

ORIENTATION PROGRAM FOR BEGINNERS AND PARENTS

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Abstract

A school orientation program was developed to: (a) create a positive base for home-school communication, (b) provide parents with some information related to school entry skills, and (c) provide an initial positive school experience for beginning students. The program consisted of six meetings, three experiential and three discussion. During the experiential meetings pre-beginning students were asked to perform everyday activities which demanded use of co-ordination, language, or perception skills. These were selected to suggest to parents the importance of interaction with their children in skill development. Topics for the three discussion meetings involved development of responsible behaviour in children, availability of psychological support services through the school, and school rules. The success of the program was indicated by parent response to a questionnaire and excellent parent attendance in the schools where it has been used.

Résumé

On a mis sur pied un programme d'information scolaire afin de répondre aux trois buts suivants: a) créer un mécanisme positif pour établir la communication entre le foyer et l'école, b) fournir aux parents les renseignements pertinents au sujet des compétences requises par l'élève débutant, c) donner aux nouveaux élèves une expérience positive de l'école. Six rencontres eurent lieu, trois à caractère "discussion", trois à caractère "expérience". Lors des rencontres "expérience", les futurs élèves s'engagèrent dans des activités journalières qui font appel à la coordination, au langage ou à la perception. Ainsi, on signalait aux parents l'importance de toute interaction avec leurs enfants pour promouvoir le développement des habiletés de ces derniers. Lors des rencontres "discussion", on aborda le développement du comportement responsable chez l'enfant, la disponibilité de services auxiliaires psychologiques à l'école et enfin, les règlements de l'école. Les réponses des parents à un questionnaire et leur excellente participation dans les écoles désignées témoignent éloquemment du succès de ce programme.

INTRODUCTION

A current major focus in school counselling centers on the development of preventive and developmental affective education programs. At the elementary school level several programs are available which are designed to enhance the interactions of children with their peers, parents and teachers (Bessell & Palomares, 1969; Dinkmeyer, 1973; Dreikurs, 1964; Dupont, Gardner & Brody, 1974). In the experience of the author, activities which facilitate smooth entry into the school system are of equal importance. These set the tone for the child, parent and teacher and can provide a focus for the development of positive relationships (Nelson, 1970).

Children often begin kindergarten at four and a half years of age and are confronted by a large group of other children as well as by new adult authority figures. According to several developmental theorists children in this age group are typically involved in: (a) developing and

enhancing receptive and expressive communication skills (Blocher, 1966; Havighurst, 1953), (b) observing nurturant adults for examples of acceptable skilled and social behaviour (Erikson, 1950; Hetherington, 1965) and, (c) developing a sense of independence from parents (Blocher, 1966).

The developmental growth of the child within the school system can be fostered most readily within an atmosphere of co-operation between parents and school personnel. This atmosphere seems most readily achievable when school personnel recognize that parents: (a) approach school involvement with positive or negative perceptions depending on their own school experience; (b) need to develop a sense of trust in the teacher who will be involved with their children; and (c) want their children to succeed in school.

Given the needs just cited regarding pre-beginners, parents and school personnel, the

school staff at Parkdale Elementary-Junior High School, Edmonton, Alberta developed a school orientation program with three major purposes: (a) to create a positive base for home-school communication by providing a setting in which initial parent contact with the school is developmental rather than problem centered; (b) to provide parents with some information related to school entry skills often expected of students; and (c) to provide an initial positive school experience for beginning students.

Previous programs with which the author has been involved typically consisted of a single afternoon meeting held in the school. The beginning pupils were taken to classrooms to practice being "students" for an afternoon and parents (usually mothers) were given talks by the school principal, counsellor, psychologist, nurse, etc. These lectures were often general presentations regarding school rules, child development, and parenting skills. Problems with this type of meeting included the following: (a) communication was one-way, parents listened and school personnel talked; (b) there was little opportunity for informal interaction among parents or between parents and staff; (c) the lectures were often so general and academic that much of the information they contained seemed to mean little to most parents; (d) few concrete suggestions or examples were presented regarding entry skills beginning students were expected to have, or how parents could facilitate their acquisition; and (e) holding the meetings in the afternoon made it very difficult for working mothers and fathers to attend.

PLANNING

The school staff involved in the program were the kindergarten teacher, the grade one teachers, the vice-principal, and the school counsellor (who acted as co-ordinator). Areas of concern regarding skill development in pre-school children fell into three general categories — co-ordination, perception and language development. It was suggested that parents be involved in meetings concerning each of these areas and that the meetings be experiential rather than lecture format. It was also felt that it would be useful to hold discussion meetings involving topics such as; developing responsibility in children, school support services and school administration.

The proposed program was presented to a group of six parents who had been involved in other activities in the school. They agreed with the need for such a program and offered their assistance by acting as resource people in selection of other parent volunteers to help run the program. They also acted as volunteers themselves. More specifically this group of parents: (a) formed a phoning committee to invite

parents of kindergarten children and parents of children registered for kindergarten for the following year; (b) found parents to babysit while meetings were in progress; (c) organized collection of materials needed for the first three meetings; and (d) helped to find parents to assist in the experiential components of the first three meetings.

The school staff responsibilities included co-ordination of activities for each meeting and provision of written handouts that illustrated the theme of each session. More specifically, each of the three teachers involved assumed responsibility for one of the first three meetings, the school counsellor organized the discussion meetings on responsibility and support services, and the vice-principal conducted the meeting on school administration.

THE PROGRAM

Meetings were scheduled for seven to eight o'clock on six successive Tuesday evenings in February and March. The total program was presented to parents in a covering letter which outlined the theme of each meeting.

Three Experiential Meetings

In the first three meetings parents were invited to bring their four or five year old children to participate in a series of activities designed to facilitate parent-child interaction in the promotion of skill development in the areas of co-ordination, language and perception. Activities selected represented those often mentioned in pamphlets developed by school boards for use by parents (Edmonton Public School Board, 1974).

Co-ordination. Activities were designed to promote development of large and small muscle co-ordination and included tracing around objects, paper cutting, shoe lacing, and throwing balls at a target.

Language. Children were asked to perform tasks requiring receptive and expressive language abilities. These included following verbal directions, telling a story about a picture and describing an object which could be touched but not seen.

Perception. Activities focused on auditory and visual perception and included classification of objects, matching shapes and identification of sounds made by objects hidden from sight.

Obviously most of the activities chosen employed elements of co-ordination, language and perception. The intention of grouping the activities under three major areas was to provide a focus for each activity and to provide input to parents regarding their role in the development of each of the three areas.

Each activity was co-ordinated by a parent

volunteer. Every parent and child were escorted through the series of skill activities by a grade one student who acted as a guide, but who also participated in each activity. The grade one students were used in order to: (a) involve their parents, who brought them to the meeting; and (b) to provide to the parents of the younger children examples of a different level of skill development. Following the procession through the activities, the beginners went to a babysitting room while parents were offered coffee and given the opportunity to discuss the different activities. Emphasis by school staff during these discussions was placed on recognition of individual rates of skill development rather than achievement of a specified standard. At the end of the evening, parents were given a list of suggestions of ways that they could enhance skill development through involvement with their children at home.

The Development of Responsibility (Meeting Four)

The theme of the fourth meeting involved the development of responsible behaviour in children (Dreikurs, 1964; Glasser, 1965). This was a discussion session in which parents were divided into groups of four or five with a parent volunteer or staff member in each group.

Parents were first asked to suggest to their respective groups, tasks which they thought children could perform relatively independently at home. Posters had been placed in the discussion room outlining some of these tasks. Other posters suggested some co-ordination, language and perception skills which children practice while performing the tasks.

A second activity involved discussion of a series of problem situations often encountered in the home. Parents were asked to suggest solution to these problems and to share them with the whole group. Following the discussion, a list of solutions suggested by other parents was distributed for comment.

School Support Services (Meeting Five)

At this meeting the school counsellor, school psychologist, speech therapist, social worker and school nurse briefly outlined their functions and gave examples of instances where they may be involved. It was interesting to note the large number of parents who were unaware that the services of many of these specialists were available.

School Administration (Meeting Six)

This meeting was chaired by the school principal and vice-principal who outlined their roles and the basic rules regarding school operation. The parents were asked for reactions

and suggestions regarding the policies mentioned by the administrators.

CONCLUSIONS

Parents were asked to complete an evaluation questionnaire at the end of the program. Responses were extremely favorable with suggestions for extending such programs to parents of children in other grades.

Other indications of the success of the meetings were the following:

1. Attendance at the first three meetings was between 80½ and 90½ of eligible parents and for the last three meetings it was approximately 60½ to 70½. This tended to indicate that parents were most interested when their children were involved in the program. However, attendance at the other meetings seemed high enough to justify their existence.

2. The program facilitated informal communication between staff and parents. This set up a base from which to interact with parents the following year. The experiences of teachers, administrators and the school counsellor verified the success of the program in this area.

3. Discussion with the parents tended to indicate that they could understand the reasons for the activities and discussion topics presented.

4. Parents showed their acceptance of the meetings by staying longer at each successive meeting. By the end of the program, some parents were still present two hours after the meetings were scheduled to end.

5. The program is now in its fourth year of operation. This means that there are now parents whose children are currently in grades three and four who participated in the first series of meetings. Thus, the effects of the initial positive contact with the school staff has filtered upwards into the middle elementary grades.

6. The program has been implemented in other elementary schools with similar positive effects, particularly in the area of communication between home and school.

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