Playing House in College

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Playing House
in College

Ex-home manager Katherine Dodds interprets life in home management houses

This is not the story of Dr. Paulena Nickell, head of the Home Management Department, but the story of her work and the girls who make up her work. Unlike most teachers, Dr. Nickell has contact with every girl who graduates in home economics, for each one goes into home management house sometime during her senior year.

Iowa State boasts the unique position of being the only school to have as many as five home management houses. Among the 75 colleges with home management houses, 16 work with babies. Since 1926, 58 babies have gone through Iowa State home management houses.

In addition to her administrative work, Dr. Nickell, with the aid of five house advisors, keeps the houses in running order by conveying her ideas of home management to the girls and seeing that they are put into practice. She orders needed large equipment and furnishings and plans for upkeep. However, every six weeks students also have an opportunity to say how the house budget shall be made.

Each house is as different as possible from the others so the girls can work in environments with more personality and less institutionalism. Suppose you’re going into home management houses. And do not call it “practice houses!” That’s as incorrect as calling draperies “drapes.” You’re not going to practice when you get there. You are going to apply what you’ve already learned in meal planning, child development, applied art and sociology.

Go ahead and admit that you are somewhat skeptical of that “dreadful six weeks.” You have never even picked up a baby, let alone feed or bathe one, and the thought of cooking for nine people frightens you. You abhor dusting, and you’ve operated a vacuum cleaner maybe ten times in your life.

And that’s what you think home management house is? There’s more than meets the eye, young lady. You will balance books and pay bills. You will keep records and order groceries and supplies. You will make “formula” for the infant, you will send the house laundry out and you will wash baby clothes. You will be a most charming hostess. You will see things which need to be done and you’ll do them.

It sounds like a big order? Did you ever think about just you? Do you know what you want when you enter home management? There’s no other place you can obtain the personal attention you will get there. Time is scarce, but you’ll find a million ways to plan it better. You can wear yourself out, but the advisor has many tricks up her sleeve for saving energy.

Before much can be done, your group will have to decide what positions each will hold during the six weeks. There will have to be a cook, a child director, a manager, a housekeeper and a hostess. Other positions are assistantships. Disliking the commonplace names, the Isabel Bevier girls once decided to name the hostess “Suzy.” Alice Norton house had Helga and Olga for the housekeepers.

As the member of a family, you hold both privileges and responsibilities. When you have a problem, your family helps you solve it. When one of your sisters is puzzled, you offer a word of advice.

As cook, you will be surprised at the favorable comments on your meals. You really can cook, which isn’t out of the ordinary, for you have had two quarters of scientific foods background and preparation, a quarter of meal planning and your two weeks of home cooking.

During the day the child director will expect you to spend some time with the baby. You may not know much about babies, but after you have held them three or four times, you won’t want to give them up. They take a lot of loving.

Bathing the baby seems too precarious to think about? Besides receiving written instructions, you will have a demonstration by the advisor, and after the shaky first time, you will look forward to it. A healthy baby enjoys his bath and home management babies are chosen upon physicians’ statements of good health and possibility of normal development.

There is more contact with the other home management houses than you expect. No two quarters are alike when it comes to the types of entertaining the girls do. Usually your house will entertain jointly with the other houses. The progressive party is the simplest. Sometimes one house will appear unexpectedly about dinner time at another house and demand food. Maybe you can see the reason for an “emergency shelf,” even in home management houses.

With the addressing of formal invitations to dimer comes borrowing. Gertrude Coburn’s fish forks, Ellen H. Richards’ coffee table and Isabel Bevier’s finger bowls are almost necessary. Everything must be just so. Perhaps you may even borrow girls to serve the dinner. And the only pay is to return the kindness.

Much that’s good in home management has been suggested by students. One of the things you will want to develop is the ability to look at a situation and see how it can be improved or changed to greater satisfaction. For instance, one group attached the garden hose to the washing machine and saved many bucket-carrying backaches between the machine and the drain.

When you leave home management house, home making will hold no threats, only promises for you.