

The War Babies Are Coming to School

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War's end has brought many problems which the mere signing of treaties and pacts cannot solve. Chief of these is the emotional damage done to the children who have come into being during the last few years. James L. Hymes, Jr., coordinator, Early Childhood Education, State Teachers College, New Paltz, New York, evaluates many of these injuries and pleads a case for sensitive and understanding teaching methods as the means of healing the psychological wounds of the warborn generation.

V-J DAY is more than a year behind us. We all would like to think that the war is something of the past—a horrible thing over and done with—something we can forget. Unfortunately a war once started, takes a long time to stop. Only the shooting ends.

Many teachers, especially teachers of young children, may have ample reason to know this. For this year and next and in the years just ahead—through 1950—the War Babies are coming to school.

These are the children who lived their early lives while our country fought a war. They were born after Pearl Harbor; they were infants and preschoolers while the fighting was on. Now they are old enough to enter our kindergartens and our first grades. They are old enough but not all of them are ready; they will show their unreadiness in their behavior.

The war was good to some American children. No bombs fell on them. Their families had more money. Their families felt needed—there was real work to do for women as well as for men. For some children this meant the chance to grow up with more satisfied parents and to have, despite minor shortages, more of the good things of life.

What Are the After-effects?

No bombs fell, but other children fared badly. It may be hard to believe

this looking at children superficially as they come to school today and on the tomorrows through 1950. On the surface they look like all the children who have ever come to school in all the yesterdays. But some of these are different. In a sense they are veterans. The adult veteran wears an emblem in his lapel. The child has no outward badge; he cannot say it in words. There is just his behavior. That is all he has to tell us: easy—wait till you understand—there is a reason why I act the way I do.

For our part it takes remembering. It takes calling back to mind what all of us saw and knew a short time ago. The things we could see in our own home towns. We saw traveling on trains—news photos—fathers leaving—women with lunch pails—crowded defense towns.

We must remember that some of these children had, not one mother, but six, seven, eight. Their own mothers worked full time at busy, hard jobs during the war. There were maids, housekeepers, grandmothers, child-care center teachers: in some children's lives a whole succession of them.

We have to call it back to mind. What was it like for a mother and child when mother came home at the end of an eight-hour day in shipyard or factory? For some, for many: the



Courtesy Norfolk (Va.) Schools

What lies ahead?

tiredness, the irritability, the lack of bounce. Not all children growing up during the war felt these things but some did and they will be coming to school now. Home for them was not stability, security, the certainty of affection. For some it was change, tired people, the coldness that comes when fatigue and worry creep in.

Some of these youngsters entering school now had their mothers at home with them during the war years. Some were lucky because of that, some were not. For good growth comes not from the physical presence of a mother but from the qualitative relationship between a child and a warm, responding person. And some of the mothers who stayed at home were not, could not be, warm responding people. They carried inside of them anxieties of their own: the strain of the double job of being mother *and* father—the doubt about

finances—the worry about their men's safety—the load of the concern about their children—the tension from living with parents or in-laws.

Some mothers carried their double job all too well: with too much enthusiasm, too much determination. They drove themselves hard to bring up their children well while their husbands were away. Some were over-protective or overbearing or over-controlling. They pushed their children too hard for "good" behavior; that, as they saw it, was how they could carry their share of the war. It was hard to keep your balance when, for the first time, you had to make all decisions by yourself.

Still other children of those now entering school had very little home in the usual sense. America was on wheels and they too were rolling. A stopover at grandmother's—a train trip to Norfolk to see daddy—living for three months in defense housing—a second stopover at grandmother's.

Consider the Emotional Climate

No one event by itself need have special significance. Women can work and their children can gain. Fathers can be away and their children not suffer. Families can double up and children make out. Families can travel and all goes well. But underlying these events in the years just past, for many children there was an emotional climate that hurt. It deprived them of some of the really precious things they needed: affection, stability, appreciation, time, steadiness, interest, a chance to get their feet down, a chance to be themselves, even a chance to be a little bad and naughty. Life during the war moved too fast for some; it was too

complicated by adult tensions. Some children lost out and they are beginning to come to school now.

And the losing out did not stop when the shooting stopped. Some fathers did not come home. At least the tragedy in their children's lives is one we are educated to recognize. Their children we may spot. We know that someone, somehow, must make up to them for what they miss; we know that we must take their loss into account, that we must make allowances. There are other children, however, whose fathers *did* come home and the going is tough for them because of that. These children are harder to understand.

Sometimes their fathers came home with military minds; they learned and liked in the Army the "do-as-you-are-told" idea. That can be hard on children growing up. It does not fit in with what young children are like. Other men are just out of sympathy. They were away when their children were growing up. They have little idea of what fours and fives and sixes like to do. How children get to be the way they are is a mystery beyond them. In some cases the men know only: "I don't like it and it has to stop." A severity enters and demands come which are beyond the children's years.

Some fathers, a few, want to bring back the babyhood they missed seeing. With mother's help, they want to keep their children younger than they are, younger than they need be, younger than the children want to be. The men had enough of danger, of taking chances. They want their children to live while they can, to get fun out of life, to have things their way and to get them all while the getting is good.

Life for some children becomes too soft, too easy—no problems to solve.

And in some homes husbands and wives, reunited, find it hard to pick up again and to carry on in the old smooth and easy ways. It is no automatic, mechanical task. There are conflicts, pressures, tensions—and these today are finding their outlet in some children. Some youngsters, perhaps never fully wanted anyhow, now become a drag, a weight on their parents' shoulders. They are an unpleasant reminder of a marriage that is, in many ways, over and done with.

The War Babies are coming to school and some of them will be difficult children. Unless some good predictions fail, these children may well fight more or hit out and hurt or break rules; forget, be late, seem lazy; some of them may whine more, cry easily, not seem to try, be sure they will fail. These children will not make it easy for teachers. No children who are hurt ever do. Children cannot live their early lives under tension—with no good safety valves along the way—without explosions. They cannot miss out while they are young on the things they vitally need—affection, appreciation, belonging, a chance to succeed—without disturbance and upset. Feelings cannot stay forever bottled up inside; the lid sometime must blow off.

America owes something to these children. They are no special brand of children. Youngsters like them have come to school before; children whose emotional needs have not been met will probably always be coming to school. Yesterday, today, and in the tomorrows that stretch ahead children will come who have lost out, who were not good

enough the way they were, who were pressed too hard or too soon or with too much severity. There is nothing new in this but this much is new—the War Babies are coming to school *now*. They are a group. You can put your finger on them. If we can learn how to help these children—coming out of backgrounds which are real and known to all of us, coming to us all at once so we can spot them and be ready for them—then we can learn how to help all children, the children who will continue to come when the war is beyond our thoughts.

What Can We Do?

We must work along two avenues at the same time. We must work for clinics and child guidance centers. Some of these children will need this; some certainly will be truants, delinquents, maladjusted so that only specialists' skills will help them. We know that a group of children are coming to school whose needs in infancy and early childhood were not fully met. One thing we can do is to be ready with the technical guidance services that will aid these children when their troubles come to the boiling point.

This is an urgent need, one we must all support, yet while we do it we must see its limitations. Individual guidance facilities cost money; they take skills and training which are still relatively rare; inevitably, working with individuals means reaching only a handful of those who need help; and always the help comes after the trouble breaks out. It means bringing the horses back into the barn and then closing the door.

We must work along another path, too. We must see what can be done

in a preventive way. We must try to reach these children before big trouble starts. Is it possible to make up to them for what they missed and want so their troubles never come to a boiling point?

The answer is "Yes." Teachers are the ones who can do it. They are the ones who reach all of our children. Teachers can do it by using the beginning years of school as a great preventive effort. Through the way they act toward children (they as people), through the curriculum that is planned, through the experiences children have, through the life children lead in schools the emotional needs of boys and girls can be met. And this is prevention. This saves children.

We have to turn the cart around. We think of guidance largely as a specialist's task. We think of it as something that goes on in a special room at a special time with special equipment and facilities. Sometimes it is that—but teachers can do another, a preventive, job. They can immunize children. Not through a new course of study. Not through something they do after school or with a new set of books. Teachers save children from the stresses and strains of their early life through their daily relations with children and through the kinds of experiences they make it possible for children to have in the daily school program.

Sensitive teachers have long done it. They start with a faith in children and with a conviction that all children want to be good if they can. They know in their hearts that, when something goes wrong, there is a reason why. With these attitudes to build on, teachers have found their own ways to make their schools friendly places. They have

worked so that children, each and every one of them, get *in* and belong. They have recognized that children do have feelings and they have made opportunities in the curriculum so that children can honestly express them. They have planned the kind of program so that each child not only gets but he fully gives—a program, where no matter what his talents, he succeeds and contributes and takes part. It is this kind of teaching which the War Babies need.¹ If they have this in their first years of school, scars will not be so likely to show. For this can satisfy their emotional needs; with it the children can go ahead living as healthy, happy people.

The War Babies need this sensitive teaching but the cards are stacked against them. More children are coming to school now than ever before; the birth rate has been high and the building rate low. In many cities shifts of population have swamped classrooms that would have been full to overflowing without the added deluge. And there are fewer teachers in the profession to do the job.

These new warborn burdens press down and add to all the old obstacles: the rules and set standards and fixed schedules and regulations that try to tell teachers what they must teach and when; the endless interruptions that pull teachers away from their children; the scarcity of the supplies that sensitive teachers need to work with: paints, clay, blocks, wood.

¹ The Teachers Service Committee on *Meeting the Emotional Needs of Children*, 17 East Ninety-sixth Street, New York, has underway a series of publications, to be available in the near future, bringing together the various classroom activities which teachers have found helpful in aiding children to build emotional stability.

Even the children will make it hard. It will be easier to clamp down on them, to "make them" learn, to call them names. It will even be easy to say, "They're War Babies" and to think that does the job.

Supervision and administration and teachers together may not be able to end these obstacles soon enough so that these children are helped. It may be the preventive job just cannot be done. It will take time and money to reduce class size and to get in the hands of teachers the tools that they need. We may have to accept as our only alternative spending more money later to patch up bent and broken humans.

There is one thing supervision and administration can do right now, however. It may prove to be the biggest thing. It may be so big that it will overcome many of the other obstacles and children still will be saved.

That one thing? Supervision and administration can build up teachers' faith in themselves and in what they have to give to children. Supervision and administration can say: helping children is the teacher's biggest job. It can say with the authority of administrative support: in this school children's emotions also count. It can end the cult of eyebrow-raisers who haunt the teacher who steps out of line. It can give its permission and its approval to the teacher who wants to try something different because it means better living for youngsters.

If teachers can have this backing, enough of them will find a way so that, despite the obstacles, the War Babies will get the help they need and so richly deserve.

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