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**Parenting the very young – key to the future**

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In a recent edition of "The Weekend Australian Review", columnist Phillip Adams drew attention to a new book by Neil Postman that focuses on the challenge parents face in trying to preserve childhood for their children. Postman argues that given the pervasive influence of television, mass media, popular entertainment and the Internet, parents who want to preserve childhood for their children must conceive of parenting as "an act of rebellion against culture."

Postman is convinced that parents who want to educate their children in such things as delayed gratification, modesty in their sexuality or restraint in their manners, language or style must place themselves in opposition to almost every social trend. It is a sweeping scenario but not unrelated to what many of us in the education industry observe more and more. Adams comments that none of these things is easy for a parent to do and they require a commitment and allocation of time fewer and fewer parents are willing to make. Perhaps he is right on the whole. Certainly today's children have to compete with a range of other demands on their parents' time and energy.

Nevertheless, the greatly increased number of books published and courses offered that deal with parenting skills, points to a real desire of at least a sector of the new generation of parents to do the job right. Likewise, the number of state and federal government funded programmes that deal with parent/ family issues indicates that the nation as a whole is investing in the family and parents as key resources for the future of the nation.

At the 1998 AIFS Conference, the Parents for Education Foundation, known as Pared, had the opportunity to focus on parents as the primary educators of children and to share its twenty years' experience of establishing schools based on this reality. In that paper, we described a related initiative, known as Family Education Australia, which operates under the Pared umbrella which was piloting a course specifically designed for parents of 0 to 5 year olds. Since 1998, close to 200 parent couples in Sydney have undertaken the "First Steps" Course, as it is called, and this year, courses have also been run in Melbourne and Perth.

**First Steps recognizes the vital importance for life of the education a child receives in the infant and preschool years.** This importance is increasingly magnified by our growing knowledge of brain development, to mention only one area of research. It is in the child's earliest years that vital educational foundations are laid for the future. First Steps also recognizes that parents of the very young often need practical advice for their task as educators. Through the methodologies of lectures, case studies and group discussions, the Course explores such topics as the early establishment of good habits, the environment in the home, the child's emerging sensitivities, the role of play, and parental communication.

Family Education Australia now has 20 years experience in running parenting courses. Through our affiliations with similarly focussed initiatives overseas we eagerly investigated a programme developed there for parents of children under 5 years of age. The emergence of this programme, which we have been easily able to adapt to Australia circumstances, was timely, as our local experience had increasingly shown us that a key area of need in Australian parent/family education is young parents.

We have tapped into a new generation of parents who are themselves the children of the "liberated" baby boomers. Many of these have grown to maturity with divorce and family break-up a common reality in their lives. Many have been emotionally traumatised by their childhood experiences or have friends and relations from dysfunctional family backgrounds. **Many of these individuals are approaching parenting with a determination to do a better job than their parents.** They have a keen desire for knowledge and advice. Sometimes this desire is manifested in a simplistic quest for easy answers to parenting problems, answers which simply do not exist. Criteria and knowledge always have to be adapted to the individual situation.

A common feature in each of the First Steps Courses run so far has been the high level of enthusiasm of the participants. This has been quantifiable in comparison with previous programmes from the excellent attendance records and the desire of participants to continue meeting with follow-up groups after the completion of the course. It has also been a gratifying characteristic of the comments received in course evaluations written by participants.

First Steps consists of 8 topics, each of 2 to 2\_ hours' duration. The course structure may consist of either one night per week over 8 weeks or the whole course can be run over 2 weekends or over 4 days. What the course aims to do in this time is encourage a professional attitude to parenting in the participants, by helping them see themselves as educators. This involves the transmission of both knowledge and skills.

Parents need to be able to analyze their own unique family situation. Training in this analysis is provided through study of third party **cases studies**. The cases emphasize that parents need to be able to examine their own family situation, distinguish between fact and opinion, identify problems and seek individual solutions. In other words, the case study method encourages the participants to seek solutions and improvements to their own family problems. The anonymity of the case study is important so that participants do not become bogged down on any individual participant's specific problem. **The goal is for everyone participating to analyse and suggest solutions to the case then apply learned skills to draw inferences and criteria for their own situation.**

The second methodology provides participants with information about objective matters such as children's stages of development or differences in temperaments. Collected positive experiences can also be passed on to the group. This is done through short talks given by presenters who are experienced parents or educators who have some expertise and training in specific topics.

Here I can give only minimal detail of the First Steps course content. The introductory topics, in weeks 1 and 2, examine the importance of the child's total formation with special emphasis on integrating the physical, psychological, cultural and intellectual aspects of development. For parents of very young children, four basic habits, namely, **eating, sleeping, hygiene and routine**, are presented as operational objectives. Parents easily recognise the importance as much for their child's welfare as for their own peace of mind and body, of ensuring that baby is eating and sleeping well, that toddlers do not disturb their parents' sleep, that meal time is not a battle zone, that young children have a healthy diet, that toilet training is not unduly delayed, that pre-schoolers learn to put things back in their place, and that meals, sleeps and play times are scheduled with some semblance of routine. Many of these objectives seem minor but the fact is they have to be achieved before higher order goals can be targeted. Indeed, for new parents, their successful achievement may be the most daunting professional challenge they face at a given moment.

After some degree of success is achieved with the four basic habits mentioned, attention can be given to the development of other human virtues. Parents are made aware of the need for **sincerity and obedience** as bases for the acquisition of other virtues. The importance of parental example in the child's acquisition of virtue is obviously a recurrent theme throughout the course.

Other topics that are covered to varying degrees include:

- Parental need to recognize **hereditary and temperamental difference** between their children. Participants should also be aware of their own temperament and the way they impose their personal preferences on family life, for good or ill;
- **Motivating and disciplining** of children, always an avidly awaited topic. Essentially, this deals with forming children from their youngest years in self-discipline and consequently self motivation, achievements which are stepping stones to human maturity;
- The **role of play** as the pre-schooler's "full time job" and an awareness of aspects of human development that play assists such as fine- and gross-motor development and social interaction with peers;
- Issues in the selection of pre-schools and child minding are canvassed. Parents are informed of their **natural rights in educating their children** and reminded that they only delegate part of their authority to teachers, pre-schools and schools but never hand over their ultimate responsibility for educating their children.
- The environment in which the family lives is of crucial importance and the Course examines both the **home's physical setting** and the **dynamics of family interactions**. The child learns about his or her own place in the world through the home's physical environment, through the norms of family behaviour and family style, and through the role of the extended family.

A key topic in the Course is **parental communication**. This is a special challenge given the pace of modern family life but all the more important. Parents are encouraged to make time to reflect on and analyze their family life and the needs of

each family member. All this is a major challenge and presupposes good communication.

In each new topic the habits of analyzing one's own family situation and setting goals are emphasized. The need to **establish clear goals** for each child's development in sound habits is stressed. These are not long term aspirations but practical, short-term, achievable goals.

The First Steps Course recognises the need young parents have for long term support. The course relies on **small group work** (this is the third methodology). These working groups provide the basis for ongoing groups that reunite in the months following the course. Friendships, based on common interest in parenting, often form and **mutual support is consequent**. We provide stimulus material for ongoing study, discussion and sharing in the groups which meet monthly or bi-monthly.

The course uses other methodologies such as panel discussions and question and answer sessions where possible and appropriate to better enhance interactivity and involvement of participants.

Awareness of the First Steps Course spreads principally by word of mouth. First Steps is not designed for families with clinical problems or serious dysfunctions who may require specialist professional intervention. The focus is essentially on parents helping other parents. Participants are charged a modest fee to cover costs.

So far, Pared has run ten First Steps courses. We are presently training additional moderators with a view to increasing the number of courses we can run. We are also seeking government funding, not so as to provide professional moderators, but so as to professionalize the administration of the courses, quality and distribution of pedagogical materials and facilitation of the on-going support groups.

Experience has shown that the most important aspect of the First Steps Course, apart from the knowledge and skills it provides, may well be the **encouragement it gives younger parents** in their long term task as educators. Young parents are often ill equipped for the task for a variety of reasons yet their commitment to becoming parents requires moral support as well as practical input.

The First Steps Course has been highly effective in addressing a need that is ever more urgent in Australia – namely, capitalizing on the good will and hope that motivates young parents to bring new lives into the world. Pared would like to thank the AIFS for the opportunity to share of its experiences with young parents and the First Steps Course.