



CHAPTER 8

PARENTS AND THE PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILD

Thirty-something

Husband–wife relations

The child's development

The hurried child – a cause for concern

The school, the parent and the child

Television: friend of foe?

Summing up

PARENTS AND THE PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILD

The most significant change during middle childhood is that children enter school, which is in many ways a microcosm of the community. Here, children are introduced to the values, norms and expectations of the world beyond their home. For some children this will be a natural progression, for others, a leap into a world very different from what they have been accustomed to. The greater the similarity between home and school, the smoother the transition is likely to be.

This stage has sometimes been referred to as a 'plateau stage' because it seems relatively calm compared with earlier and later stages. For the parents it may be physically less exhausting than being the parents of babies and pre-schoolers. On the other hand, it is also likely to be a more settled and less turbulent time than when there are adolescents in the home.

Being a plateau does not, however, imply that nothing much is happening. As in all other stages, much development is taking place in both parent and child. Being a parent of a schoolgoing child has its own challenges, problems and rewards. Just how parents will cope with these new developments in their child is partly dependent on their own development.



THIRTY-SOMETHING

Many parents of primary school children are in their thirties. So, rather arbitrarily, certain fairly typical patterns of the thirties are considered.

The twenties tend to be years of testing adult roles and making certain commitments in regard to work and family life. As the thirties are entered,

Levinson says: 'The age thirty transition is a remarkable gift and burden. It provides an opportunity to work on the flaws of the life structure formed during the previous period and to create the basis for a more satisfactory structure that will be built in the following period' (1978, p 84). In general, the thirties tend to be fairly settled and stronger commitments may be made as goals become more clearly defined.

WOMEN IN THEIR THIRTIES

A notable change in the last two decades has been the increasing number of women in the work force. Many women re-enter the employment field in their thirties because they feel that their children no longer require as much attention as in early childhood. Some mothers may feel rather isolated and lonely at home, which is a risk for full-time housewives. A major reason for going out to work, apart from financial and professional considerations, may be a need for social contact. The social reason for going back to work should not be underestimated, as the need for contact with colleagues, customers and clients may be an important motive for seeking employment. This may be less the case among those groups who live in an extended family or who have the financial resources to pay for good childcare, thus freeing them to pursue hobbies and interests of their own. Others may be forced to go back to work by economic circumstances, including rising school fees and other expenses incurred when the child goes to school.

Career women who may have temporarily stopped work to be with their babies and pre-schoolers may now realise that if they postpone re-entry into their occupations any longer, they risk being unable to bridge the gap created by their temporary absence. It is often in their thirties that women change from a 'just a job' orientation to a true career commitment with definite long-term goals.

What all this suggests is that the child's entry into school generally affects a mother's life more dramatically than a father's.

HUSBAND-WIFE RELATIONS

This may also be a time when marriage partners have more time for each other. The intense demands of young children have somewhat lessened,

and fathers in particular may be more established in their work situation by now. Many marriages at this stage could do with some revitalisation.



POINT TO PONDER

A strong marriage is a great aid to effective parenting. It also provides a good example for children to follow. Especially as they enter their teens this can strongly influence their relationship with the opposite sex.

Ten questions and suggestions for revitalising a marriage

Couples could ask themselves the following questions to check if their relationship is perhaps a little jaded or in danger of becoming somewhat distant:

- Are you taking each other for granted? It needs to be remembered that babies and toddlers in particular can be physically and emotionally draining. They can also be great 'passion killers' as they have a peculiar tendency to wake up and demand immediate attention just when their parents may be feeling romantic. Distance between partners may have increased because of their different priorities, with husbands being more career focused and women more children focused. It may also be worthwhile to remember the effort made to please one another when dating, and how important a part this was of the mutual attraction. Is it necessary to find some time and energy again to please one another?
- Is your relationship given a high priority? In the twenties, when so many new roles have to be learned, it is not always easy, or possible, to give the relationship with partners this type of priority. This may be done more easily as experience in various roles is gained and a greater settledness in the home occurs.
- Do you know what is important for your partner? If there is good communication between a couple, this would certainly foster understanding of each other's needs and priorities. Anticipating and satisfying one another's needs is what strengthens relationships. Keech

says: '... in looking for ways to enhance or save a marriage, close attention should be paid to the possibility that it is not love that is lost, but other needs that lack satisfaction' (1993, p 33).

- How flexible are you in your relationship? Successful couples are flexible and able to change if necessary so they are able to adapt to suit the needs of their partner, except when this involves being untrue to themselves or what they believe in.
- How much give and take is there in a relationship? C S Lewis makes the distinction between 'Need-love' and 'Gift-love'. The former takes and the latter gives. There should be giving and taking by both partners in a good relationship. The person whose love is based largely on Need-Love may be seeking compensation for what he or she lacks in the partner. The unattractive male seeks a beautiful partner, the melancholy woman a cheerful counterpart. While opposites can and do attract, and one can learn to enjoy these differences, this is rather different from using the partner as compensation for what one lacks. There is a distinction between an ego-bolstering compensation and an appreciation for what is different: an introverted, socially somewhat shy woman marries an exuberant, outgoing man and really enjoys his personality.
- Do you accept and value your partner? In successful relationships, partners value the 'real' other person, not some idealised image which never meets their expectations.
- Is your relationship open and honest? Love is fostered by openness and honesty. This means acknowledging one's flaws and shortcomings, and taking responsibility for one's mistakes, rather than hiding them or projecting them onto the partner. The agony columns in popular magazines are filled with letters which clearly show how one partner absolves himself or herself from any responsibility for difficulties in the relationship. Yet there are usually two sides to a story.
- How tolerant are you? Tolerance is an important aspect of love. Some things one can change in a partner, for example if a person is chronically late, one can encourage them to allow more time for unexpected delays and gradually improve their sense of time. Other aspects cannot be easily changed, such as personality traits like extreme extroversion or introversion. However, tolerance does not refer to major problems such as addiction to gambling, alcoholism or abuse. Rather it is accepting the 'otherness' of the partner, even though it may be puzzling or irritating.

- Are you companions and friends? Sharing interests and activities, that is being companions, makes love grow.
- How considerate and appreciative are you of one another? Being considerate means being able to see things from the other person's point of view and being able to communicate effectively. Being considerate can mean putting your own needs aside for the benefit of the other. For example, a recent article in a women's magazine posed a question to the effect of 'When did you know that a person was the right partner for you?' One of the respondents, who believed in postponing sexual gratification until marriage, one night had too much to drink and was willing to compromise this ideal with her boyfriend. At this point he refused, tucked her into bed and told her to go to sleep. It was this action which convinced her of his genuine love for her.
- How supportive and sharing are you of one another? Being supportive of one another in times of trouble is the glue that holds relationships together. No relationship is without its difficulties, nor is life ever trouble free. So most relationships are likely to be severely tested at times. It is at such times that the support given by a loving partner is vitally important and in the long run helps to strengthen love. Happy events too, need to be shared. A German proverb says: 'Shared joy is doubled. Shared sorrow is halved' (Keech,1993; Santrock,1995; Sternberg,1986).

EXERCISE

His/her needs

No one can meet all the needs of his or her partner, nor do specific needs always have the same importance for husband and wife. Nonetheless, it can be very helpful to know what needs you frustrate or satisfy in your partner. This is what the exercise below relates to.

- Without consulting one another, each partner should list their top five personal needs in order of importance. (Needs could relate to earning a living; proper budgeting; sexual needs; contact with own friends; social life; tidiness, punctuality; appreciation; support; security; understanding; faith/religion; togetherness or separateness; owning a home; rest and recreation; having children, and so on.)

1
2
3
4
5

- Having completed these visits separately, compare them.
 - Are there important differences between them? Are they a problem? If so, what can be done about dealing with them with a view to better understanding and, possibly, some adaptation by one or both partners? (Refer back to chapter 5 on communication and try to discuss these matters calmly.)
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THE CHILD'S DEVELOPMENT

Physical development

Middle childhood is taken to cover the period from six to twelve years. The growth pattern during middle childhood is one of slow, steady development. On average, children grow by 5–7 cm per year. 'Baby fat' generally decreases and a more slender body emerges as muscles develop. Muscular strength increases and co-ordination improves greatly. Many new skills are mastered.

The large muscles are ahead of the smaller muscles in development, which accounts for the fact that a six-year-old is better at the movements involved in drawing bold pictures than in the finer movements involved in writing. By the age of seven, more control is emerging and by the age of twelve, fine co-ordination is similar to that of adults.

Differences in strength between boys and girls explain some of their preferences. Boys prefer activities involving running, kicking, throwing, jumping and batting. Girls prefer skipping and activities involving rhythmic movement such as dancing. Both boys and girls can become more tired from long periods of sitting than by physical activity. In other words, they need active rather than passive activities.

In our urban environment, children are often living in confined areas which limit vigorous physical activity. A child running around in the country, noisily chasing a dog or trying to catch a bird is accepted as



behaving spontaneously. A child of the same age rushing noisily along the passage of a flat building may be seen as a nuisance. A city child may be anchored in front of the TV eating lots of junk food. It is this combination of passivity

and junk food that has been held at least partly responsible for the poor physical condition of many children in the United States (Santrock, 1995). It is not always easy for children in confined urban areas to get the exercise they need for healthy development. This is particularly true since the high crime and accident rate in this country has almost put a stop to a 'streetlife' where children used to ride and wander round their neighbourhood, meeting friends on the way. Now it is more likely that a suburban child is confined behind a high wall, missing the change, excitement and exercise that could be found on the streets. A different lifestyle may prevail in disadvantaged areas, where cramped and crowded living often forces children into the streets. This may provide some interest and excitement, but may also expose a child to certain risks such as gangs.

What the foregoing suggests is that life in today's world is not particularly geared to the child's need for constructive participation in activities which challenge and develop its muscles, strength and co-ordination while at the same time providing the fun which goes with such activities. It is often the school which is the only place providing scope and opportunities for such activities.

Sport can assume particular importance in the middle childhood years. Apart from promoting the physical development of a child, it often provides the opportunity to learn social skills, such as co-operation with others as part of a group or team. It also encourages competition, a dominant feature of the Western world. And success in competitive sport can contribute to a child's self-esteem. However, excessive demands by parents and others can turn what should be an exercise in fun into something very stressful.

Puberty and sexuality

As a child nears the end of the primary school years, puberty approaches.

It is vitally important that a child be prepared for this, so that it can be accepted as part of the normal progression towards an adult body.

At this stage, if not already before, sex education should become more specific. Its biology should be fully explained, which most children find fascinating. It is also important to correct misperceptions which may abound, especially if peers are the main source of information or disinformation, such as:

'You never get pregnant the first time you have sex.'

'It is the only way to prove your love.'

'Having sex shows you are an adult.'

(Refer to chapters 7 and 9 for further suggestions on talking about sex to one's children.)

Thinking during middle childhood

In the pre-school years, thinking reveals itself mainly through physical action. For example, at the age of four Jonathan is able to sort out oranges and apples into different boxes. But it is only somewhat later that he is able to imagine doing this without performing the action. This is one of the features of middle childhood that mental activity changes from being very concrete to being more abstract. This is a gradual process towards which school syllabi are well adapted. It is part of an ongoing learning experience. There is also noticeable improvement in children's memory.

It is also at this time that certain concepts become more clearly understood, such as those referring to shape, size, weight and volume. Ordinary household activities can provide many relevant examples. Children can learn many concepts fundamental to maths, such as measurement, in the kitchen, as when helping mom measure the ingredients for baking a cake. By measuring out one cup of flour, a half cup of sugar, and a quarter cup of oil, a child is learning the difference between a half and a full cup, and so on. By pouring a bottle of cooldrink into a jug a child learns that while it looks different, the volume actually remains the same. When watching dad paving the yard with some bricks, a child can learn that cement, sand and water have to be mixed in a certain proportion to make the paving hold firm. Ten-year-old Timothy often goes to the café to buy bread and milk. He gradually learns what different items cost, how much he needs to pay and what change to expect.

Obviously, parents should be explaining and dialoguing with their children when letting them observe or take part in such activities.

In other words, many ordinary everyday activities provide the opportunity for teaching children certain concepts which form the foundation for many subjects at school. Naturally, such learning experiences should begin long before a child enters school.

Reading

Reading skills are among the first a child has to master during the first years at school. Being able to read well is essential for progress in acquiring



knowledge in the modern world. Some parents, therefore, believe in teaching their children to read long before they attend school. Educationists have divided opinions about this, but there seems to be considerable agreement that early reading should not be forced. Perhaps the most important thing that parents can do is to encourage an interest in books, rather than in reading as such. Yet it is astonishing how many homes may be bookless, though they may have a sophisticated sound system and a large TV.

Interest in books should be encouraged long before children go to school. Pre-school children love to sit looking at books or having a bedtime story read to them. They especially enjoy books with colourful pictures of animals, people and nature, and then try to recognise what they have seen in books, elsewhere.

Little five-year-old Kirsty excitedly led her grandfather into the garden to show him the 'baby dinosaur', which turned out to be a chameleon! Needless to say, Kirsten and her grandfather had spent many happy hours looking at a book on dinosaurs.

By involving children in everyday activities in the home, by talking to them, by keeping their interest and curiosity alive, parents are in many ways preparing them for those skills they will need when they go to school.

Social development and friends

The amount of time spent with friends increases progressively from the toddler stage and, notably, once a child enters school. The sharing of information, talking about worries, interests, and secrets and just having fun is an important feature of friendship.

Timothy, aged 11, says: 'I like my best friend because he is friendly. He is not sulky and he laughs a lot. We make up funny games like putting a parcel on the pavement with a string around it and then we cover the string with sand so no-one can see it. Then we hide behind the bushes, then when somebody tries to pull the string, the parcel jumps. You should just see their faces! Then we run away. I know that my friend won't ever tell on me so I can trust him. We also both like soccer.'

Claire, aged 10, describes her best friend as: 'She's really nice. She's never nasty to others. We like to do things together and help each other. When I am cross, she cheers me up and we giggle a lot. I'll tell her secrets I won't tell anybody else. We both like skipping and jumping games.'

These two anecdotes tell us a good deal about what is valued in friends at this stage:

- They should be 'nice', that is friendly.
- They should be fun.
- They can be turned to in times of trouble.
- They are loyal and can be trusted.
- They enjoy doing things together.
- They can communicate well.

In other words, friendships provide the opportunity to learn and practise many social skills.



POINT TO PONDER

Would your list of what you value in friends differ from this list? If so, in what way?

An important feature of social development in later childhood is the ability to feel sympathy and empathy for the feelings of others. This is

distinctly different from the more egocentric view of the pre-schooler, who is unable to really put himself/herself in the shoes of another.

Friends, classmates and other children with whom a child associates have an important socialising function to perform. The significance of this is not always fully appreciated. Some parents want to see their children 'occupied' all the time, failing to realise the role played by the child's peer group in teaching a child to become a co-operative member of a group. The functions of the peer group can be summarised thus:

- It is a community in miniature and a child learns different kinds of behaviour in this group, such as the rules of a game and penalties for non-compliance with them, co-operation and rejection of unfair play.
- The child must earn acceptance by the group and hence learns to adapt.
- Identification with the group aids gaining independence from adults.
- In the group, what is acceptable behaviour for boys and girls is learnt.
- Moral development may be fostered by the group in that it rewards acceptable behaviour and 'punishes' unacceptable behaviour, often by rejection.
- A child learns that people react differently and that its behaviour may have to be changed to fit in with others. This is an important lesson to be learnt.

Popularity

Being popular becomes very important at this stage. Many of the features valued in good friends are often associated with popularity. Certain other features could be added, for example, popular children tend to be self-confident, but not conceited. They gain attention by what they say or do, but not by showing off. Obviously, not all children can be equally popular. Some children may be delightful in a quiet way. It should not be a matter of concern to parents if their child does not top the popularity poll. They should only become concerned if their child veers to extremes of aggressiveness or withdrawal.

Aggressiveness

Aggressiveness may be a way of attracting attention or a way of venting frustration that has built up. Aggressiveness is more readily expressed

towards other children than adults, and parents may only become aware of this when observing their child in a group. To help children deal with aggression, parents can try to

- understand its cause, for example, is the child unhappy about something at home or at school? Often an underlying fear is masked by aggression
- encourage their child to gain attention in positive ways and praise helpfulness and co-operation, be it taking the dog for a walk, playing ball with a younger sibling or whatever can be done successfully
- listen to their child and try to understand what is at the root of this behaviour
- help their child to listen to what others are saying
- encourage their child to join in with others without forcing his/her way of doing things

Personality development

Erik Erikson (1963) stresses that the schoolgoing years coincide with the **development of industry** in a child. In essence this means mastering new knowledge and skills, and learning how things are made and how they work. The word 'industry' is used to highlight the work aspect involved in doing, making and creating things. The same curiosity that we find in the pre-schooler remains, but the difference is that the child now uses its own initiative to a far greater extent to seek answers to questions. In turn, accomplishment leads to increased self-confidence. Difficulty in coping with school and other tasks can lead to a sense of inferiority.

The role of the parent in fostering the development of industry should be to encourage the child and help it to find sources of information, but not to carry out tasks on its behalf. It is by personally completing a task that a sense of achievement is felt, that experience is enriched, and confidence is gained.

It is important for parents to see the psychological development of their child in a balanced way, recognising that different children have different strengths. For example, Sally, aged nine, has a social awareness way ahead of her peers. In the classroom, Sally will immediately notice if a child has not brought lunch or needs a pencil sharpener, and will do something about this. She will notice the sad child and will spontaneously

put her arms around her. But Sally has a specific learning problem which only time and special teaching will help her to overcome. Academically, she is unlikely to achieve great heights. But here a very special person is emerging with those qualities of caring and sensitivity in abundance which our world so sorely needs. There are many Sallys in this world who need to be appreciated for their very special gifts.

By contrast, David is academically highly gifted and, at the age of nine, has analytical computer skills far beyond his years. He is extremely introverted and prefers working on his own. He lacks all social awareness to the extent that he often says hurtful things without realising he has done so. David's parents have always been highly supportive of him academically, but are now beginning to recognise that they also need to encourage friends and interaction with others so that David can begin to acquire some social competence.

THE HURRIED CHILD – A CAUSE FOR CONCERN

Elkind, a noted American child psychologist, has written an entire book on the hurried child who is 'growing up too fast, too soon'. He explains the reason for writing this book. Elkind claims that in the sixties and seventies there were many 'spoilt' children, especially among the middle class in America, who were given 'great freedom to express themselves' and who were unrestrained, wilful and quite 'abominable', being allowed to express their most primitive impulses, for example nursery school children pelting teachers with clay.

By contrast, Elkind explains, the eighties seemed to produce a different kind of child which he calls 'The Hurried Child', 'who make up a large portion of the troubled children seen by clinicians today. These children are placed under too much pressure to achieve, to succeed and ... to take on the physical, psychological trappings of adulthood before they are prepared to deal with them. We dress our children in miniature adult costumes, we expose them to gratuitous sex and violence and we expect them to cope with a bewildering social environment – divorce, single parenthood, homosexuality' (1981, p xii).

In South Africa we can add the uncertainties and fears resulting from high levels of violence and crime. In short, hurried children are stressed children. Certain features are associated with a parental attitude and action of hurrying children to **pseudo adulthood**:

- a shift from activities considered to be fun such as picnics, campfires, and non-competitive games to skills training and highly competitive sports
- a change in clothing so that children wear miniature adult clothes (or is it that adults are wearing clothes that children would be comfortable in?). The point is that clothes help define positions in society and the interchangeability of clothes could be an indication of a broad uncertainty about roles and patterns of authority
- the exposure to different adult role models, for example on TV and in the movies, which is confusing to them. Children may be told by their parents to be considerate and kind but heroes on screen may be ruthless and aggressive
- an unwillingness to accept 'late bloomers'. That is those children who simply need more time to develop. To admit that one's child has been held back a year at school may be perceived as a major disaster by a parent. Yet it may truly be in the child's best interests, allowing it to catch up or establish a firmer foundation for future learning
- the child being seen as a parental status symbol. All parents take pride in their children's accomplishments. But parents to whom their child is a status symbol tend to drive them relentlessly so that they, the parents, feel good.



All the foregoing relate to the egalitarian philosophy of our time which emphasises equality, sadly confusing equality with sameness. Children are not the same as adults, nor are adults the same as children.



POINT TO PONDER

'In truth, the recognition of a group's special needs and accommodation to those needs are the only true ways to ensure equality, and true equal opportunity'

(David Elkind).

Latchkey children

There may be circumstances which may leave parents little choice but to expect adult behaviour of their children. One can think here of 'latchkey children', that is children whose parents are away at work and who have the key to their home so that they can let themselves in when they come home from school.

Latchkey children are, by definition, children between the ages of four and sixteen who are regularly without adult supervision. They are in 'self-care' for a substantial part of the day. Sometimes they are in the care of older siblings who are also still children. A relatively new phenomenon, it is attributed to the increasing number of women in the labour force, the increase in single parents, and the absence of close-knit communities as previously found in villages and small towns. It is a phenomenon often found in unsafe neighbourhoods. In black families, the breakdown of the extended family system has contributed much to this situation (Swart-Kruger, 1994).

Latchkey children are classified as neglected children. They are often instructed to stay at home until their parents return. Inevitably, they often feel lonely, bored, fearful of situations they may not be able to deal with, and resentful of being left alone. The effects of being alone will depend partly on the age of the child, with younger children being more vulnerable than older ones. Although responsibility may be fostered in some cases, it is hardly an ideal situation for a child to spend so much time alone. Not surprisingly, they may seek company and without adult supervision, this may not always be of the desired kind.

How not to hurry a child

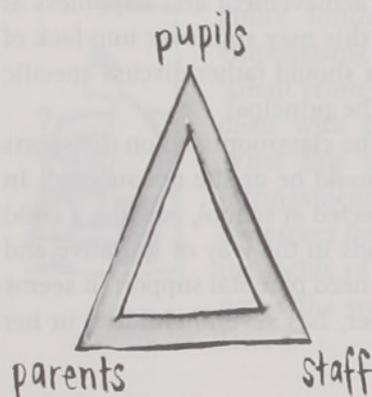
- Parents should respect a child's own pace of development and respond to it appropriately and not force its pace.
- Parents should encourage co-operation and should not focus excessively on competitiveness.
- Parents should acknowledge the importance of play, which has its own developmental value.
- Children should not be used as surrogate adults.
- If circumstances compel children to take on adult roles, then the parents should ensure some support in their absence. For example, a group of

neighbourhood mothers or grannies who could be enlisted in some way or telephone numbers to call in times of emergency or fear, such as Child Line.

THE SCHOOL, THE PARENT AND THE CHILD

In 1995 in an address to parents and members of staff, Mr Theo de Wet, principal of Irene Primary School, used a triangle to highlight the interaction that should exist between the three stakeholders involved.

For a school to function effectively the triangle needs to be in balance and a healthy link needs to exist between parents and pupils, pupils and staff, and between staff and parents. The parents and staff form the base upon which the development of the pupils rests and the links between all three



stakeholders should be strong and clear.

The balance of this triangle may be disturbed in various ways:

- if staff are not fulfilling their role adequately
- if pupils are not fulfilling their role as learners
- if parents give little or no support to the staff as educators of their children or to their children as learners
- if the interaction/communication lines between the three stakeholders are not honest, healthy and open.

The principal went on to explain that children of today are different from children from a decade or more ago. He describes the youth of today as 'confident, outspoken, informed, critical and vibrant in their zest for life. Our present pupils are quite a handful, yes, but they are receptive to guidance, and not unwilling to be structured. Parents and teachers too have changed. They have become more flexible in their approach to children, yet parents often expect schools today to be like those they themselves attended.'

Other points emphasised were that schools are under enormous

pressure today, even the more privileged ones. They are more than places of learning, and are often a safe, if temporary, haven for children who are under severe pressure or stress. With the breakdown of so many families, many children arrive at school emotionally and, sometimes, physically battered. Children come from vastly different backgrounds, now that acceptance into a school is no longer on a neighbourhood/geographical basis as children from further afield must be accommodated. Syllabi and teaching methods are also under review. If ever schools and pupils needed parental support, it surely is now. Moreover, parental attitudes towards school have a direct bearing on children's achievement and happiness at school. If parents have a negative attitude, this may spill over into lack of interest and rebellion in the pupils. Parents should rather discuss specific problems with the teachers concerned, or the principal.

A secure child is willing to venture in the classroom and on the sports field without fearing a negative reaction should he or she not succeed. In other words, insecurity in the family is reflected at school, causing a child to be pre-occupied and anxious which stands in the way of initiative and learning. Just at a time when children most need parental support, it seems to be diminishing. Maria, a Grade 1 teacher, has several children in her class about whom she is really worried.

Little six-year-old Johnny regularly complains of bad headaches. This could indicate anything from a visual problem, which could be rectified by appropriate glasses, to a serious illness or neurological problem. Yet all attempts to reach the parents have been in vain, although they both accept messages on their cell phones.

Bright seven-year-old Judy seems to lose all concentration at times, staring blankly into space and, unseeingly, gazes at her teacher. Then suddenly, after a moment of confusion, her concentration returns. This could be a case of 'petit mal' requiring medical attention. Do her parents know this? Her teacher would like to know, but where are they?

And then there was also Thomas, aged eight, was still at school at 6 o'clock because he had not been collected.

Just what is a concerned teacher supposed to do, and where does the school's responsibility begin and end? What is the responsibility toward a family when the parents tell a school: 'If our child behaves badly at school, that is your problem. Don't call us next time.'

A further problem in schools may be poor equipment or resources

stretched beyond their limit. A disturbing phenomenon is the increase in stealing. Especially under such circumstances, the inculcation of values and responsible behaviour is of major importance and in this regard in particular, parents and schools need to act together to become part of the solution.

POINT TO PONDER



Police forums, here and overseas, are increasingly emphasising the importance of dealing effectively with 'small crime'. Experience has shown that when this is dealt with effectively, serious crime also decreases. What this suggests is that leniency toward minor infringements cultivates an attitude of disregard and disrespect for rules, regulations, the law and inevitably, the rights of others. Once such an attitude develops it paves the way for an ever-increasing disregard of the law.

Multiculturalism in school

As schools in this country become more integrated, so the concept of multicultural education becomes more evident. But just what does this mean?

Jeffcoate (1975) says that in essence multicultural education is based on two major assumptions, namely respect for self and respect for others.

Having respect for oneself implies a positive self-image and confidence in who and what one is. It is often the person with low self-esteem on the one hand, or inflated self-esteem and arrogance on the other, who finds it difficult to respect the dignity of others.

Respect for self and others means accepting



- the uniqueness of each individual
- our common humanity
- the principles of equal rights and justice
- the value of achievements or traditions which differ from our own
- the damage which prejudice does to those discriminated against. To this we could add, the damage done to those who are prejudiced and consequently lack sensitivity and awareness of the needs and values of others.

TELEVISION: FRIEND OR FOE?

Television has become an integral part of most people's lives today. The question arises what impact it has on the ideas, values, attitudes and behaviour of children. That parents have differing opinions about this is reflected in the following statements:

- 'How can one stop one's children seeing undesirable programmes?'
- 'Looking at TV – you'd think only crime and sex were important.'
- 'Oh come on, you take TV too seriously – most of it is play-play.'
- 'I wish they'd bring back censorship of sex and violence.'
- 'I don't let my children watch TV news anymore, there's just too much violence.'
- 'Much of what we see on TV is just plain silly. We just have to teach our children that.'
- 'I think some of the educational programmes are great.'
- 'Well, you don't have to watch what you don't like.'
- 'I think it's public enemy number 1.'
- 'There's too much about sex and too little about love.'

Several explanations have been advanced concerning the possible effects of television. First there is the **Catharsis Theory** which rests on the assumption that one abreacts negative feelings by watching something on TV with which one can identify, and while watching then can let go of similar feelings. Available evidence points to the contrary. Television may act as a **trigger** for behaviour, for example airing information about the amount of money being collected for a charitable cause tends to increase donations. On the negative side, a disturbed person may be triggered into action by something seen on TV in the form of some destructive action. This is similar to the Copycat

Phenomenon whereby people with similar problems or motives then follow the example set by somebody else. Another theory which has been well substantiated is the **desensitisation** theory. Simply stated, it means that if you see enough violence or other disturbing scenes, it blunts your feelings – you become insensitive that is an ever stronger stimulus is needed to get the same effect. The same applies to pornography.



POINT TO PONDER

'If everyone agrees that television has unrivalled efficiency at selling goods, services, culture, music, politics and fashion, why does the industry continue to claim that the one thing it cannot sell is violence?'

(Paul Johnson).

In South Africa, the Human Sciences Research Council undertook extensive research on the effects of television on children. They established that primary school children in grades 5 to 7 watched television for 22 hours per week and high school children for 17 hours (Pitout, 1985).

Santrock states that 'Few developments in society over the past 25 years have had a greater impact on children than television has. Many children spend more time in front of the television set than they do with their parents' (1995, p 252).

There is mounting research evidence on the impact of TV on children and teenagers. Moreover, viewing habits, it appears, are often already established at pre-school level.

Negative effects

Of particular concern has been the effect of television in a society that is manifesting more and more violence and aggression. One study in America compared two small towns of similar size, population and economic condition. One of these towns had TV before it became available to the other. The aggression levels of children from both towns were

assessed at the beginning of the study and were found to be similar. After two years they were re-tested: it was found that the children from the town with television were much higher in aggression (Joy, Kimball, Zabrack, 1977).

Programmes which children tend to find especially disturbing are those which reflect domestic violence, especially if weapons are used; violent sex, cruelty to children and animals, murders and horrendous road accidents, unrest situations, necklace murders, close-up shots of corpses, rape and suicide (SABC Annual Report 1987).

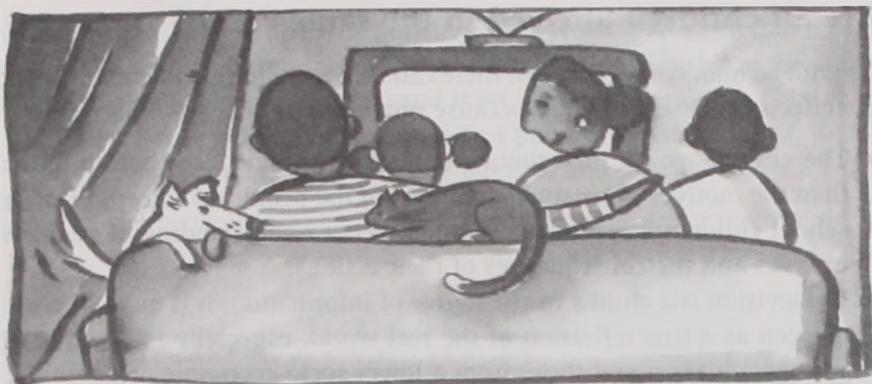
The British Swinfen Working Party on the effects of television viewing, concluded that there is 'a causal link between the viewing of scenes of extreme violence and actual violent behaviour in some children and young people' (quoted in Van Rooyen, 1987, p 81).

There are many investigations which point to the potentially negative effects of TV, especially in regard to aggression which may be increased by

- identification (you feel and act like a certain character on screen)
- imitation in that aggressive skills may be learnt
- weakening of inhibitions about negative acts: everybody is doing it, so why shouldn't I?
- reinforcing the notion that the world is a dangerous place
- making people less sensitive to negative and destructive acts
- blunting the imagination. Just think of the importance of make-believe play in which children act out real-life situations, using their imaginations. This can be a useful way of practising skills and imagining solutions for problems by the child. In such play a child has a feeling of being in control. Television is no substitute for this. Creative activities like drawing, writing stories, making music, dancing, to name but a few, are not exercised by the child glued to the TV set for most of its spare time.

Positive effects

It would be wrong to view the effects of television only in negative terms, as there can be no doubt that it can also be a positive influence. The effects will, partly, be determined by how 'real', that is true to life, the people and situations depicted are seen to be. The more real, the greater the impact. Some research was undertaken to find out how real 'The Cosby Show' is seen to be.



'The Cosby Show' has proved to be as popular in South Africa as in the United States. An analysis of the perceptions of South African children revealed several factors which were linked to identification with members of the Cosby family, as had been found to be the case in America. First of all, the Cosby family was perceived to be like a real family. The interaction portrayed is that children can talk to their parents. The family has fun together and shows mutual affection, for example by hugging one another. Furthermore, they seem to come up with solutions to their problems. 'The present study indicates that the popularity of "The Cosby Show" might be more than mere entertainment and that it could be used by children in South Africa, particularly black children in cultural transition, to be a model for their own behaviour' (Van Vuuren *et al*, 1990).

Television can also promote pro-social behaviour because

- programmes about remarkable people provide exposure to greatness and positive models with whom to identify
- knowledge can be expanded as one is introduced to a wide range of people and situations that would otherwise be unknown
- it can provide historical and cultural information and perspective
- it is a source of entertainment and can be a relaxing break from work
- it can be a wonderful source of information (one need only think of the magnificent films about different peoples and countries made by National Geographic)
- it can increase tolerance and friendliness toward others, even those very different from ourselves. This has particular implications for the understanding of different ethnic groups in South Africa as differing customs and traditions come to be better understood and respected
- it has a vast potential for educating children and adults

Are all children affected in the same way?

As with so many other matters, there can be no single generalisation about the effects of TV on children because numerous factors are involved:

- The child's age. A pre-schooler tends to respond to the action rather than the motives or personal emotions of the people on screen. Primary school children already have a much better understanding of people's motives and the consequences of their actions.
- If television is a child's **main** source of information, it is quite likely to be seen as a true reflection of the real world, especially in the case of younger children and those from a lower socio-economic group.
- TV can isolate a child from the family and TV-bound children tend to become less willing to help in the home. In families with much conflict it may become an escape.
- Some children will not have enough information or experience to critically evaluate what they see.
- Certain personality traits such as low self-esteem, poor social skills, being self-willed and aggressive make children more vulnerable to the effects of TV. The Swinfen Working Party, which examined the effects of TV on children, came to the conclusion that 'the indications are that the short-term harmful effects [of viewing extreme violence on screen] do not last long in normal, healthy children especially where there is wise parental support and a secure family and home environment. Where such basic security is lacking, the harmful effects last longer and may do permanent damage' (cited in Van Rooyen, 1987).

Parents and television

From the foregoing it is clear that parents should limit and monitor their children's TV viewing. Older children and adolescents should be guided to become more critical of what they see, for example by making a TV programme a topic of conversation, instead of a substitute for it. The viewing of educational programmes should be encouraged.

EXERCISE

Choose two or three TV advertisements. Then ask your child or children

what they think the basic message being conveyed is. What is it that is said or done in this advertisement which makes them think so? Are there any hidden messages or suggestions, and if so, what are they?

Why do they think this is a good or a poor advertisement?

Have they been influenced by the adverts, and in what way?

SUMMING UP

The schoolgoing child enters a world peopled by its own generation. Peer interactions are therefore of paramount importance. It is a period of immense learning. It is also a time when children have to face situations without the immediate help of parents being available. Yet the support and love of parents remain as crucial as before.