

By EMMA N. PLANK

The School Camp

--An Experience in ~~Good~~ ^{Group} Living

What are the unique contributions a school camp makes to the development of children three to seven years of age? What are some of the prerequisites for successful school camp planning? Why is school camp planning important in these times? Mrs. Plank, director of the Presidio Hill School, San Francisco, and former staff member of Haus-der-Kinder in Vienna, answers these questions from the richness of her experiences on two continents.

"LITTLE OLD FISHERMAN" they called him, even though he was only six years old. He arrived in camp with fishing tackle and flies and the earnest determination to catch fish. While the others played and swam, he sat most seriously, fishing at the creek without any chance for success, but perfectly happy.

His name was Francis. At school he had seemed very strange to his peers because of his lack of motor coordination. He would descend stairs step by step like a two-year-old. He was afraid to use any play equipment in the school yard and was rather isolated in the group.

The advisability of a camp experience for Francis had been questioned but the results to him left no doubt of its value. The children developed a very sincere feeling for him and his persistence, which led to his excellent integration into the group during the next school year. The boy who could not step stairs before coming to camp was now able to balance on a self-built stone bridge over the creek and refused help in crossing a cattle guard.

The younger the child the more important it is to integrate real life into his school experience. The most interesting way is by trying to reach the life of the child as a whole by taking him to a school camp, rather than by merely working with groups of children for a few hours a day as we do in nursery school, kindergarten and primary school. Group living in a school camp has an inexhaustible potential for opportunities of development.

We talk so much of emotional security which the child has to find first in his family to make a happy adjustment in life. Very often this security does not fully exist and cannot be created. So a substitute environment in which this security can be developed must be found. When a teacher takes her class to live a month in the school camp we have this substitute environment. Here the child can gain a new type of security through his desire to become a part of a situation well planned beforehand with his own participation, with all the members familiar to him.¹

The value of camp life in general has been well recognized, though coeducational camps for young children are not too well developed and with good reason—the first separation from home is a delicate problem. The best solution that experience suggests is to introduce not more than one new factor at a time into the child's life. The school

¹I have seen this principle at work for the past twenty years, both in Europe and in this country. I have seen group living in institutions, camps, school camps, and an evacuation camp for Basque children. The latter two, each in its way, have appeared to me to be the most fruitful, though I shall not go into the evacuation camp experience in this article.

camp—by having all other factors known and stable—is a continuation of the child's regular life with separation from home as the one new element.

In camp life the teacher takes over some of the functions of the mother but with a different slant. Her attention and care are directed partly to the group as a whole and partly to the individuals who compose it. For instance, the mother will try to have some quiet minutes with her child before he goes to bed. In group living the teacher, not harassed like the mother by a pile of unwashed dishes or the demands of other members of the family, knows that this evening hour is one of the nicest times of the day for the children. So she will prepare a story or song or a talk about things that happened during the day; then the children will go to sleep with a feeling of enjoyment of what they have seen or done in common as a group, or with the recurrent enjoyment of a song they have heard together. After that the teacher will make her round and have a chance to tuck each child in, to give or get a kiss where it is wanted, and even to receive some most confidential whisperings.

The teacher, of course, both gives and receives emotions as a mother substitute. But her position is quite different from that of other substitute mothers, such as foster mothers. A child finds it difficult to adjust at the same time to both the foster mother and his own mother. Both require the same emotional response which cannot be divided. Group living obviates this difficulty. We have often found that after camp life the child's relationship to his mother has grown deeper. He has become more independent, is proud of his achievements, and is full of tales to tell when he comes back. Peter provides a good example:

All the way back from camp Peter, aged six, said, "At the depot I'll get the next bus and go back to camp." Upon

greeting his mother, of course, he was overjoyed to be at home and forgot his idea. His mother reported later: His first night at home Peter was definitely happy to be back, but expressed a feeling of belonging to both places. The following morning he happily appraised his own accomplishments at camp by offering to make not only his own bed but the beds of others in the family. During the following month there were many conversations with playmates during which camp trophies were shown, always with the concluding comments, "I am going to go to my camp every summer as long as I go to this school."

Let us not forget that mother has had a deserved rest, too, and is more ready to cope with the daily routine.

What group living means to a child was brought home to me dramatically by my experience with Jan whose mother had died and whose father was a political prisoner in another country. He had been sent to us from abroad, boarded with friends of his family and attended our school for two years. In the second spring we took him to camp. Afterward he had again to go to another country and there I saw him several years later. When I entered his poor little room there were two things over his bed—a map of the world and a photograph of our group around the campfire.

Prerequisites for Successful School Camp Planning

Under what conditions should a school camp be planned? The first prerequisite is the confidence of the parents and their participation in the plan. The second is the interest of the teachers in group living with their children. The staff of a school will work much better after having created a camp together and shared the enjoyment of it. The third prerequisite is the creation of a congenial body of student helpers.

These helpers are usually eager to enter some field of teaching or education work and come with a very open and enthusiastic attitude. They get a chance to see whether they can build up the right relation with a child and whether they can take upon themselves all the little matters of daily routine. They should be included in the planning and preparation a long time before camp starts, and should be entrusted with some specific responsibilities of their own. Even if the camp funds were sufficient to employ trained personnel only, it would be to the advantage of both children and teachers to include the right kind of young people, although untrained. It is good in-service training for them, too.

We developed a plan which made it possible for everyone to afford the school camp. Camp sites can be had for relatively cheap rents before and after the full camp season.² When the camp is used within the school year a staff of regular teachers and young volunteers can be gathered without extra expense. Both in Europe and in this country I have found social agencies interested in helping with camperships.

Plans and preparations can be worked out with full parent participation. In our camp all the preliminary shopping and menus were worked out by a committee of mothers. Fathers came along to get the place ready for us. Sewing groups prepared the clothing lists and gave advice on the right kind of simple and healthful clothing. Books and toys were collected; medical equipment was provided. The budget was completed by the parents so that they all saw what was needed and contributed freely above the required minimum.

I prefer to have no mother actually along with a group of young children. The child gets less of a chance for full inde-

pendent adjustment and the presence of one mother may also disturb others whose mothers cannot be present. On the other hand, parent visits can be a great contribution. After the first adjustment it is much pleasanter to have parents drop in informally and really participate in the camp life than to have a "visiting Sunday." In a camp for which a group of parents have shared in the preparation the parent does not come as an individual but as a representative bringing messages or gifts for the whole group.

Parents who have had doubts as to the abilities and charms of their children are sometimes amazed to see them show up in camp. They have never had a chance to see their child functioning outside of the family unit and are pleasantly surprised to find him nicer and more independent than they expected—an appreciation that cannot be achieved by reports nor by school visiting.

The camp not only helps the parents to know their children better from a different angle, but it also gives the teachers a better insight into the mother-child relationship. As planning and preparation for camp mean a less usual and more complicated job for the parents than the regular school routine, they bring about more revealing reactions on the part of the parents. Letters show much, and the way a child's equipment is collected and kept is a story in itself. One mother who never came to parents' meetings and almost avoided all contact with the teachers was particularly eager to send her five-year-old boy to camp. When he came his whole equipment was brand new, though the parents had been told not to go to any unnecessary expense. In this particular case the mother felt so guilty for failing to give proper attention to her child that she compensated by equipping him well to show us how much she did care for him.

²A camp for children from three to seven years of age should plan for not more than twenty-five or thirty children. It is most successful if it resembles as closely as possible a small all-round farm. Water and virgin country around the place complete a perfect environment.

Benefits to the Child of a School Camp Experience

What does a school camp offer to the child itself? The simple processes of daily life are mostly out of reach of the understanding and observation of a young child in a metropolitan city. So a main objective of the camp—apart from the value of group living as such—is that everything that happens in daily life can be seen clearly as a process by the children. Instead of buying a can of apple sauce they shake a tree, gather buckets of apples, cut them, and cook them into sauce.

They make a mailbox, take the collected letters to the village, and wait for the bus that brings the mail from the city. Writing and reading mean for the first time a real means of communication.

They collect kindling wood or watch the butane tank being brought in. Science and physical skills are in their natural setting. The creek invites the children to learn swimming or to dare for the first time to step into running water. A neighbor invites them for a hay ride or to watch the sheepshearing. They in turn invite him to a campfire and he contributes delightful local songs and stories.

The realization that by walking you actually do get from one place to another is a new experience for some children. That the countryside also has machinery of its own is an eye opener, too. I saw its spell work in a California redwood lumber mill as well as in an Austrian salt mine that had been in operation for some two thousand years.

Amazing growth—physical, emotional, intellectual—can often be observed, after a few weeks at camp, in children who have been developing very slowly during the year. The reason is clear: to overcome cer-

tain difficulties these children needed a unified environment free from the duality of home and school that sometimes unavoidably is at cross purposes. It is interesting to observe how often small happenings at camp will be retold and glorified during the following year at school. It seems to be a strong common memory which somehow gives an emotional backbone to a group of children.

How "collectively" the children have responded to the camp environment appears when we try to carry back to town safely all the turtles and the salamanders, the Indian arrows and hammers—especially all kinds of remarkable stones—along with half-broken skulls, cow jaws, ram horns, hides, caterpillars, and the Indian corn harvested in the vegetable garden.

We might ask ourselves what good it does to have such plans beyond our usual scope of education presented at a moment when some of the most dire needs for education cannot be satisfied—plans which seem so unrelated to the immediate problems which we have to face. But these plans are related. Our children live in a much less stable emotional environment than ever before. We must try to build up their feeling that they belong somewhere. Also, the emergency has forced and the post-war era may force separation of children from their homes; they will be better prepared if a first separation has taken place under carefully prepared, controlled conditions. We do not even have to think of mass evacuation: families moving to other cities following the call of war needs, mothers going to work, and all the many similar situations put stresses on the child that work in the same direction. Now if ever is the time to plan for the life of the child as a whole. A school camp experience offers limitless possibilities.