

"Character" — the members of our modern day society must improve theirs, say behavioral scientists, to cope with the crowding of population increases on our earth. These scientists say the most necessary criteria of "character" is "consideration for others." Development of this awareness or tolerance of others is of concern in all walks of life—but how does this subject concern Agriculture?

There is definitely some evidence that a person who was born and raised in a rural or agricultural environment is most apt to be an adult with "consideration for others."¹ This agricultural setting, of 20 to 40 years ago and earlier which produced these desirable character attributes, is fast disappearing. However, maybe we can ascertain some of the human environmental characteristics of this era that should be injected, if possible, into plans for our current and future society structures.

For our purposes here, character is defined as "how" or the "way" a person decides what he will do concerning other people which affects their state of being and welfare. If we, as parents or as a nation, are interested in our children, then apparently character research has discovered some probable factors that could be of assistance to us.¹ Let us examine five such factors in the light of their operation through a rural environment.

1. Likely of crucial importance for a child to learn to give "consideration for others" is the factor of *being genuinely cared for, loved, and trusted* by those near him, especially when he is younger (from birth to three or four years of age). If the child becomes convinced he is "worth our time," then, he feels that learning is exciting, interesting, and leads to a feeling that he matters or makes a difference to others, that he is an important being. Later, since he feels he is a valuable person, he "has time" for others and may become interested in their welfare. Perhaps then, love (and being cared for and trusted) is the "non sine qua" for greater maturity in the development of character.

The average rural mother of 40 years ago would be considered "isolated" by today's standard yet this isolation produced a nearly constant 24-hour relationship of mother and baby. This constant family relationship from birth to three or four years of age constitutes to the child its

The Influence of Rural America on the Character of the Nation

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"entire world." Contrast this rural constant-relationship of mother and baby with today's urban and even rural situation of mobility and communication doing away with the isolation. Today's baby may quite often be put into a nursery, ignored for more hours per day (during TV shows), and in general enjoy less tender loving care than his 40 year old rural predecessor.

2. Another factor in character development probably is our behaving as models of what we would like to see our children become. How much "consideration for others" do we display, day in and out? How authoritarian or democratic are we when our children cause us, as parents, frustration and disgust? Also, in what manner do we react to others who tend to be hostile and aggressive to us and our beliefs? Just how the internalization of socialized requirements of behavior occurs and develops is moot. Perhaps it is a process of imitation of a model; possibly it is identification with a model. Probably it is a combination of several things. Nevertheless, the parent acting as a model in his day-by-day, hour-by-hour behavioral displays around his children probably helps to determine their character.

The so-called isolation—or total involvement of the young rural child in his simple environment — created a

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¹ Amos, William E., and Wellford, Charles F. *Delinquency Prevention—Theory and Practice*, Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967, p. 41.

rather simple "model" for him. A single way of life existed pretty much for all families in the rural community. Families within a rural community usually developed an interdependence or concern for each other. This concern for others manifested itself in the farmers helping one another during peak seasonal labor periods and helping the one who became sick or had some other misfortune befall him. This concern and helpfulness on family level for everyone the family came in contact with was instilled in the child as the way to live.

A more urban child of today may daily be confronted with several households with different rules — as he migrates down the block in play. Many of the households have little in common other than geographical location. Many different families and ways of life, other than his own family, are daily available as models in some way. These different families have little in common so there is less concern among them for the fortunes of each other. "Independence—don't be bothered or concerned with the other person" may be more of the model today exhibited to our children.

3. Aligned with stability of personality and predictability of behavior for effective character development, we, as parents, need to be *consistent* in our behavior and demands concerning our children. If we, at our time, behave in relation to our child in a certain manner but when he is doing something else that would require similar performance from us, and we fail to do so, then he is probably confused. In time, children w

not be sure what to expect from us in many situations, thus leading them to behave somewhat unpredictably. Inconsistent demands made on our children, under similar circumstances, also will tend to confuse them. Mindfully, children might think at such times, "Why do they want me to do this, now, when before they wanted me to do something else?"

One might characterize the rural agricultural home as being rather "consistent" in many ways. The rural families livelihood and family life were all interrelated into one continuing situation. To the child there was no other way-of-life other than that presented to him. Any contacts outside of the family were very likely to be very similar to those encountered in his own home.

Again, contrasting with an urban family, the urban child is more likely to meet variable situations seemingly similar to the child but calling for apparently different or inconsistent responses. More different and variable demands may be made on an urban (or modern rural) family which filter down to the children.

4. If we, as parents, will take the trouble to tell them just why, rationally and realistically, certain behavior is required or appropriate this apparently promotes "consideration for others." Rational explanation of reasons for certain behavior gives the child justification for his behavior and later can help him to begin to discern by himself what behavior is more appropriate in a given situation to think through unique situations in advance of and along with attempts at suitable behavior. If the behavior proves inappropriate, then the child may examine the situation more carefully for details and cues to determine what to do next. In other words, a child begins to learn to use his own thinking to examine what the outcome of certain behavior might be and what details make the difference.

Again the rural, isolated, rather simply oriented family environment created a situation of not only consistent demands but also demands with rational and realistic explanations. Business hazards of the farm were realistic to children and consistent from year to year. Jobs and duties of family members were quite consistent and explainable. The farm duties had to be carried out everyday — no matter what! Thus the rural family situation was one of self-

discipline for all concerned. Many times these duties and obligations also involved other families in the community. As a result the child was likely to develop a strong sense of self-discipline and responsibility to fulfill all of his obligations. This rural child learned to make behavior decisions based on the probable effects of his behavior on others.

Today's urban child with little or no knowledge of the father's occupation and sometimes few real home responsibilities finds realistic demands at a minimum. The urban child is not really needed to make the family go — and help in the father's profession — hence less feeling of being needed or less sense of responsibility. The urban child's behavior is likely to be in response to variable outside demands on himself or the family hence some variability (inconsistency) of behavior response on his part.

5. If we parents use praise for our children more frequently than *blame* or punishment to demonstrate the appropriateness of behavior, along with the suggestions made above, "consideration for others" will probably develop in our children more effectively and more rapidly. If a child is praised or rewarded for his behavior, he feels less anxious (and perhaps elated) and will likely repeat such behavior again, under similar circumstances. If in some way, it is made clear to our children when and why their behavior is incorrect, not appreciated, or unsuitable, and what behavior is effective and warranted, and why, then, our children will tend to profit from such criticism. It seems, therefore, praise is more effective than blame or punishment and more efficiently promotes desirable behavior. In such processes "consideration for others" becomes an easier step, since the child tends to learn to examine social situations with greater care, before displaying behavior.

It may be wishful thinking to attribute our rural agricultural parents with doing a better job than urban parents with their children in this area of praise or criticism. However, from the child's point of view the rural farm situation was one involving family and profession or livelihood and presented an opportunity for the child to help in many ways. The rural child could help do many things around the home or farm and know he helped whether he received any praise or not. The urban child of today has limited

opportunity to really "help" the family—none to help father in most cases.

The rural child may have had many more "good" experiences of helping mother or dad—and really knowing that he did a "man's job" that contributed to the welfare of the whole family unit.

In summary, what main characteristics or attributes should we try to include in our social planning for tomorrow?

The family unit should be reinforced — with perhaps de-emphasis on working mothers and emphasis of the family unit to include greater demands of parents on children to contribute in a realistic manner to the welfare of the family unit. Encouragement of youthful employment in our society probably would help to hold your youth accountable for their actions.

Finally, paying more attention to and expecting more from our youth will perhaps develop in them a greater sense of consideration for others.

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