

RECREATION THE BASIS OF ASSOCI- ATION BETWEEN PARENTS AND TEACHERS

BY

CLARENCE ARTHUR PERRY

DEPARTMENT OF CHILD HYGIENE OF THE RUSSELL SAGE FOUNDATION



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Recreation the Basis of Association between Parents and Teachers

One winter's evening several years ago, a tough walked into a New York evening recreation center. He had gone there with the avowed purpose of "cleaning out" the whole place, but on observing the rather determined and capable athletes who were present he gave up his idea, and stood watching some boys do stunts on the horizontal bar. Presently the gymnast in charge noticed him and asked him to take his turn with the others. To his astonishment he found that he could not perform feats which the others did with ease. The instructor gave him some points and he improved. The next night he came again, and the following one also, each time making straight for the little group around the horizontal bar. He soon became more proficient than any of the other boys.

In the meantime the principal of the center had learned that the new youth was the leader of a notorious gang which had long terrorized the neighborhood. Seeking him out one night the principal suggested that he might care to organize a basket ball team among his fellows and take part in some of the match games which were being held in the center. The boy brought in his gang. In order to get up a team they had to hold meetings, and the principal gave them the use of one of the class rooms. To transact business it was not possible for all the boys to talk at the same time. There had to be some order in the speaking. The club-director gave them some assistance and presently the leader of the gang found himself enforcing the ordinary parliamentary rules that obtain in public meetings.

Having formed a basket ball team that played regular match games the boys fell into the habit of meeting at the center. The team was a nucleus, which, under the stimulus of a meeting room, all their own, grew into a club. Besides holding match games the new organization began to hold debates. In order

to argue the members were obliged to obtain more information, and searching for it led them into the library and into a permanent interest in books. Thus, in time, the gang which had been a terror to the neighborhood became an active athletic and literary society, and the one-time tough was its president. In such ways as this the evening recreation centers of New York City are accomplishing their work. Thus they are demonstrating what the late Miss Evangeline Whitney, their organizer and long-time director, believed to be one of their main purposes; they are proving that for the boy in the city street the acquisition of "the athlete's code of honor is a triumph over lawlessness, the beginning of a citizen's conception of duty."

I have related this incident because of its significance as a method of dealing with delinquent youths. Let us see now just what means were used. In the first place the boy was attracted and caught by satisfying one of his strongest interests—admiration for physical prowess. The tough was proud of his own strength and his respect was given immediately to the gymnast who could surpass him. Instead of trying to kill this instinct for feats of the body the recreation center exalted it and provided more abundant means for its expression than were furnished by the saloon or the street corner.

Again, the tough was proud of his leadership. His subjects were only a gang of street boys, but ruling them satisfied his natural desire for power. Instead of throttling this ability the recreation center gave it, in the basket ball team and the debating society, a wider and more dignified range of opportunity. In a word, the center takes the keen, impetuous interests and powers of lusty boyhood, and, in place of attempting to starve them out of existence, it feeds them, develops them, and guides them into wholesome and useful forms of activity. It is the psychological method of leading lawless youths into the paths of upright citizenship.

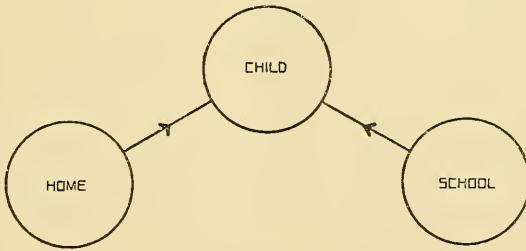
And yet what is the method that is still much used by people in dealing with errant boyhood? Is it not that of reprimand, humiliation, and repression? Whenever we can buttonhole the reckless youngster we point out his misdeeds, dilate upon the terrors of the future towards which he is surely moving and offer him the choice of an immediate right-about-face or the penalty of lifelong misery. He is doing wrong; he must be made to do right and do it instantler. The logical way, obviously,

but does it seem as efficient, as promising of results, as the way of the recreation center?

Robert Louis Stevenson gave his view of these two methods in his well-known essay "A Christmas Sermon." Says he: "There is an idea abroad among moral people that they should make their neighbors good. One person I have to make good—myself. But my duty to my neighbor is much more nearly expressed by saying that I have to make him happy—if I may." There you have it in a nutshell. To try to make people good is the logical way, but to make people happy is the psychological way, the most effective way, of helping them to grow good.

How now does this theory of the best method to use in attempting to mold the lives of others apply to the business of planning an organization of parents and teachers? In every combination there must be some reason for the union, some mutual advantages to be gained by coming together. The association must satisfy certain interests of both groups, and the stronger these interests are the more robust will the association be. What, then, is the most vital set of interests which parents and teachers have in common? What is the strongest tie that exists between the home and the school?

If that question were put to a speaker who happened to be near a blackboard he would, in nine cases out of ten, seize some crayon, rush to the board and draw a diagram like this:



After wiping the dust from his fingers he would beam upon the audience and say: "There you have it! It is perfectly simple. A blood relation exists between the parent and his child. Things related to the same thing are related to each. Ergo, home and school are bound together, and it's the child that binds

them both. It's the child which must be the basis of any association between parents and teachers."

Very well, suppose we have an association based on this principle,—let us see how it works. You, a member and a conscientious father, have just come home from a hard day at the office. After dinner your son hands you an announcement from the principal of his school. At eight o'clock to-night Professor So-and-So, of such a university, will address the association upon "The Spiritual Atmosphere in the Home and Kindergarten." All parents, teachers and their friends are cordially invited to attend. The discourse is to be about the two places which have the greatest influence upon your child's character; it is to reveal the highest aspect of the forces which are molding your child's life, the offspring of your flesh and bone.

Just watch yourself as you read that announcement. Observe how it *draws*! Do you feel it pulling you up from the table, pushing you into your overcoat, and sending you out to that school? But why not? It concerns one of the things you love most; it's designed to promote the highest welfare of that child for whom you'd gladly give your life. But do you go?

Suppose you are a teacher. It's 4.30 o'clock in the afternoon. You are just beginning to breathe naturally once more and you happen to remember the notice which the principal had sent around the day before, saying that on that evening the Reverend So-and-So, not only a prominent clergyman but the father of a conspicuously well-behaved family, would address the Home and School Association upon "Does a Child Need Discipline or Sympathy?" Now that is a matter upon which you need to have all the wisdom that is extant. It's necessary to have it for the preservation of order in your class room and for the display of that proficiency which brings promotion. And yet does the prospect of that meeting fill you with thrills of enthusiasm; does it quicken your progress homeward and send you out again on the wings of expectation?

On the other hand, what would have been the probable effect upon that father and that teacher if an announcement worded as follows had come to them? "At the meeting of the Parents' Association on Friday evening Dr. Frank Lively of the County Historical Society will give a lantern talk on 'Local Landmarks and their Romantic Associations.' The Ladies of the Fort-nightly Musical Club, whose assistance last year is so pleasantly

remembered, will be present and favor us with several vocal selections. During the social period following the stated program there will be refreshments and informal dancing. You may already have many acquaintances in the neighborhood, but there are still some charming people whom you ought to know and who would like to know you. Making their acquaintance might result in new and treasured friendships. The schoolhouse belongs to the people of the neighborhood and it can be used to enrich their life as well as that of their children."

If the interests of the child form the guiding principle for the promoters of a home and school association it is inevitable that the program arranged by them will be filled with talks and lectures that are prepared especially for, and aimed directly at, parents and teachers; and only geniuses, capable of the highest platform art, can prevent such deliverances from smacking of the righteousness-making motive. The irresistible tendency of speakers selected from that viewpoint is to point out shortcomings, the higher parental duties, neglected professional obligations and a multitude of ways in which fathers, mothers and teachers can *better* themselves in their relationship to the child. My point is not that such talks would not be good for the hearers. Their improvement in precisely these respects is most essential to the progress of the race. But however improving a talk may be potentially, it does not improve people actually if they do not come to hear it. The improving talk is the wrong kind of bait to use if you wish to catch fish after sundown.

Social affairs, occasions that amuse, exercises that afford recreation, doings which take the mind off from the troubles of the day and strengthen both it and the body for the morrow—these are the things which, in the margin of the day, engage the interest of the majority of ordinary human beings. Teachers are not simply implements for tilling the soil of the child's mind. They are people of flesh and blood, of warm human sympathies, and if parents meet them upon the ground of common human interests, of like capacities for enjoyment, they will not only know them better but they will find them more interesting. Likewise fathers and even mothers prefer to be known as somebodies other than the mere progenitors of their children.

The keynote, the prime requisite, of every occasion held by a home and school association should be *enjoyableness*—and this quality should be sought for with all the skill of a commercial

amusement provider or the ability of a hostess in the diplomatic set.

What, now, are the means of recreation, of sociability, to be had in a schoolhouse? Especially—I fancy someone is asking—how can a group of grown-ups have good times in a building which has neither auditorium nor gymnasium, nothing but a lot of class rooms filled with fixed, uncomfortable children's seats?

It is a difficult situation, but the successful work of the Home and School League in Philadelphia and of similar associations in other cities where the older type of elementary school building still prevails shows that it can be met. In such schools as these the main reliance has to be placed upon the kindergarten rooms and the eighth grade rooms. The difficulty about chairs in the case of the former can be solved, when the school board will not furnish them, by raising money through an entertainment in some school that has an assembly room or by soliciting private contributions.

The varied sources of enjoyment which are found in the average city neighborhood and which can be drawn from by almost any society of parents and teachers are well illustrated in a list of sociable occasions taken from the annual report of the Boston Home and School Association.

ENTERTAINMENTS HELD BY BOSTON ASSOCIATIONS

- A Chorus of Civil War Veterans sang Camp Fire Songs
- An Illustrated Lecture on "Lincoln"
- An Apple Lecture, with apples for refreshments
- A Travel Talk, illustrated by lantern slides
- The High School Orchestra assisted with selections
- A Musical Entertainment by Pupils, including Piano and Violin Solos
- A Double Quartette from the School gave several numbers
- Local talent—musicians, elocutionists, banjoists—helped frequently
- A Playlet by the Children entitled "The Birds' Christmas Carol"
- An Exhibition of Folk Dancing by Pupils
- An Apron and Necktie Party (Dancing)

The reports of the individual associations frequently tell of "tea and cakes served at all meetings," while one in particular gives a suggestive account of how the business side of hospitality is managed. "We have had coffee at most of the meetings, sold

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us at a reduction by a store-keeper; cream supplied at a reduction by another member; sometimes paper napkins are given us, with the name of the firm printed on. We make the coffee ourselves on a gas stove at the school, and we wash the dishes ourselves. Refreshments at an average cost \$1.50 a meeting. We have bought one hundred cups and saucers, \$10.00; 144 spoons (at wholesale), \$4.00; plates, 40 cents; pitchers, 70 cents; and before the next meeting shall have a coffee boiler. We have had fruit punch once."

Nearly all public schools, high schools especially, have musical organizations and talented pupils who would be stimulated and given a desirable kind of practice by assisting at home and school meetings. Likewise there are in every neighborhood accomplished musicians, reciters and travellers, who, if tactfully approached, will gladly give their services for the community's benefit. Inexpensive resources for entertaining are abundant on every hand and it requires only the right kind of organization to make them available for the enjoyment of the many.

One of the best vehicles of enjoyment which can be utilized in almost any kindergarten room and by any group of parents and teachers is social dancing. As a physical exercise for adults of sedentary habits there is none better. It not only makes the arteries more elastic, stimulates digestion and strengthens the lungs, but it frees the mind of worry and brings cheer into the soul. For eight years now in Providence, Rhode Island, a group of portly bankers, elderly merchants, and busy professional men have been meeting weekly and taking lessons from an expert in fancy dancing. The Highland Fling is their favorite dance. It must be beneficial to them or they would not keep it up. Indeed it would be difficult to find a group of men and women so old, so dignified or so prominent in the world's affairs that they would not be benefited by participation now and then in the good old rollicking Virginia Reel. There is also probably no way in which a superintendent of schools could more quickly and inexpensively energize his corps of teachers than by arranging for them and the people of the neighborhood a series of weekly dances in the schoolhouses. Many people find more real fun in the frequent and informal affairs than they do in the set dances, while several lively waltzes and two-steps make an excellent finale for any sort of a home and school meeting.

Another enjoyable general exercise which mixes well in any

program is group singing—congregational singing it is sometimes called. This is one of the most successful features of the general evenings in the Rochester social centers. The songs are thrown on a screen by a lantern and the audience sings them with such a will and vim that the Rev. Samuel M. Crothers of Cambridge, the "gentle" essayist, on the occasion of a visit said he had not heard such singing since the Civil War days. "You people," said he, "have done a great thing. You have found a substitute for the only good thing about war, so that war is no longer necessary. The one justification of war is that it makes people realize that they have a common bond, a common interest—and they express that feeling in songs."

Suppose now that we have an association formed on the basis of simple enjoyment; suppose that it successfully provides recreation and amusement for its members—what results will inevitably follow? In the first place its occasions will have large attendances; it will be a strong association. The effects of co-operation will react beneficially upon the members; they will become more truly social in their interests. It is inevitable that under such circumstances the parents and teachers will become sympathetically acquainted. The two groups will spontaneously talk about children. The parents will unwittingly absorb a knowledge of class-room difficulties and the teachers will pick up scraps of information about their pupils' home surroundings. The fathers will see the kind of equipment the school has and become more intelligent supporters of the superintendent's plans for improving it. These are just a few of the things which will happen from the very nature of the case in an association which is built on the plan of furnishing, primarily, enjoyment.

But the meetings, the occasions of the organization, would fail of giving the highest enjoyment if they did not lead somewhere. A novel may have the most enthralling interest; its characters may be drawn with surpassing skill; its plot may be full of the most tragic situations; but if its perusal does not leave us with a clearer insight into the mystery of life, does not yield us a sharpened sense of our rights and obligations, it fails to give the highest pleasure. A play may afford two hours of bubbling enjoyment, or an equal period of the most heart-rending tragedy, but if it does not send us out of the theatre with a quickened conscience and an energized will it fails to arouse in us the fullest enthusiasm.

And so with a home and school association,—its meetings may be landmarks of happiness in our dreary lives, but unless they at the same time make us feel that we are getting somewhere, that we are accomplishing something more than just having good times, then they will fail—not only to make us good, but to exhaust their capacity for making us happy.

There are at the present time several movements which home and school associations are promoting and in connection with which much remains still to be accomplished. These are the matters of public recreation, the institution of a sane but enjoyable and significant manner of celebrating our holidays, medical school inspection and school hygiene, of which open-air schools form an important branch. While all these subjects center upon the child they are so objective and scientific in character, so largely matters of community administration rather than individual obligation that they interest and do not repel. Being more or less new to the teacher as well as to the parent, neither has the advantage of superior knowledge and both can approach them upon the terms of equality. They are admirably adapted as subjects of discussion or promotion in connection with the regular social and recreative work of an association, and occupation with them will furnish the serious element that must be included in its activities if they are to afford the most satisfying enjoyment.

One cannot peruse the reports of the larger federations of parent-teacher associations without being amazed at the number of important things they accomplish. The Philadelphia Home and School League, which is made up of some fifty branch associations and twenty-six affiliated organizations, supported and ran during the winter of 1909-10 eleven social centers. It runs a bureau of speakers and entertainers; has a school luncheon department which is serving daily luncheons in four schools; holds two annual conferences; and constantly throughout the year it brings the grown-ups and the young people together in the schoolhouses in enjoyable and profitable ways. Through the efforts of the various branch associations the schools are receiving new pianos, pictures, domestic science outfits, playground apparatus and many other valuable pieces of equipment. At the same time a stream of information, advice and inspiration is flowing into the homes which enables them to co-operate more efficiently with the schools in the upbringing of children.

The Boston Home and School Association, to which reference

has been made, not only furnishes large numbers of people with most enjoyable social occasions, but it undertakes serious sociological inquiries and performs other services of the greatest importance to the community.

For example, its committee on theatres and amusements investigated the manner in which some 3300 school children spent their evenings. The results, which were published, were most significant and valuable to parents. Its hygiene committee has exerted a strong influence upon the school officials to have the school windows kept clean, thus helping to conserve the eyesight of the pupils. The same committee has also performed some very successful experimentation with penny lunches for school children. They are now (1910-11) working in some twelve schools, in each of which about 200 children are given penny luncheons at the morning recess. Another one of its committees, at the request of the city school board, prepared an elaborate scheme for the wider use of school buildings. These are only a few of the ways in which the Boston association is enriching the social and intellectual life of the whole community.

In Auburn, New York, there is a federation of parent-teacher associations which carries on each summer an extensive playground work and which recently waged a successful campaign for the addition of a probation officer to the staff of municipal officials. In Houston, Texas, there is a most energetic group of mothers' clubs and parent-teacher societies. They number only seventeen, but in two years after starting they raised over \$21,000. This money was expended in serving hygienic lunches, equipping school kitchens, purchasing pianos, and providing numberless other things that were needed in school work but which could not immediately be secured from the city.

One of the chief advantages of having an association on a recreative basis and of having as features of its work the promotion of the objective movements which have been mentioned is that both of these things can be taken care of by people outside of, but working in co-operation with, the school system. The daily duties of the teachers are all they can perform and perform well, and the association, in affording them recreative occasions instead of opportunities for a lot of arduous work, is only performing a part of its mission and, incidentally, promoting efficient class-room work.

Behind every successful organization in the industrial or com-

mercial world there is some one personality of conspicuous force and ability. And so in starting a parent-teacher association the principal, or whoever takes the initiative, might well seek first for an experienced leader. The chief requisites are leisure, organizing skill, executive ability and a capacity for hard work. In making the proposal there should be pointed out not only the good such a person could accomplish but the power that would be wielded and the social rewards that would ensue. The latter may not seem a high motive, but it is one of the strongest forces back of the large achievements in politics and business, and there is no adequate reason why it should not be used in pushing a home and school association.

To be most efficient a meeting of parents and teachers—and the provision of a series of these constitutes the chief business of an association—should have the principal qualities of a work of art. It should afford delight to the senses in ways that also satisfy the needs of the soul.

SUGGESTIONS FOR STARTING AN ASSOCIATION

Organizers of parent-teacher associations can obtain model constitutions and by-laws, as well as other assistance, by addressing the National Congress of Mothers (806 Loan and Trust Building, Washington, D. C.). *Home and School* (Christopher Sower & Company, Philadelphia), an attractive little volume by Mrs. Mary Van Meter Grice, the president of the Philadelphia League, contains many suggestions that would be helpful in starting this work. Useful information will also be found in the *Wider Use of the School Plant* (described on a following page), Chapter XI of which is largely devoted to the doings of these and similar organizations.

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