

CASEWORK SERVICES TO HEBREW DAY SCHOOLS

by ROSALIND EDELSTEIN

Supervisor, Jewish Family and Child Service of Metropolitan Toronto, Canada

The Process of Working Out Relationships

SINCE January, 1965, the Jewish Family and Child Service of Metropolitan Toronto has been involved in a school child guidance and counselling project, together with participating community agencies under the auspices of the United Jewish Welfare Fund.

The original purpose for this project was to develop a more amicable relationship between the agencies involved and of pooling their skills in meeting the special economic, learning and emotional needs of the children of the two largest day schools—Toronto Hebrew Day School and the Eitz Chaim Hebrew Day School—and to reach the orthodox segment of the Jewish community, which for various reasons was isolated from us, and consequently resisted involvement when we began.

The process of setting up this program was a difficult and somewhat dramatic one, not only of finding our own role in this program and learning what the needs of the schools were but in understanding and working with the psychological ambience. We needed to get a sense of the special milieu of the day schools.

We soon found we had to start at a basic primary level of "educating" principals, teachers and parents as to what a caseworker was and that difficul-

ties in learning were often related to emotional factors and could sometimes be overcome by casework treatment. We found that the principals, all 7 of them, had various degrees of knowledge about what a caseworker was. Some of them thought the worker was there to carry out the directives of the psychologist and cherished the folklore that the agency's primary and only function was to give financial assistance or to place a child in a foster home. They had considerable doubt as to how necessary or possible it was to involve families in treatment, or whether fathers were so important that they needed to come, or whether learning disabilities had any emotionally charged components. And more basically, we were confronted by principals and some parents with the question—what did we really do? The teachers at first felt threatened by our presence and resented the time they needed to give for conferences, and some of the principals felt threatened by the potential exposure of questionable educational practices.

The teachers at first questioned all of it and doubted whether we could understand their type of school. The worker was an outsider who, they felt, could not appreciate their special problems. However, identification with, and understanding of, the cultural and religious milieu were the key factors in helping open the schools' closed systems. The author's

own background and education had its roots in the orthodox Jewish subculture. The Rabbis were impressed that references to the Hebrew curriculum or Jewish customs elicited responses of awareness and understanding. The next stage in the process of our developing relationship was one in which they isolated the author as an understanding worker, but denied that the agency could also be accepting or approve of their value system, so that it was then necessary to bridge this gap.

Resistance diminished further as we moved into closer relationships with the school and as teaching staffs learned they could use me for advice or for support with behavior difficulties they felt they could not handle, and after many achieved satisfaction with their own involvement in the treatment process.

Teachers and principals were included in sessions on various aspects of school adjustment—learning problems, behavior, and so forth. The direct confrontation, particularly with parents, child and teacher, sometimes clarified what the issues were and frequently cut through the overprotection of the child from taking responsibilities. After beginning relationships were established we entered a phase of impatience and disappointment by school personnel because there was no immediate change evident. And teachers and principals had to be further helped with learning about the process of change. It was a steady learning process all the way. For the schools to open up and use what we could offer and for us to use ourselves in very unorthodox ways as we reached out for more dynamic modalities of involvement. We found that the role as family therapists in a school guidance project went beyond the mere treatment of children and/or families, who came to us for help as they normally do in our regular reception. Families referred required an extended beginning period of reaching-out. Cases

were often kept open from six to eight months before clients would come for treatment. Cutting through the teachers' resistance and denial took concentrated effort and time so that many cases were kept open which ordinarily would have been closed at intake after the first few contacts. There was, particularly at the beginning, a vast difference in attitude and readiness for help between clients coming through the front door of our agency and those referred by the school, because the school, not they, took a decisive step about a problem that may have been painful to expose to themselves. All the pain and conflict of self confrontation that goes into a decision to call an agency was for the most part absent. And frequently the referral strengthened the defense of clients' denial. In addition, in the beginning, the schools referred their hard core-cases by which they had felt pressured for a long time. It is not surprising that these people so referred were more resistant than our usual agency intake.

During the first year and a half we were careful to follow up initial contact quickly and protected cases from being on our waiting list, when shortage of staff required many cases on our regular caseload to wait. And this in turn met with strong resistance from staff. Could the agency indeed afford to expend all this staff time in reaching-out? And why should priority be given to school project cases? These cases were not the "meat" of the agency business and there was some staff feeling that our involvement supported sectarian values they could not support. This intensified as my caseload reached its saturation point and cases needed to be distributed among agency staff. It took considerable effort on my part to get support among staff within the agency for the necessity of reaching out in these ways. And indeed resistance by staff to the parochial school setup and unrelatedness to subcultural

implications was prevalent. This was reflected in dropouts or lost cases at this intake level, where these areas of relationship were most crucial. Later, intake was confined to either myself or one other worker who was more oriented to the school milieu and the religious subculture. And this helped to sustain a considerable amount of cases. There was an active involvement with teachers in discussing a particular child, partly to help us diagnostically, but mostly to coopt the teacher in the process of helping the child. It was often helpful to the teacher and relieving some of his tension to share the responsibility with someone else.

Contact with the families brought out marital difficulties or dysfunctional parent-child relationships, or both, and often siblings other than those referred have been of more concern to the parents or were of crucial importance in relation to the original child referred. By serving these families we were not only involved in what seemed to be the immediate problem, but with all the connected inter-relationships which would help the individual children referred. And because of our own conviction about the child being one part of the whole unit, the effects reach far beyond those originally referred. A total of 92 children were involved in the 57 families referred from Eitz Chaim. Sixty-two children were involved in the 36 families referred by the Associated Day School.

The families were treated in conjoint family marital pair, parent-child and individual sessions, when treatment warranted it. A number of members of some of these families participated in group therapy sessions—marital, teenage, parental.

Because the characteristics and needs of each school differ, we might briefly describe general characteristics of clients in each school and the particular quality of our involvement.

Associated Hebrew Day School

We have been only sporadically involved with the elementary school and officially, only with the junior high and high school, which include grades 7-13. Most of the cases are similar to those coming to us through other channels. These are for the most part, middle-class families, the majority of which are paying fees. Students were referred because of poor scholastic achievement, disruptive class behaviour, truancy, school phobia, and misbehavior at home. More recently however, as their understanding of child behaviour has increased, the teachers and principals have become more perceptive about less obvious symptoms of malfunction and have referred children with poor peer relationships and withdrawn behaviour.

Eitz Chaim Hebrew Day School

Eitz Chaim is the institution in the Jewish community which has accepted within itself some of the most economically emotionally deprived families in the community. Families come from a wide range of economic and social levels in the orthodox Jewish community. These range from families with high scholarly expectations where children pressure themselves to over achieve, to families where the children are culturally deprived and include a large number of camp and war survivors who have suffered severe emotional deprivation and use the school as a haven in their isolation from the rest of the community. More than half of the families referred from this school are immigrant families, at least half of the families have one or both parents who are camp survivors or war survivors. The consequent problems are obvious. The plans of treatment ranged from intensive family therapy to simple tutoring or environmental manipulation.

Preventative Programs

We might have been satisfied with simple permission to set up an office in each of the schools where referrals would be received. But we went beyond, because we realized that our role in a school guidance project necessarily involved more than the mere treatment of children and/or families, who came to us for help. And needs could not be met simply by casefinding. Indeed what has become apparent since the program developed exceeded our early plans or expectations.

When we first began, the rash of referrals of severely disturbed children from one school, and the resistance of referral from the other was so overwhelming that we felt we could move most effectively into preventive programs, such as the following:

Among many roles, the author assumed one of mental hygiene consultant. As teachers and principals at either school could relate to the worker, they asked for guidelines in handling problems connected to their everyday school experience, not involving actual referred cases. At one school in the casual encounter in the teacher's lunchroom or the teacher's lounge they would ask for help in general, and sometimes end up with referral in particular. At another school the teachers buttonholed the worker on the stairs, about referrals of children or appointments for feedback.

Secondly, we found ourselves moving from the pressure of emergency referrals to preventative work in teacher workshops, parental guidance sessions and family life education programs for students.

At Eitz Chaim we instituted two projects:

For the past two years we had experimented with a "remedial acculturation" program. Because of the large numbers of immigrant families and fami-

lies of low culture we have involved six volunteer case aides in a remedial program to bridge the culture gap that keeps many children from learning, children who begin grade one handicapped by a sterile, unstimulating pre-school experience. Case aides were brought in to afford them experiences as that of going to a zoo or to the library, and to move them to story-telling and, finally, to basic reading help. Through warm individual attention they have been helped to learn and to assimilate, to the extent that the success in the secular department has carried over to the Hebrew department as well.

To meet other special needs of the school we concentrated on working with the first grade and pre-school teachers. They met for a series of seminars for the purpose of developing further understanding of children at these age levels and learning ways of coping with them. The teachers used the program to ventilate frustration with overcrowded classes which included children unready intellectually and emotionally for reading. Towards the end of the sessions, they were able to come to terms with some limitations in the school setting and could move on to referring children with learning and behavioral problems. We could then work with families at a more preventive level of family dysfunction. The principal was impressed with recommendations made. He could finally be more selective in screening out pupils who were neither intellectually nor emotionally ready for first grade, and this was a considerable sacrifice for the school because some mothers withdrew their children when they were rejected for first grade.

The pre-school supervisor requested a workshop for pre-school teachers. Nursery and kindergarten teachers determined the curriculum. They examined shared concerns such as behavioral ex-

expectations for these age levels, discipline, how to "handle" mothers, helping children adjust to beginnings, their own concerns as working mothers, expectations of themselves in their teacher role, how to cope with hyperactivity, shyness, etc. The growth and development of these teachers has been most exciting. They recommended that parents of these children participate in a program as well, and when the parents responded, a group of parents met to discuss the role of parenting as well as expectations of children of this age.

At the Associated School we set up a family life education program for students. The family life education meetings have given these students an opportunity to learn more about family and peer relationships and for some, to open up directly different areas of their own family relationships, the gap in communications between the generations, the cultural gap between parents and themselves, and peer relationships outside the school. They have been able to ventilate some of the pressures of competition within the school and have learned they are not alone in universal concerns about dating, mating and sex.

In addition the sessions helped them express their fears about leaving the school. They carried some anxiety about what it would be like when they left the protection of the day school. Many were not ready to think of the possibility of making friendships outside the school, or whether they could possibly have anything in common with students outside a day school.

After some experimentation with various grades we found that boys and girls at the seventh and eighth grade levels needed basic sex information. The aim was to give specific sex education which we found the students needed and wanted, together with some opportunity

to express their concerns about sex. To this end we have begun to train teachers to continue this so as to free the social workers for family life education for the groups at another level of development.

Conclusion

In the process of setting up and administering the program we demonstrated that

- Different kinds of skills in working with resistance as well as empathetic responses to the subculture of a group based on some understanding and knowledge are both necessary.
- The schools are an important wedge in reaching resistant, economically and culturally deprived families.
- Family therapy, often combined with intensive marital counselling plus intensive work with the teachers, can bring changes in family transactions with evidence of change in children.
- Educational counselling and direct remedial help are often necessary adjuncts to treatment or may in some cases be the only necessary modality for effecting change.

In retrospect the essential importance of making the breakthrough to the schools and to the orthodox segment of the community emerges. Without effecting this breakthrough or were it pretended that the resistance did not exist, the program would never have developed in the way it did.

The breakthrough was partly effected through some knowledge of and sensitivity to not only the orthodox sub-cultural values of the schools, but to the educational subculture as well. But, also, basic casework concepts were essential in making this breakthrough. Success was basically achieved through the gradual buildup of relationships

with the staffs and all people involved and our own sureness about our professional responsibility in effecting changes, even with untried, unorthodox methods.

And lastly, it required a firm professional integrity and trust in personal development through relationship process at every step of the way.