

There Was a Child Who . . .



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The Delta Kappa Gamma Society Bulletin Volume XXXIV-1 Fall 1967
By The Hogg Foundation for Mental Health
The University of Texas
Austin, Texas 78712

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IF THE TITLE read "There was a child who had special needs," teachers would know that it referred to every child they had ever taught. "God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb," goes the saying. Sensitive teachers know that each child is "shorn" in some way.

Often teachers can judge what lies behind a child's misbehavior or his failure to learn. Many are as insightful as the one who, knowing that some of her children were troubled, asked them to write essays concerning their own lives. The greatest troublemaker in the class wrote:

I am a watermelon. I am lying on the sidewalk. There is a crack in my side, and the pink is running out. I cry "Help! Help!" but nobody hears.

Those who teach often hear the "Help! Help!" cries of children. We recognize that a school is not a small therapy center—that the school is for learning; yet we also recognize "the healing forces of others" in our work with children. Let us think about three kinds of children.

There was a child who . . . was immobilized by fear, upon whom terror lay so heavily that he had to shield himself by immobility, by disappearing from others, by total

withdrawal. Or, he warded off forces by hyperactivity and constant movement.

All of us learn from exaggerations. We know that the mentally ill person is very much like ourselves, only many of his traits are heightened. For example, we have all had the experience of walking into a room full of people only to have a hush come over the group when we stepped inside the door. "They were talking about me" is our immediate reaction. This type of reaction might be labeled a paranoid one. The truly paranoid person, however, feels this sense of suspicion not just sometimes but all the time and in great measure.

Everyone has fluctuations of mood which come from waking some mornings feeling gay and other mornings in a state of depression. The manic-depressive person is much the same only, again, his feelings are of great length and constancy. Even the catatonic schizophrenic is not so far different from other people except in degree. All of us, at times, have to hold back anger and stiffen because we feel so hostile that we are afraid we might be destructive if we let go.

Teachers in "normal" classrooms are not likely to see behavior that is bizarre to the extreme; they do, however, find evidences of extraordinary activity. Teachers are the

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prime forces in prevention, detection, and early care. Dr. Frances Fuller, University of Texas, has said it thus: "Every criminal, every genius, and every mentally ill person was once in somebody's first grade." The school, in our culture, is one of the few organizations which will accept all comers and which must take children of all backgrounds and degrees.

The philosophy expressed at many facilities for seriously emotionally disturbed children is that schooling is important even for these sick children because school is the life task of a child, and the road to normalcy lies in school activity. If school is such an important work for sick children, how much more so must it be for our usual population.

If we do, in truth, learn from exaggerations, we have a great deal to discover from work with seriously emotionally disturbed young people in a school setting. For example, at the League School in Brooklyn, a little girl could not learn to read or write or compute problems. Her only interest was in food. The staff began letting her write the menus, and she had to learn in order to do so. She also began to learn simple arithmetic in order to count out the menus. Her skill was used at the level of her concern. The same was true of a boy who was interested only in electricity. His learning began with spelling words like "plug," "socket," and "switch." Campbell Loughmiller, who for many years has run

a highly successful camping program for disturbed boys, has always operated on the theory of giving youngsters success at their own level and ability and helping them to achieve in meaningful ways.

All of us can certainly learn from these examples ways in which we, as parents or teachers, may help all children to learn to live lives of worth.

There was a child who . . . could not learn to read or to do problems in mathematics. Everyone thought he was stupid. Even he believed it.

This child had a learning disability, something we are beginning to understand a little better than we ever did before. Many children who have in the past been regarded as unmotivated, distractable, stupid, or retarded may be victims of learning disabilities. Now we recognize many variations. Sometimes we talk of minimal brain dysfunction; sometimes we know that there is observable brain damage.

These children need special help; most of all they need to be recognized and aided before they have experienced such a long pattern of failure that the emotional overlay is as crippling as the learning disability. All of us need success in our lives, but these children almost never obtain it. As one person observed, "Imagine what it must be like to be nine years old and to have known nothing but failure."

Recognition is coming of the fact that many children who are normal or above normal in intelligence cannot read or tell time or distinguish

between right and left. Such children often respond selectively to some type of material. They cannot generalize, and they cannot perceive a whole. They need to be aided painstakingly and with real understanding.

A speaker at a recent meeting of the Texas Medical Association told of a youngster with a serious learning disability who was taken to a knowledgeable doctor. The doctor prescribed a tranquilizer to help his great distractability, and the child was placed with a teacher who could give him some special instruction. The boy showed remarkable improvement in mathematical ability and was able to jump his skills two grades. When the mother went back with the boy to the doctor, he inquired "How is Johnny doing?" The mother exclaimed, "Oh doctor, thank you so much for your help. His math has gone way up. Now, can you give him a pill for his English?"

There are no "pills for skills," of course; however, some of the relationships which these children are able to develop are even more important than medication. Dr. Ralph Rabinovitch, of Michigan, tells of a program with a group of children with learning disabilities. One little boy was given a teaching machine. This permitted him to go over and over and over the same material. The child progressed well for several days, after which he regressed. When one of the teachers tried to find out what was wrong, the child replied, "Oh, this old machine isn't

any fun. I can't get it to blow its top like I can Miss Rose!" People do need people, and youngsters with learning disabilities need the help of understanding adults.

Dr. Sheldon Rappaport equates the problem of the brain damaged child and his learning with saplings and guy wires. He says that the weaker the sapling is, the more guy wires are needed to hold it up. When a sapling is able to put its roots down deep into the ground, the guy wires are almost unnecessary.

There was a child who . . . had poverty of body and spirit, who was culturally deprived. He knew not the gentle comfort of communication nor the delight of discovery nor the pain of beauty. He did not recognize himself in a mirror. He knew the world in only two-word takes: "Sit down." "Shut up." "Go out."

Can you imagine what life must be like for children who never know the joy of talking with another person? We think of programs for such children as beginning in the third grade or the second grade or the first grade. Only recently have we begun to learn that children should have help long before they start school. Even newborn babies have such needs.

The National Institute for Mental Health has been sponsoring a study of 15- to 18-month-old children. When two populations of children—one from lower socio-economic levels and the other from middle-class families—were tested, the IQ's

showed no appreciable difference between the two groups. After eighteen months, however, there began to be some great falling off of IQ levels in the lower socio-economic group. Aid for children in the second and third grades often comes too late.

For example, in one city some potential drop-outs have been part of a research program. One finding which has come out of the study is that these children cannot stretch their imaginations the way other children can. They do not even know that they *can* wish to be something great and wonderful. We all know the words from a song "To dream the impossible dream . . ." but here we have a population of young people who have lost the ability to dream. The moral for all of us who care deeply about children is evident.

There was a child who . . . was blessed with a teacher who liked himself, who knew that he could not succeed with all children at all times, who accepted his abilities and—yes—his disabilities.

A study in the College of Educational Psychology, sponsored in part by the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health in Austin, Texas, the National Institute of Mental Health, and later by the United States Office of Education, has been set up to learn about mental health of children by instructing teachers in good mental health practices. The research has taken into account the teacher as a person—his concerns, his potentials, his limitations,

his tasks, and his problems. A fundamental premise of this study is that, ideally, education is a fruitful dialogue between a fully known self and a fully known environment.

A well-known principle of mental health tells us that we must love ourselves before we can reach out to love others. We need the kind of love which helps us to understand ourselves realistically, to accept ourselves with our failings, and then to be able to reach out to others with the same acceptance and understanding. Teachers owe it to themselves to be the best persons they can be and then to give their best to others—and to do so without any sense of guilt over what they are unable to accomplish.

There is a story of a sculptor whose yard backed that of a family with a young boy. The youngster used to climb on the fence to watch the sculptor. After he had been away for the summer, he returned to find the work covered with a cloth. When the sculptor saw him, he drew back the cloth to display a gigantic and beautiful lion. The boy looked and gasped, "How did you know he was in there?"

How do teachers know what needs are in the children with whom they come in contact? By their sensitivity, their insight, their wholesomeness as human beings, and their concern for others.

There was a child who . . . was blessed by having a teacher who knew "what was in there" and helped him to grow into a meaningful human being.