

I Have Seen the Children

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FEW OF US have first-hand knowledge of the actual wartime conditions existing throughout the United States which directly and overwhelmingly affect our children. For this reason, The American Social Hygiene Association undertook a reconnaissance study of a section of the country including the South and Middle West (to be supplemented later) in order to obtain a sampling of conditions which may or may not be typical of those existing elsewhere.

The backdrop against which the present problems of youth are highlighted is a familiar one to all of you—poverty-broken homes and poor living and recreational facilities, added to which are the sociological factors implemented by the war, migrant populations, women in industry, Army and Navy cantonments encroaching on already overburdened communities, racial hostilities, newly developing caste

systems, changing social mores, and poor parental standards.

Causative factors include the glamour of the uniform, the sophistication and accelerated maturation of the teen-age girl, the lowering of communal and familial standards, the attempt on the part of many girls and women to adopt one sex code—that of men—the mistaken patriotic theme of the so-called "victory girl," and the sudden increased earning power of youth and parents engaged in war work.

The children I have seen include those living in trailer camps, large industrial cities, small rural communities, and in urban areas. Some of these children are neglected, lacking in parental interest and supervision and seeking their pleasures outside the home or on the streets where they are in constant danger of becoming delinquent. Sexual promiscuity is an increasing problem at the moment, especially among the teenage group.

Josephine D. Abbott (Mrs. T. Grafton Abbott), Educational Consultant of the American Social Hygiene Association, draws upon her observations gathered during travel through the South and Midwest to bring to readers of Educational Leadership her impressions of children in a warring nation. Finding an appalling lack of supervision and planning for children in homes dislocated by the war, Mrs. Abbott challenges the school to assume a new and broader responsibility for child growth.

Children Pay for Their Mothers' Emancipation

My own deep conviction, on the basis of this preliminary study, is that the price being paid by the children for the sudden emancipation of women into industry and war efforts is cause for great concern. From the lowest to the highest strata, these children whom I have seen and to whom I have talked

are not finding their mothers where they belong—in the home—but away from it in the name of war duty, which to them justifies their absence.

Losing their perspective, some mothers no longer find that the need to preserve the important function of the home is sufficiently compelling to keep them in it. Now, whether factory or canteen workers, many women see in their new duties an escape from the monotony and drudgery of child rearing and homemaking. Their job having never been a glamorous one at best, they now are freeing themselves from the chains which so long have bound them.

Mothers, too tired and weary to do two jobs well—that of war work and homemaking—are, at the expense of their children's well being, letting the homemaking go by the boards. Too often the children are being locked out of their homes or being paid to keep out so that their parents may have some sleep—if not privacy. I have seen small children in "beer joints" late at night, taken there by their parents who would not sacrifice personal pleasure for their children's need of sleep. I have seen children as young as 10 years working in drug stores and on the streets at all hours, their parents apparently indifferent or unconcerned as to how they spend their time. The community seems disturbed even if the parents are not.

Children are, in many cases, being openly rejected by their parents. Men are coming into courts with small babies in their arms and saying, "My woman has walked out on me." Women are repudiating their marital and affectional responsibilities and openly rejecting their feminine role in an acceptance of

war work as a compensatory measure for their inefficiency and sexual maladjustment as mates and mothers.

I have seen in Juvenile Courts and in some of our jails our societal failures—children who, through lack of supervision, loving care, affection, and adequate knowledge, have gotten into serious difficulties. I heard, in one court down South, a mother—twice divorced and now working in a war job—asking the judge to relieve her from the further care of her 13-year-old daughter who had been entertaining as many as three sailors a night.

I have seen, in the deep South, young girls from 13 years up who have falsified their ages in order to marry service men—even in some cases aided and abetted by their parents.

I have visited trailer camps and seen the children there living under the most primitive conditions, with inadequate housing facilities, little or no schooling, poor or unwholesome recreation, and almost a total lack of resources for healthful living.

Youth and Sex

In my travels, I was most deeply stirred by the attitude of these young teen-age boys and girls with regard to sex and morals. Many of them do not consider that the sex experimentation in which they are indulging is wrong. Two girls, age 15, overheard by a friend of mine talking in a drug store, said, "I don't care if I have a baby—I don't care if I have an abortion—all I'm afraid of is getting a disease." The knowledge, experience, and sophistication underlying such observations must make us pause. What is the matter? Wherein does the fault lie? Whose is

the responsibility for the inculcation of standards and ideals? If the home is failing in this respect, may this not be a direct challenge to the schools and to the teachers who act *in loco parentis*?

The attitude of youth regarding sex and the problems which it entails is not confined to any one socio-economic group. I have talked with many college students who stated openly that when it comes to marriage, they prefer a girl who knows her way around, sexually speaking, to a virgin. Some well-known physicians, public health officials, and obstetricians to whom I have talked claim that so-called "nice" girls and boys are swamping them with demands for help along sexual and venereal disease lines. Whether or not their interpretation can be offered as pointing to a general trend is open to speculation.

The majority of the problems coming into youth consultation centers are on a sex basis and have to do with fears, frustrations, and extra-marital experimentations. These youngsters do not know how to handle their physical and emotional urges which are in advance of their chronological age. Many of the post-depression youngsters have, through lack of privacy in their homes, actually witnessed sexual intercourse, with resulting mental and emotional conflicts. Much of the sexual experimentation on the part of the young girls stems from the desire to be popular, to copy the patterns set by the older girls, and to buy favors through the giving of their bodies.

In our efforts to teach the facts of life to our children, we have given them factual knowledge and in doing so have often destroyed ideals and the mystery and romantic illusions which make mar-

riage an important sacrament. We have described sex as just another appetite; we have debunked it, stripped it of its glamour and essential meaning so that now, to many of our youth, extra-marital sex experimentation is just a means of obtaining status, gaining popularity, or it is a compensatory experience for frustrations in their own personal and emotional lives.

These are the conditions I have actually seen. How extensively one can generalize from such relatively incomplete data is a real question, but the fact remains that something is radically wrong in the familial relationship when such conditions can exist at all.

Our Task as Educators

If the home cannot or will not assume its responsibility, wherein can the schools pick up the challenge?

It seems to me that our task as educators lies in several definite, well-defined directions. First we should attempt to spot the potential problem-youngsters while they are still in school and before they have become delinquents or entered upon anti-social careers. The teacher is in a key position to take this first step because a lack of interest in school work on the part of the child is often an indication that all may not be well with the child as a person. Here, then, is an opportunity for a second step—the chance to get close to the individual student, to show a personal interest in the child, and to make him feel he has a real friend in his teacher. Too often we are too busy or not sufficiently concerned with the whole child. Many of us are teaching curricula and not meeting the children's personal and individual needs. We neg-

lect the life adjustments in our unawareness of individual needs.

We are sometimes, I am afraid, either lacking in imagination or too fearful of the vested interests to which we cater. Often, we do not know the actual community resources in our immediate neighborhood to which we might, if we knew the pupil, direct him in accordance with his needs.

The overgrown girl and the undersized boy are potential psychological problems—both feeling inadequate, inferior, and often resorting to unwise methods of compensation to cover up feelings of inferiority. Could we not, through wisely chosen counseling-teachers (such as the Board of Education has selected in Philadelphia) work with these children on a personal and intimate basis? Each individual needs such a friend—someone in whom he may confide, someone not easily shocked who will understand and not condemn, listen and not moralize, and in whose eyes he will not lose caste through the telling of his experiences.

My question is whether teachers could thus function, or would their authoritarian connection with the school mitigate against their serving in such capacity? Youth is justly apt to distrust those in authority and to fear the betrayal of confidence. Might these obstacles be overcome? If so, how? Many a young girl to whom I have spoken has said she could not confide in her mother as the mother would, she felt, betray her confidence, talk things over with the neighbors, or be shocked and horrified when the girl needed sympathetic and loving understanding.

If real counseling is to take place as an answer to the immediate needs of

youth, the setting in which it is established is of the utmost importance. An attractive environment, a non-authoritarian approach, accessibility and ease of contact, are important considerations together with a careful selection of personnel.

What Schools Can Do

It seems to me that many of the schools have a great opportunity which they are missing and which is indicated by the problems of children cited. I refer to the introduction of sex education as an integrated part of the public school curriculum. Too often public opinion, vested interests, and lack of adequate personnel are the stumbling blocks to progress in this field. I have searched for schools which are progressive in these respects. I found an interesting illustration of how this job can be done well in the Skokie Public School (elementary) in Winnetka, Ill. The subject is introduced there in the fifth grade and is made so normal and such a natural part of life, together with an inculcation of standards and ideals in regard to marriage and the family, that the children, and their parents as well, are more than pleased with the results.

I realize that in these times it is difficult for any school to keep young teenage girls interested in academic subjects when there is so much in the war and the glamour of the uniform to attract them. The resulting increase in truancy attests to the difficulty of the problem. Truancy is a definite indication of inadequacy in the present educational set-up and should be taken far more seriously than it is at the present writing. According to one case-worker who is

very close to the individual problems of youth, truancy used to be thought of as an incidental affair of no serious moment or import—just a “gone-fishing idea,” but now it has a subtle implication related definitely to the total war picture as its effects seep through to the children still in school.

Truancy is apt to be a first step in the maladjustment of the pupils in our educational system. Could a school system be envisaged in which such a problem is not common? Is this not a challenge for our educators? In many communities truancy is so out of hand that it is being handled by the Juvenile Courts where it certainly does not properly belong.

The falsification of ages in seeking employment, the readiness of labor to accept under-age children without asking too many questions, again brings to the schools problems of tremendous import. I have seen these children so eager to work and earn “big money” that in one city in the South the two day camps operated by the Board of

Education did not have enough boys to fill them.

These problems which I have cited are partly the effect of the war, partly the fault of parents and of communities which are unable to cope with them.

One final suggestion—could the schools arrange for a more extended use of their buildings, equipment, and facilities during the evenings and especially in the summer months when this type of service is so much needed? The cost would prove only a fraction of the remedial cost involved if even one child, through the lack of such opportunity, becomes delinquent.

And, in conclusion, if the home is failing to give our children what they need in physical, affectional, and social care and the community is unprepared or unwilling to take up the burden, may not this present opportunity be a challenge to the schools to emerge from their apathy and defensive attitude where such exist in order to undertake the task of inculcating standards, ideals, and an understanding of life?



Sketch by Vera Nelson
Courtesy of Manitowoc (Wis.) Public Schools

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