SERVING THE BLIND CHILD IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD COMMUNITY CENTER—A PROFESSIONAL CHALLENGE*

by SIDNEY R. SAUL

Guild for the Jewish Blind,
New York, N. Y.

ABOUT 100 parents crowded into a room of the large new community center building of Bronx House, in New York, to participate in the season's evaluation of summer day camp. An exciting part of the camp director's report concerned the small group of visually handicapped children who had been an integral part of this program. When she had ended, a mother arose and with a great deal of pride said, "My son's buddy was one of the sightless children, and he never even told me about it. I found out only a few days ago. It hadn't seemed to make any difference to him at all." Another parent added, "When I visited the Pearl River Campsite and saw the rough grounds, I asked my son, 'How does the visually handicapped child get around?' and he told me 'Oh, mommy, they go straight. We are the ones who trip and fall.' " One by one, the other parents arose—mothers and fathers of sighted and blind children.

Parents of the blind children said, "My child, partially sighted, has learned to ride his bike, and has begun to make friends in the community." The children learned to use the bus, to navigate the rough terrain, to use the swimming pool. One child's speech was vastly improved.

There was general agreement that sighted and blind children had gained great and valuable understanding of each other. What lay behind this unique discussion? What was the backdrop for this dramatic curtain raiser? And I use this term intentionally, for this was just the first of many programs which we expect will be more and more successful.

Need for Integrated Social Experience

The need for serving blind children during the summer was presented to us by their harassed parents. One after another, they described their difficulties during the summer months when schools and specialized agencies suspend regular program. Some had attempted to enroll their children in day camps and/or country camps. Most of them were turned away, as the camp administrations had felt themselves incapable of serving the blind child. A few children were accepted—often into a substandard camp. More often than not, the child was placed with a young guide and promptly ignored because, "How could he participate?" or, "He would hold up the other children."

In this discussion we will refer to individuals who are legally blind. This description applies to anyone whose vision

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cannot be corrected to better than 20/200. Many blind people, therefore, can see but the amount of usable vision is seriously curtailed. The case records gathered at the casework department of the New York Guild for the Jewish Blind help give a composite picture of the life of a blind child.

Jerry, for instance, has been blind from birth. When he was three years old, his parents thought he was ready for his first group experience. They tried a dozen nurseries, but none would accept him. And so Jerry, who needed desperately to learn all about the world into which he is growing, was sent to a nursery for blind children, located far from his home. That was the first step in removing him from contact with his immediate community. Even if his parents had been able to help him make friends in his neighborhood, at the age of six he is picked up by the Board of Education bus and taken to the one public school in his borough that has a Braille class. There he spends certain hours of the day in Braille class and other hours in a regular class of his grade. Again he is removed from his immediate community.

Billy also attended a nursery school for blind children. When he graduated, his parents thought he'd be "better off" with his "own kind" and sent him to one of two residential schools for blind children in New York City. He lived there from Sunday evening to Friday afternoon, and spent the weekend at home with his parents and sighted sisters.

Marvin's mother told us that he is "friends with everyone in the neighborhood" but when our social caseworker looked into the situation she found that he had only a "hello" acquaintance with them. They would come and play with his toys for a while but would soon leave him to play in games that would exclude a blind child. Marvin didn't have a real friend or playmate.

Kathy's parents wanted her to have the fun of participating in an organized recreation program, and they sought admission for her to a neighborhood community center. This was quite unusual, for most parents are afraid of rejection and do not even make the attempt. Kathy was not accepted, and so on Saturdays she attends a recreation center for visually handicapped children. Here, together with Billy, Jerry, Marvin, and other blind children, she enjoys entertainment, games and refreshments.

Separate classes, separate schools, separate recreation centers. How isolated, how segregated, how narrow—and ultimately—how lonely is the life of such a child!

But aside from the loneliness of this segregated existence, there are personality problems engendered by it. A child who grows in this way, protected and inexperienced, may become insecure. Having been isolated from other children (except those, like himself, also protected) he tends to become immature in his social relationships with his peers. He may also tend to be dependent.

However, he lives in a world of reality, whose demands will continually converge on him, forcing him to make adjustments for which, therefore, he is often unprepared. Problems begin to loom out of all proportion. The individual may become hostile and defensive.

I am not painting a picture of every blind person in absolute terms. I say merely, that these potentialities are inherent in a segregated situation and are often, to a lesser or greater extent, present in many of the individuals who come to the Guild for help. It becomes clear that Bill and Jerry and Kathy have not been permitted to develop as part of a wholesome and complete social group. They have been relegated to the fringes of the lifestream.

Because of this, it is crucial that any help tendered the blind child toward growing into a happy and well adjusted person should be given, where possible, in a normal setting, in the child's own community. We, at the Guild, would have to move blind children into groups where they *would* face real life situations and learn, with help, to solve their problems (as, of course, all children, with or without handicap, must do). Where they would also engage in normal play and activities with children on their own level and enjoy group experiences with their peers.

Development of Camp Program

To us at the Guild, Bronx House seemed the natural agency to be asked to join in this program. We felt that both the Guild and Bronx House had a great deal in common, for *both* agencies and their boards serve a broad community, have a forward looking policy, and high professional standards. In addition, Bronx House has participated in pioneering services to other handicapped children.

The New York Guild for the Jewish Blind is a non-sectarian multifunctional agency serving visually handicapped people of all ages. It provides casework, vocational rehabilitation services, sheltered workshops, group work and recreation programs in both its city center and the Home for the Aged Blind in Yonkers, N. Y.

The Guild's orientation is toward ultimate integration of blind people into their sighted communities, wherever feasible. In our vocational rehabilitation program, for example, the goal is to train the blind worker for return to industry. The Guild now places thirty trained blind people into private industry each year. Similarly, in our Group Work and Recreation Department, we aim to help people become part of the community in which they live, using its facilities and group work services in addition to, and ultimately instead of, ours.

Therefore, integrated day camp experiences for children are entirely in keeping with the Guild's philosophy and represent one further step in its implementation.

The first problem to be solved was recruitment. Because of the confidentiality rules of the New York State Commission for the Blind, we had to use our own resources. We drew from our own case load, and publicized our program in the public schools and in the special schools for the blind. In this way, we were able to interview seventeen children—nine of whom we were prepared to accept.

Next came the intake procedure. Together with Bronx House, we worked out a simple set of criteria. The child was to be within the normal range of emotional health, was to be able to get around reasonably well, and take reasonable care of his own physical needs. We also limited registration to those children who could be met at any of the several bus pick-up points on the Bronx House schedule. In this way we could hope for year-round center participation by the children who attended camp.

Intake was conducted by a team consisting of a caseworker from the Guild, the group work director of the Guild, and the camp director of Bronx House. Each of these individuals, by virtue of his function in the program, had a clearly defined role in the intake process. Both parent and child were interviewed by each member of the team.

We were careful not to duplicate areas of discussion in the interviews. This intake procedure proved valid and a great deal of its success was due to the careful co-planning of the staff, as well as an active team awareness which led to free-flowing interchange of information wherever necessary. Then there followed a meeting of the team where recorded material was carefully reviewed and final decisions were made.

The group of visually handicapped children that was finally accepted included five boys and one girl in the 8–10 year group; one boy and two girls in the 4–6 year Children's Center. All but one had been blind since birth; one suffered a cranial tumor which blinded him at the age of four. Some were totally blind; some had light perception, two had a tiny amount of real vision—up to 5/200 in

each eye. Their previous group experience was varied. Of the younger group, only one had attended a nursery school for blind children. The older children were either in public school, Braille or Sight Conservation classes or in schools for the blind. Only one had ever had an organized social experience together with sighted children—two previous summers in Bronx House Day Camp. In general the group included children with a great range of intellectual and social functioning, who had in common only their visual handicap and the segregated experiences this had imposed on them.

A review of summer day camp goals is in order. A child goes to camp to enjoy good healthy summer fun and activities, and to keep cool, in a healthy environment. We try to give him a wholesome group experience, to plan and share his fun with other children, and to enjoy cooperative living. He should acquire new skills such as swimming, camping skills and athletics, and participate in creative programming of many kinds (such as music, dancing, crafts, dramatics). And for the city child we want also to add some experience in country living.

The blind child has the *same* needs as the sighted child and derives the *same* benefits from a summer day camp. Some of his needs are, perhaps, more intense, as his experience is more limited. For example, the acquisition of new skills may be a slower process for him because of his handicap, or he may have greater difficulty in adjusting to group living. But, basically, he has the same requirements and is capable of participating in much the same type of program.

The Bronx House set-up at Pearl River consisted of eight co-ed groups from 7–11 years with about 20 children in each group. Each group had two leaders. There were 5 blind children at any one time, four boys and one girl with two leaders, one male and one female, supplied by the Guild along with a young Volunteer.

Because this was a learning experience for both agencies, and we were exploring methods, we kept the visually handicapped children as a separate group for one week for them to become accustomed to the new environment. During the second week they merged with an eight year old group in a moving ceremony in which the blind children presented the sighted children with a tree to be planted in their campsite, while both groups sang songs to each other.

The structure we used gave leadership to both visually handicapped and sighted children so that the larger group could break down into sub groups at times to pursue other interests. The blind children, therefore, were never an obstacle to the others.

We found—in the main—that there were many more things they could do together than separately. Some adaptations, of course, had to be made. For example, the game of kickbell was altered slightly by attaching bells to the volley ball so that our sightless children could compete on a more equal basis; or when food was placed before them, the blind children had to be told what they would be eating and where it was placed.

In connection with such modifications, one interesting incident occurred which is worthy of mention. Our area was separated from the main dirt road by a dry bed of a stream active only in the springtime. The older children in camp latched onto the concept that the blind children would find this a difficult physical barrier to traverse, and they were motivated to build a bridge. When the construction was completed and an appropriate ceremony held, the sighted children discovered that they, too, profited from the activity, for the bridge was a great convenience to all, especially when they had to lug lunch bags, milk and other heavy supplies into the camp area.

Therefore, what had begun as a special "adaptation" proved to be an improvement for everyone!

Programming provided no great difficulties. There was a wide variety of activities which included swimming, gardening, nature, camp craft, singing, dancing, arts and crafts, and hiking. Some of the visually handicapped children with usable vision were even able to play ball. The weekly mass program with each group performing before the entire camp became a strong motivating factor in group life. A highlight of the closing ceremonies was a puppet show performed by the integrated group.

At this point let us refer to some of the carefully recorded material. First, with respect to skills:

> Harry (blind) has been learning the use of the saw and hatchet. I have broken down each skill part by part, and have used this in teaching Harry and the other children how to use the tools.

And again, on July 20th,

> Joe (blind) is having a tremendous learning experience in the water. Although somewhat afraid, he is beginning to learn new skills. He enjoys kicking, lying on his back and holding on to the wall in the water, kicking his legs.

On August 1st,

> Fred (blind) wants to learn how to use a knife. I told him to bring one and I would show him how. Mark (blind), too, is interested.

And on August 10th,

> Some of the boys in the group admired Mark's ability to hit a ball. Some were surprised that he could hit safely . . . Fred achieved some group status when he was able to show the sighted group (it was a mixed game) that he could hit.

At another time,

> The Friendly Eagles (blind) and the Nomads (sighted) have really taken over the gardening project and made it their own. Mike (blind) is friendly with many children and seems to work well with all the children. A new project has been started, and Mike immediately pitched in, clearing the rocks from the area. The area will be the nature garden and part of the newly formed animal farm. Mike said he would like to care for the animals. After some discussion about the animal farm we took a walk to see the animal farms at other campsites and to get an idea of what is needed.

At our Weekly Campwide Program,

> Fred played the drums for mass program. Our group sang Shalom Chaverim and Shabbat Shalom. The children did a small circle dance. The entire camp became quiet, watching. I realized that the sighted children were amazed at our performance. Their expressions of friendliness and warmth were obvious.

In the Campsite,

> During the cookout, we attempted to give all the children different jobs which we broke down on a rotating basis. At the cookout, I saw Frank (sighted) nudge Peter and Hank (also sighted), and say "Look, Harry (blind) is making his own hamburger. How do you like that!" They were both rather surprised that Harry was able to hold his own patty over the fire.

Let us not get the idea this experience was a summer idyll, unmarred by any antagonisms or hostilities. There were plenty of those. But these are normal in development of children's relationships and attitudes and our children felt free enough to respond in a normal manner.

> Harry (blind) and Randy (sighted) pushed each other around today over the water fountain. Harry said, "I'll knock your block off." Randy said, "I'll push you through a water bucket. . . ."

The line at the water fountain was also a place of profound social development. Witness this excerpt.

> An incident developed between Harry (blind) and Naomi (sighted) today. Harry went to get a drink at the fountain. Naomi and a group of other girls were standing there getting ready to take their drink. Harry asked "Can I have a drink?" and Naomi said "Harry, you have to get to the back of the line like everyone else." Harry,

without any further provocation, punched her in the stomach.

When I asked Harry what happened, he told me "I think blind boys and girls should get a drink of water first and not have to stand in line." I explained that since the girls were standing in line they had first chance and he should take his turn. "But," I asked, "Do you really want to be treated in a special way?" Harry said, "Yes, I do." (At this point I felt that the issue of not fighting was more important and made a mental note to pick up on the issue of special privileges at another time.) I then suggested to Harry that if he had taken the time to discuss his viewpoint with Naomi she may have let him drink first.

We who work with blind people often hear the phrase, "It's coming to me because I'm blind." This attitude has been fostered by both blind and sighted. Experiences such as Harry's promotes his learning that he is an *equal* member of society, with *equal* responsibilities as well as *equal* rights.

Experiences like that stimulate mutual sympathy and understanding among the children, qualities that add dimension to their development. It is interesting to note the growth of wholesome attitudes which resulted from experience, contact, and intelligent interpretative leadership. For example,

Jay has made friends with Joan (sighted); she acts the role of overprotective mother with him, holding him as if he were a toy. I had to move in, as this was good for neither of them.

When Jay (blind) didn't want to water the plants, Mark (sighted) thought Jay was afraid of the water. So he took his hand and gently poured some water over it. "There, did that hurt?" he asked. Jay said "No." Then Mark took Jay's hand and helped him water the plant.

During the water games, Roberta (sighted) threw her arms around Fred (blind) and both almost fell into the water over the side of the pool. For the first time, Fred showed neither anger nor fear but he laughed, saying "Holy cow, we almost fell over the side!"

We can turn to the children's own comments for cues to their summer's fun and positive social experience:

Robin (sighted) said "Since knowing the blind kids, I've been finding out things that they can do well. I've never known blind children before and I've made friends with them in camp." Jack (blind) said "We have learned how to get along with each other."

Randy (sighted) said "I find that blind children do things well, especially they can hear and use their fingers well."

Lynn (sighted) said "It's been fun meeting the children that cannot see because they see things in a different way than we do."

As predicted, the blind children showed healthy growth. One child began to ride his bike in his neighborhood and started to make friends. Another father reported that for years he had been in the habit of taking Fridays off and taking the family to the beach. After the second week of camp, the blind child told his father, "dad, you take mother and sis. *I'm going to camp today!*" At the close of the camp season another child told his parents "I don't want to go to that school for blind children any more. I want to go to regular public school, just like all the other kids!" His mother enrolled him in public school.

The blind children grew in other ways. Those youngsters who did not know how to lace and tie shoes soon learned how. They learned to manage their food and fed themselves with greater skill. As indicated before, even the "simple" procedure of getting on and off the bus represented a victory; and, of course, the varied skills of camping and outdoor living gave them an experience they may never have gotten in any other setting.

Values to Parents and Families

Our experiences with parents tell us of shame, of guilt, and often of ultimate withdrawal from normal community contacts even for themselves. They may

have feelings of inadequacy with relation to themselves as men and women, as well as with respect to the seemingly insurmountable problem that they face in trying to rear their handicapped child. Even from a practical viewpoint, the parent who faces the daily tasks of teaching, training, and raising such a child is often, of necessity, isolated from his community when the child attends school and activities far from home.

It is axiomatic that such parental attitudes will reflect on the development of the child's personality. Since both parent and child are limited in their contacts with people outside the family, they are both caught in a vicious cycle of negative feelings.

Eventually, all such parents must turn to their communities to meet the various needs of their growing child such as for education, camping, organized group experiences and individual social contacts. At this point they hit a stone wall—the community's negative attitude toward the needs of a blind child (in fact, of any handicapped child or adult). This attitude stems from ignorance, misinformation, fear, or immature social attitudes.

At this point, too, parents must grapple with their own attitudes about blindness, which they find actively mirrored in the community. The blind child's isolation and segregation have their impact on all aspects of family living, especially on the lives of his parents.

We have learned that the psycho-social development of the blind child differs to some extent from that of the sighted child. The lack of social group experience, coupled with the real problems of daily living caused by the handicap has a telling effect on the rate of development. Therefore, a ten year old often gets along better with eight and nine year olds than with children in his own age group. This was something we learned as the summer progressed, and which required consideration in planning. Of course, each child has to be considered individually—and this will be a key factor in our grouping in the coming season.

Concluding Observations

Blind children do have some special problems and needs which demand recognition and handling, and require the patience, devotion and initiative of the leader. Also necessary is the ability to find new ways of teaching skills and the courage to experiment with them. Most important to realize is the generic principle that the group leader of any group must be sensitive to the needs and requirements of the individuals within that group and must respond to them accordingly. Once a child with a certain need (be it blindness or any other handicap or an emotional need) has been accepted into the group, then the leader must be able to find ways of accomplishing all the goals that are set for any leader of any group.

Courage and initiative are administrative requirements, too. For example, our experience last year has impelled us to begin this year on the completely integrated level, rather than starting with segregated groups and then merging them.

And this brings me to my final, and most universally applicable point—that courage and initiative are demanded similarly of our camps and community centers everywhere to reach out and serve this hitherto unserved group. I submit, that our centers *are* equipped to serve blind and otherwise handicapped children and adults without being required to make a single major change in facilities, program or budget.

The old bugaboos about the need for special staff, special training, special knowledge, have all been exploded by even our limited experiences thus far.

In order to insure the success of this pilot experience, the Guild supplied two skilled leaders. We believe that when there are as many as 3 to 5 blind children included in a single group, junior counselors might be required in addition to the number normally provided for. It is our opinion, however, that when the blind child is absorbed into a camp group on the basis of age, interest, maturity, etc. (as any other child is) then even this additional help may prove unnecessary.

There was no need for special equipment or special walks, guide wires or other expensive devices. In fact, there is no reason for an agency to expend any unusual amounts of money to service a group of blind people *within* its existing facilities.

More important than any other requisite is the Neighborhood Group Work Center's willingness to accept this responsibility as part of regular activity, to accept blind children, teen-agers, and adults as members of the community who should and can be served in the center.

Already many agencies are recognizing the reality of this need and the validity of this service. Sleep-away camps for adults and children, and some community centers, have begun to explore with us the opening of their doors to visually handicapped people. With careful planning and intelligent forethought, experiences in integration can become more and more successful.

Herein lies the challenge to us professional social workers. We live in a time of great decision with the values of human life balanced against the threat of nuclear annihilation. Our dedication toward serving and helping people places us squarely on that side of the scale which demands the cultivation of all available human resources. The Community Center must always recognize new frontiers of service demanded by the dynamics of the social scene. We, as social workers, must have the courage and initiative to follow through on extending help to blind, handicapped and all unserved sections of the community, to meet the needs, whatever they be, of human beings —wherever they are.

And what more direct convincing appeal can be made than *Jo* a blind child, who said, during the evaluation session:

"Now I know I'm a normal child—
Everyone treats me like one."