

Adult Education and Family Life

Part I

**Modern family life education is concerned with how
all members of the family relate to one another**

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WHAT NEEDS does a family have? What is being done to meet these needs? How can it be done better? Nobody can really answer these questions today, but a hundred years ago the answers were clear to everyone. Basic family patterns were set and everybody knew how a family should behave. If it didn't, it should be preached at. If there were dark, secret corners, they were best ignored. Today we have brought the family into the center of our attention. We know about it, we suggest solutions for its ills, and—most important of all—we try to improve it. In the adult educational movement now being developed in this country, no theme is more widespread or diverse than family life education.

The purposes of this article are to bring into focus the complex nature of the family and the study of family life and to identify some of the major influences in family life education.

FAMILY LIFE EDUCATION

The family is a social group which is constantly being influenced by its culture but which also has an inner structure. If we are to appraise family needs, we must realize that outside forces—social, economic, technological, and community trends—do not beat upon

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and influence a vacuum. Every family is a force-field within itself, in which the most powerful of all human aspirations and drives are constantly at work, sometimes reinforcing each other but often operating in a way that produces conflict and tension.

Since the family is the primary group in any society, we have difficulty seeing it as a whole and seeing it plain. The ingredients of the family are simple: a father, a mother, and children, surrounded by a penumbra of relatives. But no two families are exactly alike. *Anna Karenina* begins with the words: "All happy families resemble each other; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." Despite this observation, each family—happy or unhappy—knows that it is unique.

More than that, the family is hard to see because it is so close at hand. From birth to death, we live within the framework of our own family. Each of us is so involved in his particular cluster of relationships that the whole texture and meaning of the family grows out of immediate satisfactions and frustrations. A sociological diagram of the external and internal tensions which beset marital relationships seems infinitely remote and unreal to the man and woman whose days and nights are filled with anxiety about their own incapacity to adjust to one another. The formal listing of the functions of a family seems pallid and preachy to the father who, in the shared duty of painting a barn or the pleasure of a hunting trip, builds a sense of companionship with his son.

Yet in many of the other basic activities of life, we have found that study and teaching can greatly enrich the quality of experience. When the Agricultural Extension Service first began to teach scientific agriculture to American farmers, their chief attitude was one of apathy strongly tinged with suspicion and distrust. That attitude gave way very slowly before the combined assault of research and practical teaching. Gradually the activities of everyday farm life were transformed by the application of knowledge. The same process has occurred in such other fields as safety, health, recreation, and race relations.

Growth of Family Life Education

Admittedly the family is at once more profound and more difficult to analyze than any of these other fields of educational endeavor. Nonetheless, in the past 75 years there has been a constantly growing interest in the subject and an effort to do something about its improvement. We may identify, somewhat arbitrarily, three major thrusts in the growth of family life education.

Role of the Woman The first of these centered around the role of the woman as homemaker. When domestic science began, family bonds were strong, and courses taught to girls dealt chiefly with the immediate skills of housekeeping. But with the changing nature of the family, early emphasis on cooking and sewing gradually broadened to include a great range of courses which, while beginning with practical needs, focuses on the context of family living. In the words of Hazel Kyrk, "The aim of home economics is to provide the facts, knowledge, and understanding which will help families make decisions concerning all aspects—social, physical, and aesthetic—of their home and family living."¹

Parent Education A second major effort has been the cluster of activities centering around parent education. The central task of each family in a society is to raise its children to be mature and responsible citizens. The lore of the ages with respect to this function has gradually given way to a body of principles which, while often a battleground of theory and application, still provides guides for parents who need to create a positive home environment and who constantly must cope with particular problems. We often hear of the parent education "movement." That term appears to be justified for the varied and diverse activities which it includes spring not from any central organization but rather from countless efforts, all having the same general purpose and emphasis.

The Whole Family The third major effort has been larger in its framework than either of the others—it has been concerned with the whole family. In studying social groupings earlier sociologists never ignored the family but their efforts tended to be both theoretical and partial. They described basic familiar patterns but did not concern themselves particularly with how to create a happy family. Moreover, as is appropriate with specialists, they tended to concentrate on particular aspects—on courtship patterns, on marriage customs, and on the various aberrations of family life. In recent years, however, sociologists have sought to find a synthesis, a way of looking at the whole family. In this effort, they have been aided by students of other disciplines, notably psychoanalysis and human development.

Modern Family Life Education

The central integrating theme now emerging is the analysis of interpersonal relationships of members of the family as they pro-

¹Quoted in: Ruth L. Bonde, "Our Professional Responsibilities," *Journal of Home Economics*, XLVIII (September, 1956), 490.

ceed through the life span. As parent education grew out of the close analysis of how the parent should interact with the child, so modern family life education is coming to be based on the study of how all members of the family should relate to one another at each successive stage of life. Perhaps this synthesizing principle may seem too simple. Let me remind you, however, that great advances must often await the emergence of some central idea which, once understood, provides the basis for all future development. Nothing could be more variable than the weather, but modern meteorology rests upon a simple, central idea that weather is created by the movement of air masses. Perhaps the study of family relations can best be built around the idea of the typical life cycle. Reference to three books will illustrate this.

The Happy Family by Levy and Munroe² is a small, simply-written book intended for the general public. Even though it presents little data, its basic orientation is psychoanalytic; and the acuteness of its observation, the depth of its understanding, and the clarity of its writing make it a profoundly influential book. Its popular acceptance is indicated by the fact that it has had many printings; its soundness is reflected by its being quoted in even the most profound academic works.

The Family by Waller and Hill is a far more comprehensive work. Its central theme is stated very simply: "We shall, then, study the American middle-class family as a unity of interacting personalities, each with a history."³ This theme is worked out elaborately in terms of the varied patterns of family life, and with a review of the literature in the field.

Family Development, by Duvall,⁴ also deals with the family life cycle, as conceptualized in eight separate stages, with an emphasis on functions and upon the developmental tasks which each member of a family faces at every stage. This book is full of practical suggestions for those concerned with family life education; methods of approach are integrated by a central theme.

However, separate emphases of the past have not yet formed into any comprehensive movement; therefore family life education is still a rather indefinite term. It will be used here to include all three of its operational elements: concentration on the interpersonal relationships of the family as a whole, on the relationships of

² John Levy and Ruth Munroe, *The Happy Family* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954).

³ Wilfred Waller and Reuben Hill, *The Family* (New York: The Dryden Press, 1951), p. 6.

⁴ Evelyn Mills Duvall, *Family Development* (Philadelphia and New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1962).

parents and children, and on the skills and insights of homemaking as they contribute to better family living.

INFLUENCES IN FAMILY LIFE EDUCATION

The true significance of family life education lies in the fact that it is found everywhere. So much is going on within this broad field that only outlines of present activities can be sketched. The most powerful influences in family life education are the mass media, particularly those commercially operated. The facts, the ideas, and the values of the American public are very largely shaped by television, motion pictures, the press, radio, and magazines. Hollywood does not give us many new facts but its rigid and explicit production code strictly reinforces basic moral patterns: a motion picture may wallow in sensationalism but usually everything comes out all right in the end, with virtue rewarded and sin punished. The same thing is more or less true of all of the other entertainment media.

Undergirding this general influence is the fact that most mass media, particularly those which use print, are deliberately educational, or if you prefer, informational. Each editor and program director has a formula designed to appeal to his particular audience. Often he includes educational material in this formula—he does so because he knows his audience demands it.

Popular Magazines

There are now ten popular magazines which have a circulation of five million or more.⁵ Six of these emphasize information about the American home—including the nature of the family living in that home. These include *McCall's*, *The Ladies' Home Journal*, *Family Circle*, *Woman's Day*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, and *Good Housekeeping*. *The Reader's Digest* and *Look* have two or three articles or features on family living in each issue. *The Saturday Evening Post* and *Life* average fewer than one article per issue on this subject. These ten magazines have a total circulation of more than 74,000,000 copies, each of which is usually read by several people. Because of the duplication of circulation, the actual spread does not reach the whole American public, and not everybody reads everything in every issue. But the cumulative effect of these and all other magazines of lesser circulation is very great, par-

⁵These figures drawn from N. W. Ayers and Sons, *Directory of Newspapers and Periodicals*, 1963.

ticularly since it is constantly reinforced by newspapers, books, and other forms of print.

Newspapers and Trade Books

This point may be highlighted with a few more facts. Every newspaper, as we know, has a women's section dealing with family living, and featuring articles in other parts of the paper on the same theme. The number of trade books sold is rising rapidly and, leading all other authors is Dr. Spock; even the most casual survey of the shelves at any bookstore or the racks at any corner drugstore or supermarket will reveal titles that relate to family living. Both the number and per cent of adult non-fiction books circulated by public libraries are steadily rising—a large number of such books deal with the family. Pamphlets are sold in profusion. The average reading level of the American is rising slowly and steadily, and with it the interest in self-education manifested by the use of print.

Many people assume that those in control of commercial mass media have no basic interest in education but operate only with a concern for making money. By the nature of these media, economic interest must always be paramount (and sometimes it is unbridled with any other motivation), but many people who work in the mass media have educational philosophies of a most sophisticated sort. These people must come to terms with limitations of the media but operate on the basis of basic integrating conceptions.

An example of one such person will illustrate this point. Mrs. Donald Lach is foods editor of the *Chicago Sun-Times* and writes under the names of Alma Lach and Martha Reynolds. She grew up on a farm and, as a girl, was a 4-H Club member. She is highly skilled in the theory and practice of food preparation and is one of the few Americans to hold the three-year diploma of the *Cordon Bleu*. Mrs. Lach has a very clear philosophy: She is convinced that there is emerging a new American cuisine which is partly indigenous and partly borrowed from other cultures. She believes that American women should be interested in the preparation and serving of food as an art form in which they can have pride and a sense of accomplishment. She thinks a great deal about cost and effective consumer buying and about the provision of an adequate, well-balanced diet. She is, in short, concerned with much the same things as an Extension foods specialist though her own special interest is translating into American terms the highest forms of culinary art.

Many of those working in the more accepted educational agencies now use commercial mass media extensively. Also non-commercial mass media play an important role in family life education. For years government bulletins have had wide circulation. Through educational radio and television many millions of families are reached every year. We have long used films and other visual aids. Even though the net effect of these exposures is nowhere near as great as that accomplished by commercial media, it is nonetheless substantial.

The virtue of mass media is that they reach vast numbers of people. Their defect is that they impose severe limitations on the educative process as we know and understand it. Each separate item must stand on its own, carrying its particular set of facts—and often with a very sketchy indication of the background within which such facts should be set. Continuity of contact is hard to achieve. Writers and speakers who address many people must use such a general approach that they cannot deal intimately with individual problems. Often two items are, or appear to be, contradictory; the net effect is a cancelling of both ideas and a belief that nobody really knows anything. Most fundamental of all, no general conception of viewpoint is provided to the reader, the viewer, or the listener; therefore, he has no way to establish a frame of reference within which he can strike a balance and reconcile conflicting ideas in light of everyday practice.

Educational Institutions

The need to provide a more sustained and intimate approach has given rise to the development of countless educational institutions. Two of them are of the first magnitude but they are supplemented by a host of other efforts. The largest and most widespread agency for educating the American family is the Cooperative Extension Service. The mind cannot really grasp the scope of this Service: 2,759 counties being served with home economics staff members, 3,949 workers, 5,717,984 personal contacts, and 1,260,824 group or club members.⁶

The second great program built around the needs of the family is that provided by the public schools. The purpose of this program is defined by the Office of Education as that of helping homemakers improve the quality of their family life through better use of human

⁶*Extension Activities and Accomplishments: 1961*, Extension Service Circular 229 (Washington: USDA, June, 1962).

and material resources.⁷ For 1959-60, the total evening and part-time enrollment in these classes was 641,249, including 21,996 men.⁸

Other institutions at work in the field are legion. In the course of preparing this paper, I have read or scanned perhaps 75 other treatments of family life education; every one of them has made the point that agencies at work are too varied to be described and too numerous to be counted. But among these are (1) voluntary associations, such as the Parent-Teacher Association, the American Association of University Women, the Y.W.C.A., and the General Federation of Women's Clubs; (2) special parent education or family service agencies; (3) research bureaus or institutes in family life established by universities; (4) university extension divisions; (5) programs of parent education maintained by school systems; (6) churches or other religious groups; and (7) public welfare and health agencies and family and juvenile courts.

The 1960 White House Conference on Children and Youth, recognizing the need for family life education, adopted several recommendations for this decade. These recommendations suggest that courses be taught from elementary school through high school; that religious institutions and other community services strengthen their family life education programs; that parent education through discussion groups in all areas of family life be expanded; that the number of guidance workers be increased; and that educational institutions provide systematic training in the developmental changes of early adolescence, with sound and practical materials for all parents and future parents, as well as for physicians, teachers, and others who work with young people.⁹

There are a thousand different approaches to family life education, and somewhere in the United States today someone is trying each of them.

Suggested lines for future development of family life education will be explored in Part II of this article which will appear in a subsequent issue of the Journal.—The editors.

⁷ Public Vocational Education Programs, U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Office of Education, Pamphlet No. 117 (Revised), 1957, p. 13.

⁸ *Digest of Annual Reports of State Boards of Vocational Education* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1961), p. 41. Figures given are provisional.

⁹ Eli Ginzberg (ed.), *The Nation's Children: Golden Anniversary White House Conference on Children and Youth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960).