
GROUP LEARNING TOWARDS FAMILY DEVELOPMENT

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Resume

The agency described here works with low-functioning excluded families. Members of these families often cannot perform ordinary family tasks, and one of the agency's aims is to assist development in these areas. This article reports an attempt to use some principles of adult learning theory with a group of women who meet regularly in a social/educational setting.

Group learning towards family development

The Agency

St. Anthony's is a small, voluntary, family welfare agency, founded and managed by the Sisters of St. Joseph and situated in the western suburbs of Melbourne. The agency's work takes place in families in which functioning is so poor that breakdown has occurred or is a distinct possibility. There have been many structural and functional deficits in these families' lives over past generations, and these accumulated deficits, combined with current and related problems such as child neglect and/or abuse, family violence, physical and mental ill-health, poverty, unemployment, drug addiction, alcoholism etc. create negative conditions for family development. Consequently these families are, and historically have been, almost invariably among the "excluded" members of the community, suffering poor personal and social relationships, and having difficulty in making use of the community's resources and facilities.

St. Anthony's concentrates on trying to promote development in the long term, and relies heavily on the skills and talents of case workers, family workers, child care worker, education worker, substitute care-givers, volunteer co-ordinator and volunteer families to this end. Our understanding of family development is that in each family there are possibilities for more effective and constructive functioning in the areas of leadership, role anomaly and family identity, which we try to discover, support and expand. (1) (J. Healy). Workers are involved in teams constructed to meet the individual needs of each family. Team consultation is a strong feature of the organization and teams meet regularly to co-ordinate, to support the workers and to discuss the impact and value of intervention.

The Group

One of the long-standing activities conducted by the agency has been a weekly women's group. This group began seven years ago when the case-workers felt that some women were tentatively reaching out for information about their young children's behaviour and development. The education worker (currently still organizing the group), who had begun to establish trusting relationships with these women, was asked to begin a low-key, socially oriented group. Five women began participating, and as it was felt by all concerned that both the social and educational aims were being met, the group continued and developed. Over the years many different activities have taken place, such as having different speakers on a wide variety of topics, crafts, films, luncheon visits to each other's homes and outings. Good contact has been made with the local TAFE, who have provided teachers and facilities, e.g. for a cooking course. The education worker is now regularly assisted by a family worker and by two volunteers who offer friendship, a "mothering" aspect and normalizing influences.

The Current Group

The current group consists of six to ten members who have been involved for periods of approximately one to three years. Their participation rate ranges from those who never miss a meeting to those whose commitment is intermittent and dependent on such factors as the appeal of a special outing or celebration. Some members always arrive independently by public or private transport, but others never come unless they are brought by a staff member. For some time it has been clear that this group values pleasurable outings above all other activities and only time constraints (e.g. being back by 3 o'clock to pick up the children from school) limit our choice.

Nevertheless the list of excursions is extensive and includes: the Zoo, art galleries, the Arts Centre and Concert Hall, Werribee Park, Como House, Government House, Ripponlea, Old Melbourne Gaol, the City Baths, the Meat Market Craft Centre, the Tulip Farm, Tullamarine Airport, Queenscliff, Hanging Rock, the Royal Botanic Gardens, various other parks and gardens. In addition, a connection with the local Women's Learning Centre has led to some limited participation in their courses.

Costs are sometimes borne by the educational fund of the agency and sometimes by group members, and transport is frequently provided by a volunteer with a small bus or by agency cars. A special activity, for which members save all year, is Christmas luncheon at a restaurant in the Dandenongs.

As an outcome of this group's activities we believe that feelings of self-confidence and self-esteem have been enhanced, and that these personal developments have been facilitated in an atmosphere characterized by qualities of acceptance, trust, respect and support, which permeate the agency's work in general.

Some examples of this development include - a group member who once always looked at the ground or covered her eyes when talking, now looks other people in the eye and joins in conversation; some members are able to welcome and support new members; some are able to bring new information into the group; many are able to put their point of view in group discussion and make some effort to listen to others. Since many members have suffered lives of rejection and have a history of social behaviour more characterized by withdrawal, attack or extreme defensiveness, we hope that socially competent behaviour learnt and practised in the group will have outcomes transferable to the wider social world, e.g. to school and kindergarten parent groups.

While valuing these social developments the education worker felt that this was not the only learning which could take place, particularly from the excursion program which was more at the level of pleasurable entertainment and a diversion from the stresses of daily life. It was believed that the conditions were present for more structured outcomes, consonant with the agency's aims of family development.

In recent years there has been much research into adult learning and many principles in this area have been described. (2) (Brundage & Mackeracher). On reading this literature we realized that many of these principles had been operating in the group without being made explicit, and we extracted those most pertinent to adults whose learning processes we presume to have been damaged.

1. Change is possible
"Adult behaviour is not fixed, but

changes in response to both internal and external pressure. Therefore proper planning relates to removing and reducing obstacles to learning and to enhancing individual learning processes and group activities."

2. The value and meaning of experience
"The experience which adult learners bring to any learning activity is both a helpful source for further learning and an unavoidable potential hindrance. Adult learning is facilitated when the learners' representation and interpretation of their own experience are accepted as valid, acknowledged as an essential aspect influencing change, and respected as a potential source for learning. Therefore program plans should include opportunities for learners to compare and integrate new learnings with past experience and to modify, when necessary, meanings and values assigned to past experience."
3. The importance of reflection.
"When past experience can be applied directly to current experience, learning is facilitated. Therefore planning learning experiences should appear to the learner to be relevant to life experiences, both past and present. Learning content should bear some relationship to the learner's past experience and current concerns. Planned activities should provide opportunities for learners to reflect on their own experience without the threat of being judged or evaluated."
4. Increasing the likelihood of success.
"Adult learning is facilitated by environments which are free from threat and which provide personal support for change. The teaching and learning activities need to include provision for testing new behaviors in relative safety, for developing mutually trusting relationships, for encouraging openness to feedback, and for reducing anxiety and fear of failure. There should be a built-in success factor. A collaborative planning process is required."
5. The necessity of practicality.
"Adult learning is facilitated when the material to be learned, or the skills and strategies to be used, can be applied immediately to real-life experiences. Therefore programs should focus on practical material which is relevant to the current or future concerns of the learner; should include processes which can be utilized in life exper-

iences; and should provide for the most productive conjunction between what is desired and what is possible."

In our reflection on these principles we realized that all except the third were in operation in sufficient degree for learning to take place, but that group members had not been encouraged to reflect on their experience and to connect these personally enjoyable outings beyond the day on which they occurred to the other parts of their lives and in particular to their family life. If education is partly about supporting, even provoking people to learn through experience, it would make sense to use the excursion experience for this purpose, and could enhance parents' ability to exert more active and productive control over their own decision making, at least in the area of recreational activity for their families.

The education worker then designed an outings survey sheet and presented it to group members as an opportunity to keep track of and rate the enjoyment of our activities. It was also suggested that some outings might be pleasurable enough to share with others, especially other family members, and that the survey sheets could help make that decision. After a few joking remarks about the worker sounding "just like a teacher", the group members tackled the completion of the first sheet with interest and enthusiasm, and then proceeded to recall past experiences and fill in all the sheets provided. The organizer had also provided folders and additional items such as post-cards, information leaflets, etc. These were perused with interest and the group members showed real satisfaction with their efforts. In the following weeks involvement did not decline and members usually filled in the survey sheets without prompting after each excursion.

The outings survey contained the following questions:

- Name address of place.
- Did I enjoy it?
- Would my family enjoy it?
- How would we get there?
- How much would it cost to take the family?
- Will I take my family?

At the end of the year, when the group usually goes into recess for the school holidays, a special meeting was held to discuss the possibility of group family outings being held instead. This idea was well received and the group made plans, centred around the following points - outings should be cheap, easily accessible by public transport, and enjoyable by the whole family. The four excursions chosen were - the Zoo, the Botanic Gardens, Footscray Park, and the Treasury Gardens.

Staff Discussion.

Aim

For families to learn that they can arrange and carry through outings that they could enjoy, that would be a good family experience and that could be repeated.

This program is designed to increase family participation in enjoyable recreations activities.

It is for families who are otherwise inclined to stay inside for days watching television and video, or keep their children outside in yards bare of provision for play, or who let them roam the streets.

The program presumes a background of experience, information, preparation and personal choice which have occurred in group excursions and discussions. It is desirable that families see this as a personally chosen opportunity, not as an agency command or request.

Families might perceive the program in a number of ways, e.g. as something parents want to do, but have to put up with having their children alone; as something their children would enjoy and they have to tolerate; as something they and their children would enjoy as a family; as something the agency wants and which could give them the opportunity to ask for money or transport; as something we are pushing them into, thereby creating resistance.

It is suggested that we do all that is necessary in terms of preparation, and then leave things to each family, whose choice may tell us something about their functioning. This could be of greater value to the family, and to our knowledge building, than making sure the family has the outing.

What might we learn?

We must be careful not to divide families into "good" and "bad" depending on whether or not they participate. It would be preferable to ask questions such as:

- Which families are able to take advantage of a situation which requires personal motivation and organization?
- Why is this so?
- What part have we had to play - for example, have we created resistance or over-dependence?

In reference to the last question, a complicating factor is that the agency has, for some time, run a holiday program whereby we take people for family outings, providing transport, food and the company of at least two agency workers. The aim of these outings is for families to have good experiences together in a supportive atmosphere. It is possible that these supported outings, because they require no personal effort or expense, may be more desirable and take preference over outings which require choice, personal

organization and effort. This complication has become obvious as the two sets of outings have proceeded. As it is a belief of the agency that we are often required to perform functions which families themselves normally carry out we face questions such as:

- How do we determine what is best for each family, bearing in mind our developmental aims?
- In which situations should we do things for families which they cannot do for themselves?

Questions and observations concerning individual families were also pursued in team discussion.

Results

The participation rate was as follows:

- Five families attended the first outing.
- Two families attended the second outing.
- Two families attended the third outing.
- Three families attended the fourth outing.

In addition, group members were asked to reflect on and evaluate the holiday program by considering the following questions:

- Are group holiday outings a good idea?
- Did we choose good places to go?

All responses were positive and centred around the themes of involvement and pleasure. The group decided to keep filling in their outings survey sheets through the new term and to plan similiarly for the next school holidays.

Concluding Discussion

We have tried to apply some principles from adult learning theory in a program designed to stimulate and encourage a change in family functioning in the area of recreational activity.

This theory presumes pre-conditions of acceptance, support, respect, and the development of trust which are consonant with the agency's aims for its style of contact with family members. In addition we had to understand and incorporate the significant role of experience and its effect on learning and people's actions. We have found that simply giving information is not enough to promote change. Nor is experience, no matter how pleasant, a sufficient condition for change. Experience must be reflected upon and decisions made arising frm that experience in a carefully structured, but flexible and non-threatening situation.

The program of group family outings was structured around certain principles of learning previously described.

1. Change is possible
The agency operates on the belief that

change in individual and family functioning is possible. This program attempted to promote a change in one area of family life (i.e. school holiday outings) by using group activity to enhance the individual learning process.

2. The value and meaning of experience
The program attempted to alter assumptions based on past experiences of the parents involved - that holiday outings would be either impossible or unhappy, by involving them in a personally enjoyable experience in a supportive group to extend the individual experience into a family one.
3. The importance of relevant reflection
Group members had the opportunity to reflect on their own experiences (both on group and family outings), and to plan activities suitable to their current needs.
4. Increasing the likelihood of success
The group provides an atmosphere free of threat and personally suppor-

tive. The likelihood of a successful family outing was increased by the prior experiences of group members conducted in an atmosphere of pleasure and free from anxiety.

5. The necessity of practicality
The group members decided what they wanted, i.e. group holiday outings with their families, and they also decided the conditions under which this would be possible in the light of their own experience.

(1) Healy, Sr. Joan; (1983), *Towards Understanding and Good Service*, A progress Report of St. Anthony's, Footscray.

(2) Brundage, D.H. and Mackeracher, D.; (1980), *Adult learning Principles and their Application to Program Planning*, Ministry of Education, Ontario.



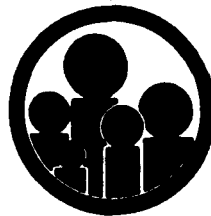
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