

STARTING YOUNG - THE LIFESTART INITIATIVE

Whether or not children stay on in school depends to a large extent on home circumstances and environment, according to recent research (see p.6). Many parents of young school leavers think they could have done more to encourage their children, but often feel they are not educated enough to help them. One initiative that has got parents more involved in the education of their children is the Lifestart initiative, which is now running in several areas in Ireland, some urban and some rural.

The Lifestart programme is important for a second reason. Research has shown that children learn a great deal of what they will ever learn in the first five years of their lives. The Lifestart programme focuses on these five years. In disadvantaged families many children often receive insufficient educational stimulation during these early years, and it is towards the needs of these children that Lifestart is particularly directed.

A good deal of organisation goes into setting up a Lifestart programme, but when it is up and running it looks something like this. A group of local people are recruited and trained; these are called family visitors. Parents with babies, ideally newly-born, are identified and are invited to take part in the programme. Each month the family visitor gives the parent(s) a copy of a leaflet called 'Your Growing Child'. The copy given corresponds to the child's age, - there are sixty different copies in all. The leaflet suggests

practical ways in which parents can provide a rich, stimulating and inexpensive environment for the child. Simple explanations are given as to what is happening during different states of the child's growth. It is one of the main functions of the family visitor to encourage and support the parents in using this material and in living out their role as the most important educators of their own children. The family visitor visits the parents once a fortnight by agreement. These visits continue until the child is five years old.

To give a brief flavour of the programme: one of the most popular items is *Talk to Your Baby*. In this parents are reminded that the richer the home environment as regards sounds and especially voices, the better the development of language. Conversely parents are made aware that children raised in institutions are unable to distinguish between sounds, and between the directions that sounds are coming from. When a baby utters a sound parents are encouraged to respond, and parents are to encourage the baby itself to respond to the parent's voice.

The family visitor supports the parent(s) not only by delivering the reading material, but by building up a good relationship with the parent. In this way friendly, informed and frank discussions on parenting and child development can take place on a regular basis. A questionnaire is used to gather information about changes in parental behaviour and attitudes. This information not only helps parents to evaluate their parenting, but contributes to the improvement of the programme on a partnership basis.

The programme can be run in conjunction with activities in a Family Centre which provides opportunities for parents to learn the use of creative art and story telling to help in the child's development. At a later stage meetings can be organised where groups of parents come together at regular intervals in each others homes with the family visitor, to discuss their children's development and The Growing Child Programme.

The Lifestart programme had its genesis in the U.S. in the sixties under the name Operation Head Start, which was a pre-school playgroup programme. However it was soon noted that where the home was not sufficiently supportive the playgroups did not have a lasting effect on the children. A refinement of the programme, called High Scope, was set up in Michigan, and this combined preschool playgroups with a home visitation programme. This programme provided parents with the kind of information and support needed in order to induce better parenting and to improve children's performance in school. Lifestart develops this movement into an informal curriculum for parents, using the 'Growing Child' materials, designed for use in the home.

A lot of work has to go into the adaptation of 'The Growing Child' for local use. It is published in the U.S. by Dunn and Hargitt Inc., Lafayette, Indiana. As it is American the text needs to be adapted to suit local needs and culture. The copyright of the materials has been given to Lifestart.

Even more important than preparing the reading material is the training of the family visitors and other workers connected with the programme. Workers need, for instance, to have a grasp of the theory and practice of child development, and to have the skills to talk seriously to parents about their child's development. They also need to be able to train parents to observe the children and to decide on appropriate stimuli for them.

There are quite a lot of expenses connected with the programme, and finding adequate funding has delayed the programme in Ireland. In some cases the programme has been carried through by volunteers. In other cases a FAS programme has been used.

Lifestart is a pilot scheme and it is still too early to say conclusively what effect it will have on the later development of the child. But preliminary research shows that children who have been through the programme perform better when they start school than those who have not been. Few of the par-

ents who begin the programme abandon it, which must in itself say something about the usefulness of the programme.

Further information about the programme can be obtained from Fr Sean O'Connor S.J., Caoran Beag, An Cheathru Rua, Co. Galway (Tel.091-95098). More limited information is available from Fr Bill Toner S.J., **Working Notes**, 26 Upr Sherrard Street, Dublin 1. Tel.O1-874-0814.

