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SUMMER PROGRAM FOR CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES:

A DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

It has long been noted by the members of the staff at The Fundy Mental Health Centre that there are many children who, in the past, have been referred to the Centre for testing and evaluation by school personnel and medical doctors to determine their intellectual ability, because they were not functioning well in the school situation. Many of these children were found to have a limited amount of ability and could not be expected to do any better job at school than they were already doing. However, there was another fairly large group who seemed to have a great deal more ability than they were able to use and show in the school situation. It was decided that some research should be done in this area to determine whether anything could be done to help these children perform better in school.

During the early spring Dr. Grant and the present author began to map out a program to attempt to do something to help these children. It was decided that any initial attempt to devise a program such as this should have research as its primary objective. The first step in setting up the program was a selection of appropriate children. The criteria for selecting these children were that they be between the ages of 7 and 11, and be average or above average in intelligence. Also, it was felt important that these children be selected from a group that had been seen at The Fundy Mental Health Centre so that there would be sufficient background information on each of the children.

It would be difficult to group the children who participated in this program into any one category. Several of the children had a history of brain damage and were taking anti-convulsive medication; several had extremely over-anxious parents who did a great deal of worrying about them; and some of the children just seemed to have been defeated in their school experiences from the time they entered Grade Primary, and just viewed themselves as failures.

Once these children were selected the next step was to have a meeting of the parents to see if they would be in accord with having their children participate in such a program. Most of the parents were very interested in having their children participate, and made a great effort to arrange transportation among themselves to attempt to have all of the children who wanted to participate sure of having transportation from home to the clinic and back home as often as possible.

Next it was decided that from the very fine response from the parents there would be several children interested in the program and, therefore, to achieve maximum benefit, more than one leader was necessary. It was decided that Mr. Barnes would lead the program but because of the physical demands of the activities to be done Dr. Grant would serve as a consultant

to the program and not take an active part with the children. Mrs. Beverley Kempt, an elementary school teacher with two years experience, was hired as an auxiliary staff member to work with the program and with the children during the active sessions. In order to pay Mrs. Kempt a salary, funds had to be raised and we therefore turned to the local service clubs which responded quite generously and before long we had enough money to get the program officially started. It should be noted that Acadia University Department of Education was quite generous in loaning equipment to the Centre for use in this program.

Following this the exact activities to be done had to be selected. The criteria for selecting these activities were:

1. That the activity be enjoyable from the children's point of view;
2. That the activities did not simulate the school situation;
3. That the activity could be done minimizing competition among the children;
4. That the activities be valuable in teaching the children skills that would be useful in school situations and/or in building their own confidence and willingness to attempt new activities.

Many activities were found that could meet these criteria very well so it was decided that early in the program we would try many different activities and that in the later stages of the program we would concentrate on those activities which the children seemed to enjoy the most, so that there would be the maximum motivation on their part to perform as well as possible. It is not the purpose of this article to go into detail about the specific activities. Following is a list of many of these activities and the interested reader should have little difficulty finding more detailed information about them.

Activities

1. Calisthenics and isometrics and buddy exercises,
2. Catch and throw balls all sizes and shapes,
3. Throw and shoot at targets,
4. Wand drills,
5. Marching and rhythm activities,
6. Balance beam exercises,
7. Tumbling and gymnastic balance,
8. Art work — crayons, painting, clay, puppets,
9. Work in dark (develop sense of hearing),
10. Develop sense of touch.
 - (a) form board blindfolded,
 - (b) grades of sandpaper blindfolded,
 - (c) distinguishing different weights blindfolded.
11. Feeling numbers and letters,
 - (a) crawling patterns,
 - (b) writing on hand,
 - (c) writing on back,
 - (d) writing in dark with flashlights,
 - (e) simultaneous writing on blackboard.

12. Memory training and awareness of surroundings.
 - (a) numbers and letters on board,
 - (b) objects on table,
 - (c) people and things in room.
13. Sense of direction,
 - (a) blindfolded show direction of voice or sound.
14. Self expression.
 - (a) art work,
 - (b) leading wand drills,
 - (c) talking into tape recorder,
 - (d) recording puppet shows,
 - (e) action stories.
15. Combination of activities.
 - (a) adding music to other activities,
 - (b) obstacle courses,
 - (c) working on activities with small groups.

It was also decided that late in the program we would add the element of competition but that it would be group competition with one group competing against another. This was added in the hope that skills learned and confidence gained could be maintained under the emotional stress of competition. This was done in an attempt to make the transition from the summer program, where competition was minimized, to the school situation, where competition is intense, a less traumatic and more gradual one.

During the early part of the program it was necessary to encourage many of the children to attempt new activities; however, as the program progressed they joined in willingly. A definite atmosphere of acceptance was created and all attempts at competition were played down by the leaders. A system of reward and punishment was established so that whenever a child tried a new activity he was praised regardless of his performance. When any of the children exhibited undesirable behavior, they were ignored; no child was forced to attempt any activity but if he wandered off from the group he was ignored.

The program began on Wednesday, July 5, 1967, and continued for 18 sessions meeting every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday through Monday, August 14th, 1967. Over the duration of the program 17 children took part, 13 boys and 4 girls. However, all of the children missed at least one session and several of the children attended fewer than three-quarters of the sessions. Midway through the program a parents' meeting was held during the afternoon while the children's program was going on. Dr. Grant conducted this program with Mrs. Kempt and Mr. Barnes making appearances whenever possible. The purpose of this meeting was to get information from the parents about what their children had to say regarding the program, and also to determine if they could notice any changes in the behavior of their children since the program began. This meeting was quite successful, not only in gaining information but also in helping the parents to gain reassurance that their child was not the only one having these problems.

At the conclusion of the program individual interviews were set up with the parents of the children participating in order to get more detailed

information on how the children felt about the program and their reaction to specific activities and what, if any, differences the parents noticed in the behavior of the children at home and in the community. The results of these interviews were very impressive. Many of the parents noted a considerable change in the attitude of the children in wanting to attempt new activities and in their motivation on practicing activities done at the clinic while they were at home. Many of the parents noted that the children seemed to be generally more happy with life than they had been before the program and that some of the children were very anxious for school to start so that they could prove themselves in this area. Several of the children became more aggressive at home and were not dominated nearly as much as they had been in the past by their brothers and sisters. It was also noted by several parents that their children felt they were a real part of the group here at the clinic and were always anxious to come because they were well accepted by the other children and by the leaders. Many parents also reported a noticeable increase in physical strength and endurance, and the children seemed to be less tired and more able to partake in activities with family and friends. It was also noticed by several parents that there was an increase in accepting responsibility by the children, particularly that of being home on time.

During the school year following the summer program each of the children's schools was visited three times by the author. Records were kept of both the teachers' and principals' comments regarding each child as well as his grades and academic progress in each of his school subjects. The social and personality development of each child was checked during each school visit and also during interviews with the parents.

At the close of the school year a final visit was made to each school and records of all final grades were copied in order to compare the children's progress during the past year.

The results were impressive. As a group the children failed only two subjects while the previous year they had failed thirty-seven. Also as a group they raised their grades in *each subject* an average of 19.83 points. The individual results in many cases were even more dramatic: one boy raised his average 37 points. Perhaps even more important was the information supplied by the teachers regarding their personality and social development. Most of the children were no longer afraid to try and were mixing very well with their peer group.

The program was run again in 1968 and the initial reports were again impressive.

These studies have implications that perhaps schools could use some of the summer vacation time to offer programs such as this to students with learning difficulties. It is hoped by the author that if school personnel are interested in a program such as the one described, they will feel free to contact him if assistance is desired.