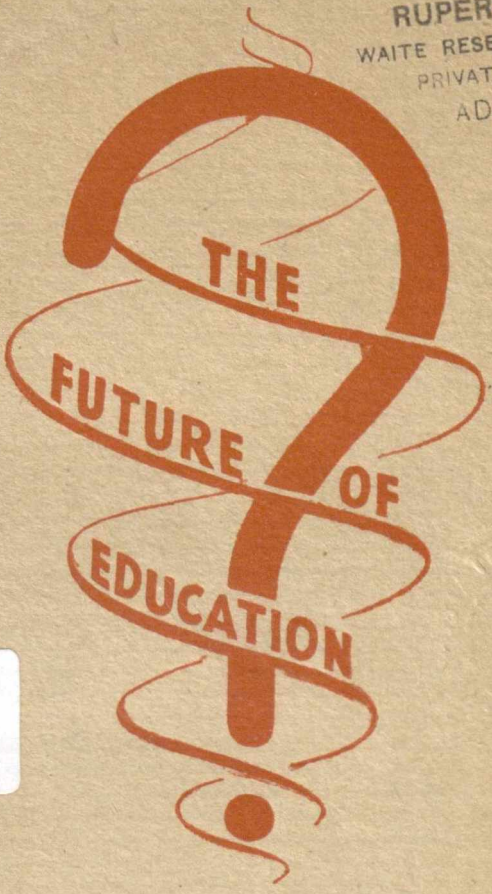
1944

Education for parenthood.

Zoe Benjamin

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH



No. 7

EDUCATION FOR PARENTHOOD

ZOË BENJAMIN

PRICE SIXPENCE

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THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION

No. 7

EDUCATION FOR PARENTHOOD

BY

ZOË BENJAMIN

(Former Vice-Principal of Sydney Kindergarten Training College)

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

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EDUCATION FOR PARENTHOOD

PARENT EDUCATION AND RECONSTRUCTION

AMONG the civilized peoples of to-day there is stirring a great creative force which is expressing itself in a desire for the building of a better world; a world that has more rational thought and justice, greater tolerance and sympathy, less selfishness and greed. The happiness or unhappiness of the new world, like that of the old, must result from the character of the men and women who are that world; a world made up of people whose fundamental needs, physical, emotional, mental and spiritual have been satisfied. If, however, children become men and women unhealthy or undeveloped in body, immature in mind and emotions, selfish, intolerant, or uncooperative in their relations with others, the new and better world will be but an ineffectual dream. In most plans for reconstruction it seems to be forgotten that success can only be achieved by making some great and fundamental change in the quality of human thought and feeling. As this, in its turn, depends primarily upon the education of the child from his earliest years, we must have not only new and better schools, but also new and better homes. For the latter, far reaching housing schemes are necessary; but this is not enough. The house is merely a shell within which is shaped the pattern of family life. It becomes a home, only when the family life is built up on a basis of mutual love, understanding

and respect. As the responsibility for this development lies with the parents—a responsibility for which few of them are properly prepared—education for parenthood must be an inherent part of any plans for reconstruction.

THE NEED FOR PARENT EDUCATION

Many people still believe that parents need no training—that on the birth of a child the mother instinctively understands all that is necessary for bringing it up in a completely satisfactory way. The fact that so many men and women are inefficient, selfish, uncontrolled and unsocial in their attitude towards others, thereby creating many of the problems against which almost the whole of humanity is struggling, indicates that parents have either not understood what should be the aim of child development, or have not known how to achieve it.

We have a casual method of judging whether parents are good or bad. If the home satisfies the child's basic physical needs, if the parents are honest, clean living, law-abiding, and especially if they are members of a Church, they are usually regarded as good parents, irrespective of whether they are really making their children happy or not. Should one or more of their children become 'difficult,' we often hear the comment, 'It is strange that such good parents should have such undesirable children.' That the children have been well fed, well clothed, sent to school, that they have been given the normal privileges of childhood, is regarded as an indication that they must have had good parents. But is this all

that is required if parents are to fulfil their responsibility? Though these things are necessary they do not make up the whole of a child's life.

It would be absurd to expect that all parents should be perfect; but with adequate facilities for education and training, we could have, in each generation, a steadily increasing number of men and women capable of carrying out their parental responsibilities with wisdom. Each parent who brings up a child well is preparing a new generation of parents to carry on the job in their turn. It is encouraging that so many young parents to-day are aware of their limitations, and are anxious to get all the help they can through lectures, trained psychologists and literature; but it is a serious reflection on our educational system that the need for education for parenthood is so little recognized in Australia, and has had little encouragement from the Departments of Education or Child Welfare, save by the establishment of Baby Health Centres and a few, very few, Child Guidance Clinics.

If parents are to meet the demands of their profession (and it is a profession) there must be a complete sweeping away of the traditional attitude that they instinctively know what is best for their children. Why, in spite of all the parents' efforts in the way of punishment, etc., do children continue to be disobedient, tell lies, destroy their toys, tease and hurt other children, suck their thumbs and have temper tantrums? Why are so many adolescents so rude, so unmanageable? Why do some children dream and dawdle, whilst others seem to have little or no power

of concentration? Why are some timid or over assertive, whilst others avoid, or are incapable of standing up to any responsibility? Surely these are indications that instinctive understanding is not helping the parents to meet the essential problems of child upbringing. It is, of course, easy for them to blame the child for being difficult or bad, and so shift the responsibility for failure from their own incapacity to that of the child's failings or depravity.

Though I am placing so much emphasis upon the parents' responsibility for the pattern of the child's development, it does not lie entirely in their hands. All children are born with certain inherited potentialities, some of which are racial and some individual. It is the modification of these by the influences brought to bear upon them, particularly in the home and the school, that determines their character and personality from childhood onwards. It is necessary, therefore, that parents should have some understanding of the characteristics common to all children, and of the particular needs of the individual child. It is when parents understand these, that many of the problems of child management disappear. The difficult child becomes happier and more serene, and ultimately, a new and better relationship is established between parent and child.

If the parent-child relationship is to be completely satisfactory, there must be as little friction as possible. This will be the case only if parents understand and satisfy the child's needs at every stage of his development. Many of the difficulties in managing children arise from the parent's ignorance or neglect

of some fundamental need. These needs exist in some form throughout the whole of human life, and show themselves definitely in infancy and early childhood. It is the way in which they are met that determines the child's happiness or unhappiness. It is important that we should remember that life is a unified and continuous whole. Each stage of human development is the inevitable result of the one preceding it. Infancy leads to childhood, childhood to adolescence and adolescence to adulthood. If the infant is unsatisfied, either physically or psychologically, it is impossible for the child to have complete development. If the child has not been allowed to use his mental powers, has not had full emotional satisfaction and has not been guided in the forming of desirable habits of body and mind, if he has not been helped to adjust himself satisfactorily to his fellows, the adolescent will find it impossible to achieve his full maturity, and consequently will be incapable of attaining full adulthood.

Too much emphasis, therefore, cannot be placed upon the significance of the pre-school period, for it is in these early years that the foundations are laid for all those habits of mind and body that are most important for the happiness of the individual life, and for the satisfactory co-operation of the individual in the life of the community.

THE AIMS OF EDUCATION

If children are to grow into the type of men and women the world needs there must be a great change in the methods of child upbringing. As Bishop

Burgmann says in his pamphlet 'The Regeneration of Civilization,' 'We cannot make a good society out of damaged children.' Parents, like teachers, cannot guide children satisfactorily unless they know the direction in which they wish them to go. Many of the problems of life arise because the methods of child upbringing are inconsistent and illogical. It could not be otherwise, since such methods are often the outcome of parental impulse and emotion, too seldom controlled by rational thought. The child is pulled first in one direction and then in another, and the variable standards demanded develop in him a state of confusion and mental conflict.

What type of individual is the world needing? It is needing one 'who has been so trained in youth that his body is the ready servant of his will, and does with ease and pleasure all the work that, as a mechanism, it is capable of; whose intellect is a clear, cold, logic engine, with all its parts of equal strength, and in smooth working order, ready, like a steam engine to be turned to any kind of work, and spin the gossamers as well as forge the anchors of the mind; whose mind is stored with a knowledge of the great and fundamental truths of Nature and of the laws of her operations; one who, no stunted ascetic, is full of life and fire, but whose passions are trained to come to heel by a vigorous will, the servant of a tender conscience; who has learned to love all beauty, whether of Nature or of art, to hate all vileness, and to respect others as himself.' (Thomas Henry Huxley.)

This quotation points a very high, and for most, an impossible ideal, but as a guide it can give us a

very good direction. In his insistence upon the importance of clear and logical thought, of enjoyment of life and of social responsibility, Huxley does not suggest any stereotyped pattern at which education should aim, but urges the development of qualities necessary for complete and satisfactory living.

Education for a Changing World

One outstanding purpose of modern education is to prepare the child to meet the demands of a changing world. We do not know what kind of a world he will have to face as he grows older. It seems safe to assume, however, that little will be static. There will be great changes in all aspects of human life, political, social and economic. The fabric of national life and international relations will, in all probability, be woven into a very different pattern from that which we know to-day. For this reason we must help the child to develop those powers, which all possess in varying degrees, of thinking independently, of making intelligent judgments, of balancing moral as well as intellectual issues, and of realizing the social implications of his acts. This education should begin in the home, should be carried through the school and, as far as possible, into the after-school years. It will show a big step forward in our understanding of the real meaning of education when the worth of a school will be judged by its success in developing children in these ways, and not only by its success in training children for the passing of examinations. Education should also be concerned with the developing of the powers of the child in a variety of ways through a varied curriculum, so that,

on leaving school, the hand-minded child as well as the book-minded child will know the vocation for which he is best suited.

Education for Leisure

One must not consider education, however, as merely a preparation for the future; it should be concerned equally with present living. It must take into consideration the twenty-four hours of each day. This means that parents must consider not only that which the child is now learning to enable him later to gain a living, but also what he is gaining that will help him to spend his leisure hours happily and well. Ideally, every child should have a home in which the parents are not only honest and upright, conscious of their responsibilities as citizens, but possessed of a cultural background that enables them to introduce the child naturally and unconsciously to the realms of literature, music and art.

Unfortunately, in the majority of cases parents cannot provide such a background because of the limitations of their own upbringing. This could be overcome by encouraging men and women to realize the importance of having their own recreational interests. The woman who becomes entirely immersed in her housekeeping, the man who has little time for anything but his work, tend to become mentally stunted and emotionally starved. The parents of to-day could also be helped by a widespread programme of adult education which could give them much of the fullness of life that they have missed; the parents of to-morrow can be saved from mental and emotional starvation by an educational policy that

will introduce into the school curriculum a wide range of cultural and constructive subjects in which each may find some satisfactory outlets for the expression of his individual life.

One of the most important aspects of parent education is that of making men and women aware of the great importance of providing the children with satisfactory and constructive interests for their leisure hours, for it is during this period that so many of our social problems are created. In a world that is ruled by machinery, which imposes a deadly monotony upon the working hours of the majority of youths and adults, there is a more urgent necessity than ever before for leisure time activities that will satisfy the innate creative impulse possessed by all human beings. When the conditions of the home limit the possibilities of the young people's leisure time activities, parents should become so aware of the probable influence upon the child of this limitation, that they will organize a weight of public opinion demanding the establishment and organization of community centres to supply these needs.

It is unfortunate that some of the finest inventions of the modern world, with vast possibilities for good, are responsible for the development of some of the undesirable aspects of modern life and of child life in particular. The two instances of which I am thinking are those of the cinema and the radio. People of all ages from childhood upwards, have become more and more dependent upon the efforts of others to fill their leisure hours. Constant attendance at picture shows, and the continued listening to the radio, is

encouraging the desire for passive amusement which certainly has its place in life, but not to such an extent that people lose capacity for developing their own recreational interests. The standard of programmes for adults is not always of the best, and for children it is infinitely worse. Parents should realize that as citizens of a democracy they have power by means of the vote to force a Government to provide National or Subsidized Theatres, Cinemas, Recreational Centres, etc., to meet the needs of adults and children. We have found that our governments can find money for war—let us now find money for life. There is little doubt that many children to-day have lost the power of imaginative play. Hours that should be spent in the garden or backyard, and in the home inventing their own games, are spent sitting in a picture show, listening to the wireless, or complaining that they don't know what to do. This tendency to depend upon others for their amusement in childhood leads to continued dependence in youth and adulthood upon commercialised entertainment, and is probably responsible also for much of the existing desire for excitement and experimental living. It is only as the child is given full opportunity to realize himself in leisure, as well as in work, that he can have a properly balanced personality.

The Child's Rate of Development

We must realize that not only should each child be helped to find his own avenue of development, but his *own rate of development* should be studied and understood. The average parent, through lack

of knowledge, tends to judge a child's abilities by those of other children of the same age. For example, because the baby next door, who is a month or so younger than their own, is beginning to sit up or walk, they sometimes try to force their own baby to do the same thing. Young parents especially need to learn that they must follow the child, who, if given the right conditions for his age, will show spontaneously when he is mature enough to undertake any new activity. Thus, before the baby attempts to sit up it goes through the preparatory steps of struggling to lift its head and shoulders. The act of sitting up can be undertaken only when, through these preparatory exercises, the nerve centres controlling the necessary muscles have become sufficiently mature.

Similarly, parents make demands upon their children's mental capacity that cannot be fulfilled. This may be because the children have not the innate ability, or because they are not yet sufficiently mature. For example, parents knowing that another child has learnt to read at five years of age, force their own child to do the same whether he shows interest or not. Owing to causes which we cannot here discuss, the average modern parent tends to exaggerate the importance of learning the 'three R's' at an early age. The child who is forced to learn these at five years of age is often irritated and bored, yet he would learn with ease and pleasure and in half the time if he were allowed to wait until he was six or seven years old. The deplorable tendency of thinking of education as the learning of subjects rather than as the

development of the child, not only breeds unhappy relations between parents and children, but has a most destructive effect upon the children themselves. If the latter show intelligence and initiative, and a good sense of social responsibility out of school, the parents should recognize that these are qualities of the best type and be content even if the child does not come near the top of his class.

A very large number of family problems arise because parents expect their children to achieve standards beyond their ability, but which they might have achieved in some measure, if they had not been pushed and badgered into a state of resistance and resentment. Parents should watch their children, provide them with as many opportunities as possible for the development of their physical and psychological powers, and then allow them to develop quickly or slowly, as nature urges them to do. This does not mean, of course, that the child should not be expected to make any effort. On the contrary, if he is being brought up in the right way, is having the work and play that is really suited to him, he will make tremendous efforts to overcome any difficulties that lie in his path.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PRE-SCHOOL YEARS

(*a*) *Physical Care*

As the average child passes the greater part of his pre-school life in the home, there is very great need for parents to understand how best to meet the needs of these years. Of these needs those of the body

are of fundamental significance. For this reason parents should make it their first duty to understand the physical conditions that are essential for their children at every stage of their development. If they are not given the correct food, sufficient sleep and rest, if their functions of elimination are not looked after properly, and if they do not have sufficient exercise and play, they must suffer. It is not unusual for parents to be meticulous about the physical care of their children in the pre-school years, particularly during the clinic period, and to become casual as they grow older. The result of the lack of proper care is shown throughout childhood in conditions such as bad teeth, disturbed sleep, bad posture, nervous instability, intestinal troubles, lack of vitality, and susceptibility to colds and other childish ailments. Sometimes the results are evident also, in feeding difficulties, temper tantrums and general unmanageableness.

Fortunately, in attending to the child's physical health, his mental health is also being affected. It has been said that the human being does not consist of a mind and a body, but is a body-mind because the interrelation between them is so close that what affects one, affects the other. Parents should realize this fact as early as possible, because it underlines the importance of physical care. The correct baby routine with its regularity and consistency, establishes not only good physical habits through developing regular bodily rhythms, but also gives the child a sense of security as he becomes conscious of his mother's love and her association with the satisfaction

of his rhythmic needs. Should the mother, however, disregard the need for method and regularity during the infant years, and, for the sake of peace, pick up the child or feed it whenever it cries, the latter will suffer, in all probability, not only from digestive troubles, but may become wilful and uncontrolled. In such instances the harm may be rectified to some extent when the child is older, but at the cost of conflict which could have been avoided had correct habits been established from the beginning. We see, therefore, that the mother's care for the baby's health is influencing the development of his future personality. Many young fathers are also taking part to-day in the physical care of their babies from infancy. As one of them said, they are 'doing everything but breast-feeding.' This not only gives welcome relief to the young mother, whose demands in the home are many, but brings the father into intimate contact with the child's life from the beginning.

(*b*) *Psychological Needs*

If, in addition to their physical care, the child learns to feel that his parents are to be depended upon for companionship and for the understanding of his psychological needs, a sound foundation is being laid for his own development and a happy parent-child relationship in the future.

I. *Love.*—At birth each child has certain innate tendencies and capacities, some of which are common to all children, while others are more specifically individual. All children, for example, have the need

for love, but the love they are given is not always of the kind that helps them in their present or future lives. The love children need is that which is expressed in sympathetic understanding, in slowness to anger and readiness to see things from the child's point of view, so that he never suffers from a sense of injustice. It must be expressed, also, in the parents' desire to put the child's good first, and not their own emotional satisfaction. For instance, such love does not demand that the child should remain a baby and dependent, when Nature demands that after the physical weaning has taken place, the psychological weaning should follow. The ability to free the child slowly and gradually from control, and, by means of constructive and wise guidance build up his power of self-government, is one of the greatest tests of parenthood.

II. *Mastery.*—All children have also the urge to satisfy the mastery impulse, they need opportunities and facilities for play, for self-expression and companionship; but each child will show these needs in some individual way. These needs are the mainsprings of human action, and the foundations of all the strongest impulses and interests of human life. If the child's normal and urgent need for love, for mastery, for play and self-expression is neglected or frustrated, mental conflicts are set up which lead inevitably to symptoms of maladjustment or anti-social behaviour. Some children are naturally much more difficult to guide than others. This happens when any particular tendency is overstrong or very weak. Some, almost immediately after birth,

show the need for mastery in a strong assertiveness which makes them fight strenuously for anything they want. These are the children who demand from us much insight, imagination and patience if this tendency is to develop into determination, the capacity for patiently overcoming obstacles and the power of leadership, instead of developing into obstinacy, the desire for domination and a selfish lack of consideration for others. The so-called good child, who is easy to manage because of lack of assertiveness and his willingness to adopt the ideas and suggestions of others is often an unrecognized problem, for he may suffer from a lack of will-power, independence and initiative.

III. *Play.*—One of the most important phases of child management is concerned with providing the child with legitimate opportunities for exercising the mastery impulse. This can best be done through play. In play the child at every age satisfies some of his deepest impulses. For the young child it is the only satisfactory means of self-expression he possesses. And even as he grows older it is the most satisfying medium for the exercise of his imagination and creative power. Through it he gains many muscular skills, whether it be in his play with out-door apparatus, or with blocks, tools, paints, etc. If he is not provided with the toys and playthings suitable for his age behaviour problems will arise.

For instance, young children may wander away from home, suck their thumbs, hang round their mothers, show little initiative and resource, and constantly get into mischief because they have not been provided with the correct toys and play material.

Expensive toys are unnecessary. The child gets much greater satisfaction from simple playthings that he can use in a variety of ways. The older child who has developed no inner resources through his play and play things will depend upon commercialised amusements such as pictures, and will play on the streets or in other people's houses rather than return to his own home.

The toys given to the very young child are too often of the cuddly variety. They have little play value, as the child cannot do anything with them except hold them. If parents watch the normal activities of a normal child of this age, e.g., poking their fingers into holes, fitting on lids, filling and emptying boxes, digging in the earth, they would get suggestions for simple toys that they themselves could make as, for example, a peg board made of a strong piece of wood with lengths of thick dowel sticks to fit into it; or a box or piece of wood with a stout string tied through a drilled hole which could be used to load stones, etc.

A large box filled with waste material, such as odd bits of wood, empty boxes and tins, cotton reels, bits of string, etc., and some strong tools will provide the child from four and a half onwards with many hours of happy play. Another box with dressing-up properties is also valuable for boys and girls of the same age and older.

For outdoor play, empty wooden boxes are very useful and can be used by the child to push, to get into, to climb on, and in a variety of other ways. Boards of different sizes, odd pieces of thick wood to be used as blocks, boxes with their lids tacked

on, ladders small enough for them to carry about by themselves, all provide opportunity for vigorous and imaginative play.

If the child's toys do not give scope for the exercise of his imagination he soon loses interest. This is the reason why many children who possess a great number of toys are often much less happy than the children who have few, but who are given freedom to make what they wish of all sorts of odd things around the house. Dolls, blocks, and other ordinary toys are of particular value because they give the child a starting-off point for much imaginative play which can be indulged in by a child alone, or lead to interesting co-operative play with others.

IV. *Companionship.* — Because mankind is naturally gregarious children of all ages should have companionship. If they do not, behaviour difficulties are inevitable. The manner in which this need is satisfied in the early years is largely responsible for the quality of the child's future relations with others. In infancy the mother should make a practice of talking to the baby during the daily 'play-period,' or 'mothering-hour' as it is sometimes called. If she cannot give the time to nursing or playing with him for the hour, she should have him near her in his pram or cot so that she can talk to him. The father should also make a practice of talking to the baby. In this way the child is not only getting the mental stimulation necessary for developing his intelligence, he is also having the companionship that is so necessary as a basis for the future good relationship between parent and child. Care should

be taken, however, that the child is not over-stimulated, nor made so dependent upon the parents that he becomes incapable of being alone.

Somewhere about the age of eighteen months to two years the need for the companionship of children of their own age strongly develops. Parents should not be unduly concerned, however, when children of this age quarrel with one another, as all young children are egoists and can pass only gradually to behaviour controlled by socialised standards. As Miss Heinig is writing a pamphlet on "The Pre-school Child" I shall not say anything more about this except to mention that many behaviour problems such as temper tantrums, thumbsucking, destructiveness, clinging to the mother, wandering from home, that first occur at this period, are often due to the child's lack of companionship of children of his own age.

As the children grow older parents should do all they can to make the home the centre of the child's social life by encouraging him to bring his friends there. Even if they are undesirable it is better that he should meet them at home, more or less under supervision, than that he should form the habit of playing with them in their homes or in the streets. The more the child is encouraged to feel happy in his home the less likely is he to develop the idea that fun and pleasure can only be found outside it.

MENTAL ATTITUDES

(*a*) *Reasonableness*

The first steps in the forming of mental habits such as those of intelligent curiosity and concentration

are also taken in the pre-school years. The parents who, as far as possible, encourage the children's questions by giving them satisfactory answers, who give them toys, play material and books which will stimulate further questions, are keeping alive the normal instinct of curiosity with which the child meets the new and fascinating adventure of life. If, in addition, he is granted his normal right of asking the reason for prohibitions or commands, and is given reasonable explanations that he can understand, habits of intelligent, rational thinking are being developed. Arguing, however, which is adopted as a means of procrastination, should be discouraged.

(b) Concentration

Nothing is more harmful to the development of the child's power of concentration, than the constant interruption of any activity in which he is interested. It does not matter whether it be the putting on or taking off of a bootee by the baby, or the absorbing play of an older child, these activities are at the moment the most important things in life to him, and are what work of the most vital character is to the adult. Of course, there is great variation in the natural capacity of children for feeling strong desires, and this, in large measure, is responsible for the variation in their powers of concentration, which may be evident at a very early age. Training, however, may modify these innate capacities for good or ill.

SOCIAL ATTITUDES

Parents should also consider the social implication of certain attitudes they encourage in their children.

What may seem a small and insignificant act for a child, may, if fostered, become a habit that will be detrimental to his future. For example, the small child who is told when he has fallen or has bumped himself against some object, to 'hit the naughty floor or chair,' is being taught to place the responsibility for his own failures or mistakes on others, and to feel spitefulness and anger towards any person or object obstructing his desires. This may also be the first step towards the habit of muddled thinking. This attitude is often encouraged, as the child grows older, by impatient or unjust criticism and discipline, and leads him to the habits of making excuses, of blaming others or of shifting the responsibility for the results of his own defects or lack of vision on to Fate, or Luck, or the Will of God. The child who is over-indulged because he is young and appealing, is being taught selfishness and unco-operativeness. The parent who first refuses a child's request for a cake, or lump of sugar, and who, in spite of the knowledge that the first refusal was right, yields to the child's insistent pleading, is encouraging active and deliberate disobedience and disrespect for law. When the child is older, however, he is often punished for naughtiness or disobedience because, in some mysterious way, the parents now deem him capable of behaving in a manner diametrically opposite to that previously encouraged.

For instance, it is illogical to punish a child for his refusal to perform certain duties in the home, when as a tiny child his desire to 'help Mummy' was

have attained, by the age of six, the ability to co-operate happily with others in work and play.

It is the lack of the recognition of the child's right to increasing opportunity for self-government that is responsible for many parental problems during adolescence. Freedom is perhaps the greatest spiritual need during the period of adolescence. It is because of this that wise guidance in pre-adolescent years is so important. The child who has been helped to use his own thought, who has been encouraged to exercise independence and initiative whenever possible, who has learned to respect the rights of others and to be co-operative in his home and school, has been well prepared for a happy and satisfying adolescence and adulthood.

A good deal of antagonism arises between adolescents and parents, because the latter are unsympathetic towards the young people's efforts to form their own standards of living. We should not forget that two generations cannot think alike, no matter how good the standard of the older generation, for each has been brought up and has lived in a very different world. The younger must develop new attitudes, new ways of thinking, new sets of values and different forms of behaviour. It is the duty of parents to try to maintain an elasticity of mind that will enable them to go a certain distance, if not the whole way, with their children. When they do this, a spirit of mutual respect develops between them, and the young people are much more likely to be guided by the wisdom which the older generation sometimes does possess. It is only by the establishment of a sense

of friendship based on reciprocal love and respect that a satisfactory parent-child relationship can exist. The quality of the relationship that exists between the parent and adolescent is, as a rule, the logical result of attitudes developed from the pre-school years.

SPECIFIC PARENTAL PROBLEMS

The difficulties experienced by parents in the bringing up of their children may be due to conditions that are the outcome of the parents' personalities and to factors that are the product of the individual home. On the other hand, many problems arise through situations which are common to a very large number of homes. No matter what parent groups may be formed, there are certain problems that always arise, such as the inability to keep the balance between freedom and control; behaviour problems due to ignorance of the child's needs, reticence about or inability to give the child necessary sex education; a child's refusal to eat, thumb-sucking, bad language, undesirable companions, wandering, disobedience, stealing, rudeness and defiance, quarrelling and regression to infantile habits.

These general problems lose a great deal of their seriousness when parents understand that they are not the result of any innate depravity or naughtiness on the child's part, but are due largely to their own misunderstanding. I can, in the space at my disposal, deal briefly with a few of these only.

Perhaps the most valuable contribution which Parent Education can make to the problem of child

training, is the development of right attitudes. Parents usually feel that if only they knew what to do, behaviour difficulties would vanish immediately. What they expect is a kind of psychological magic. They have to learn there is no such magic formula. We must regard behaviour problems not as naughtiness, but as symptoms of some disturbance in the child's emotional life. If the child is at all unhappy, some form of undesirable behaviour will probably occur. For any one particular behaviour problem there may be a number of different causes. Let us put it this way: if a number of people suffering from headaches decide to get medical advice, it is probable that each would be treated in a different way. In one case the headaches may be due to some eye condition, in another to digestive disorders, and so on. When we are considering behaviour problems the situation is much the same.

(*a*) *Destructiveness*

Destructiveness, for example, is natural in a small child of two or three years of age, but he should have outgrown it by the time he is four, if all his physical and psychological needs are being met. If this tendency still persists in a child of four or five, it is evident that for some reason he is unhappy. Unhappiness that expresses itself in destructiveness may be due to many different causes, such as:

1. Ill-health or over-fatigue.
2. Disharmony in the home.
3. Too much discipline and constant interference.

4. Frustration due to parental over-anxiety or possessiveness.

5. A sense of insecurity which may develop after the birth of a new child, loss of a loved relation, or unsatisfactory relations with brothers or sisters.

6. Unsuitable toys and play material.

7. Too many or too few toys.

You will see that each of these causes suggests its own remedy. When the cause of the trouble is removed the undesirable behaviour disappears. It may be as well to be a little more specific in relation to points 3, 4, 5, because in these the child's destructiveness is a symbolic act. By this we mean, that in destroying his toys or other material he is symbolically destroying or getting rid of the people who are responsible for his unhappiness. It would be useless to ask him why he was so destructive, he would probably say, 'I don't know.' This would be true, because the motive for his act is unconscious. When the cause is a sense of insecurity it is not necessary for example, to remove the new baby, but to make the child feel he is wanted and loved as he used to be.

It is impossible to over-emphasize the importance of the diagnostic attitude in dealing with behaviour problems. The rough-and-ready methods with which children are treated as the result of ignorance, are responsible for a great deal of unhappiness. Those in charge of children should understand not only the physical, but the psychological needs of the child at every stage of his development. By so doing, it is possible for them to analyse the conditions of the

child's life, and possibly rectify those conditions that may have led to bad behaviour.

(*b*) *Parental Anxiety*

In their growing awareness of their responsibility for the child's complete development, however, young parents should try to avoid over-anxiety, because it leads to all kinds of behaviour difficulties. Over-anxiety results in undue interference with, too much pressure on, and over-protection of the child. For instance, during the many years that I have been working with mothers there has been a steady increase in the numbers who have feeding difficulties with their children. This, I am convinced, is due to the fact that they have become so diet-conscious, so frightened of doing the wrong thing, that they have lost all sense of perspective and sometimes all common sense. To a large extent the clinics have been responsible for this particular difficulty. Many clinic sisters do not allow sufficiently for variation of individual needs. Mothers are told that the child must eat a certain amount and must put on a certain weight. The young mother becomes so frightened of not doing what is right that many babies are overfed, many little children are forced to eat when for some reason they are suffering from some temporary loss of appetite. This naturally leads to resistance on the child's part—a resistance that shows first only in relation to food. The mother is so closely associated with food that the resentment felt at all meal-times often creates a general resistant attitude towards her. The mother dreads the approach of meal-times,

and the annoyance and irritation felt by her is expressed in impatience with the child at other times. The constant inter-action of irritation on the part of the mother and child can ultimately create a relationship that is marked not by trust and harmony, but by conflict.

This over-anxiety shows also in the desire to bring up children too well—to make them 'ladies and gentlemen' years before they are capable of being either one or the other, and all because the parents are anxious that other people should think well of their children. Over-anxiety has a very bad effect on the mother herself, who is never free from nervous strain. As her attitude develops inevitably in the child some form of behaviour problem, this strain steadily increases, until she becomes quite incapable of managing the child with sympathy and common sense. The antagonism expressed by many adolescents towards self-sacrificing and sincere parents often arises through the too concentrated care they have been given, and through their natural nervous reaction to the parental attitude of anxiety.

Parents who are over-anxious can never really enjoy their children, because they are so afraid of doing the wrong thing. Conscientious care all children need; but, fortunately, they will survive, and even thrive, in spite of many mistakes. If this were not the case, how is it that there are so many healthy and admirable men and women in the world, many of whom had anything but a perfect upbringing?

(*c*) *Freedom and Control*

In the management of children there is, perhaps,

no more difficult problem than that of keeping the balance between freedom and control. The failure to achieve this balance usually produces one of three situations.

1. The child is over-disciplined.
2. He has no discipline at all.
3. The discipline is variable and inconsistent.

The average parent has no clear concept of the meaning and purpose of discipline, nor the place of freedom in human life. For the democratic way of living freedom is a necessity. If men and women are to have the power of governing themselves wisely as free individuals, they must be trained for this throughout childhood and youth. If, as men, they are to have the power of thinking for themselves and making wise judgments, if they are to be aware of the many problems, social, political and economic, as well as individual, that life presents, and are to be capable of thinking about them constructively, they must have been given the opportunity in childhood for using their own power of reasoning, and for choosing their own courses of action. In the home and, unfortunately, in the school as well, the majority of children are not stimulated towards this type of development, but are encouraged, if not coerced, into accepting the ideas and judgments of others.

At the same time this emphasis upon the right of the individual to freedom of thought and action must be limited by a sense of social responsibility. The freedom that he has, others must have also; and if he is to live with others in a community he

must learn to balance his rights with his responsibilities. The home should, therefore, be a miniature community in which each individual has his rights, but only so far as they do not interfere with the rights and comforts of others. For example, children should learn that they cannot make a noise in the sitting-room if mother has visitors, because it makes conversation impossible. They should learn, also, that furniture is not meant to be jumped on, because it spoils the property of others. Children should not make a noise in school because it interferes with the other children's work. Unfortunately most children are not given the social reasons why these acts are not permissible, but are made to feel that their activity is prohibited simply because the adult does not approve of it. Children are very responsive to discipline that is given rationally. Of course, there are exceptions, but on the whole the more children are treated as intelligent, reasonable beings, the more reasonably they behave.

It may be said that this method of treatment is not discipline. Actually it is discipline, but not punishment. Punishment follows after an offence with the idea of preventing its recurrence. Discipline may also do this, but it has a much more constructive function, in that it tries to develop in the child habits of thought and feeling that may prevent him from doing undesirable things. Constructive discipline aims at gaining the child's cooperation so that he is happy in doing what is right, whereas discipline in the form of punishment prevents the child from repeating an act by arousing

fear. The advantage of constructive discipline is that the child can be trusted at all times, whereas the effect of punishment, in many cases, is that he will still perform the act if he can evade authority.

Constructive discipline begins from the moment of birth by the establishment of those physical habits that are necessary for the child's physical welfare. By the establishment of these, psychological habits are being formed at the same time. Very soon after birth, the child has realized, through his mother's responses to his expressions of love or anger, whether he has the power to make her do just as he wishes, or whether he has to learn to conform to certain laws which have been made for his good. The baby who realizes that by his cries he can induce his mother to feed him before his regular hour, or by the same means can persuade her to nurse him instead of leaving him in his cot, is gaining a knowledge of his power over people which he may exploit to the utmost and which may have very serious effects upon the development of his later personality. It may, in fact, influence all his relations with others, in childhood, youth and manhood.

In the preceding paragraphs we have emphasized the importance of establishing right habits of thought as a form of preventive discipline, but occasions arise when the child has committed some act which is detrimental to his own welfare or to that of others. These are the occasions that are generally followed by punishment. Much of this has no effect upon the child, who persists in repeating the undesirable behaviour. This may be due to genuine forgetfulness,

because the punishment, unless severe, may have so little inherent connection with the misdeed, that one fails to recall the other. This is frequently the case with a young child. Sometimes the punishment may fail because of the resentment that has been aroused in the child who feels he has been punished unjustly. Such may be the case if the child's motive has been misunderstood. Adults frequently fail to realize that the child's immaturity, lack of experience and inability to analyse a situation fully make mistakes inevitable.

If a child suffers constantly from what seems to him unjust punishment and if, for any other reason, continuous conflict arises between him and the adult, deliberate disobedience will probably occur. It follows, therefore, that we should not interpret a child's misdeed by its surface value, but should consider the total situation. Contrary to common belief, the normal child has no desire to be naughty unless he has been mismanaged or frustrated in the satisfaction of some normal or urgent need. If the latter is the case, we can often prevent a repetition of the behaviour by discovering this need and giving him the opportunity to satisfy it in desirable ways. For example, many children of all ages are destructive because their urge towards construction or their need for creative effort is not given legitimate avenues of expression.

There are occasions, however, when the child's action must be followed by some situation which will be a deterrent against repetition. When this occurs the adult should try to determine the real meaning

of the child's offence so that the punishment that follows seems a logical consequence. For instance, if a child breaks some object which belongs to himself he must suffer the natural deprivation which follows, and nothing should be substituted in its place; even if it were an accident it might have been prevented had he used more care. The reason for the mishap should be explained. He should learn from the earliest days that we cannot avoid the logical consequences of our acts. Should he break something that belongs to another, sending him to bed or smacking him *bears no relation to the act*, the meaning of which is that he has destroyed or interfered with the property and rights of others. The only logical thing for him to do is to try in some way to rectify the harm by replacing the object if possible, if not, by providing some gift or service as a compensation. The mother must not provide the gift nor perform the service; otherwise the experience has no value to the child. Punishment of this kind arouses no anger, but develops in the child a consciousness of ethical principles and social responsibility. Most people think that a punishment can be effective only if it arouses tears and shame. Neither is necessary. The child should be helped to understand that mistakes are common to people of all ages.

A very important part of Parent Education is that of developing the realization that discipline, if it is to be truly constructive, must seem to the child the logical result of his act, and not the expression of personal feeling. Undoubtedly this objective ap-

proach makes bigger demands on the parents' self-control, reasoning power and imagination, but the results of trying to achieve it are well worth the effort, and are a definite part of the parents' responsibility.

(d) Sex Education

Another problem common to all homes is that of the child's sex education. Though there is a greatly increased number of parents who are dealing with this matter wisely, the overwhelming majority still ignore it or fight shy of it. Many adults, because of the attitudes developed in their own childhood, have a feeling of shame, guilt or embarrassment associated with the whole subject of sex. The refusal to deal with the matter does not solve any problem. It is not a question of telling the child or of his remaining ignorant; he must ultimately learn the truth. Parents should decide whether they want this knowledge to come to him in a desirable or an undesirable way. We should realize that sex is something more than a physical relationship in connection with which have arisen many sordid associations. Sex is not only the very foundation of love between men and women and of family life, but it is also the source of almost everything of beauty that the world possesses. Remove all the music, literature, art, all the fine deeds that have been inspired by some aspect of sex and the world would possess very few of those things which are man's most lasting possessions. The degradation of sex has come about through social beliefs, creeds,

and customs which have become so closely associated with it that, in the minds of many, they cannot be divorced.

Before a child asks the question 'Where do babies come from?' he has already had his first education in sex by the way in which he has been taught to regard his body and its functions. The child who is taught to accept these simply and objectively, who is given their correct names so that he is not forced to use those that are silly or vulgar, is being taught to accept sex knowledge in the same way, without shame and without vulgarity. If the child lives in the country, he learns the facts of procreation naturally, and when he asks 'Where do babies come from?' he has already a biological approach. Books such as *The Web of Life*, by the Earl of Lytton, or *Growing Up*, by de Schweinitz, are very helpful to those who wish to understand how best to answer the questions of the young child. Many mothers are surprised at the ease with which they can answer their children, because the latter are quite impersonal; to them the birth of a child or any young animal has no more significance than the origin of wind or rain.

The reluctance of parents to satisfy their children's curiosity on this subject is one of the most outstanding causes of lack of real intimacy between parent and child. Once the latter becomes aware of the parents' avoidance of this subject it may stimulate an overwhelming curiosity. On the other hand; because the child senses the parents' feeling of guilt or shame it may arouse fear of the forbidden and the unknown. In either case there has arisen a subject

upon which all discussion is taboo. When the child has been told fantastic stories of storks and cabbages, and then learns the truth, he ceases to confide in his parents, not only because they have told him a lie, but because he has been made to look ridiculous in the eyes of his companions.

Parents should not be unduly distressed by the sex play and play with the genital organs so common in young children. They give too much significance to this behaviour, and often fear that their very normal children may be sexual perverts. Much of this play originates with only children who are curious about the physiological structure of members of the opposite sex. Though it is not necessarily a serious state of affairs, this play may be an indication of mental conflict in the child's life.

If parents are to have a close friendship with their children there must be mutual frankness on the subject of sex. This does not mean that the children are to have information poured upon them. The wise course is to follow the child, answer his questions as simply as possible, and give no more information than is asked for unless necessary for understanding. The majority of children having been told that 'they grow inside their mother's body' are quite satisfied, and may ask no further question for a long time. Some children appear to have no curiosity about the matter. This may be the result of having already gained a certain amount of information; or it may be that some factor in their lives has caused them to lose confidence in their mother or father, so that they speak very little

about the things that mean most to them, or about which they are uncertain of their parents' response.

Whether a child asks questions or not, he should be told where babies come from during the pre-school years. There is always a possibility when he goes to school, that he may gain his knowledge in such a way that it will arouse an undesirable emotional attitude which may persist throughout life. Many marriages have foundered on emotions that were first aroused during the pre-school years. If the child has been told the elementary facts of birth and of his own physiology by his mother, he is protected against undesirable knowledge and a certain type of undesirable experience.

As the children approach adolescence they should be told the meaning of physiological changes that are taking place. In cases where a good deal of emotional instability accompanies these changes, it is very comforting for the young people to realize that they are merely passing through a definite stage of their development, and that their clumsiness, their sudden alternation of moods, are not permanent conditions, but disappear as they reach maturity. If the parents have met the problems of the young child wisely, the adolescent will come with his questions quite naturally.

Under our existing social conditions the adolescent should be warned about the dangers of venereal disease, but in such a way that the knowledge gained does not colour his general attitude to sex. In their desire to help young people avoid the unhappiness so frequently met with in sexual life, there is danger

of well-meaning people to-day creating another problem that may be as serious as the old one. In their passion for giving factual knowledge, standards of personal behaviour are often forgotten. We see the result in the increasing promiscuity and in the cynical cheapening of an emotion that has been responsible for much of the greatest happiness that life can hold. In giving the child at all ages a sound physical background, we must not forget that spiritual values must be associated with it.

THE FAMILY BACKGROUND

In addition to the problems mentioned, due for the most part to parents' lack of knowledge of the principles of child-management, there is another group for which certain emotional attitudes are responsible, and which arise from the constitution of the family itself. Some of these result from the parents' attitudes to the child and some from the attitudes of the children to one another.

The attitude of the parents to the child is influenced by their own mental and emotional development. Many are still children in their emotional immaturity and mental outlook. This immaturity is shown when certain childish characteristics that should have disappeared still persist. Behaviour that we call childish in adults, consists of such characteristics as uncontrolled impulses, dependence on others for help and advice in meeting normal problems, a sense of inferiority that causes them to react too intensely and without any sense of proportion to criticism or failure. Such reactions in adults may be the result of influences

which denied them as children rightful opportunities for developing a true sense of their own powers and personal worth, and created faulty social attitudes. This emotional immaturity may exist with well-developed mental powers, and accounts, in some measure, for the frequent failure of highly intelligent men and women as parents.

Unfortunately the effects of incorrect upbringing do not disappear when the children reach adulthood. There is an interesting tendency on the part of human beings to repeat the faults of their own upbringing when they themselves have children, even though they are conscious of the unhappiness they themselves suffered. Over and over again I have found that the parents who deal harshly and unsympathetically with their children were treated in the same way in their own childhood. On the other hand, many parents will go to the opposite extreme in order to avoid creating in their children the fear or sense of frustration that they themselves experienced. It would seem that the child who resembles a parent through the possession of certain innate tendencies, is liable to repeat his own upbringing when he or she becomes a parent. The possessive mother, for example, has been responsible for generations of possessive mothers, and shares, almost equally with the autocratic father, the responsibility for the creation of more unhappiness and maladjustment in individual lives than any other two single factors. If there is little or no similarity they tend to go in the opposite direction. There are, however, a number of people who are so well balanced, that they are able to learn from their own experiences, and to carry

the fruits of this knowledge into the understanding and management of their own children.

It may happen that the parents are not happily married, in which case their emotional frustration creates nervous tension and emotional strain which will be visited, often quite unconsciously, upon the child. A serious difficulty sometimes arises when parents pour all their unsatisfied love on the child who may become either too strongly attached to them or resentful of their emotional demands. In these cases the parents feel that the child is ungrateful for all the affection that is showered upon him, and this further intensifies an already bad situation.

The presence in the home of grandparents or other relatives is sometimes responsible for a situation with which it is difficult to cope. Many relatives are resentful of methods different from those they believe in or have practised, as they feel that the new methods are an implied criticism of themselves.

In any scheme of parent education it is important that the interest of the fathers should be aroused as well as that of the mothers. Little can be done to improve home conditions for the child unless both parents work in co-operation. If, for example, one parent is stern and the other too lenient, it creates confusion in the child's mind because conflicting standards are being upheld. This leads almost inevitably to the child playing one parent off against the other. In the quarrels that ensue the child experiences further emotional disturbance because of the conflict of loyalties that is aroused. He *can develop normally only in an atmosphere of harmony and co-operation.*

Difficulties between children, however, are responsible for nearly as many problems as are unsatisfactory parent-child relationships. Jealousy exists very frequently between children, and often takes forms that seem to be totally unrelated to any family situation. This is particularly the case when a new baby is born. The older child is now no longer the baby. He used to be the centre of interest not only to his parents, but to all who came to the house. In many ways his freedom of action is now interfered with because his mother is feeding the baby, or the baby is asleep. At first the child's interest in the newcomer is so great that it overshadows everything else. But as the child becomes accustomed to the situation he begins to realize more and more clearly how his own life is being affected. So, in an instinctive attempt to become a baby again he may refuse to feed himself, he may wet himself or wet the bed, refuse to play outside, insist upon always being with his mother; he may begin sucking his thumb, or masturbating; he may even give up talking and revert to baby noises and crawl instead of walk. The cause of these symptoms of emotional distress is very rarely recognized. Though he shows affection for the baby he often has periodical spasms of anger or cruelty towards it. Parents frequently think that by telling the child that they still love him, they have done all that is necessary to reconcile him to his new position. But it needs more than this. They must make the child feel by their actions that he is just as important as he used to be, that he is needed in the home, and that as the bigger child he has his

own special place in their affections. It is remarkable how quickly, in most cases, the child's behaviour changes when he feels again his old sense of security.

This feeling of antagonism towards another child often includes the mother, for she was his most priceless possession; he feels that she has betrayed his love and trust in her, so the bitterness of his disillusionment comes into conflict with his still existing love. This will be shown in his alternating moods of clinging to her and of disobedience and resistance.

Jealousy may be aroused by the natural inequalities of the children. If one is better looking, more intelligent, makes friends more easily, the sense of inferiority bred in the other often leads to antagonism and dislike. If parents are so unwise as to hold one child up as a model, this unbrotherly attitude is intensified. If privileges are showered upon the youngest, and the older ones are always expected to give in to him, the harmony of family life must be affected. So even the difficulties between children are often based upon faulty parent-child relationships.

In the preceding sections I have dealt with a few of the problems which would probably not arise if young people were trained for parenthood. Unless parents have a greater understanding of the needs of childhood, they cannot meet the responsibility that is theirs.

Wise parents will give the child not only physical care, but also understanding and sympathy. They will realize the importance of upholding standards

and principles, but will take into consideration the child's immaturity and inexperience. They will see that their children are given the fullest opportunity for the development of their powers through each succeeding stage of growth, so that they may not only find the vocation for which they are fitted, but will also have those inner resources which make for the realization that enjoyment does not depend upon possessions, that imagination can be a source of wealth, and that no small part of happiness lies in finding an outlet for creative impulses. But while giving every opportunity for individual development the wise parent will not forget that the child from the earliest days must be prepared for future citizenship. He should be helped to realize that he is one of a community and must learn, even in the home, to balance rights and duties. If these things are done the child will be given that sense of security essential for his harmonious development, and he will have for his parents the trust which is the foundation for lasting friendship between parent and child.

AGENCIES

Who is to undertake the work of educating parents? It should be an inherent part of the educational system, parent groups being formed in connection with every school, whether State or private, and in relation to children of all ages from kindergarten upwards. Many child guidance clinics should be established and especially in connection with welfare centres, which should be extended to deal with

children beyond infancy. Women's organizations and clubs formed in connection with churches, etc., could arrange lectures and discussion groups in Child Development and Child Management.

The Discussion Group Scheme of the Tutorial Departments of the different State Universities could be given wider publicity, and broadcasting stations should make parent education a part of their policy. Groups formed for Parent Education should have libraries for their use containing books dealing with the physical and mental hygiene of the child. Groups studying Parent Education should also demand that local libraries have a section to meet their needs.

Pamphlets, such as those published by the State Universities of Iowa and Minnesota, dealing simply with different phases of child welfare, should be written and published in Australia to give parents practical help in meeting their problems.

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