

TRAINING IN CARING: A PRACTICAL PROGRAM FOR SIXTH AND SEVENTH GRADERS WITH PRE-SCHOOLERS*

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Abstract

This paper describes the training of sixth and seventh graders in helping with preschoolers. So far 230 students have been involved in three 2½ hour play sessions. After helping, students filled in observation forms and met with the writer for a half-hour discussion and feedback. The training concentrated on helping them understand normal development, the concept of developmental stages, on self-awareness and the learning of communication skills to facilitate caring and interaction with young children.

Résumé

Ce document fait la description de l'entraînement donné à des élèves de 6ème et 7ème pour aider des enfants d'âge préscolaire. Jusqu'à présent 230 élèves ont participé à trois périodes de jeu de 2 heures et demie chacune. Après chacune d'elles, les étudiants ont rempli un schéma d'observation et ont pris part à une demi-heure de discussion avec l'auteur. L'entraînement a visé à leur faire comprendre la nature du développement normal, du développement par stages, leur identité personnelle, et à faire acquérir une facilité de communication qui pourrait rendre plus facile le soin des enfants et l'interaction avec eux.

A few years ago the writer worked with a Public Health Nurse who established a parent-tot drop-in centre ("Play Day") in an elementary school. The sixth and seventh graders played with the youngsters while the nurse and counsellor would lead a mothers' discussion group. In a previous paper the rationale for the program, the counsellor's role in the mothers' group, and the implications for the community around the school were described (Allan, 1975). In this paper another program is delineated in which particular attention was paid to the training of the sixth and seventh graders with the preschoolers.

The author has always had a strong interest in primary prevention (Allan, 1976) and though the job of an elementary school counsellor usually demands a lot of energy spent on remedial counselling s/he has always tried to devote some time each week to developmental and preventive counselling. On moving into a new school district in 1975 the author approached one of the principals with the idea of establishing a parent-child drop-in centre once every two weeks for an afternoon (1:00-2:30 p.m.) in the school gym. The purpose of this was:

- 1) To help the preschoolers get used to and to know the school before entering kindergarten,

- 2) For the school to offer the mothers a space to meet, to watch their children playing and to talk with a counsellor and
- 3) To train sixth and seventh graders in understanding and playing with young children.

The principal raised the issue with the teachers and they were enthusiastic about the idea. The school nurse was consulted, she recommended the program to certain mothers in the area and an announcement was made in the school newsletter. Volunteers were asked for from the sixth and seventh grades and the school board provided some funds for the buying of toys and books. The program has been running for four years now and this paper reports some of the findings of the work with the sixth and seventh graders. In particular, it will concentrate on a description of what the experience was like for them, what they learnt about young children and how to relate to them. To date, 230 students have been involved. At each session 15-20 mothers were present and between 20-25 babies, toddlers and preschoolers.

METHOD

One of the teachers, in charge of the school's child-care club, asked all of the sixth and seventh graders, in early September, for volunteers to help out with the preschoolers. In the first year 53 children applied; two-thirds were girls and one-third

* Paper presented at International Round Table for the Advancement of Counselling, Oslo, Norway, July 1978.

boys. They were broken down into seven groups with approximately nine students in each and each group would work with the preschoolers for three sessions. Each session was held once every two weeks and would last 2 hours (1:00-3:00 p.m.), of which 1½ hours was spent in play and ½ hour (2:30-3:00 p.m.) in supervision and feedback. Before the start of each session, the students met with the writer and were told that this was to be a learning experience for them in terms of how to play with and understand young children. They were shown how to set the room up into different stations or play areas; i.e., a drawing and play-dough area, a puzzle and block area, doll and toy area, a gross motor area for balls, hoops, running, bars, and floor trampoline and a quiet area with a mattress for resting and looking at books. They were told their main purpose was to play with the children, to follow them around, to do what the youngsters wanted (within reason) and to write a brief report at the end on what they did. If they got stuck or wanted help they were free to come and ask the writer.

At the start of the session they were to greet the mothers and children, take their coats, and to write out name tags. At the end of the session, after the play time, they were to fill out an observation form. This form consisted of five questions:

- What did you *notice* about the children?,
- What did you like about today?,
- What did you not like?,
- Do you have any suggestions as to how we can make 'Play Day' better?,
- Did you have any problems or concerns?

After ten minutes the forms were collected and the last 30 minutes was spent in supervision; i.e., in discussing what occurred, in helping them understand young children and in sharing alternate ways of interacting around difficult situations. After all three sessions, the students were asked to list what they learnt from Play Day.

RESULTS

The results will be presented in three parts: (1) Writer's Observations, (2) Student Self-reports and (3) Supervision Phase.

(1) *Writer's Observations*

During Play Day the writer was the anchor man for the students. He would walk around chatting with the preschoolers and be available to the older students if they needed help. This gave the writer time to concentrate on observing the interaction between the preschoolers and the sixth and seventh graders.

The observations fell into two categories. Those based on: (a) watching the students interact with the young children, and (b) listening to them talk

about the preschoolers during the half-hour supervision sessions.

(a) *Watching the Interactions.* The writer was always struck by how smoothly the one½ hours went. The older students seemed competent in their interactions. For example, they quickly got a number of gross motor activities going — trampoline work, chasing games, piggybacks, floor hockey, etc. — and after 30-40 minutes of this, would start, of their own accord, to do quiet things with the children — reading picture stories, drawing, play-dough, puzzles and blocks. This led into a third period of increased activity during the last half hour but one where the students now attempted to demonstrate skills to preschoolers; i.e., walking along the balance beam, somersaults on the trampoline, catching balls, etc. This would all occur spontaneously and without any direction from the writer. It was as if the natural rhythms of both sets of children matched each other. The students seldom approached the writer for help and indeed did not seem to need him there.

Sometimes the older students would get carried away with the equipment and start to play amongst themselves. A gentle reminder that they were in Play Day for the youngsters would help them orient to the preschoolers again. The number of older students in relation to preschoolers was 2:2, 2:4 or 1:1. Often the mothers would comment with amazement at how well the older boys and girls managed.

(b) *Listening in the Feedback Sessions.* When the older students talked out what was happening to them during the discussion sessions much more information became revealed. For example, at first, on the feedback forms, practically all of the students would write in "no problems." However, on talking with them and probing a little, lots of "problems and concerns" were revealed. It seemed very hard for the students to admit that there were any problems or that they needed help. Somehow this was seen as a "weakness" and the language for requests for help was not in their repertoire.

Another aspect that emerged was the element of *surprise*. That is, the students were very surprised, and often shocked, that the preschoolers at first did not talk to them, clung to their mothers, would not listen when read to (but started to tell their own stories), told "lies or stories," did not stop when told to, did not share and kicked or spat when mad.

As we talked more about this, it became apparent that underneath the surprise were some *hurt* and *angry* feelings. The students felt rejected that the preschoolers would cling to their mothers rather than play with them and angry that they would not do as they were told.

Another feeling to surface in the discussion phase was that of *hopelessness* and a feeling of being *at a complete loss* as to what to do. This arose particularly when a young child would cry (i.e., when they fell and hurt themselves or when their mother went out of the room). It also occurred when they could not understand what a child was saying to them (i.e., due to language immaturity).

(2) Students' Self-reports

The students also noticed and recorded some of their own feelings in response to playing with the preschoolers. Some of these were: "I felt:

- 1) *Lost*. "It's hard to understand them." "I didn't know what she wanted." "I couldn't understand what he was saying." "I just didn't know what to do." "The babies are cute but I didn't know what to say to them."
- 2) *Tired*. "It took lots of energy to keep up with them. They never seemed to want to rest. I was exhausted at the end. When they cried a lot I got a headache."
- 3) *Hurt*. "They scraped my nose with the hoop. They choked me to death and didn't even say 'sorry'." "They scratched, slapped, kicked and spat on me and I felt hurt." If a child was shy, or clung to their mother or ran back to her, the student tended to feel personally rejected.
- 4) *Shocked*. "I just didn't expect them to be so rude. I thought they would do what I said."
- 5) *Frustrated*. "When I told them to shut up, sit down or to stop fighting they didn't. I couldn't control them. It made me a bit frustrated and I didn't know how to handle them."
- 6) *Mad*. "I feel like hitting him and throwing him down. I wanted to hurt him back but I didn't. I just told him to 'get lost'." "I was getting a bit mad but I knew that I shouldn't get really mad at him."
- 7) *Worried*. "I kind of worried when the little kid crawled up the stairs and I asked his mother if he was allowed to." "I was frightened when he choked on a peg."
- 8) *Great*. "It was great fun playing with them. I would like to do it again. I think they are cute." "I love to work with them."

(3) Supervision Stage

Once the observation and feedback forms had been filled in the writer met with the students and told them that the purpose of this time together was to discuss what had occurred, to learn about young children and ways of relating to them. Following this the students were asked to tell what they noticed about the young children, what they liked and disliked and what concerns and problems

they had. Once an incident had been related the writer focused on trying to help the child think it through for himself by asking:

- "How did that make you feel?,"
- "What did you do?,"
- "What would you like to have done?,"
- "What would you do next time?,"

After this, the writer would open the discussion up to the rest of the group before making any suggestions himself. The purpose of this was to try to give them a format for thinking through a problem, to do the thinking themselves and to let them see there might be many ways to handle one situation.

At the end of the discussion the writer summarized what the students noticed and what they had learned about how to handle the problems that occurred. An emphasis was placed on understanding normal development, the concept of developmental stages and on the learning of new skills.

For example, in regards to shyness the students were told that:

- a) it is normal for toddlers and preschoolers to cling to their mothers and to be a bit frightened and shy in a new place with strangers,
- b) it takes time for them to get to know you,
- c) sometimes a too direct approach might scare them, and
- d) one approach might be to sit down near them and to one side with a toy, puzzle or drawing and let them come to you.

Likewise, it was explained that all the characteristics they noticed about young children were common and normal and that some of these changed as the child matured. Also, that their own feelings (of hurt, anger, concern, etc.) were normal and similar to what parents and teachers feel when living and working with children.

Some time was also spent on teaching them how to interact with the young child; that is, how to let the child take the initiative in the play, how to follow the child, how to wait and be patient, how to allow and encourage successful experiences and how to set limits and say "No."

The limit setting was one of the hardest tasks for them. In response to being "bugged" by a kid or seeing kids fighting, they would tend to say: "Why don't you go and bug Karen" (another seventh grader), or "Go and fight with a bigger kid" (meaning another preschooler). Around situations like this the writer showed the children a number of different communication skills (Allan, in press; Baruch, 1949; Ginott, 1972; and Gordon, 1970).

Some of these were to:

- a) *Describe what they see*: "I see two boys fighting

- over the puzzle and neither of them want to give it up.”
- b) *Verbalize their own feelings*: “I feel upset,” (sad, angry, tired or whatever),
 - c) *Make a request for change*: “I wish you would stop.”,
 - d) *Offer a distraction or an alternative*: “Billy, do you want to come and play with me on the ladder?” or
 - e) *Help them solve their own problems*: “I see we have a problem here. I wonder how I can help you both to solve it so that you can both feel good about it,” and
 - f) *Set effective limits*: “Joey, if you hit Billy again I’ll have to take you over to your Mum for a while until you quieten down.”

They were taught other limits too regarding:

- a) *The use of toys*: “The puzzle is for putting together. If you throw the pieces around I’ll have to put it away until next time.”,
- b) *Sharing*: “The one who had it first can play with it until she’s finished, then you can have your turn.” and
- c) *The use of themselves*: “Sandra, I’ve been giving you a piggy-back for 10 minutes now and I’m tired and I want to rest by myself. Could you go and play with Marie?”

In this phase of training much use was made of giving them alternate ways of handling the basic day-to-day problems that arise in dealing with young children. The examples, of course, were always taken from their experiences during Play Day so they were real to them.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

A number of points stand out from this study:

- 1) Developmentally speaking, students in the sixth and seventh grades seem highly motivated and well able to take care of and play with babies, toddlers and preschoolers when supervised.
- 2) The students enjoyed the experience of caring and playing as well as enjoying the youngsters themselves.
- 3) The experience enabled students to share their concerns and difficulties, to learn developmental concepts and some basic communication skills. To this extent, Play Day provided many highly “teachable moments.” For example, the students learnt about normal developmental stages by seeing and playing with babies, toddlers and preschoolers, by writing down their own observations (i.e., “What did you notice about the children?”) and by discussing these with the supervisor at the end. These moments were “highly teachable” because of the pupils’ excitement and involvement with the young children and because the writer took his cues from their written comments and their verbalized concerns. Likewise, the students were open to learning communication skills because there was a very real need based on

the difficulties they were experiencing with the youngsters. Whereas initially they experienced a sense of helplessness (“I just didn’t know what to do or say”), the communication skills gave them a sense of mastery and a feeling of being able to cope and handle young children. In sum, the discussion of developmental stages was geared to helping them understand young children and the communication skills helped them act in an effective manner towards them.

4) The training itself proved to be a reality testing experience in that students were surprised at the degree of difficulty and frustration involved in caring for young children. It became very apparent during the first group feedback and discussion that there was a great discrepancy between how they expected the youngsters to be and how they actually were. The students came in with an idealized image of the child as someone all lovable who would do as they wished. The reality was a shock and a surprise especially when they found that the children often did not comply, resisted their suggestions, were defiant and sometimes physically abusive. They experienced the normal ambivalent feelings involved in looking after children; i.e., the pleasure and joy and the frustration, anger and tiredness.

5) The experience helped them remember what they were like “as kids” and also helped them develop some degree of empathy with parents and teachers. Frequently heard comments were: “I remember what I was like when I was a kid.” “I guess I used to bug my older brother and sister just as much as these kids sometimes bug me.” Other comments were directed towards parents and teachers: “Now I know what it’s like to be a parent (or a teacher),” “Our parents get as tired with us as we did with these kids,” “It must be hard work being a teacher and looking after kids all day” or “I understand why my mum gets so mad at me.” Thus the experience seemed to help them understand what they were like as a young child and what it is like to be parent or teacher. This empathic feeling might help to improve communication at home and at school.

6) The trainer needs to be conscious of not only what he sees taking place with the students but also how they are experiencing and interpreting their interactions with the preschoolers. In particular, s/he needs to pay attention to how to help them verbalize their unspoken thoughts and feelings.

In sum, the school counsellor, because of her/his special training in understanding developmental concepts and communication skills and his release from classroom teaching, is in an ideal position to establish and run training-in-caring programs. If such training-in-caring and parenting

were part of every elementary school curriculum great benefits to society as a whole might ensue.

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