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### JUVENILE DELINQUENCY AND PROBLEM CHILDREN: SOME COMMENTS\*

MORRIS WITKIN, M.D., F.R.C.P. (EDIN.)

*Paediatrician, Johannesburg*

In the world today no social problem is causing graver concern than the anti-social acts committed by children from the ages of 6 to 18 who constitute our juvenile delinquents and problem children.<sup>1</sup>

Juvenile delinquency is a 'deficiency' disease but not of the familiar A, B, C variety. It is not a deficiency of the soma or body but of the psyche. These children suffer acutely from 'moral and spiritual avitaminosis.'

Juvenile delinquency is primarily parental delinquency. A problem parent often breeds a problem child, and most parents of problem children are unhappily married. Wretched home conditions, bad environment and poverty are the commonest causal factors. It is not so much the broken home as the disorganized home that is at fault. The broken home may be brought about by divorce or the loss of a parent or both parents. It is not so much the physical absence of one or both parents as faulty human relationship which causes the numerous inimical anti-social acts committed by juveniles. In the disorganized home we find one or more of the following factors having a trigger action: criminal parents, mental instability in one or both parents, over-severity, neglect, jealousy, favouritism, domination, or parental maladjustment due to race or religion.

The delinquent suffers from an inferiority complex which is manifested in bullying, shouting, lying, vandalism, sadism, vagrancy and bizarre sexual offences. A particularly common form is truancy from school, which has been labelled the 'kindergarten of crime.'

The juvenile delinquent and problem child appears on the surface as a cold, callous and predatory person. He seems to be devoid of remorse or a sense of guilt when faced with his misdeeds. This is only a mask. He is 'putting on an act', or basically he is jittery, anxious, uncertain and insecure. The problem child has a constant struggle between repression and expression. There is far too much repression but little chance for expression, which must find an outlet. Alcoholics, drug addicts, sex perverts and criminals can often trace to early childhood their subjection to severe emotional stress and strain.

The unloved child, denied an outlet for healthy self-expression, develops a masochistic attitude. Frustration forces aggression, and a series of tensions resulting from neglect and operating over a long period commonly precipitate conduct disorders. And not only the grossly neglected and unloved child is a possible candidate for delinquency, but also the over-indulged one. Parental overindulgence creates an artificial environmental protection which stunts normal growth and development. Such a child lacks stability. Youngsters are attracted to gang groups because their own homes lack warmth and attraction. These gang groups are the breeding grounds for gangsters and gangsterettes.

Strange as it may seem, the problem child is always struggling to *solve* a problem rather than to *be* one. His methods, alas, are crude, his conception of his problem is faulty, and his technique fails to conform with the recognized conventional standards of the community. His fantastic anti-social conduct is the result of his grave emotional imbalance.

What effect does divorce or remarriage have on a child like this? The grim fact must be faced that the most glamorous woman can never replace the real mother, and no man can fill the vacant chair of the father.

A golden rule was laid down by John Locke, a physician and philosopher who lived some 250 years ago: 'Caress and commend children when they do well. Show a cold and neglectful countenance to them upon doing ill.' Today we have the warning words of Leo Kanner, of New York: 'Avoid parental despotism on the one hand and parental submission on the other.' With better, more informed and responsible parents we will have a reduction of the problem of delinquency and crime.

The chief desideratum of a growing child is a peaceful home—'peace that passeth understanding.' Love and affection are the essential 'vitamins' for a child's physical and spiritual growth and development. A stable and secure family in a happy home is the pre-eminent requisite for the prevention of delinquency. Every normal child wants to feel that his parents love and adore him, and that he has the best parents in the world. It is chagrin for a child to find that his parents are

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corrupt and social outcasts. Such dreadful discovery deflates his ego and is soul-destroying.

Sex delinquency is often traceable to parental incompetence in dealing with the question. Proper enlightenment is the best prophylactic against early sexual maladjustment. Adequate sex education requires a full measure of frankness, tact, and sound common sense. Many parents look shocked or grin or mumble something incoherent when questioned innocently by their child on sex matters. They pretend to be horrified at a natural and correct question on a vital matter which is perfectly physiological and essential for the average normal child to understand. Such parents goad their enquiring intelligent child to obtain information from most harmful channels, where sex is presented in a distorted, melodramatic and obscene form—with grave results.

*Prognosis.* What does the future hold for the delinquent and problem child? A natural orthotendency tends to produce adjustment. Despite the fact that thousands of boys and girls get into trouble every year, most of them grow into good citizens, but some continue their delinquent careers and are the professional criminals of tomorrow. It is truly amazing how many problem children become fairly well adjusted in later life. Indeed most delinquent children can be reclaimed. This demands continuity of treatment of each child as an individual.

#### *Treatment*

How should one treat these deviated children? It is a difficult task because it is complex. There are many facets in the child's make-up, and each facet must be scrutinized. Team-work is essential. The personnel should consist of the general practitioner, the school teacher, pastor, the scout master, the nurse, and the social worker. Such a team will approach the problem child with tact, understanding, and a knowledge of child psychology.

In order to correct character deviations in children we must penetrate the basic layers of character growth and

development. If that can be done our next task is to resurrect the natural qualities of anxiety and guilt which were buried at an early age. Find the causal factors and, if possible, eradicate them. It is painful to face the grim fact that despite all our efforts we are often driven to remove a child from a disastrous domestic environment. These unfortunate deviated children need sympathy and understanding, and to provide that we must go down to their level and avoid undue criticism and moralizing. The child must be treated as a whole; he is a unit in himself as well as a unit in his home and in society.

Ira S. Wile,<sup>2</sup> a leading American authority on behaviourism, advises us, when treating a problem child, to think of a cart wheel. Consider the child as the hub; his home, school-mates and companions are the spokes, and his economic, social and creative opportunities as the circumference of the therapeutic wheel. The careful and cautious turning of the wheel will guide the development of a sound character, a healthy mind in a healthy body, from childhood into adolescence.

The child must be examined physically to determine that organically he is sound. Any physical defects must be corrected and his level of intelligence measured. Readjustments in the home and school will awaken interests and responsibilities which will guide the child into paths of correct social conduct depending on his capabilities.

*Prevention.* Medicine in the future will concern itself mainly with prophylaxis. Social service will focus its attention sharply upon undesirable environmental conditions which adversely affect the health and welfare of the community. For the prevention of juvenile delinquency a well organized happy home is the great objective. When that is achieved, the problem child will become a rarity.

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