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## The Taking and Use of Records

Louise P. Woodcock

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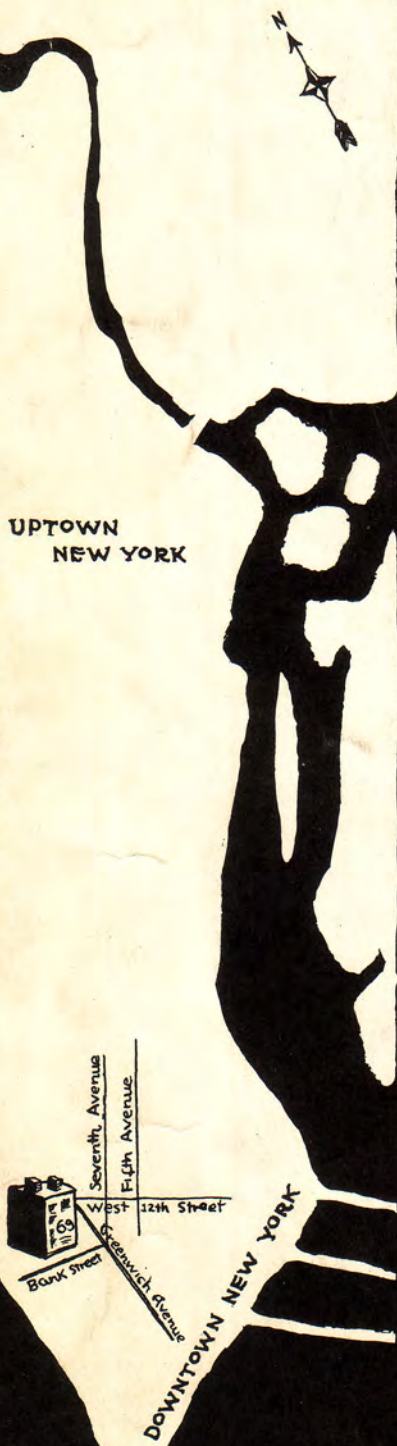
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FEBRUARY 1935

VOLUME I

NUMBER 5

THE TAKING AND USE  
OF RECORDS

by LOUISE P. WOODCOCK



CURRENT NOTES ABOUT CHILDREN  
CURRICULUM AND RESEARCH FOR  
TEACHERS AND PARENTS ...

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VOLUME I

FEBRUARY 1935

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### THE TAKING AND USE OF RECORDS

Louise P. Woodcock  
Co-Director, Harriet Johnson Nursery School

"What kind of records do you keep?" is a question commonly heard where nursery school people meet. The feeling is abroad that records should be kept but there is much vagueness about what form they shall take.

The fundamental consideration in your choice will be, of course, the purpose of your records and the kind of thing you want them to tell you. You may, for instance, be collecting a large body of material about children of various ages for a planned research program. You may be collecting data regarding individual children in order to know how to serve their personal needs most fully. You may wish from your records to evaluate your school program, your choice of materials, your teaching techniques. Certainly the decision as to the type of record taken must depend in great part upon the end in view.

What the Harriet Johnson Nursery School\* is doing in record-keeping at the present time should be pictured only against a background of its particular history. The present teaching staff has inherited from the large group of research workers who have constituted the Bureau of Educational Experiments, the tradition of ceaseless interested inquiry about children and, with the tradition, the technique of record-taking as a means of finding the answers. The spirit of inquiry is in the air, and I think there is no teacher who is not influenced by it or left unstimulated by its presence. The teachers themselves have suggested the study of new interests, as for instance an extensive inquiry into the thumb-sucking habit, experiments and research in the field of music, and other topics of interest to individuals or the group.

The record-taking program now in use in the school is simple in form but definite in purpose. It comprises two features: the teacher's running account, written daily and typed weekly, of the activities of her group, and a slowly growing body of material, collected in folders, about the individual children.

The purpose of these records is definitely educational, as contrasted with material gathered primarily for scientific research. Their use is immediate and vital. For new teachers the training that record-taking

\*Formerly the Nursery School of the Bureau of Educational Experiments

gives in observation is a factor too obvious to be enlarged upon. The constant help that her daily recording is to each teacher new or old is another self-evident fact. She is constantly looking back to see what one child or another has done in the past, who started a pattern of building, what reactions, perhaps almost forgotten now, were characteristic of a certain child when he first entered school in the fall, and similar facts of concern to her in her work. Lack of frequent comment regarding any child will call to her attention that she needs to watch him more carefully; he is escaping her notice, perhaps to his own loss. Her group program will be found unfolding in her notes through the year, available for her appraisal or for the study of others interested. When she is asked to make a special report on any child in her group, excerpts are typed from her records consisting of all entries that have shown the child's activities in any detail. These are invaluable to her in making her report and will form part of the material that is being collected in his individual folder. At the present, both the manner of writing and the selection of material are left for the teachers to decide. There are no set requirements for length or form of entry. Some of the diaries are more systematic than others, some more anecdotal. Some include more, some less, of the teacher's techniques as she tries them out in difficult situations, as well as questions regarding individual or group needs.

For those who are interested in collecting age-level material, whether teachers or other members of the staff, these group records are mines of new evidence. A reading of one teacher's record after another, according to increasing age of children pictured, shows the impressive progression from the two-year-old struggling doggedly to interlock two train blocks to the group of fives arguing as to "who made the world?"

Staff members who are teaching classes of students in the Cooperative School for Student Teachers find the records rich in illustration of the points they are discussing, whether they concern curriculum, language, social reactions or intellectual growth. Studies of phases of child development already published by staff members, and other writings in preparation, are based on these diary records.\* The group records are also read by student teachers when they change from one classroom to another, as a means of orienting themselves in the new group and of learning something about the experiences of the children together since the opening of school.

Turning now to the children's individual folders, these contain for each child a questionnaire--filled out by his parents--regarding his babyhood development, a physical examination chart for each year in school, a "first impression" and a last-of-the-year report by each former teacher. In addition to these, there may be any number of other special reports: interviews between director and parent or teacher and parent, report of a psychological examination if he has had one, excerpts from the group record if these have been taken out, and such detailed behavior

\*H.M. Johnson, "The Art of Blockbuilding." L.P. Woodcock, "When Children First Say Why, Because, If." B. Bibor, "Children's Drawings: From Lines to Pictures."

records as may have been taken of him at any time during his school year with us.

This latter type of record has always seemed most valuable to us; behavior minute by minute as it occurs, recorded with the objectivity, understanding and selectivity that are possible for the interested and experienced teacher-recorder. The inexperienced recorder seems to lack a certain perspective to govern her choice of details as well as the particular verbal skill with which to get them on paper as rapidly as she needs. That our teachers feel a definite need for this concrete kind of record is evidenced by such remarks as these: "I don't feel as though I know just how Jimmie is getting along. If I could just find time to take a record of him, I would know more about him." Or: "I took a record of Mary yesterday and it quite surprised me. I had thought that she only trailed after and copied the children she played with, but in this record you'll see that she has a good many ideas now to contribute."

Often the over-shy child, the inactive child or the generally confused child is the easiest possible member of the group, always accepting routine, never creating difficulties. Yet these children do have problems that the teacher could and should help them through, if she can sense just what they are. The concerned and alert teacher may be full of impressions of her children's personalities and needs and yet find it difficult to cite at a moment's notice concrete examples of the things that give her those impressions. If a child's problem comes, in time, to assume large and urgent proportions so that more than the school situation requires modification to meet his needs, a body of records taken periodically through his past nursery school life will be invaluable not only to his future teachers but to the psychiatrist or other expert who may be called to his aid.

In these behavior records there may be found those subtle evidences of a lack of complete ease, of inability to meet experience, of incomplete enjoyment of the thing one is doing. In a running account of a single child's morning, details such as these may appear repeatedly:

"Sylvia offered to play with her but Marian shook her head silently and turned back to her blockbuilding... Took no part when others, working with clay at her table, announced what they were making and compared notes with each other about their work... When I said that we were going to have music in a new room this time, she edged close to me and said in a low voice with her head hanging, 'I don't want to go to a new room. I don't like new rooms.'"

Or such as this:

"Dana walked back and forth in the room for some minutes before getting to work. Put a hand on a block, withdrew it, took out crayons and set them on a table, then put them back on the shelf. Returned after some

peregrinations and murmured, 'I guess I'll paint,' then, however, moved to the block shelves and set to work on a building...Built, took apart, rebuilt, brows drawn down, silent...Complained, 'This isn't very good,' as he caught my eye, but to Ralph, who made a slighting remark about it in passing said, 'It's the best building in the world'...Finally took his building apart before picking-up time and put the blocks away of his own accord. Moved hesitatingly to the easel remarking, 'I'd like to paint, only there wouldn't be time, probably.'"

Undoubtedly Marian's teacher knows that Marian is shy, doesn't play readily with other children, and is reluctant about meeting new situations, but a record confirms her impression by showing a series of consistent reactions of withdrawal.

Or Dana's vagueness and vacillating habits might have troubled his teacher without her having any concrete evidence for her belief that he finds it difficult to make a decision, that he is dissatisfied with the thing he finally creates, while he is driven to extravagant claims for it in the face of another child's criticism. Whatever may be causing this child's difficulty, whatever measures may need to be taken to free him for a happier relation to life, detailed records of his behavior should be a valuable aid in arriving at a diagnosis and suggestions for treatment.

In the record-taking program, therefore, we provide for such minute-by-minute records as these, especially in the case of the children who puzzle us by their behavior or attitudes. These children are very likely to be fully discussed at the weekly staff meeting.\* These case study meetings are a most valuable experience for all the group. They are conducted by the school psychologist, who organizes the available material, calling for contributing reports from teachers or others as she wishes. When all possible findings are in and brought into form, a very complete description of the child is before us; and the discussion turns to the subject of what the child's needs are and how they may be filled. Ordinarily, after the pooling of opinions of all the staff, we are able to arrive at a program of action that we think will help the situation. When the child's needs seem to us beyond our powers to meet by any adjustment in the school situation, whether in the program or in the teacher's reaction to him, we may recommend to his parents that an outside consultant be called. In the meantime, all the staff is conscious, after each meeting, of having gained immensely in ability to see a child in clearer sharper outlines than before. We have invited our student teachers to certain of these meetings this year; and they have felt them to be an invaluable contribution to their training. Records are the material that give reality to the discussion.

\*See article, "A Nursery School Puts Psychology to Work," by B. Biber in December issue.

Again it must be stated that a record-taking plan as simple in forms as ours depends for its value on the training and attitude of those who contribute to it. It rests upon a foundation of experience in observation which has given awareness of normal motor behavior, and a knowledge of age levels and of physiological growth. Years of recording at the Bureau have created a common fund of knowledge for the staff members.

When the nursery group consisted of only eight babies from about fifteen months to three and a half years of age, records were voluminous and detailed since they were used as a basis for research by a fairly large staff. These records have been fully described in Harriet Johnson's book, "Children in the Nursery School." When the nursery school was increased to sixty children ranging from two through five years of age, it gradually became evident that the whole plan of record-taking needed revising. The older children had perfected the muscular patterns of walking, climbing and propelling vehicles so that there was less of this to record than had been the case with the babies whose day-by-day attempts showed progressive development. Since the language of the older children was, comparatively speaking, a perfected technique, the content of their speech became of more interest than the form, while among the younger children the reverse was often true, as in such a remark as this: "Everybody are not eating toast but I."

A revised list of topics seemed to be needed for the older children, who had developed beyond the sensori-motor levels of the very young. What seemed significant to the teacher of the four-year-olds, for instance, was the content of their blockbuilding, drawing, shopwork and dramatic play, or their reactions to trips taken with her as shown in their play, their work and discussions.

Efforts were made during the first year or two of the enlarged school to follow roughly the old type of record with different topics for the older children. The next change made was the drawing up of large weekly charts on which the group activities could be followed. Entries were made in briefest sentence form rather than by a system of checks, a form of recording that has always seemed lifeless to us.

On these new charts, divided for daily entries, one could follow the development of the school program and of the children's interests as their play and their work reflected the trips or the stories that they shared with each other and their teacher. The trip that was taken on Friday might have no reverberations on the chart before a week from the next Wednesday. One grew to expect that lag as characteristic of four-year-olds. Five's might reproduce their trip sooner.

By looking back over her chart the teacher could keep a check on the trends of the group interest, could evaluate her own alertness in meeting a little more than halfway the rising needs or concerns of the children, could sense which story or which trip had disappeared without an observable ripple beneath the surface of the group's common living.

The teachers seemed to feel dissatisfied, however, with the charts. They were large and cumbersome; they were also omnipresent. One had to

have them ever in mind and yet their information was scanty. The pressure to fill in each space with something tended toward perfunctory rather than significant entries when one had nothing in particular to say. Moreover, the individual child, unless outstanding in creativeness, was very lightly sketched into the group picture. His social relations and development, his attitudes toward routine or personal responsibility were all unrecorded, though the content of his play and of his constructions was noted.

When one or two quite difficult problems arose among the children, it came more pointedly to our attention that no daily, weekly or even monthly detailed records were available from which to study the development of the symptoms that might have indicated a condition now felt to be acute. Each teacher had, it is true, written a report of her "first impressions" of each child in the fall. Again at the close of his year with her, she had written a fairly lengthy report of his stay in her group, but for the most part such examples of behavior as she gave were drawn from her own memory, with the danger of inaccuracy or of coloring from her later formed opinion. They had not been recorded on the spot in the cool unemotional light of a routine record system. To the questions of psychologist, doctor or parent she could reply from her general opinion and recollections, but no detailed examples lay at hand of the behavior that seemed to her and to them indicative of a need for particular attention.

The charts were given up and there was a swing back to a more intimate discursive type of record. The present scheme seems now to be serving us well but we do not consider it inviolable or past improvement. We hope that we may be able to remold or rebuild it continually, as we see new possibilities for it, possibilities in terms of genuine use to teachers, research workers, and the children whose cause we all serve.

#### SAMPLE DIARY EXCERPTS OF ONE FOUR-YEAR-OLD'S BEHAVIOR\*

Bernard was in good form today. He went directly to blocks, making a tugboat (a square structure) and a long fence-like arrangement that attached it to a "ticket office." Was interested and pulled me over to see it several times. He seemed very friendly and affectionate. The only violent disturbance of the peace was cutting Sally's overalls. He is not safe with scissors; two or three times he has retired beneath a table and given himself a haircut before any adult could interfere.

Bernard was very jittery today, going from one thing to another aimlessly, throwing dolls, etc. I finally got him at crayons, where he stayed for a good long time. No one used clay - the new crayons were still tempting.

\*See December issue of 69 BANK STREET, page 10, for other material on this child.



Roof. Bernard and Donald built an aeroplane and were interested and active. Bernard tried to squeeze into the packing-case between the boards that were laid across the top. Donald said, "You look like half a boy," as his top half protruded. They both laughed, though I cannot be sure that Bernard really got the joke.

Bernard has developed a threatening technique and seems more genuinely in it than he is in most things. He had a lot to say about schools and guns and shooting people, which seemed to please him enormously.

Later he got to building and made a criss-cross of long blocks which he called a "wind-boat" to make wind on the river. (Later in the morning he mentioned a windmill.) Then he built rows of cribs "so the babies could sleep in a different one every night." Kept running to me with news of his building.

Bernard came in screaming the most blood-curdling yells of the season. He was half frozen (it was 13 below zero) and was not wild and unapproachable as he often is. Clung to me and seemed glad when I wrapped him in a blanket and laid him in the sun. Later rose by himself smiling and built a beautiful aeroplane with wings, a driver, a seat, etc.

Marian and Bernard were interested in a large mass of finger paint on an oilcloth. They smeared and were smeared, but seemed really happy at it.

Bernard actually does not seem to understand the technique of bridging, that is, of making the gap the right size. When in building he was faced by too wide a distance between cylinders he ran to get more cylinders, supporting his 4-unit on three instead of two, although he could perfectly well have moved his two. Another instance of his illogical but successful working out of problems.

Bernard is quite different again - almost back to the fall behavior patterns. His grin, a friendly pleasant smile, is back and he looks alert. Today he went through the physical exam without a murmur. He has again become capable of small responsibilities such as running errands and putting on his own clothes (formerly he was absolutely uncooperative). His building is interesting though precarious as ever, and it seems to hold his attention.

#### EXCERPTS FROM A GROUP RECORD OF FIVE-YEAR-OLDS

Outdoors Harry built a counter and placed some pails on it. Norma objected that stores did not have it that way. Harry, "We're going to have these to advertise what we sell." Norma then asked, "Where is the counter where we sell?" Harry said, "Go ahead and build it," and she did.

Tommie and Wanda built together. A broom in his hand started recollections of the train trip they had had during the summer. The straw end of the broom was like the porter's broom to brush clothes. Tommie, "They put the seats into beds and in the morning they put them into seats again."

(Tommie is very observant. He has made several comments on the materials. "These are garden shovels, aren't they?" of the scoops.) Joan approached, "What is that, a boat?" Wanda, "Yes." Tommie, "Yes, of course. I must get a smokestack." And he put a keg on top of the building. It was Joan's question that caused the house to become a boat and it is interesting to note how tied the children are to the combination boat-smokestack.

There is mostly boat play with ropes for fishing. The children asked to have stones tied to the end of the ropes for bait.

Today Gordon mentioned his father and when I asked him where his father is now, Gordon answered, "He's home now. Every week he goes to China and brings us toys." Actually his father does make a trip once a year.

Harry finished two paintings and got a pile of blocks. "And I'm going to make a train track." He proceeded to lay blocks on their sides with a passage way between. Harry, "In the country is a track, is a track, is a track, in the country is a track," etc. Peter, "If you want to get a curve, go into that house and there's a curve," pointing to his building. Then in reply to a question, "Trains don't go into houses very much." Harry, "Well, I've seen stores with cellars and then the subways are there." Gordon and Peter pushed double-unit trains along the track and the curve in the house, managing the manipulation around the curve through a window.

Wanda loaded two cars of her long train with lumber. On the other passenger cars, two dolls slept covered with blankets. She built a coach for the engineer in the first car and the coach in the last car for the conductor. Tommie built a large hollow boat with passengers on seats inside, and the driver near the front at an open window. I think it is quite a mature piece of work. It is interesting that the wooden dolls which are painted as workmen and workwomen, having the specific attire of their jobs and the broom or rake to fit, are used indiscriminately by the children as babies, engineers, passengers or, in some cases, decorations. Wanda and Tommie are using their summer experience, a trip on the train to Wisconsin, in their play. She is building a country house for train passengers who have traveled "two nights and one morning" to Wisconsin (as she did).

Nora placed four unit blocks on their sides to form a square. "See my house." She placed two cubes on the rims and two cubes inside. She pointed to each cube in turn, "This is a sink, this is a wash-stand, this is a light and this a towel hanger" - a very good example of the use of symbols. It is surprising that Norma with her apparent maturity in other ways is satisfied still to use a symbol instead of the more realistic structure.

A PORTION OF "FIRST IMPRESSIONS" OF A TWO-YEAR-OLD

Billy is short and stocky with blue eyes and straight light brown hair. He has a pasty color and puffs under the eyes just now, which gives him an appearance of poor health that is not borne out by his vigorous attack on the nursery materials. Was vaccinated just a week ago and this may account for his looks at present. His strength of arms seems rather unusual. His bodily motions are quick and seem well coordinated except for numerous baby hangovers as noted below.

On his first day he was ludicrous in his feverish dashing from spot to spot as he saw each new piece of material, usually those in the hands of another child. Each time, he seized the thing he saw, whether in another's hands or not, and it required almost one person's full time leading him from that article to a similar one that was not in use.

His social advances were of much the same vigorous and direct sort. He has been kept away from other children on account of his rough handling of them, so that his first drive toward them, the experimental touching and tasting stage, seems to have gone unsatisfied until he reached us. He pawed at children, put his mouth on them, took off hats, and finally waxed rougher, pulling or squeezing until his victim protested loudly. He was so determined in these attacks that it was judged better to moderate their violence rather than to try to prevent them entirely. When he was exhorted to pat his victim gently he would do so readily, often ending with several carefully imprinted kisses in the vicinity of the other's mouth or nose.

He shows many physical immaturities, for example:

Sits down by bending at knees and hips a little, then falling backwards to his buttocks.

Has been seen pointing with his whole hand instead of his index finger.

When an adult pointed out something to him far down the roof, he reached out his arm, finger extended this time, in the same gesture.

When he was shaking a musical dumb-bell up and down in one hand, his other hand, empty, shook up and down just as vigorously.

Used iron first in left hand, then in right, as though perhaps he has not passed out of his baby ambidextrous stage.

Shows baby-like twistings of his hands on his wrists when he reaches out toward something he wants.

Runs with shoulders switching, arms and legs flying sideways a little.

Climbed from floor to low table throwing whole leg up instead of a knee first.

Carried under his left arm a green board resting in his curved hand. His empty right hand hung down in a similar position at his side, fingers and palm bent as his left were.

Is often seen with two articles of the same kind, one in each hand, as two shovels or two brooms.

Also relieves himself of anything that he has in his hands that he doesn't want by the baby method of relaxing his muscles and letting it

drop. This is oftenest seen, of course, when he sees something else that he wants to take hold of.

See instances below of some of these things:

Billy ran across room with two Montessori cylinders, spied dolls, dropped cylinders from relaxed hands, and grabbed dolls.

Billy picked up one shovel in each hand and banged on the tiles alternately in even rhythm, then banged them in unison, probably persistence of both the armloop and the beating and flapping tendencies of his earlier youth.

He also used two hands on a hammer.

Betty, Anne and Billy took turns climbing to slide chute from half-way station (low table). Billy, two-like, tried to walk up the chute he had just come down though Anne was just getting into it a few feet above him and would most certainly bump him if he stayed there. The very young seem unable to foresee the possibilities of this kind of dynamic combination of child and slide, child in a swing, etc.

He has come quite quickly to orientation both in the physical environment and the social so far as accepting rules go.

Billy wanted to get on the wagon that Anne was using, but Anne was not willing. Adult suggested that he get another wagon. He went directly from the other end of the roof to the shelter and brought out a wagon. A wheelbarrow lay in the path and he very carefully moved it aside. He seems to have got in mind very quickly the positions of the shelters and seems to recall readily where to find things.

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