

# Starting Young

By ROBERT MILLER



**AN ARTICLE** in the March issue of *Reader's Digest* explains how children of six to eight years old are being introduced to basic economic concepts in schools in the United States.

As far as establishing and maintaining interest is concerned, "Our Working World," as the programme is called, is a roaring success; the children find the discussions a refreshing and exciting change. It is the creation of Professor Lawrence Senesh, a Hungarian-born university economist, who believes that it is high time all ages caught up with our economic ABC's — and who will disagree with him? "Young children," he says, "have a tremendous drive to fit themselves into the real world around them. Why not make it easier for them by letting them in on the ground rules?"

But what are the ground rules? Well, let us see how Professor Senesh proceeds with his course. The children in a class are asked to name things they would like to own — house, car, swimming pool, and so on. They are then asked to think of all the processes necessary to produce these things — ore to be mined, forests to be cut down, factories to be built. "The children are thus introduced to one of life's stubbornest facts and the starting-point of all economic theory — the conflict between unlimited wants and limited resources."

One hopes that in due course this conflict is clarified, and no doubt it is. For the moment one must assume that it refers, partly at least, to man's unlimited desires coming into conflict with his natural wish to gratify them with little or no exertion; in other words, the resources are limited to the extent to which man is prepared to work. There are other factors of limitation, of course, but this is a comment on a short article, not a full-scale treatise on a lifetime's work.

Through stories, games, filmstrips and field trips, the children learn, among other things, what money is — how it represents the value of goods created and services rendered; they learn the principle of division of labour by making gingerbread men — first by each child carrying out the whole process from start to finish, then by one mixing dough, another cutting it, and so on, and seeing for themselves how many more cakes can thus be produced. They see the principle applied at home, where each member of the family has responsibilities, and in the shopping centre, where tradesmen specialise.

This specialisation then suggests the idea of interdependence (surely in actual practice such long words are not used with six-to-eight year olds!) and bartering is acted out in the classroom. "A baker with toothache visits a dentist, and offers bread in payment. But the

dentist has plenty of bread but needs new shoes. The children find barter so clumsy and unworkable that they quickly invent money and credit."

On the field trip to a bank they see that it is a place where money is put to work, so they form their own bank and take turns in applying for loans.

The children learn the lesson that since we cannot have everything we must make choices, and that the choice disappears the moment the money is spent — and we assume that it is further explained that this personal choice ultimately determines what goods are produced.

By using slices of bread and sausage, Senesh teaches how the concept of marginal utility operates in trade. "A girl entrusted with ten slices of bread estimated that she could eat only three pieces, leaving seven for which she had no use. A boy with ten slices of sausage thought he would have had enough after four slices. So, for their owners, only the first three or four slices had full value . . . . However, when the extra bread and sausage were traded, the marginal or surplus slices made all the slices valuable, for other pupils wanted them."

We must resist the temptation to judge Professor Senesh's intriguing experiment too hastily on such scant evidence. We may note that there is no mention of fundamentals; we may regret that we see no attempt to define terms, and, after having explained to the children, quite rightly, that an electric mixer used for mixing dough is stored-up wealth used to create more wealth, we will certainly deplore the unfortunate statement that education is a "tool" that enables more goods to be produced in the same way.

Nevertheless, as the Professor says: "I want the child to see his problems as understandable and manageable. As long as he feels unable to deal with a way of life, he can never feel he belongs to it. I want him to identify with something larger than himself." The important thing is that he has captured the imagination of the children, and at a very early age too. Later they will see for themselves any inconsistencies in his teaching, for unlike adults so hardened, frustrated, prejudiced, confused, with and by everyday business and personal problems, children have a knack of grouping things in their logical order once their curiosity and interest have been aroused. One or two basic principles thoroughly grasped will lead to the desire to explore others upon which to build a sound and fair appraisal; and later still, experience, exchange of views, and an increasing knowledge of facts will prompt questions concerning systems and their faults. Having learned something of the How, they will begin to question Why, and, who knows, some of them may arrive at the right answers.