

MISS CHRISTISON

Miss Christison said she was delighted to once again have the opportunity of addressing conference.

Once it was customary for the Officer for Pre-School Education to talk largely of administration of kindergartens, but she had never followed that course. She spoke of what was actually happening in kindergartens and why. She wished to talk to them about the growing personality of the child. Recently in Wellington a post-primary teacher was quoted as saying that education is what you have when you have forgotten all you learned at school. We are not only concerned with what children know, but also with what kind of people they are turning out to be. This is obviously a job for the kindergarten, a shared job because the home plays an even greater part than the kindergarten. A kindergarten is really to supplement the work of a good home, and it has always aimed at encouraging health in all its aspects. We thought we knew a great deal about the intellectual development of the child, but do we? Similarly with mental health, we do not know as much as we would like to know. Some of the facts are rather disturbing.

It is important in kindergartens to keep in mind that we must help the child to achieve a state where he can be confident and independent without being pushing or brash, where he can learn to love and be loved, where he can learn to be a leader without always wanting to be in first place. Very often roots of mental health develop in early childhood when the personality is growing - they are not always to be found in early childhood, but they very often are. Things go on in early years that can result in breakdowns with long and difficult recoveries. How much better if we can guard against this kind of illness before it even begins.

Besides these growing pains you will all know people who have difficulty in adjusting to the realities of life, who find it extremely difficult to live with themselves and the people around them. Then there is wastage of human skill and human endeavour. We do know there are certain things which pre-dispose the child to adjusting to the realities of life and the realities of life in a community of people. Kindergarten can provide for healthy emotional development. These emotions can be very strong in early childhood and when anybody is in the grip of an emotion, whatever it is, the whole person is involved. When it is all over you are exhausted. Emotion uses up a very great deal of energy with anybody, energy that could be and should be used for growing up, for instance. We have to help the child to use this energy in constructive rather than in mal-adjustive ways. A child can feel something very strongly, his emotions are at a very infantile level, but they can persist into adulthood and repression makes the cure fairly long and difficult.

To continue on the subject of these feelings, let us accept that to feel emotion is not only perfectly normal but very desirable. We would not want our children not to show warmth for those whom they love. There is room for the protestors in our society against things that are considered unjust. We must have these emotions. Some of the negative emotions must have their place. We want children to know that there are dangers and how to avoid them, but one of the first jobs a child has to do as he grows is to learn to control his feelings and show them in a controlled way. Again in our society it is not common for the open expression of affection between friends to be displayed. We do sometimes ask a bit much of our children, but surely if they are to fit into the society in which they are going to live, society expects that they will learn to show their emotions in an acceptable way. One of the things I have noticed is the difference with Maori children who do give way to emotions and are more easily able to express them than some of the European children. The European child will often try to hold back tears.

Sooner or later society imposes its demands on a child and he 322

as to learn to express his emotions in an acceptable way. This is not easy, for a start a child lacks reasoning ability. He has not the ability to look through to the end of a situation and see that it is all to the good. He lacks the ability to look through and see the consequences.

He also lacks skill in actual physical ability. He has not got the social skills, does not know the right words to use. He just has not got the skill to get through these situations. This is where we come in. We can help him. First of all we can help him by recognising these strong feelings. Another way in which we can help is by giving him the opportunity for these very strong feelings to be expressed in a way that society will accept. We can give him the play in which he can expend his energy. I think that if we regard the child as a worth while person whose growing up is important to us, then we should be able to spare the time and effort to try to improve things. What we should do is to find out how best we can help him.

First and foremost and all the time he needs warm and continuous love, especially from his parents but from his teacher as well, continually supporting the child and being with him when he is in trouble. He needs this kind of love in order to build up trust, trust that the world is a place in which he has a part to play. He needs enlightened and consistent control, from parents and from teachers. When a child is in the throes of an emotional outburst he must be made certain that we will control him, that we will not let him hurt himself or us. Control first comes from us, but little by little we pass it over to him. He must have realistic standards.

We can make it easy for him. In a good kindergarten or home you would not say "tidy up that mess". You would say "let us see if we can make this nice and tidy". We can help him to do the job by giving our own practical help.

He needs acceptance for what he is and not for what we think he ought to be. We do no service to the child by expecting him to behave in a way that is completely foreign to his nature. He needs to feel that he, too, can achieve things, that he can be successful, that he can do things that are worth while. We are helping to get somewhere even if at first he does not achieve things. A good home can do and does do these things and a good kindergarten can do and does do these things.

A child needs play and plenty of it, plenty of time with children of his own age. What then does play do to help the child in the control and expression of his feelings? First and foremost, there is the messy play, the water play, the finger painting, the clay; here is somewhere that he can make a mess. In kindergarten we can provide him with the material and he can make a mess.

Besides messy play, he needs imaginative play, play in which the big world can be brought down to child-size level, where his house is just his size. This is the reason for the boxes, the planks, ladders etc. All the list of things which the child can use as he wishes, to be what he likes. Therefore, too, the dressing up, the family corner where he can be mother, father, big brother or visitor and because a lot of his growing up is done inside the family, so a lot of his play takes place in the family corner. He needs physical, active play where he can learn skill, control and independence. He needs creative play, things that he can make and achieve. It is the doing that he needs. Manipulative play is something in which you can do, complete and achieve. The child will often come back to the same puzzle over and over again because he can achieve success.

Our aim is to provide all the things home can provide, but in addition all the things the child needs to express his emotions, to realise his emotional rights, to support him, to control him where he needs control, but little by little to pass that control over from us to him.

We help him during this time to achieve the independence we want him to achieve as an adult.

The Director-General said in his talk that the leaders of your movement have always put quality before quantity. We cannot give this kind of care if we try to put too many children into a kindergarten at once. We cannot give the kind of understanding, supporting care to all the many children because we must understand them as individuals so well that we can provide for each child individually. It is the hardest, most demanding, most time consuming job that ever was put before parents and teachers and it is also quite the most rewarding.

Mrs Downer moved a vote of thanks to Miss Christison for her address, saying that she was sure that all will have been deeply moved by the very fine way in which she had outlined the difficult period of growth children go through in our kindergartens and reminded us of the responsibilities we accept as administrators.