

LIFE IN THE NURSERY SCHOOL

by

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Principal of Gipsy Hill Training College ; Chairman of
Nursery School Association of Great Britain, 1929-1938.

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FOREWORD

This book is intended to help young teachers and students to understand the growing child and his problems. It aspires to be a guide to their work, in Nursery Schools and classes, of fostering development and helping each child to educate himself as he spontaneously tries to do. Each chapter, and in fact the book as a whole, should be treated as merely an introduction to the wider study each teacher should pursue for herself.

Consideration of such items as buildings, furniture or costs have not been dealt with. Information on all these practical matters is included in various pamphlets issued by the Nursery Schools Association of Great Britain and brought frequently up to date. A competent statement is also given in *The English Nursery School*—by Phoebe Cusden.

Many people have helped directly and indirectly in the preparation of this book, and it would be impossible to name all who have stimulated me in my work for young children, extending now over thirty years. To the late Frances Newton, Principal of my training college in Sydney, and to Lucy Spence Morice, M.B.E., friend and counsellor, who helped me in so many ways when I was organizing pre-school education in Adelaide between 1905 and 1917, I owe more than can be expressed in words.

I also wish to put on record the contribution made to the cause of education by Miss Belle Rennie, who founded Gipsy Hill Training College in 1917 and its Nursery School "The Rommany" in 1919. As Principal of the College since it was opened, I have had a unique opportunity for continuing my study of early education and experiment in the training of teachers for it—an opportunity for which I am deeply grateful to Miss Rennie

and without which this book could not have been written.

My thanks are due to the many superintendents and teachers in English and foreign Nursery Schools who have given me facilities for observing their methods ; to my colleagues at Gipsy Hill and to my fellow-workers in the Nursery School Association, more especially to Miss Grace Owen, O.B.E., M. Ed., to whose enthusiasm and understanding the movement owes so much. I should like to mention Phyllis Booth (Duncan), B.A. ; Dora Cadman, M.R.C.S., L.R.C.P. ; Gwen Chesters, B.A. ; and Irene Bromhall Champernowne, B.Sc., who have helped directly in the preparation of some sections of this book.

Many old students and friends have supplied photographs which have been arranged into composite pictures by Paul Gillett who contributed the line drawings, the photographs facing pages 118 and 184, the frontispiece, and designed the dust-jacket.

I wish to thank the authors and publishers, including the Controller of H.M. Stationery Office, for permission to quote from their publications ; Mr. John Cox, Director of Education for Bolton, for permitting the inclusion of drawings of equipment in use in Bolton Nursery School and classes ; Dr. E. Davies, Director of Education for Willesden for the plan of Gladstone Park Nursery classes ; and Save the Children Nursery School Committee, for plan of Jarrow Nursery School.

Finally, I desire to express my very great appreciation to Mrs. Roy Devereux for reading the MS., and advising me generally on the arrangement of the book.

L. de L.

Gipsy Hill,

1939.

INTRODUCTION

THE passing of the Education Act of 1918 permitted Local Educational Authorities to establish Nursery Schools and classes for children under the age of five, and to give grants in aid to voluntary bodies doing so. Some time elapsed, however, before the need for this new departure was generally recognised, and the economy forced upon the government of this country by the financial crises that followed the Great War, retarded the growth of the movement. Of recent years its value and national importance have been demonstrated by the striking physical and mental improvement in the children who have attended the nursery schools established during the past twenty years. This improvement has more than justified the faith of pioneers, and has strengthened the demand that the legislation affecting them should no longer be merely permissive. Out of a hundred odd nursery schools in England with at most eight or nine thousand children in attendance, nearly 50 per cent. are provided by voluntary bodies. To-day it is widely felt that the time has come when it should be made obligatory upon local authorities to provide adequately for children under five as they are required to do for those over that age. We cannot afford this neglect of the critical early years if our children are to grow into fit and fine citizens. It involves the expenditure of vast sums annually on mental and physical ill health, much of which, as well as the suffering involved, could be averted by wise care in formative years.

The increase in the number of nursery classes has been much more rapid, but as they are not subject to the regulations imposed upon nursery schools, they have, in

the past, varied considerably in quality. The administration of the two services is entirely different. Nursery schools are classified under "Special Services" and receive grants from the Board of Education if certain conditions are observed. These conditions were framed to secure for children between the ages of two and five the fullest measure of care and nurture. This includes open-air buildings, whole day sessions with carefully planned meals and sleep. In addition to training in health and cleanliness made possible by carefully planned buildings, specially trained teachers, the daily visit of a nurse and frequent medical inspection are provided in the nursery school.

Nursery classes being part of the Elementary School system are, on the other hand, controlled by the Code. There are no special regulations for the care of the under fives attending them. In the early days, therefore, these so called "Nursery" classes had little to recommend them. They were carried on in the ordinary school rooms, in many cases by teachers not specially trained for the work, nor were there facilities for an open-air life nor for inculcating good health habits. Neither meals nor regular medical inspection was available, and the supply of toys and educational apparatus was extremely meagre. In consequence of the widespread propaganda conducted by the Nursery School Association and the foresight and initiative of various Directors of Education, the great difference between nursery classes and nursery schools is disappearing and a single standard of nurture and education is being established. In several parts of the country there are to-day nursery classes in which the conditions necessary for good all round growth are provided as adequately as in nursery schools. The majority, however, still close from noon till two o'clock. This makes a badly balanced day, inflicts the fatigue of a double journey upon children at a time of day when they should

be asleep, and also deprives many of them of a midday meal specially dieted to meet their needs.

Perhaps the most significant progress that has taken place is the recognition that the Nursery School is "not a wayside concession to charity" to borrow Dr. Tawney's phrase. For years it laboured under this misconception and the assumption that it was a remedial service necessary only in slums for children who were the victims of unsatisfactory social conditions. Its chief function is on the contrary to foster the all round growth of normal children. It is primarily educational and only secondarily remedial for the nature of the remedy varies from child to child. For one the need is bodily cleanliness, or enough to eat; for another it is training in self-reliance and independence. Children from some homes need the love and attention that give them confidence; from others they need to discover the claims of other children and to learn to co-operate with them. Those remedies cannot be settled on a regional basis—not even the need of physical nourishment. Some poor mothers are wise spenders and good cooks, others are not, and side by side one may find people well and ill nourished in every district. It is obvious that the working mother with her slender purse, and her marketing, cooking and cleaning duties cannot be expected to give her children the care and training they need, nor provide the nourishing food, open-air life, and space for play that are so essential. The long waiting lists and the increasing demand for fee paying schools are evidence of the need felt by parents generally for the help and expert care that nursery schools provide.

The belief that home, any sort of home, is the safest place for the high-spirited young child is evergreen despite much evidence to the contrary. Though road accidents are heaviest in pre-school and post-school years, the number of accidents that happen in the home is

nearly half as many again. Over 80 per cent. of the total deaths from scalds fall upon children under five. Again over 25 per cent. of the fatally burned are children, half of them under five. Of drowning fatalities 40 per cent. were children of whom one-third were under five.¹ There are no figures for cuts, bruises and broken bones that result from falls and playing with dangerous instruments, which are very numerous.

The importance of the beginning of life when growth is rapid and the organism is susceptible to influences that affect it permanently for good or ill, has been recognized for centuries. "Whatever the creature, be it plant or animal, tame or wild, if its earliest growth make a good start that is the most important step towards the consummation of that excellence of which its nature is capable," said Plato. Throughout the arches of the years this belief has echoed and re-echoed. To-day, as Gesell puts it, it has passed from belief to knowledge, and "modern science has confirmed the judgment of common sense."

Research into physical and psychological growth has been intensive and world-wide. It is now generally accepted, that the foundation of health and intelligence, and the pattern which the child follows in unfolding his personality are laid down in infancy. After an early age, growth is in the nature of an elaboration and modification of the original design to which it adheres in all essential features. It is not a succession of stages, but a continuous progression, like a river wherein anything that enters to enrich or to pollute is carried onwards. The effects of malnutrition and infectious disease in early years are carried as scars on the bones from childhood till death. Those weakened by ill-health in childhood are rendered more susceptible to breakdown later. The

¹ Helen Sutherland and Lt.-Col. Pickard : *Mother and Child*, November 1937.

effects of psychic malnutrition or mishandling are as serious, leading sometimes to unhappiness and neurosis, sometimes to delinquency and crime. On the other hand, helpful influences and robust health established in early years are of permanent value.

The demand for more nursery schools is in effect an insistence on the right of every child to conditions of life that ensure opportunity for a full development of mind and body. To provide such opportunities should surely constitute a basic responsibility of the civilized state.

If nursery schools were established in all areas it would become possible to link them up with the Maternity and Child Welfare centres and the School Medical service into a continuous scheme of health supervision. This might become the nucleus of a still wider organization of *growth* supervision in which psychiatry and medicine could work hand in hand. Such arrangements as exist to-day are dis-continuous and partial and consist of little more than the examination of children's health at specific ages. "The enigmatical oneness of the human being has its corollary in the fact that bodily facts are not purely physical, nor mental traits purely psychic."¹ Thus even the cause of physical ill health cannot be truly ascertained nor any satisfactory remedy prescribed without knowledge of the child as a whole. The principle of attaching psychiatrists as well as doctors to nursery schools is adopted in the United States and is to be a feature of the new scheme for Australia.

With two or three exceptions nursery schools have been limited to children between two and five years of age. To-day there is a strong body of opinion in favour of extending the age to 7 + as is possible under the Act. It would undoubtedly be better to do so, for there is no justification for the break that now occurs at five. Five to seven is from the physical point of view a period of

¹ Aldous Huxley: *Ends and Means*. (Chatto and Windus.)

very rapid growth in which the same close attention to nutrition and health that characterizes nursery years, should be provided. From a psychological point of view also a break then is very undesirable, as many of the qualities and powers that begin to take shape in nursery years, do not complete their first phase of growth before six or later. To change a child's way of life and of learning at the wrong time may be, and frequently is, as disastrous as the transplanting of a plant about to flower. If it does not kill the plant it makes for an impoverished florescence. Man is wiser with plants than with children whose natural development is constantly hampered by lack of sensitive feeling and scientific understanding of the problem. When this happens growth is apt to be arrested at an infantile stage in one way or another and the child is thus prevented from developing a balanced personality. In method, spirit and approach education should not change until the child himself changes as he does between seven and eight. If his play life has been adequate, by that age he is ready for schooling proper, and if his intelligence has not been dulled by drilling in special skills such as the three Rs, nor his will-power weakened by being over-taught he will seize upon the opportunity that school brings him with vigour and enthusiasm. Time is lost rather than gained by premature insistence upon learning.

It is coming to be recognized generally that under seven years of age there should be no compulsion for children to tackle school work. They should, on the contrary, be left free to follow their own interests and to progress at their own pace. In the experimental two to seven nursery schools already in existence and in many progressive infants' schools it has been found that if they are given an environment planned to meet their changing needs, some children begin one or other of the three Rs around about five but most of them disregard all three

until between six and seven. Yet it is evident that these children educate themselves very thoroughly in their play and become intelligent, co-operative, self-reliant and efficient. When they turn to formal work, as they do spontaneously when ripe for such learning, they make very rapid strides. Given the good foundation to education that life in the nursery school ensures, children are not only prepared well for their subsequent schooling but are enabled to get full value from it. What is more important, they experience a way of life that should help them to grow into healthy men and women of character, poise and intelligence of which our democracy has more urgent need than ever before in history.

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CHAPTER I

GROWTH

THE words "growth" and "development" though often used interchangeably do not really describe the same process. Growth is primarily concerned with increase in size, development with complexity of structure and function and to some extent with the change of proportion.

According to Gesell who has written in such an illuminating way about infancy, "Growth is the most significant term in the vocabulary of hygiene," having in some respects "a meaning more pregnant than the word health."¹ The chief business of the young child is to grow, and therefore this phenomenon is of prime importance to the teacher, who should know all that is possible about the process and the modifications it brings, and understand the child's own effort to develop his body and mind. Hers is a task of co-operation, for the function of education is to foster growth. She is called upon to protect and encourage it in every way so that children progress spontaneously and naturally towards the fullness of vigorous life.

Human growth is a miraculous and incomprehensible process during which a microscopic speck of protoplasm changes into a complex organism possessing diverse powers. The full-grown person, who may "take the wings of the morning and explore the uttermost parts of the sea," has a body that is "fearfully and wonderfully made"; a mind capable of thought and reason, of artistic creativity and scientific imagination, and a personality

¹ Gesell, *Guidance and Mental Growth in Infant and Child*. (Macmillan Co., N.Y.)

in which hopes and fears, love and hate, fear and fortitude are blended with the capacity to wonder, and to worship. All of this evolves in some inexplicable way from a single cell.

The original cell from which the individual grows contains all the potentialities of full development. No others can be added by education and training, opportunity or experience. The only help that can be given from without is in the direction of releasing and developing inherent potentialities. "It is believed by many people that rare talents and artistic gifts of mankind are not due to something added to the make-up of an ordinary man, but to the absence of factors that inhibit the development of these powers. According to Bateson they are to be looked on as a release of power normally suppressed."¹ The theory of evolution postulates a process of eliminating factors that inhibit development and regards all forms of life that at present inhabit the world, plants, insects, animals, man, as having evolved from the one first cell that implanted life on this planet. In this conception of the unity of all life, science and philosophy meet.

THE PATTERN OF GROWTH

The impulse towards growth and development is inherent in all living things which follow a definite and unvarying sequence peculiar to the species to which they belong. Just as in plant life flowering must precede and prepare for fruiting, so too in human life each phase is a preparation for the next. The whole process is a progressive revelation. There is frequently a preliminary stage of practising that takes place some time before the new power appears and that prepares the way for it, as, for example, the babbling that precedes speech.

The child grows as a unity in which body and mind are

¹K. Glover and E. Dewey, *Children of the New Day*. (D. Appleton Century Co.).

interdependent. In early years the sequence of psychological development appears to be closely connected with bodily growth. Thus the young child's power of learning and acquiring skill is not absolute; for the activity of each stage is limited by physical structure and the extent of neuro-muscular co-ordination. This holds true throughout the growing years in which the child's impulsive action and natural interests are indicative of his learning ability. "These manifestations come from an inner compulsion and are primarily organized by inherited mechanism and by an intrinsic physiology of development. The very plasticity of growth requires that there be a limiting and regulating mechanism. Growth is a process so intricate, so sensitive, that there must be powerful stabilizing factors, intrinsic rather than extrinsic, that preserve the balance of the total pattern and the direction of the growth trend. Maturation is, in a sense, a name for this regulating mechanism."¹

There appears to be an inner rhythm which, though it is affected by outward influences, sometimes accelerated sometimes retarded by them, is never really broken. The process of maturation goes on in spite of handicaps, for the nervous system "tends to grow in obedience to in-born determiners whether saddled with handicaps or favoured with opportunity."² For instance the baby does not learn to sit up. "He sits up when the neuro-muscular system has attained a certain degree of development."³

During the process of growth the child passes through sensitive periods, in which the learning in specific ways and the development of particular skills, necessary as a preparation for what is to follow, are easy. Special attention should be paid to these periods which are of importance in regard both to successful learning and to

¹ Gesell: *Guidance and Mental Growth in Infant and Child*.

² L. Wagoner: *The Development of Learning in Young Children*.

³ L. Wagoner: *Op. cit.* (McGraw-Hill Publishing Co., Ltd.).

the conservation of vitality for the needs of natural growth. When children are provided with an outlet for the type of physical or psychological activity that synchronizes with the phase through which they are passing, there results a harmonious flowing of vitality, and growth proceeds normally. If, however, the child is denied the right outlet for the expression of interests and is required to learn things or to behave in ways that have no relation to his degree of neurological ripeness, the result is quite contrary. There is strain which may be harmful, and is always wasteful, and energy, instead of flowing in the way of nature's needs, is arrested or diffused. Thus growth is handicapped. To expect a child to adapt himself to ways of living beyond his developmental age, such as to sit still at four or to learn the three R's, is harmful and spendthrift of the child's time and energy. Premature achievement does not make for sound growth nor for permanent gain. It often produces an outward appearance of growth without the reality—like flowers stuck in the sand that make a brave show momentarily and then wither and die. Failure to give the right opportunity for the full use of powers as they emerge is equally wasteful and may cause an arrest in the growth of these powers, which are starved and stunted if not actually destroyed. The consequence of expecting a child to adapt himself unnaturally may be serious, for the damning back of any full flowing stream serves only to force the current in some other direction. Emotional inharmony, intellectual prejudices, physical strain, may then arise singly or together and produce incorrigibility, neurosis and dullness. Maturation and learning must always be related and the value to the teacher of the study of normal growth in normal children is that it enables her to plan both environment and education in a way that has a direct relationship to the developmental needs of her little ones.