

Toward Effective Teaching of Family Relationships

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I have been invited by your editor to discuss the teaching of family relationships in secondary school home economics programs. Many Canadian home economists have expressed an interest in and a concern for family life education as a part of these programs. In Ontario, for example, a Grade 13 home economics program, The Canadian Family in Perspective,¹ has recently been developed and is being taught in some schools. Other provinces are moving in similar directions. Here in British Columbia a week-long conference about families is being planned for home economics teachers. This conference will be held July 14-18, 1969, at the University of British Columbia.

What is family life education? Why is it being taught? What is the content of such programs? How can it be taught in the classroom? Is such teaching effective? These and other questions are being asked by the teachers considering this new direction in home economics. The answers are not simple nor are they distinct, for all elements of a family life education program -- philosophy, curriculum, methods, and evaluation are closely interrelated.

Why Family Life Education?

Family life education programs were developed originally out of a concern for social problems believed to be related to the family - problems such as a rising divorce rate, juvenile delinquency, and the increasing incidence of mental illness. Improving family living was seen as one avenue for attacking and reducing these kinds of problems. Family life education also serves a more positive function, that of encouraging more healthy, more human, and more creative individual development and family living. While the stresses of automation and technology, of rapid change and, mobility, and of ever-expanding knowledge in all areas create new problems and new responsibilities for families, they may also enhance the possibilities for seeking new and exciting solutions to both, old and new concerns. It is these latter possibilities that give life and, impetus to the present-day family life programs.

What Is Family Life Education?

Briefly, the main purpose of family life education is to help individuals and families learn about human growth, development, and behavior in the family setting

throughout the life cycle. 2 The major concept in these programs is relationships, as these are involved in personality development and self-esteem and to personal decisions and commitments.

The content of family life courses will vary from school to school and from province to province, depending upon the needs, interests, and concerns of the individuals enrolled, the families from which they come, the communities in which they live, and the philosophy of those who develop the program. Generally, however, topics included in these courses are interpersonal relationships, personal development, and self-understanding; preparation for marriage and parenthood; child-rearing and socialization practices; the management of human and material family resources; and interaction between the family and the changing community in which it lives.

Two examples of differing programs are cited below. In the Ontario guide (previously mentioned.), units of work are built around, (1) the historical perspective of the family, (2) socialization, (3) economics, food, and/or housing the family, and (4) the family in cross-cultural perspective. A program developed by Iowa State University is built around the major concepts of (1) self-realization, (2) values as directives of behavior, (3) socialization, (4) development of the individual, (5) family functions, and (6) the dynamics of society. Many other variations in family life programs also exist.

How Can It Be Taught?

Methods and techniques for teaching family life education are not unique to this subject matter although some may be more appropriate than others. The selection and use of any method depends upon the teacher herself, the material to be taught and the students in the course. One cannot do justice to all of the possible techniques and to the variables affecting their use in a paper of this length. However, a brief survey of those methods which seem most effective and/or most promising for family life education would probably include:

1. A combination of the lecture, key questions and discussion techniques. (Key questions go beyond drill or recall and seek to challenge, to promote reasoning and evaluation, to launch creative thinking.)
2. Group techniques such as buzz groups, circle discussions, debates, group projects, interviews and polls.
3. Dramatic techniques, including the use of short plays, of socio-drama, psychodrama and minute drama, and of role playing.
4. The use of mass media -- newspapers and magazines, radio and television, cartoons, novels, photographs, films and filmstrips.
5. Resource persons, either individually or on panel or symposium situations, or through some media such as tape recordings.

In selecting any technique, one must remember that it is only a means to an end, and not an end in itself. For example, one would not have a classroom debate just for the fun of debating (although it may add some interest and variety to the course) but in order to search and question debatable topics or issues.

The most effective 'technique' may be the teacher herself, for her preparation and her attitudes are crucial to the successful realization of these programs. This teacher must not only be able to help others clarify and expand, their own thinking and feelings, but must also be able to deal effectively with her own feelings and attitudes. Alertness, sensitivity to others, and the ability to communicate are far more important than whether one is able to use a film competently.

Is It Effective?

The development of a family life education program should include means for determining both the immediate and the long-term effectiveness of the program. Did the program contribute to more satisfying family living? Has it contributed to greater understanding of other family practices and patterns? Were the teachings realistic and meaningful? These questions might be asked when looking at the long-term effects of the program.

For a more immediate evaluation of her program the teacher might ask:

1. Are students actively participating in the class and in the planning of content?
2. Is the information presented adequate, accurate, and current?
3. Is the course relevant to the life situation of the students, recognizing, appreciating, and adapting to differences in family values and family patterns?
4. Is the presentation of the family realistic to today's world?
5. Does the course enhance the development of the teacher as well as that of the students?

These evaluations must be an ongoing and integral part of the family life education program in order to help fulfill its potential for helping individuals and families.

In summary, the effective teaching of family relations results from an understanding and sensitive teacher with broad basic knowledge of the family, guiding a well-planned program implemented by meaningful methods and techniques, reaching students motivated by an atmosphere of relevancy, challenge and adventure.

References:

1. The Canadian Family in Perspective, Curriculum S. 6 (13) Ontario Department of Education. 1968
2. 'Family Life education programs; Principles, Plans, Procedures,' Report of the National Commission on Family Life Education, The Family Coordinator, Vol. 17, No. 3, July 1968, pp. 211-214.

3. A Guide for Developing a Curriculum on Human Development and The Family.
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