
Personal Paper

Who needs to see the psychiatrist?

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Some years ago I met a ministry inspector coming away from a residential school for "maladjusted" boys looking very perplexed and saying: "But the boys are so contented. There must be something wrong somewhere!" All the children had at some time "seen" a psychiatrist. Were they then, psychiatrically ill? Is euphoria a characteristic of the disturbed child?

Child psychiatry

In the past 13 years I have had referred to me some 2600 new patients and have undertaken some 10 400 psychotherapeutic sessions with these children, usually with both their parents, and not infrequently with the rest of the family as well. My analysis brought to light no euphoric children. Child and adolescent psychiatry is quite different from adult psychiatry. Children do not suffer from schizophrenia, paraphrenia, paranoid psychoses, mania, sexual neuroses, arteriosclerotic dementia, or chronic alcoholism. They do, however, suffer from various emotional conflicts—from fears, phobias, forms of hysteria, boredom, frustration, suppression, shame, humiliation, feelings of rejection (often justified), temper tantrums, feelings of inadequacy and of vulnerability, self-consciousness, and varying degrees of unhappiness up to utter despair and a wish that they could die; just the same feelings as normal adults, in fact, although their vocabulary limits their ability to express themselves.

Being a child is hard, much harder than being an adult. Children are utterly dependent on adults for their bare survival, let alone their civil liberties. The well-adjusted child must be

alert, toilet-trained, eat what he is told and when, be responsive, do what he is told first time, never make the same mistake twice, accept correction and advice without question, and never argue with adults, particularly his parents. He must help about the house, run errands even in the middle of his favourite television programme, go to bed when he is told, and go to sleep promptly. He must be well mannered, clean, quietly spoken, respectful and friendly, and he must also go to school each day. He must never be bored. He must always be constructively employed, never bicker with his brothers and sisters, and always be happy. Such children do not exist: all normal children are "mal-adjusted" and "immature" in some degree and for a variable time, all of them exhibiting behavioural disturbances at some time or other.

Disciplinary problems

To return to my analysis of my case load, disciplinary problems at home and at school are the main reason for referral. Disciplinary problems at school seem always to be assumed to be caused by lack of discipline at home and by an unfavourable domestic and social environment. Yet in fact disciplinary problems are seen more often in the home than at school, and I think it reasonable to assume that behavioural disturbances in either place spring from insufficient or too much discipline or the wrong sort, often imposed by children on children, at school. I cannot recollect many cases of problems at school that have sprung from the home environment, but I have often seen children whose domestic background has contained all the elements allegedly causative of bad behaviour at school but whose school behaviour record was exemplary—and I have seen hundreds of cases of bad behaviour at home that can be traced directly to bad management at school.

Even one bad day at school can undo the conditioning and training of years at home. Parents spend much of their time

training their children to respect each other's property and feelings, to talk quietly and one at a time, and not to rush wildly about the house. When the child goes to school he finds that neither his feelings nor his property is respected and, for the first time in his life, he is left at the mercy of other children.

Residential schools

Residential schools for maladjusted pupils were introduced on the assumption that home conditions were causing maladjustment at school and at home. The treatment seemed to work so the basic premise was assumed to be proved. The fact, however, that the child was at the same time moved from an "ordinary" school into a more enlightened one appears to have been missed. That the change in school was in fact crucial has been proved to my satisfaction when children, who apparently badly need residential schooling, but for whom a day placement can be found only in a residential school for the maladjusted, improve just as much as the boarding pupils. Looking at life through a child's eyes, I have been reluctantly forced to several conclusions, the first being that children go to school only because they have to and not because they want to. And, listening to the complaints of children over the past many years, I have been forced to acknowledge that good schools are almost non-existent. The cause of almost every child's discontent at school is not the school itself, or the lessons, or the teachers, but the other children. Peer persecution is responsible for children's reluctance to attend school, for truancy, for school phobia, for thefts of money or sweets to buy friends or to buy off tormentors, for depression, and even for suicidal attempts, some of them successful. At home every child expects to be protected from bullying and violence from other bigger and stronger children by the adults in charge, but apparently teachers cannot provide this protection.

From what children tell me, attempts to control peer persecution appear negligible and the capacity to deal with it non-existent. How can an intelligent adult spend even just one day in the company of a mixed group of children and not be aware of the cruel "oneupmanship" that children use against each other and the pressures they bring to bear on each other by sarcasm, rudeness, and threats of violence, and by physical violence itself? In some schools teachers are backed by the head and his senior staff and make serious, very determined, and successful attempts to manage children as well as teach them. In such schools absenteeism is due only to sickness and not to school phobia. Other schools, unfortunately often in underprivileged areas, are not so successful in understanding the ways of children and, therefore, of managing them. Such schools are filled with demoralised teachers who know what is going on but cannot stop it because they get no support from above.

Most children, however, belong to neither the persecuted nor persecutory groups, and they attend school daily because this is expected of them. Apart from sickness and domestic emergencies, absences from school are due, at one extreme, to the child's having something more exciting, and possibly illegal, to do than attending school, and, at the other extreme, the fear of his peers, or of his father's carrying out last night's drunken threat to kill his mother, or of the mother's threat to leave home. There are all sorts of admixtures in-between, but it is customary to call some of these absentees truants and others school phobics or school refusals. Truancy, however, has delinquent connotations and the last two categories psychiatric ones. The neutral term "absentee" is preferable because often the only difference between a truant and a school phobic is that the former cannot go home because both parents are at work.

I am not infrequently confronted by 15-year-old children who, for various reasons, cannot face going to school. In carefully selected cases I will deem them to be medically unfit for school, despite the chagrin of educational welfare, social services, and

the probation service, who sometimes thoughtlessly, I am sad to say, put their own saving of face before the child's welfare and clamour for a care order and a placement in a residential establishment, fearful that their quarry is "going to get away with it" and evade punishment for daring to defy them. These children would go to school if it were humanly possible to do so, and they do not deserve punishment, but sympathy and some home tuition.

Day schools

Providing special day schools for disruptive pupils is being tried with varying degrees of success by several educational authorities. The emotionally, as well as the physically vulnerable, the undersized, the lonely, the frightened, the unhappy—in other words, all children who are potential school phobics, school refusers, or even truants, should also be provided for, but on a much larger scale, and educated in day schools that provide the same sort of environment and the same sort of teacher/pupil ratio as some residential schools for the maladjusted. A child who is happy at school, who is not preoccupied with insults and threats and fear of physical violence, can concentrate on his lessons and make educational progress commensurate with his intellectual potential.

Residential schools for maladjusted children do not provide for special educational needs: they provide a specialised environment for difficult children in which ordinary teaching, plus remedial teaching, is undertaken, together with proper child management by more than the average number of teachers. The latter could just as well, and much less expensively, be provided in special day schools.

Parents' responsibility

Many of our conventional attitudes towards children, and therefore much of our mismanagement of them, are born of the fifth commandment—"honour thy father and thy mother." Parents should earn a child's respect and not demand it. Emotional disturbance in the mother, due to degrees of endogenous depression, can lead to apparently quite insurmountable difficulties within the family, unless this condition is thought of. After treatment, the change in behaviour in the child or children once the mother has regained the control of which the depression deprived her, is quite striking. Depressions that have their roots in marital, financial, environmental, or other problems do not, of course, respond in this way, but careful clinical assessment will place some of those who are apparently in this latter category into the former one.

Allowing children to settle their own squabbles, as many parents do, will not train them how to be civilised and socialised adults. No wonder so many young people yearn for the day when they can leave school because of one thing they can be certain, and that is that life will never be so bad for them after they leave school as it was for them when they were there. A jaundiced view? No—ask any 16-year-old who has just left school, and in nine cases out of ten he would tell you the same thing. Leave it until he is 17 and repression of unhappy memories has already begun, which has led some adults to believe that ridiculous aphorism that "school days are the happiest days of your life."

I am not impugning the schools in the area in which I work; the observations I have made are based on over 20 years' experience of children and their families in many areas, including London and the Home Counties, Scotland, the West Country, and the Midlands.

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