

experience for their children. Support from the Allied Jewish Federation and the United Way make available scholarships, providing the Center with funds not often accessible to synagogues. With monies available for tuition when needed, Jewish Centers can provide choices for all Jews who may wish to build on basic Jewish experiences and early Jewish identification for their children.

The early childhood staff is often aware (as is true in all departments) that preschool is not only one of many programs which make up the total agency. The preschool not only deserves, but requires, the respect of the executive staff in order to integrate the program into the total agency. It is only through interdepartmental efforts that the preschool can capitalize on the full benefits of the Center and thereby preserve

the unique quality of early Jewish education that can be found only in a J.C.C. preschool. Early childhood services are essential to the Center if it is to continue to serve the entire community. To exclude the preschoolers is to exclude a part of that community. The preschool encompasses the young children and the young parents of the Jewish community. It may well be in the preschool that parents begin to reaffirm their Jewish commitment, begin to remedy deficiencies in their Jewish education and begin to identify themselves with their children as a Jewish family within the Jewish community. Preschool in a Jewish community center can offer a beginning. It was a great Jewish sage who said, "a good beginning has no end."

The Changing Family: Its Implications for Early Childhood Centers*

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One of the challenges facing teachers today is to broaden children's understanding in a way that can encompass the complicated family life styles in which many of our children are now living. We must present the concept of "family" in a way in which all the children can contribute and feel worthwhile.

Recently, I found a 25-year-old book on fingerplays, published in 1958 by our local professional early childhood association. Some of the fingerplays went like this:

I have a small family here
A family full of good cheer
A father — a mother
A sister — a brother
A baby so sunny and dear.
Here's my mommy
Here's my brother, see?
Here's my sister
And Here is little me!

and

This is the mother so kind and good
This is the father who buys our food
This is the brother so big and tall
This is the sister who loves her doll
This is the baby so little you see
Short and tall is this family.

These words were probably appropriate in 1958. However, when I discovered the same poems in a 1974-75 edition of the same publication I wondered about the appropriateness of the message for today's children. I did some research, and here are the statistics I found. According to recent estimates, some 14 million women, with children, are working. This figure includes four out of ten mothers of children under six years old, and more than half of all mothers of school age children.¹ The great majority of these working women

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¹ Margaret Mead, "Can the American Family Survive?" *Redbook Magazine*, Feb. 1977, p. 91

are in full time jobs. A large proportion of these women are the sole family support.

Because of soaring divorce rates, and a rise in illegitimacy, it is estimated that ten million children (one in every six), now live apart from their fathers, and 40 percent of all divorced, separated or single women do not even receive any financial assistance from the fathers of their children.²

Jewish school can no longer claim immunity to these conditions because more and more, we are serving the child of the single-parent family. At the Jewish Day Nursery in Cleveland, 55 percent of our students are from single-parent family homes. In Denver, at the Jewish Community Center day care, the figure is 70 percent.

A survey of 12 representative day camps sponsored by J.C.C.'s and Federations³ throughout the country, revealed that, on the average, 12 percent of those served were from single-parent families, and, in the New York area where 14 representative camps were surveyed, the children from single-parent families represented close to 30 percent. The high was 66 percent, the low was six percent.

Today, these statistics and our own personal experiences tell us that, for many children, those old fingerplays might well have referred to "Mommy and her friend" and "Daddy on the weekend." They could mention several sets of grandparents, or none at all—for today's family is mobile and often isolated from relatives.

² *Cleveland Plain Dealer*—April 22, 1977.

³ Sherwood Epstein, "Survey of Single Parent Families, and Resident Camping" Jewish Welfare Board, New York, 1975.

As educators, we have grown increasingly aware of the changes, the choices, and the differences in family life styles. Moreover, as educators, we are uneasy about what our role should be in helping children understand and value their own family life, as well as the family life of those who live differently from themselves.

One of the challenges facing teachers today is to broaden children's understanding in a way that can encompass the complicated family life styles in which many of our children are now living. We must present the concept of "family" in a way in which all the children can contribute and feel worthwhile.

To accomplish our goal, we need to have a three-way approach:

1. We must sensitize ourselves and our staffs so that we can give appropriate support to children of single-parent families, as well as to those of intact families.

2. We must develop an early childhood curriculum for the study of the family which presents the many variations in family life today.

3. We must develop family programs which welcome and provide for all types of families with all types of schedules. By welcoming the family into the child's school life, we act as a model of appreciation and acceptance.

To begin, I turn to the first approach:

Teacher Sensitivity

As teachers, we need to support children and parents who are experiencing family variations. In like token, we must also be ready to support those children from two-parent families who are fully aware of the unsettling experiences in families of their friends.

Recently, I spoke with a parent who was the child of divorced parents a generation ago. This was a tremendous stigma for him to overcome in his early years, and he recalls the fear he had of being ridiculed or exposed as being different or, worse yet, responsible for it all. In those childhood days, it was often the

sensitive teacher who protected him from the hurt of "being different." My point is that, today, it is still the responsibility of the teacher to protect children from feelings of not belonging or from feelings of "second best" even when the unhappiness seems to affect more children.

This need for sensitivity applies equally for those of us who serve two-parent families or families with non-working mothers. These children also are puzzled by the differences they observe, and they are unsure of what meaning it can have to them and their own family's security and love. Reassurance that a family argument is not the cause of divorce and that the child is not responsible for adults living together or not living together is as important a message for the child of the two-parent home as it is for those of one-parent households.

In addition, teachers can give perspective to the role of every child within the family constellation whether that constellation is two-parent or single-parent.

Dr. Lillian Katz, of the University of Illinois, suggests that we observe and listen to the child and the parent to become aware of the role that the child plays in his family. Is she the baby? the big girl? the clumsy one?; the smart one?; or, "the one that looks just like my ex-husband." Dr. Katz feels that teachers can help a child to greater accomplishments and independence by reflecting the *true* strengths of the child to the parent, and by helping the child to see himself as he really is rather than just in the role assigned to him by his family.

In our school I have heard a parent wail "John acts just like his Dad used to act. At home he is always talking and never listening." At school, however, John does listen, and it's important that he feel recognized for his self control. Moreover, his mother can be helped to see that John is not the "talker" she described, but that he is a very special person with his own special attributes.

Sensitive teachers also serve *parents* as well as children, so we need to be aware of the

discomfort which can occur for single parents as a result of their own frustrations over trying to do the job of two people. If this discomfort is compounded by the teacher's assumption that "all children of one-parent families have problems," the burden of responsibility is even more overwhelming.

Certainly, the child's feeling of sadness and, often, anger that accompany the loss of a parent, does need to be recognized and accepted during a readjustment phase.

Recently, I took part in a kindergarten class discussion where the children were speaking about golf. One of the children was displaying a golf ball and clubs to the others. I wondered if any of the children knew anyone who played golf. Several said they did, and one little boy Jimmy said, "I play golf everyday with my dad." Larry, sitting next to him retorted angrily—"No, you don't—your mother and dad are divorced just like mine." Jimmy hung his head, and his face flushed. I said quietly, perhaps Jimmy meant that he would *like* to play golf every day with his dad. Jimmy lifted his face, smiled, and said "Yes, that was it."

Later, when he spoke of tennis, Larry said, "I only see my father on weekends—sometimes, we play tennis, *and I beat him!*" Larry was certainly making sure that I had *all* the facts and he was reassuring himself as well.

Larry's earlier expression of anger and his stated desire to be strong in control seemed to be his way of saying "Do you think I'm still o.k.?" It is at this point that the teacher can indirectly let Larry know that he *is* "o.k." She can show acceptance of Larry's situation. In private she can add "often children feel sad or angry when they can't be with a parent as much as they might like." She can reassure him that his dad and he can still care about each other even when they are not together. For children like Larry and Jimmy the schoolroom can become a neutral place where family memories and concerns can be accepted and hence need not demand continuing attention. The released energy can be rechanneled into skill accomplishment and satisfactions with the support of the teacher.

I heard a father say almost angrily: I know that the Ima is supposed to *bensch licht* but in our home I am the Ima and the Abba, so I light the candles. My children learn that it should not be done that way, and it is hard for them. His face reddened and his eyes filled as he struggled with his feelings of not doing it the way it's "supposed to be."

In this situation the sensitive teacher could open up the world of acceptable and optional actions for the children and for parents through a presentation of alternate ways to accomplish lighting Shabbos candles.

This vignette brings our attention to the heightened stress that some children of one-parent families feel around holiday celebrations that might require a two-parent orientation. Mother's Day and Father's Day celebrations need to be carefully thought about before the teacher discusses these with the children. In our school, some of the staff are thinking about the celebration of "Family Day" instead of designating the specific member of the family.

No matter how we decide to approach such matters in your school, the sensitivity of the teaching staff to the special needs of children and parents will be a foundation for the children's gaining in feelings of self-worth.

Developing a Family Curriculum

We have discussed the importance of teacher sensitivity to children's needs while they are undergoing changes in family security or even if they are just watching others experience these changes. *The second approach, to help children clarify family happenings, can be developed thru curriculum which includes discussion of family variations in membership and pattern.*

The initial step to building this curriculum is to find out what the children do know about a family. One way to learn more is to refer to notes from the intake interviews and the child's personal history form. Hopefully, there are questions and answers on it which can tell us basic facts and statistics about each child, but, primarily we will be finding out what the

parent knows, not what the child knows. It may seem simplistic, but an easy way to find out how the child perceives his family is to bring in all kinds of "dress-up" clothes, hang them in the house corner and wait, watch and listen. As the children discover the outfits and talk to each other we may learn that Joshua's dad keeps his clothes in an apartment out-of-town, or that Jenny always wants the mother's dress, and when she wears it, she is very bossy and mean. Jason won't do anything in the house corner. He says it's "girl stuff," and Candy plays there all the time as "the baby." In this way, we will begin to find out how the children are thinking about families.

A second step in building the curriculum is to bring the children together for a "sharing time." We can say, "Today, we are going to talk about our families." Do you know what the word, family, means?" A definition for family that can be considered with the children is, "a family is usually the people who live with you and take care of you. You care about each other in a family. Some members of your family may not live with you, but they still care about you very much and you care about them very much." "A family may have two people in it, or it may have many people in it."

Next, we can present several pictures of people of all generations for discussion, trying to start out with pictures of less stereotyped members of a family—an uncle, a grandparent, a teenage sister.

Pictures of family members of all races and people expressing many kinds of emotions can be shown. We can ask, "What do you think they are saying?" "Has anyone ever said that to you?" The picture might bring forth comments like, "My uncle lives with us now—he lost his job," or "My baby sister used to look like that—now she smiles at me."

During this sharing time, it's good to listen carefully to each child and to try to review what we have learned about each of their families:

"Joey's mother lives in Toledo. She visits him on Wednesdays."

"Carla's sister once lived in another

country. She has dark hair."

Phillip's grandpa lives with them.

Peter's mother is going to have a baby.

John says he is adopted.

Many of these subjects may call for close communication with parents and mutual parent-teacher support for the child. As the teacher reviews this information with the children, the best reassurance she can give them is her own acceptance and interest in what they are saying.

The family curriculum that we develop can take place casually throughout the year, or it can be more concentrated over a period of weeks.

There are several activities which can be presented, depending on the children's readiness for the concept and level of skill accomplishment. Some of these are:

1. Asking the children to bring pictures from home of one member of their family. This can be the basis for a *family bulletin board* where children could admire the pictures at leisure.

2. Because young children love to ask questions a *family survey* can be the source of information and pleasure. The class can think of questions to ask at home, and a "questionnaire" can be developed. The form can ask the parent to talk with the child about the answers. When the children return with their reports, the material can be summarized. Some sample questions might include:

1. Where do we live? In a house, in an apartment, in a trailer?

2. How many members are in our family? Where do they live?

3. What is my favorite place in my home?

4. How many (cousins, aunts, etc.) do I have?

For the children who are ready for the concept, the teacher can make a *graph picture* of how many brothers and sisters, or aunts or cousins, in total for the whole class and follow this up with "Do we have more brothers than sisters?" "Do we have more aunts than cousins?" etc.

3. It is important to make sure that the children *understand the vocabulary* that is

being represented. What is a stepmother? Who is mother's mother? What does "divorced" mean?

4. To help the children understand their own development within the family the teacher can assemble pictures of people from magazines, place them on cards and ask children to place them in a *growth series*—a baby, preschooler, school-age child, teenager, young married, middle aged, grandparents, preferably with different sexes and races. An appropriate discussion at this point may include the information that Mommy and Daddy were once children and now they are parents. In like manner the children are children now but someday they will be grown-up and they may marry and be parents, also. For the child who has a conflicted family situation this message can indicate a future hope that someday "I can create a family more like I want."

5. Each child can draw his family or pick out his family from the magazine pictures to make his *family book*. A *collage of family pictures* made by each child could be incorporated into a class book with a page for each child. Each book is a cherished record of a family—whether it has two people in it or six.

6. To help the children in their understanding of family differences and similarities: *puppets* can be created from paper plates, small cereal boxes or paper bags. "Someone from my family" can be the theme of the project or, for the ambitious, one puppet can be made for each of several family members.

Different situations of "Let's pretend" can be enacted with the puppets. The children can decide the plot. It might include a benign situation or the children might become involved in a loud discussion of "who should take care of the children in 'our divorce'."

7. For another form of family representation, "family" props: all kinds of tools, utensils, aprons, hats, shoes, purses, briefcases can be used. These can lend themselves easily to *creative drama activity*. They may begin on their own, but, if not, the children can be encouraged with some suggestions, e.g., "An exciting (funny, sad, scary, happy) thing that happened in my family."

8. *Visits* from members of the children's families can be arranged. Starting out with non-stereotyped members—uncles, cousins, grandmothers—will open up the children's views of family membership.

9. Teachers can speak about their own families and invite members of their own families to school. The children can keep a list of visitors—who they were and what they do: John's teenage brother goes to high school and works after school at the drug store; Kim's aunt, Ginny, lives with her and is a librarian. The visitors can help the children broaden their views of what women and men do, and how lots of different people in a family can take care of children.

Visiting grandparents, who are often isolated from children in our society, can be magnificent contributors to the children's understanding of the family. For many children, grandparents are a very stabilizing influence when parents are involved with other pressures.

10. Of course, all Jewish holiday celebrations—Shabbat, Chanukah, Tu'bshvat, Purim, Passover, Israel's Independence Day—are opportunities to include family members in the class activities. These holiday celebrations are especially meaningful for the one-parent family, because it allows the child to feel the tradition of "coming together."

11. When visitors do come, taking their picture with the class, posting the pictures for viewing and recall, and sending a copy of the picture to the guest as a way to say "thank you" can be incentives for the children to discuss and remember the visit.

Throughout the presentation of family, it is well to encourage continually the children to see that a person can have more than one role. A father can be a teacher. A teacher can be an aunt. Your father can be your father even if he lives in another place with other children. Your mother can work in an office or drive a bus and still be your mother. Grandma is your grandma, but she is still Daddy's mother.

Books and records can be very valuable in building your multi-faceted view of a family.

These are but a few ways to build a family curriculum. To summarize, what we hope to

develop is a curriculum which includes many different experiences and many variations of family togetherness. In this way, the children in the class will open themselves to more possibilities of self-acceptance as well as an acceptance of others who live their lives differently.

Family Program Planning

In our school, parent programs often include dinner-time meetings because we have found that for many of our parents who work, this time is available and it is easier to arrange attendance. The warm friendliness of a "picnic" dinner with the family and the families of friends adds a special dimension to the program and provides a way for parents to participate in their child's school.

We ask each family to bring their own dinner, and the children in the class provide the beverage and a specially prepared dessert. We plan a creative craft for the parent and the child to complete together after dinner. These crafts are suggested by our parent-planning committee, and the basics are prearranged by them beforehand. This year, we made Chanukah mobiles one evening, and Purim crowns on another evening. We have concluded our programs at various times with a holiday sing-along, our own *Megillah* reading, and a play presentation.

This year, our parent discussion evening included subjects that apply to all families. A list of subjects was presented by the school committee to see what was of interest to the parents. This list served as a basis for evening discussion with our child development consul-

tant. Parents and their friends are welcome at these meetings.

In addition to Parent Evenings and Family Get-Togethers, the school can serve parents through bulletin board "Matching Services." All families seek low or modestly priced sitting service, household repair, etc. so that a "Talent and Skill Exchange" or "Help Wanted and Given" list could be a service welcomed by many.

In some schools working in cooperation with local teenage or senior adult groups, "Borrow a Grandparent" or "Rent a Teenager" programs, have been other successful ways that isolated families can extend their relationships.

Summary

We have reviewed some of the implications of changing family life styles for children who are in our early childhood programs. In response to the new needs, we must be sure that, as educators, (1) we are sensitive to alternatives in family practices, (2) that we provide the curriculum and (3) the programs which can serve all of our children in a positive manner. As teachers some of us may think that education is preparation for life and others may feel that education is life itself but no matter what our philosophy as teachers we can provide an atmosphere where parents can feel assured that their children are receiving a realistic, supportive view of their lives no matter how the patterns may vary. In this way, we well enable each child to feel his own self-worth as he/she moves to successive maturational levels.

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