

HOW ARE "PROBLEM" CHILDREN MADE?

Willard Beecher

Not many generations ago, most people believed that maggots grew spontaneously on spoiled meat. Many years passed before it became common knowledge that exposure to flies was the source of the contamination. A similar naiveté exists today among many of us in regard to the so-called problem-behavior of children. Parents and teachers often seem unable to recognize how such difficulty arose with Bill or Mary, Emily or John. Such mystification only shows how little common understanding exists concerning the development of human personality. Let us see what situations furnish the soil for the usual forms of problem-behavior.

First, we must define what we mean by "problem-behavior." We may say that conduct which consistently burdens rather than helps other people in the environment is problem-behavior. By this token, the child who acts in a manner that hinders the freedom of those around him is a "problem child." Diagnosis is easy. We have only to ask ourselves whether he is a good person to live with--a good fellow-man for his age--or whether he gives us more work and responsibility than is necessary.

Through years of community living, man has developed a general idea of how capable of taking care of himself a child ought to be at any given age. Notable deviations from this "norm" stamp the child as a problem. The term means nothing more than that the person under consideration is more of a burden than a help to us. It means that we must be unduly mindful of him, for he does not act in socially useful ways; he gives us the responsibility of seeing that he does not damage himself or others. To make this point clear: we expect an average child of

"No child is personally responsible for being a problem--he is only the victim of a mistaken attitude toward social living."

three to require a certain amount of "looking after" because of his physical weakness and inexperience with life; but if we find a child of six requiring the same amount of care, he is a problem child, since he should need less attention because of his greater strength, coordination, and experience.

It becomes apparent that we are judging behavior in terms of social living--the effect of one's acts on the lives of other human beings. "Good" behavior is the kind of activity which advances our common advantage, and "bad" behavior includes the acts of commission and omission which hinder it. In short, we may say that all problem individuals have a low degree of fellow-feeling--that they thwart others for no socially useful purpose. This is the one common denominator of all problem-behavior. The proof of this point lies in the fact that one cannot imagine a helpful problem child!

We can recognize two broad classifications of problem children according to the degree of their activity. An active child who lacks follow-feeling demands what he wants, ruling and suppressing those about him. If we do not obey and give him his own way, he fights until he extorts his "pound of flesh" from us. He shows no interest in the welfare of those about him except as it contributes to his immediate advantage.

The passive type of problem child dominates by being fearful and timid; he will not be left alone. Either by being "charming" or "pathotic" he keeps attached to his service a stronger person on whom he can lean and whom he presses into a solution of his own problems. He masters his environment by making a show of his

weakness so that we often fail to recognize his power over us. But with either type we are aware that we are too much occupied and burdened. Neither type shows independence, for if we allow them out of our sight "something happens." Some damage or injury usually results, for such children do not develop the community sense which we often call "horse sense."

How does this lack of fellow-feeling get hold of such children? There are three main situations responsible for most of the difficulty. By far the most frequent cause is over-protection and pampering during the first three years of life. This is the "cute" stage of infancy when parents wish that the child would always remain a baby. Without being aware of the consequences of their acts, they make a toy of the child as though he existed only for their pleasure. If a ball rolls out of his reach, the parents retrieve it for him even though he shows every evidence of getting it for himself. Thus his budding independence is thwarted and he is trained to expect service from adults. In many other ways he is made the center of attention and shown off until he gets the idea that he ought to be "head man" in all situations--that others ought to defer and contribute to him while expecting nothing in return. Self-centeredness becomes a basic attitude, and resentment arises later in life when he is expected to share the common tasks of life; he wants always to enjoy the advantages to which he has become accustomed and expects to be spared the disadvantages of our common lot.

A second source of difficulty is an early illness or organic weakness. Illness always makes a child the center of much anxiety and care. The distress experienced from his own body and the fear shown by parents may lead a child to become self-centered. He gets the attitude that he is a "Precious" person who deserves more tender handling than other children. Even though he recovers his health, he may cling to the idea that he is exempted from showing interest in others and

feel neglected in situations where service or independent activity is expected of him. It is easy for him to become a "professional invalid" when confronted by problems demanding contribution or adaptation on his part. He learns to offer his "symptoms" as alibis for himself and as reasons why we should let him pile on us his burdens.

A third source of difficulty is neglect or hatred of the child. Few children are really neglected, even though many are disliked by their parents. But an unwanted child soon gets the impression that he is excluded from the love of his parents. Any child who feels undervalued tends to become self-centered and unsocial; he will try to "love himself" if he believes others do not care enough for him. An atmosphere of dislike arising from divorce or quarreling between parents accounts for the failure of many children to develop the attitudes of a good fellow-man.

In general, it appears that any situation which concentrates the child's attention on himself early in life may result in problem-behavior. Our task then is to keep his interest attached to being helpful and independent so that he will not become too conscious of himself apart from others. He must feel that he is no better, no worse than others, and not dramatically different from them. It should be remembered that a child is weak and inexperienced and is bound to make many mistakes. It will require years of experimental approaches and first-hand contact with the problems of life for him to develop judgment and accuracy. We cannot learn for him nor can we put our old head on his young shoulders. If we lay too much stress on his little failures we shall tend to drive him toward caution and self-centeredness. Constant admonition aimed at hastening the growth of his mental powers and judgment is more apt to breed resentment and hinder his friendliness.

Many parents who are ambitious wish to give their children what they call

"all the advantages," hoping to spare them all mistakes and pain. Too often such parents in removing burdens from their children create for them an unreal world in which all good things are furnished free. As a result, the children grow to believe that life in the outside world ought to give and give to them as their parents did, and that nothing is expected from them in return. Such children experience a sense of shock when demands are made on them. They are poorly prepared to endure tensions of need and desire nor do they know the fun of striving with others for common goals. They live as though their mere wishes were laws binding on the community; they never subordinate themselves to working for the common good. When they leave home for the larger community and marriage they resent the demands made for cooperation and contribution.

Life does not give us "something for nothing," and parents ought to help children discover this fact as early as possible. Community living demands that we share the disadvantages as well as the advantages of our common lot. One hand must expect to wash the other. The parent who wishes to pick every fly out of his child's little jar of ointment is doing poor service to his offspring and must expect difficulties later in life. It is useless to expect that a petted child will suddenly become a bulwark of self-reliance.

The problems of life demand only two qualities--activity and a feeling of fellowship toward others. How is a child to develop in this direction? All healthy children are active children unless adult interference has done its damage. Inactivity is always a sign either of physical illness or of overprotection. Within easy reach of each inactive child you will find someone who has been assuming too many of his responsibilities for him so that he has had no need to be active in the solution of his own problems. The parents of such a child must "let him stew in his own juice" until he rediscovers his lost initiative and

attempts self-direction.

The development of a feeling of fellowship in a child is an art without any definite rules. Fellowship is a job for two equal individuals--there are no masters and no slaves, no superiors and no inferiors. Needless to say, fellowship will not be attained by virtue of much talking, commanding, nagging, or preaching. A child shapes his character more from our acts than from our teaching. We must live with him in a man-to-man relationship rather than in the customary "don't-do-as-I-do-but-do-as-I-say" manner. Family life entails common rights and common responsibilities. Neither child nor adult enjoys special privileges without special sacrifices and effort on his part in return; one must put back as much as one takes out from social living, else the common life becomes impoverished. Each should have his own duties aimed at self-maintenance, and there ought to be many tasks done together as a common effort. No member of the family should advance himself at the expense of another. Emphasis should be placed on what each contributes to the common good to counteract the prevailing tendency to get "something for nothing."

The problem child, as already indicated, lives in a dependent or parasitic relationship by obliging others to provide for him. He occupies a position of power and superiority within the family, often maintaining his supremacy by the "nuisance value" of his acts. It is never easy for parents to regain their own rights after they have surrendered them to a child. Their only chance lies in the cultivation of matter-of-factness in their relationships to the child. Even though he has learned to dominate by tears, fears, tantrums and other extortion devices, he will discover that he cannot exploit matter-of-fact parents, that he must act for good or bad on his own responsibility and at his own cost. (Only the pampering parent assumes the full cost of a child's unsocial behavior.) There should be no special comment, no blame or pleading, since these are useless. The matter-

of-fact parent does not try to "influence" a child toward good behavior, since the child holds the whip. In place of such mistaken effort, the parent will do only his part within the framework of any given situation and wait patiently until the child understands that it is necessary to meet others half way at all times.

We often forget that no child is personally responsible for being a problem--he is only the victim of a mistaken attitude toward social living. Where did he get the idea that he could live always like a worm in an apple? Our own eagerness to smooth out his path has resulted in his getting the impression that our function is to serve him; and that "getting what he wants when he wants it" is the criterion of each moment. We have not made it possible for him to discover that it is just as much fun to give as to receive! Since our ambition for

his success and our anxiety for his safety have led him into this mistaken life-attitude, we must gradually retrace our steps and give back the independence we have taken from him. If it pains or frightens us to see him fumble in his efforts, then we must strengthen our own courage before expecting similar growth in him.

Problem-behavior in a child, then, is no product of spontaneous generation. It is the product of an interaction between the child and his immediate environment--the reaction of a growing personality to his family's ambitions and timidities! If we are able to detect in him the shady side of our own personality, we can help him by changing the manner in which we relate ourselves to him. Since the fault is not wholly his, he is not the only one who ought to change! Fellowship is a job for two (or more) members of the human race.

R E V I E W S

"Psychopathological Disorders in the Mother" by Mabel Huschka, Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease, 1941, Vol. 94, pp. 76-83.

"In a group of 488 problem children, 203 of the mothers, or 41.6 per cent, were found to be suffering from psychopathological conditions. Of these mothers, the 30 who were examined or treated in the psychiatric out-patient department suffered primarily from various psychoneurotic disorders. The pathology which they presented was complex, and in each case the mother's pathological state was an essential factor in the problems of the child who had been referred for psychiatric help. These mothers were peculiarly hard to treat because they had the firmly established habit of projecting their difficulties upon their children. The patterns underlying the ~~symptomatic~~ behavior of these women are distinctly individual and do not lend themselves readily to classification into subgroups with common characteristics...The essential point to be determined is why the mother behaves as she does, why she shows the

child too much love or too much hostility." This study gives ample statistical support to Adler's finding that of the social-environmental influences shaping the personality of the child, the mother's personality is the outstanding one.

+++++

"Psychoanalysis and Individual Psychology" by P. H. Ronge, Nederl. Tijdschr. Psychol., 1939, 7, pp. 199-209. Freud as the older was influenced more by the older psychological trends (associationism, apperceptionism), Adler as the younger, more by intentionalism and actionism. Thus Freud sees more separate, relatively inactive elements, Adler more movement and activity. Also the personalities of the two play a part. Adler's was a restless nature with which theory came in second place; Freud was more bookish. Freud as an oldest child was more authoritarian, Adler as a second child (who is frequently opposed to authority), more democratic.

--H. L. Ansbacher (Brown University)