

You Can't Stop Them

JAMES S. PLANT

IN EXCITING TIMES it is difficult for anyone to see beyond the pressures of each day. And this is peculiarly true of those who deal intimately with children. Here they are—each to live his life more or less regardless of the longer sweeps of social goals or struggles—tugging at us anxiously or gleefully to attend to this moment's passing interest. If the fall of 1943 finds us wondering what war is fashioning, it must then be more to light the way than to direct the steps. You can't stop them—neither the pupil eager in his pursuit nor the strong currents that push us all willy-nilly, one way or the other.

So an article with this title will have little to do with each day's steps. I can hope for no more than to give each step some sort of meaning. One realization, however, clamors for print: only when a man is hard-pressed does he really come to know his strengths and weaknesses. Perhaps, then, it will be from the matters that we can't stop or alter that we will make our most solid growth.

What, then, are at least some of the things which we can't stop? I should like, as any physician, to point out the

clinical symptoms—what we are actually seeing in the classroom and what, in the light of these observations, we can learn of the underlying problems.

1. *Our high schools, both senior and junior, are quieter, more serious, more work-minded, than they were.* This is in part due to the removal of a certain number of over-age children who never wanted to be there anyway. It is amazing in some of our set-ups what "going to work" on the part of only some six or seven children has done to a whole school. If, with the sociologist, one defines adolescence as that period between physical maturation and social acceptance (work, marriage, etc.) of that maturation, then the high school has been bedeviled by the lengthening of that adolescence and is now basking in the sunshine of its rapid shortening. But we know full well that the trend is toward lengthening and that soon there will again be the challenge as to what the upper grades can offer to all of America's children. Here now are golden months—or perhaps years—to do the sort of planning that a General Staff can do.

2. *There has been a sharp increase in delinquency among older girls.* This has been termed a war phenomenon, but I suspect that it isn't. Everyone knows that girls mature more rapidly than boys—that somewhere in high school the companions of girls begin to be boys about two years older than they. Of

Whether we like it or not, the forces of the war are influencing children's growth processes. James S. Plant, M.D., Director of the Essex County Juvenile Clinic, Newark, N. J., examines the "clinical" symptoms of this trend and points out some of the probable long-range effects of the war emphasis.

course we take no notice of this in school; all recite together the same curricular material. The armed services even reverse the natural bent, taking boys at 18 and girls at 20 or 21. Then we fuss and fume over the confusion and goal-less excitement which we call delinquency!

Is there not here perhaps once more the demand to plan for the years to come? There is nothing here that is new; it is only that the war is highlighting facts which we have failed to recognize in normal times. If out of these years we see some mechanisms develop that realistically meet the sharp differences in cadence of growth for our adolescent children, then the turbulent period through which we are passing would not have been lived in vain.

3. *Among younger children there has also been a sharp rise in delinquency.* Schools report increased tardiness and absenteeism. These trends, too, are called war phenomena—or said to result from mothers taking defense jobs. But the rise began in 1939 and in some places before that. The last peak in delinquency problems was reached during the late twenties. What data we have indicates that there seems to be some relationship between the flow of money and these indices of confusion and unhappiness.

We will have gone a long way in America when we understand why "good times" are not so good and why in "bad times" our measurements of health and social adjustment are not so bad. One talks with school people about this because they, too, are all enmeshed in this rather typically American problem as to what is success as opposed to

what is merely the symbol of success. Perhaps as far back as the first grade we imprint upon the children's minds the measurement of life by certain symbols, certain promotions, certain percentages.

This is not to lay at the school's door all the ills of man. But it is to say that these years ask us questions as only years of trial can ask them. The answers can come only in the lives of the children of these next years, but here are golden moments for the strategic planning of what those answers might be.

4. *During this past year children have shown real interest in the marked increase in rote material in the curriculum.* While this has been most dramatically shown in mathematics, all drill-subjects have been well received.

Two important principles stand out in this reaction of school children: (a) A person is ready for a subject when somehow he sees that he can use it—when it has meaning for him. This fact should give us real insight into what has been meant by "readiness." During the last decade we have thought of readiness largely in terms of maturity. Perhaps the war will teach us, as nothing else has, that we can put I. Q.'s and emotional and chronological ages somewhat in the background where pupils' readiness for certain curricular material is concerned. To the fore will come our ability to get the child to see that the subject can give him help and can enrich his life in areas where he wants growth. (b) One of the needs of people is the steadying experience gained from fixed, rote, recitative school work. Some children need a great deal of it. This is not a criticism of what has been called "progressive education," for it would be serious, in-

deed, if out of this experience we permanently swing away from an exploring, adventuresome sort of education. The place of fixed curricular material is like that of the banisters of the stairs—a part of our lives to give us courage and a feeling of safety in a venture.

5. *During the past school year I have been struck by the spottiness of the picture of anxiety in different schools.* Even where there were a number of sections of a grade in a large school one got entirely different stories of the effect of the war from the different teachers. I think that this means that the anxiety and tension were much more teacher-phenomena than pupil-phenomena.

We haven't gone very far with child guidance but at least there has been a start. Many school systems have taken it to mean vocational guidance and there has been a resplendent flowering of all sorts of tests in that field. If the present crisis points to the extent to which problems of an emotional nature affect the teacher's performance of her job, we may arrive at some sound principles of teacher guidance based on giving help in emotional and personality problems. This may turn the whole guidance movement away from being merely a highly polished technique for telling individuals what their skills are.

The basic question here is whether we do best the things we *can* do intellectually or the things we *want* to do emotionally. The guidance movement has largely given its loyalty to the latter assumption and has been correspondingly suspicious of that "guidance" which has depended largely on batteries of various aptitude tests.

6. *Schools everywhere have seen one or another evidence of increasing pa-*

rental absence from home. The day-by-day evidence of lack of care and supervision has tended to blind us to the fact of real importance which is that women have not as yet been conscripted. The critical matter is not that the mother is out of the home but that she wants to be out of the home. One doesn't criticize the person who feels that she can serve her family better in bringing in a certain number of dollars than in remaining at home. It is rather to point out that through the last hundred years various agencies, the school included, have busily been taking over what we call the "functions" of the family. What we are seeing now is merely the stepping up of a trend. This situation presents the school with the challenge to build in our citizenry a realization of the importance of family life. As long as the older adolescent can say to me, "I don't want to *only* marry," we have a real task in teaching to our children the important part that the family must play in a democracy.

7. *Industrialization has taken away many of the things that one can do for another.* For a great many generations persons implemented their emotional ties in the things they did for others. Within the family, for instance, baking bread, tending the furnace, and many other tasks of the home were ways in which we showed how we felt towards others. Today each one's task has become more and more specialized until now one merely earns money with which other services may be bought. Now there has been added an actual physical absence from those for whom we care the most. If the world for countless generations could say that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach,

what if this man for months or years is on the other side of the globe? If the mother showed her love through the countless things she did for and with the small child, how does she show this when its waking hours are time that she is in the factory?

Space keeps us from more illustrations of the relation between love and dependence. We are asking ourselves what we mean to others rather than what we can do for others. We are trying to find out how far we can love those who do not depend upon us. Whether this ends in bleak disaster or in man's taking one more step in freeing himself from his dependence on things, no one knows. The issue is not of our choosing; the specialization of the last century has forced it on us. But the resolving of the question remains a great venture.

8. There is one important fact which we tend to forget because it is so commonplace: *each of us is the product of a selective heredity towards adjustment.* For endless generations nature has thrown aside those who "couldn't take

it." There have been many exceptions, but in general only those grew up and won a mate and had children who had the toughness or elasticity to adjust somehow or other to the troubles that beset them. We need not give up all our various worries as to what is happening to children. But each of us has deeply embedded an "ortho-tendency" of great strength—a drive to right the ship, to ride out the storm.

One doesn't even guess how the children of today will meet the problems of these years. But they will—and it is worth our while to count considerably on this sturdy ability of the personality to find solution to the day-by-day problems which face it.

It is for us to see that in these years we are privileged to view somewhat more clearly than at other times those trends through which our generations are going. If we will use these insights to build a world that is richer and fuller for those who come in later years—well, then even the war will have paid for itself.



I consider a human soul without education like marble in the quarry, which shows none of its inherent beauties till the skill of the polisher fetches out the colours, makes the surface shine, and discovers every ornamental cloud, spot and vein that runs through the body of it.—
Joseph Addison, *The Spectator*, No. 215, November 6, 1711.

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