
I. P. TECHNIQUES

Co-workers are invited to send brief reports of significant experiences to be published in this section of the Bulletin.

Early Recollection in a Case of Juvenile Delinquency

PAUL THATCHER

Thirteen-year-old Jimmy was referred to the Juvenile Court because of auto theft. He had run away from home several times, after quarrels with his parents, and on the last occasion he had stolen a car for transportation. When, after several days, he was not apprehended, he drove the car home and frankly told his parents what he had done.

Jimmy was the third of four children—two girls and two boys in that order. He was about four years older than his baby brother, who was "the sweetest child." He talked readily, especially about his grievances, but seemed somewhat reserved and distrustful of court personnel in discussing motives for his behavior. He claimed that his mother and father "put up a good front," but "weren't nearly as good as they pretended." He said that they quarreled a good deal. The family lived on a farm. Jimmy felt very strongly that he was the object of unfair discrimination. Too much work was expected of him, and the other children were given more privileges and advantages than he. His parents didn't really love him. He didn't know why he had offended, but was sorry for the act.

The entire family was talented musically. Jimmy was a prize-winning musician.

Against the recommendations of the police, who said the family was "no good," the boy was placed on probation. However, three weeks later he was again arrested several hundred miles from home in possession of a stolen car, and was returned to court, where he was placed in detention pending notice to his parents.

After lunch the Judge went to the detention room for an informal interview. The door, fitted with a spring lock, was blown shut by the wind when the Judge carelessly left it unblocked. This accident forced the Judge to spend the afternoon "in detention" with Jimmy.

The common plight of imprisonment seemed to shorten the distance between them, and Jimmy talked more freely, even mentioning his shortcomings in the family group effort. Very shortly the Judge was in the role of a comrade in distress.

Jimmy related his earliest recollection. When he was about five years old he ran away to play with a neighbor boy. The boys had a fight and Jimmy was knocked down and his nose bloodied. He went home crying. His mother put the baby brother down in the crib, took Jimmy in her arms and washed his face—"and did she give that kid heck!"

It occurred to the Judge that this was typical of his pattern—Jimmy's efforts were devoted to compelling his parents to give him what he deemed to be the solicitous attention without which he felt defenseless and which he believed was stolen from him by his brother. Getting in trouble was his only sure weapon when his position of safety as the "son and heir" in the bosom of his father's family was threatened by preference for little brother's angelic behavior.

An attempt was made to explain to him this possibility. He admitted that he would really feel insulted if anyone should openly assert that he was capable of no more work and responsibility than his nine-year-old brother, and it was suggested that his parents in giving him more tasks merely recognized his superior abilities, and in no way showed lack of parental affection. He was told that, after all, his safety and welfare depended on himself and not on his parents' protective regard, and that at age thirteen he should want to begin to stand on his own feet instead of running to mamma when ever he had a bloody nose.

Jimmy also said that when running away he often thought that his parents would be sorry when they realized their favoritism had driven him away. As he was apparently an aural type, an attempt was made to reach him by saying that this behavior reminded one of the old folk tune with the words, "Nobody loves me, everybody hates me; I'm going in the garden and eat worms!" The song was sung to him so he could fix the "catchy" tune in his mind. He showed a sheepish interest in the song.

He was told that one could be excused for such behavior so long as he was a little child and did not understand why he acted so, but that as one approached manhood and understood the matter, the full responsibility could not be avoided.

In conclusion the Judge told Jimmy that now since he had in mind both his responsibilities and the reason for his past difficulties there was no reason why he should not live a useful life, and that he was therefore going to be returned to his home.

If things grew too "tough" there, he could come and tell his troubles to the Probation Officer, who would consider with him the best and most useful way to solve the difficulty. It was suggested to him that the next time he got the feeling that he must run away from his unfair home, the little song "Nobody loves me . . ." would suddenly pop into his mind and make him laugh. Then he would no longer have the desperate feeling that he had to run away, and would be able to make allowances and bear his difficulties, because his sense of humor would save him.

Three years later, although Jimmy was discouraged about his lack of scholastic achievement and he had in that period received a traffic ticket for driving his father's car without a driver's license, he had not run away and he had not stolen. He had been subjected to very little supervision during a short period of probation. Notwithstanding his discouragement about school, he was plugging away at it.