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Mrs. America Expects Perfection From You

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Mrs. America expects PLENTY from us as home economists. All of us who have been in close contact with homemakers for any length of time know that their faith—or maybe more accurately their hopes—as to what we can do for them sometimes seems to know almost no limits. I can well remember the amazement of a staff member of one newspaper home economics department when a voice on the other end of the phone said, “Say, can you tell me what to do to keep a 3-months-old baby’s hair from turning red?” Fortunately few worry about this problem.

It seems to me that the first type of understanding that is expected of us is that this job of homemaking is both complex and varied. There cannot be one set pattern. There is no truly typical home or homemaker. Each household is unique, with its own activities and problems, based on the needs and interests of the individuals who live there. And what does this mean for us? It means just this. The more we can get acquainted with these people with whom we work, the more we can visit with them—if possible in their homes—the more practical help we will be able to give them.

**Practical Help Wanted**

Mrs. America looks to the home economist for the newest information in all fields relating to homemaking. She wants those facts that come from all types of research, and investigation, and testing—but she wants our help in evaluating them and interpreting them. To put it more bluntly she wants our help in understanding this data in the first place, and then in getting it into practical and helpful form for her family to enjoy.

I think we also need to understand not only home economics but a little psychology. Take an example from the field of nutrition for instance. I was raised in the day when children were told “Eat your spinach. It’s good for you. It has iron in it.” But this logic was not enough, and I, and a lot more of my generation, can’t stand the stuff to this day, as evidenced by the lack of popularity of this vegetable in army mess halls. But, some years ago, two new factors came into the spinach story, and I think that together they make up the best joke and the best lesson that I know for us as home economists. First research discovered that though the original food value of spinach seemed high, the final value of the digested spinach had been much overrated. And then, just about that same time, a comic strip character named Popeye began gulping great gobs of spinach as the secret of his astonishing strength. And what happened? Our children developed a great liking for spinach and began tucking it away in quantities only slightly less than did popeye himself.

The point I want to make is this: Just telling the need for any certain thing, is not enough of a sales talk. We have to show people both how and why and then make them like it.

Another very important field in which Mrs. America looks to us for help is in the skills and techniques involved in this many sided job we know as homemaking—the “know how” if you wish. This may include anything from how to bake as good a pie as “his mother used to make,” to how to use that new stove with so many gadgets on it that it does everything but eat the dinner for you. And not matter who we are teaching, we should use the quickest and easiest methods that will give good results.

**No Disagreements**

It seems to me that if we are to be consistent and as helpful as possible we must have a good understanding among ourselves. For instance, take the directions for home canning. Disagreement as to methods is not too important unless financial loss or physical safety are involved. But wrong methods of home food preservation can mean waste or loss of the food itself and illness or great danger to the whole family. A conscientious person should make certain that only the safest directions, and the advice of the most reliable and competent authorities are given the public.

There is one more type of understanding that the homemaker has a right to expect from us. That is just the sheer mechanical understanding of what we say to her in written or spoken form. The language should be simple and the words understandable. If they are new or unusual, they should be explained. We do have a terminology, a jargon that is all our own. But it may leave other people a bit mystified as to just what we mean. Written material should be easy to understand.

On checking over the whole situation it does seem that Mrs. America expects the home economist to be a rather awe inspiring combination of scientist, technician, teacher and friend. Even those with the best training and the greatest ability will fall short of their aim unless they take time to develop a common ground of understanding. This takes time: time to make friends, to talk with them, and to listen to them; time to get a real picture of what they do now, and want to do or even not to do in the future. Once this basis of understanding is reached there will be helpful and happy associations for all.