster moving than our cherished independent variables. We continue to reward research—especially "hard" research, whatever that is—over teaching and service.

But concern with issues of power and control do not only afflict the educational establishment. Many young people come to troubled school systems and attempt to impose their own ideas on those systems,

disregarding the views and needs of the people already there. Far too often I see struggles for power and control in reform social change agencies, formed because of disgust with troublesome issues of power and control in "Establishment social and educational agencies. I have seen issues of race, seniority, and credentials used to maintain power at the expense of effectiveness. I have seen teachers, who beat the children out of the school at the close of day, argue that an increase in salary would enable them to improve the quality of education.

In my opinion social scientists and social service people have spent too much time and energy on issues relating to the best interest of their respective professions We have spent too much time and energy studying individuals to be served—children and their families. We have paid too little attention to whether our own structures and operations best meet the needs of our clients. We have spent too little time looking at who shapes social service policies, why it is shaped in certain ways, and why aren't the well-tested principles of child development facilitated by law and practice.

Few of us know very much about the political process. Many of us don't even want to think about the impact of legislation and social policy on the climate and operation of our institutions. Most of us have not thought very much about how school organization and management (or social service organization and management) directly affects the behavior and functioning of adults and children. We prefer to serve. But service is not enough. It is all too clear now that inadequate and unjust social policy and practice creates problems in people faster than all social service personnel and agencies can correct or overcome them. It appears to me that those of us concerned about children must pay attention to, help shape, and help implement policies which favorably affect the lives of children.

I am happy to see that there is some movement in this direction. I notice that there were three sessions scheduled during this conference to discuss the political process, but in each case legislators were telling us about how the political process works, an indication of the fact that we have a long way to go in developing the kind of interest, knowledge, and organization necessary to affect social policy. I was also delighted to see that there were two sessions regarding management skills. We will not make significant progress in providing good services for children until we pay much more attention to the importance of school management.

Yes, we are moving. But we are very late. We are already at an age in which there will be less work for more people. Yet our psychologi-

cal and social functioning is organized around work. We are still dealing with issues of busing, housing, and/or racial and class conflict at a time when we should be ready to redistribute our wealth so that families may function well, children may develop well, and people will have a sense of personal adequacy, worth, and value even though they are not working or working less.

In order to face up to the issues of our time and the future we must make some changes. We cannot continue to train teachers and other social service personnel (and even social scientists) on college campuses, isolated during most of their period of study from the environment in which they will work. We must look for ways to train researchers so that they will be more helpful in the real world. More of the literature must be from teachers, administrators, and social workers on the front line. We must pay more attention to the issue of helping children develop good social and relationship skills. They are as important, if not more important, than raising the IQ 5 to 10 points.

I suspect that today's criminals have a 10 to 15 percent higher IQ score than those of 50 years ago, but is has not helped them become better citizens.

Unfortunately, we cannot make much progress in helping our children develop better social and relationship skills until we address ourselves to the matter of creating a fair play society with reasonable conditions for parents, teachers, and children; until cooperation, sharing, and fair play is in their best interest. When we are genuinely committed to creating this kind of society, research findings will not be used to pretend that we are doing something. They will be implemented to promote and maintain a harmonious society.