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A POOR ATTITUDE: A DETERRENT TO READING IMPROVEMENT

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Today's teachers are confronted with children who display a poor attitude toward school in general and reading in particular. This situation is anxiety-producing for the teachers, as well as for the administrators. The Dictionary of Education defines attitude as "the predisposition or tendency to react specifically towards an object, situation, or value; usually accompanied by feelings and emotions" (Good, p. 49). Attitudes vary among students and cause children to respond to a situation either favorably or unfavorably. Thus children's attitudes serve as guides to behavior and profoundly affect the progress made toward educational goals and the level and degree of children's participation in educational activities. A positive attitude produces a motivational stimulus that promotes and sustains learning. On the other hand, a negative attitude results in a lack of persistent effort, a lack of motivation, an abundance of avoidance maneuvers, and various misbehavior problems.

Some educators believe that the child's positive attitude is the foundation upon which reading growth and improvement are built. For example, Alexander stated that "if attitude, the first prerequisite for reading, is not positive, then it is likely that the others (motivation, attention, comprehension, and acceptance) will not occur at all or will occur haphazardly" (Alexander, p. 6). Likewise, Groff found "that the relationship between general reading ability and attitude toward reading as a school activity approached a substantial level" (Groff, p. 314). Obviously, the teacher must take steps to ensure the development of constructive attitudes among the children if progress is to be made in attaining the goals of reading.

Attitude Development

Children are not born with positive or negative attitudes, for attitudes are developed as children become involved with people and things in their environment. Interests, tastes, and habits cause attitudes to evolve as children grow, mature, and interact with others during the preschool years. Therefore, attitudes are developed during the preschool period and condition the children to like or dislike reading. These attitudes become evident as the children enter the elementary classroom. Although modification is difficult, teachers can bring about change in children's attitudes. Consequently, "one of the most important aims of the beginning reading period is to help the child develop a positive attitude toward reading" (Heilman, p. 29).

Because the environment has such a big impact, the home life is all-important in helping children develop a positive attitude toward reading. Carter and McGinnis stated that the "attitudes of parents of superior readers emphasize the value of communication and the development of language skills" (Carter and McGinnis, p. 65). Children who see individuals reading books and enjoying the activity will have a different attitude toward reading from children who never see their parents, brothers, sisters, or playmates looking at or reading books. Over a period of time, children gradually assimilate attitudes from the actions and beliefs of those with whom they regularly come in contact. Significant others--children and adults held in high esteem by children--play important roles in attitude formation. No doubt, children who have developed a positive attitude toward reading have "probably acquired that attitude over a long period of time in direct contact with books and people who read" (Harris and Smith, p. 111).

The home life can have a very negative effect upon the attitudes of children. Self-fulfilling prophecy works for parents as well as for teachers. Parents who constantly confront their child with his/her inability to perform educational tasks help produce a poor attitude, as well as a negative self-concept. Some parents do not understand how their child can make so little progress in developing reading skills and are not "able to see how the home and patterns of overprotection, psychological rejection, excessively high standards, perfectionism, or unfilled psychological needs stemming from the family configuration, are related to reading failures" (Heilman, p. 31). The parents become ego-involved in the child's lack of

educational progress. One spouse accuses the other of causing the child's failure and an argument ensues. Tragically, the child is caught in the middle; and, as a result, the child develops a negative attitude toward classwork and school.

Sometimes attitudes are grounded in children's emotions. The emotional state of children impacts reading performance. The emotional state has been described as "a hypothetical state that is the predisposition to act in a certain manner that is the function of circumstances in the individual's history" (Wolman, p. 118). Therefore, children who have been mistreated as a result of their lack of reading skill or achievement develop strong negative emotions concerning reading. Negative emotions can also develop if children set educational goals that are too high. For example, children may expect to begin reading upon entering school. The parents could also have the same unrealistic goal. The children become distraught when they are unable to read immediately upon school entrance, and the parents become distressed when their children make no significant progress in learning to read. As a result, the children may then avoid or withdraw from reading activities. The children resort to this evasive action to keep from having a confrontation or an emotional outburst. The more negative confrontations the children have, the more that their emotions are built-up. A vicious circle has been established, and the children, instead of improving, tend to get worse. They become bewildered with their inability to resolve the enigma. The best and most used escape route is withdrawal from, or the avoidance of, any type of reading activity. Thus, a negative attitude toward reading has been established or sustained.

Symptoms

Children with poor attitudes toward reading reflect a number of characteristics. Headaches, upset stomachs, or other psychosomatic illnesses become excuses for nonparticipation. For some children who not only have poor attitudes but are also poor readers, oral reading may subject them to embarrassment and peer ridicule, thus resulting in an even poorer attitude toward reading, causing them to evade reading activities. After withdrawal, these children may daydream or just stare into space. On other occasions, children with poor attitudes may become aggressive, antisocial, and belligerent toward classroom peers, especially those who may have gained

success in reading and who frequently make fun of their less adept classmates. Peers frequently taunt poor readers by laughing at their misreading of textbook passages and their inability to answer comprehension questions.

Remediation

Children can be asked how they feel about reading and their perceptions of their reading abilities and achievement. If teachers show sincere interest and concern, many children will avail themselves of the opportunity to share their true feelings about their reading problems. This action by teachers could increase the children's receptiveness to learning.

Problems in reading should be perceived as opportunities for teachers to meet children's needs. Children readily change their attitudes when teachers show a concerned interest and provide rich and rewarding educational experiences. Teachers should select reading materials that are of high interest to children. Interest inventories have been recommended by researchers to enable teachers to select materials that will satisfy the needs of children (Burns, Roe, & Ross, p. 240).

Teachers can establish a warm classroom environment where children can find security, get rewards and recognition, and feel accepted and successful. Attitudes can be modified when there is a change in teacher-pupil rapport and the classroom atmosphere. Therefore, teachers should approach reading activities with a high level of enthusiasm, and this enthusiasm should be readily noticed by the students. Motivated teachers usually find that their students are motivated also.

The students' self-concepts have an impact upon the attitudes and the resultant effort applied to reaching educational goals. A poor self-concept "is a set of perceptions that interferes with reading ability or with the ability to learn to read" (Quandt & Selznick, p. 2). Tragic as it may be, "students with low self-concepts frequently expect to fail and usually live up to their own expectations" (Dupuis & Askov, p. 83). However, the teacher can help the students improve their self-concepts, which, in turn, will enable the children to develop positive attitudes. But teachers make the mistake of reinforcing behavior on a class level rather than on an individual level. Positive reinforcement should be given

according to each child's level of achievement; that is, reinforcement of the student's performance should be judged on evidence of individual progress. Therefore, the level of success must be measured by individual standards and not group standards, for the growth rate would be much slower for some children than for others. For the low-achieving child, this means giving positive reinforcement for any change in learning that reflects effort, growth, or persistence. Thus, teachers should realize that a child who misses five words while reading orally may be making considerable progress; whereas, a child who misses two words may be making little, if any, improvement. Successful reading teachers strive to improve their pupils' attitudes as the pupils improve their reading skills. Research has shown that there is a significant relationship between positive attitudes of children and their progress toward achieving educational goals (Groff, p. 314).

Also, the children's self-concepts are related to their self-esteem. Self-esteem is "the judgment and attitude an individual holds toward himself (sic)" (Good, p. 525). Positive attitudes are generated from having self-esteem and a good self-concept -- the self-concept being a more generalized perception of total worth or value. For example, low self-esteem is a "conviction of inferiority, fear of social encounters, self-consciousness, sensitivity to criticism, lack of confidence, remaining in the shadows, and listening, not participating" (Zintz, p. 522). Therefore, teachers must provide opportunities for children to experience success and to get peer recognition; this should bolster children's self-worth. The success and resultant peer approval are inconsistent with a lack of self-esteem and a low self-concept. Hopefully, this inconsistency will cause children to change their attitudes toward their level of growth, development, and performance in academic activities.

Children's attitudes are related to success, and teachers should recognize the fact that all children have the potential for success in reading. The degree of success, however, must be interpreted by the child's capacity to learn. Instruction should be adjusted to individual needs. Consequently, teachers must select different methods and materials to meet student needs. Probably those teachers who "are not committed to using any one program--the language-experience, the basal-reader, or the Individualized Reading approach--exclusively"

(Dallmann, Rouch, Char, and DeBoer, pp. 68-69) will experience the most success in meeting the varying needs of their students. The teacher's role is of prime importance in bringing about a change in attitude. In fact, "the role of the teacher . . . is to foster positive attitudes so that children will want to read" (Alexander, p. 7). If a teacher will plan reading lessons which enable the students to be successful, the students' attitudes will improve and the teacher's efforts will be more productive. If a child develops a positive attitude, then the child's level of motivation could change also because "the child who has a positive attitude toward the school [and school activities] will more likely be academically motivated" (Briggs, p. 3).

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