

Learning is a process which starts from the moment of birth and continues until we draw our last breath. The early years are spent with parents in familiar surroundings, developing co-ordination, awareness, and achieving a sense of self-reliance.

The growing years are spent at school, learning individual capabilities and responsibilities. The ideas which are formulated during childhood are the basis of life-long attitudes, as are the images that children have of themselves. Many of these attitudes do not have to be taught. They are most often due to the observed responses to situations, or the behaviour and interaction with others. During these years acceptance by peer groups demands an allegiance which has a powerful effect on subsequent behaviour and expressed opinions. Much of this is learned in the playground, or outside school from family, friends, or television viewing.

The purpose of the education system is to provide the opportunity for, and to develop basic skills to, a variety of levels of understanding. It should provide children with a relevant balanced course developing both social and vocational skills and resulting in a sense of their own individual worth. Learning requires concentration and the ability to commit to memory facts and ideas. It particularly benefits the more able child and seeks to remedy the situation for the less able.

Teaching requires a fine blend of discipline, encouragement, and the ability to motivate children to learn. Major difficulties arise when pupils cannot recognise the relevance of a subject area and so can easily be distracted. An awareness of the aims of the course and the provision of a sequential curriculum for the whole spectrum of ability ranges would benefit both the teacher and the taught. Aims must be realistic and systems contain a degree of flexibility to match achievement, priorities being given to written English, communication, and adequacy in Arithmetic. Given such differences in aims, abilities and achievement levels, the task of educating appears monumental. The responsibility for teaching lies with the school and its teachers. This is clouded by the lack of respect for which the parents are responsible. The fall in standards which has resulted is the fault of both parties.

My particular interest, coming from a nursing background, is health awareness and the prevention of avoidable illness. Whatever the outcome of the search for employment by school leavers, the overall cost to the country will be less if the population is healthy.

Eating, drinking, smoking and sex are among the things which children see, appearing to give pleasure and reward in adult life. To leave children in a state of ignorance about the dangers of excessive indulgence is a cruel sentence.

The most likely place to learn factual information easily is the classroom whilst choice remains an option and before attitudes develop into prejudice. The opportunity to teach ANYONE WHO CANNOT READ anything relevant about their health and well-being after leaving school is almost ZERO.

Guessing about reproduction and sex is not good enough. Persuading 7, 8, or 9 year old children not to start smoking is easier than trying to help them give it up later. The cost is infinitesimal compared with the cost of treating lung cancer and all the other conditions made so common through smoking. In the same way, the cost of treating hypertension, obesity, and coronary heart disease is equally greater than the cost of the information that the food we all eat can contribute to them.

There is a wide variety of presentation material available for pupils in everyday learning situations - radio, television, video-tape, and the written word. These are especially well received if their appeal extends to pupils from different socio-economic backgrounds. It is, however, not necessarily advantageous to have outsiders presenting instruction material to children without making certain that it is suitable and relevant to their age group and abilities. Their own teachers know the breadths and depths of their understanding and can direct or harness enthusiasm into worthwhile projects.

There are many enemies, not only in the form of sophisticated advertising, vested interests, and Government revenue from taxes on tobacco and alcohol, but also the whole spectrum of parental and environmental stresses keeping attitudes locked in the past. Ideally the children should have the choice. Accepting proper instruction can not only enrich their lives but might reach beyond them into the community. Alternatively, they may be over-influenced by the attitudes of others and adopt the habits of those around them.

Increasing the school leaving age during the last 50 years should have allowed pupils the opportunity to develop their talents in the classroom rather than leaving school at the age of 14 to learn from experience. During this same time successful immunisation programmes have almost eradicated tuberculosis, diphtheria, tetanus, whooping cough, and polio as causes of child mortality. Their place has been tragically taken by heart, lung, and digestive diseases, drug taking, and road traffic accidents. If children were given the choice they might prefer not

to inherit this legacy of avoidable disease.

It is totally irresponsible that these important years are wasted by over-emphasis on purely academic subjects when they could help develop the creativeness of the children and help them develop the ability to reason and think for themselves.