

For Every Child—A Fair Chance for a Healthy Personality—

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The Midcentury White House Conference on Children and Youth bases its concern for children on the primacy of spiritual values, democratic practice, and the dignity and worth of every individual. Accordingly, the purpose of the Conference shall be to consider how we can develop in children the mental, emotional, and spiritual qualities essential to individual happiness and to responsible citizenship, and what physical, economic, and social conditions are deemed necessary to this development.—The National Committee of the Midcentury White House Conference appointed by the President of the United States.

WHAT DOES IT TAKE to make a good human being? What does the healthy development of children and young people require of the environment that surrounds them, conditions their experience, and so largely makes them into what they become as persons? What does science, broadly conceived, have to say in answer to such questions as these? And how may all those who are concerned with the young take best account of the answers?

These questions sum up the intent of the Midcentury White House Conference on Children and Youth—to identify what pertinent research now reveals and what more it must needs inquire into; to draw the inferences for the practices of parents, teachers, and all those who deal with the young; and to mobilize action along the indicated lines.

The Theme in Perspective

This Midcentury White House Conference on Children and Youth is the

fifth in a decennial series. All four of its predecessors have been concerned primarily with children's more material needs—physical, social, economic. And all four have lent mighty impetus to improvement in the lot of children—both disadvantaged children and children in general. To them may be attributed in large measure the establishment of the Children's Bureau, the Federal program on maternal and infant care, and standards for child care and protection now widely accepted over the nation.

Why, at this midcentury mark, a shift in emphasis, a turn to concern with the happiness of all the children, now and as adults, and with their responsible functioning as citizens in a democracy? Speculation is beguiling. Is it merely that enough information is already at hand about what children need by way of more tangible services, and forces are already at work to secure them in increasing quantity—even if still at a heartbreaking *adagio*? Or is it rather because too large a proportion of even

those children for whom adequate services are available still fail to achieve wholesome maturity? Is the dark shadow of the times making itself felt? Or an access of new light on human development?

It is intriguing to note, in connection, that the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development chose "Mental Health for Better Living" as the theme of its 1950 National Conference, and that its 1950 Yearbook equates the concept of "mental health" with that of "a good human being": "Mentally healthy persons are characterized by a vital, positive approach to living, both in day-to-day experiences and in long-range terms." Surely a certain parallel with the concerns of the White House Conference is manifest here, a parallel interesting in its own right, and worthy of further exploration.

Finding the Facts

For the purpose of assembling available information on what contributes to healthy personality development, the National Committee has appointed a Technical Committee on Fact Finding, and the national staff includes a group of "fact finders" under the direction of Helen L. Witmer. Committee and staff together are undertaking to sift and sort the conclusions of pertinent scientific inquiry, examine them under the white light of interdisciplinary scrutiny, bring them into a meaningful pattern, identify what is known with sufficient certainty to warrant incorporation in practice, indicate lacunae, and call attention to the still unconquered problems of research in human development.

What, first of all, constitutes a healthy personality, and is it the same in all cul-

tures? How do interpersonal relations affect it in infancy, childhood, and beyond? How close is the relation between healthy personality development and favorable parental attitudes? What are the psychological devices by which children adapt to less than favorable parental attitudes? Is it true that personality is largely set by, say, six years of age? Can later experiences throw a good adjustment out of balance? Can a child adjust to poor emotional conditions at home if outside conditions are favorable? What do theories of learning have to contribute?

But there are factors other than the interpersonal that presumably affect personality development. What, for example, of physiological and constitutional factors, like the effects of the mother's emotional states on the foetus, body types and endocrine balance, specific illnesses and physical handicaps, nutrition and diet?

And then the environmental factors implicit in social structure and social classes, in social values, and social and economic conditions. Does the dominant American ethic impose more or less strain on personality than the dominant ethic of other societies? What are the effects of contradictions within the value system? Of discrepancies between expectations born of the value system, on the one hand, and reality on the other? If the "way up" is closing, what are the effects on "the American dream," and on personality development for as long as this dream is maintained?

Is poverty detrimental to healthy personality development?—in and of itself, or because of disappointment and frustration in a culture that puts a premium

on material success? Or is it that poverty brings too early and frequent exposure to overcrowding, worry, tension, and other evil concomitants?

Is the presence of diverse cultural groups in an open-class society favorable or unfavorable? What do prejudice, discrimination, and segregation do to the personalities of the children toward whom they are directed? Of the children who feel the prejudice and exercise the discrimination? Is it the same for all groups, or different for each in content and quality?

What is the role of religion in the development of the healthy personality, and in what circumstances, if any, does it create problems? What of the paucity of aesthetic and spiritual influences in everyday life?

And so on. These are *exempli gratia* from a long and detailed inquiry. They serve in some measure to indicate its scope, and even to a degree suggest its flavor. The possible wellsprings of healthy personality are not being sought in the small child's family experience merely, but also in all the significant forces at work in society and the culture as well. Nor is any one of these to be seen apart from the others, since interpersonal relationships, cultural patterns, social and economic conditions form an almost undifferentiable context for the individual's living and growing.

Moreover, a studious effort is being made to avoid speaking of "the American child"—as though this context were the same for the Park Avenue child and the child of migrant agricultural workers, for example, or the immigrant D.P. child and the Negro child in the urban South.

Drawing the Inferences

Since all the factors that would seem to affect healthy personality development (with the exception of the purely constitutional, if such exist) make themselves manifest and exert their influence through social institutions, it is essential that these institutions, in their turn, be examined in the light of basic information about what healthy personality development requires.

For this reason, different specialists on the Conference fact finding staff are drawing inferences as to how the activities of the following institutions should best be conducted, and assessing their present practices accordingly: the family; schools; churches; health services; recreational opportunities; libraries, museums, and art activities; employment services and conditions; social services; courts and correctional agencies; and the Armed Forces, in which, it now begins to appear, a large proportion of older adolescent males will spend a significant period.

In connection with the schools, for example, this assessment will not merely point out that schooling of standard duration, with teachers, buildings, equipment, and services up to generally accepted standard are not equally available to all the children; that expenditures are miserly in proportion to the need, and far from equal in all parts of the country. Such facts as these are of great importance.

But of clearer pertinence to the theme of the Conference are a consideration of the potentialities and limitations of the school in connection with healthy personality development; the way in which potentialities are conditioned by cultural expectancies and effective social

conditions; the particular role of the school in relation to the other institutions that also constitute essential elements in the lives of children and young people; the bearing of the curriculum and of human relations in the school; the ways in which a consideration of healthy personality development would affect the selection and professional training of teachers; how cultural attitudes toward the teacher and her socioeconomic status affect the prospects; the meaning of the predominance of females in the teaching profession for the development of the young in their care—and the like, with frontier instances cited and described wherever possible.

Similar analyses will be made in connection with all the other services and professional groups concerned with one or another aspect of the welfare of the young.

Mobilizing Action

The fact finding staff of the Midcentury White House Conference on Children and Youth is not operating in isolation, nor is anyone longer so naive as to anticipate that findings, leadenly dropped at the time of the meetings of the Conference in early December, would constitute much more than a report to be filed, a compendium to be consulted on rare and rarified scholarly occasion, something to be held in the hand, reluctantly scanned with preoccupied eye.

Instead, definite steps are being taken to develop an intent throughout the country to which these findings will give more solid basis, a movement to which they will contribute more accurate direction, a momentum they will accelerate. At the request of the Presi-

dent, Governors of all States and Territories are appointing White House Conference Committees, and these, in turn, are stimulating local discussion, inquiry, and activity throughout the country. Forty-six such committees are already at work, and an Advisory Council on State and Local Action is an integral part of the Conference structure.

There are, in addition, three other Advisory Councils. Several hundred national organizations devoted to the interests and welfare of children are setting up discussion groups, evaluating their programs in the light of the Conference theme, and initiating projects and studies closely related to it. Young people are at work on all aspects of Conference activity, and coordinate their interests and contributions through an Advisory Council on Youth Participation. Finally, thirty-seven departments, agencies, and bureaus of the Federal Government are making studies and contributing their rich resources of technical skill and funded experience to the Conference activities.

At the time of the Conference meeting in December, the results of all these various efforts will be brought into juxtaposition. In the light of all the information before them, several thousand participants will formulate principles, draw up recommendations, and suggest lines of post-Conference action.

Exploration of Some Parallels

Certain broad parallels have already been noted between the basic concerns of this Midcentury White House Conference and those of the 1950 meeting of ASCD. Closer scrutiny reveals intimations of an even greater like-mindedness.

The White House Conference is explicitly interdisciplinary in approach, and the ASCD Yearbook draws on psychology, sociology, and physiology, at a minimum, for its treatment of "mental health within the context of the total process of growth and development." There are indications of a sensitive consciousness of cultural factors as well: "Americans—particularly middle-class Americans—are entangled with the concept of precociousness." (Therefore, it is important to stress "readiness" when concern includes healthy personality development.) ". . . Much of the child's learning takes place in a repressive atmosphere that in a sense says to him, 'Get rid of your feelings'; or at least 'Don't show your feelings.'" (Therefore it is important to stress "feeling" in the total context of "thinking, feeling, and doing.")

And whereas the White House Conference concerns itself explicitly with all adults who affect children, and the Yearbook is of necessity addressed primarily to teachers, its first chapter includes a sentence that reads like this: "Those of us who are responsible for the rearing of children (parents, teachers, and others) must bear certain factors in mind when we try to help the child become a good human being."

Whence this like-mindedness? And why, at this particular moment in history?

A quote from John Dewey comes first to mind in answer: "There is no immaculate conception of ideas." Ideas are related to antecedent ideas and to concurrent ideas. They are born of the coming together of ideas in free interchange. They grow out of the problems and perplexities of their time.

The fears and despairs of this mid-century need no elaboration, nor does the prevalent grave suspicion that they stem from man's having, in his capacity for manipulating physical forces, outgrown himself as a human being.

Nor does the rapidly changing order of things require setting forth. Yet it may be worth while to draw one special thread and examine the tortions in it. So far have we come in mechanizing our civilization and atomizing its functions that the schools are put to the apparent absurdity of contriving "real life experiences" for children. What is a "real life experience" for a child in a modern, urban-patterned civilization? Can anyone say?—A civilization that shunts the child inexorably into the school in part precisely because so many *real* real life experiences either have no place for him or are all too clearly *nichts für Kinder*?

The ramifications of this dilemma are widespread. What once just befell, in the "natural order of things," is now of necessity devised, contrived, constructed. What is made can be made better. We look into the outcomes of the experiences we provide, and try to conceive of better outcomes and more appropriate experiences. In this planning, doing, judging, trying again, the road to better living undoubtedly lies. But there is considerable doubt about the wholesomeness of an order of things where so much of a child's experience is necessarily "manufactured" for him. Especially in view of the fact that in the process we become self-critical, then self-conscious, and, if we are not careful, eventually frustrated and anxious.

So much, in brief, for the times.

As to the climate of ideas, one is led to wonder to what extent we may be in

the continuing throes of what one day may come to be called "the Freudian revolution," more violent even than those of "the Darwinian revolution." Validity aside for the moment, we who work with the young find ourselves tempted and at the same time repelled, intrigued, and suspicious. The theories afloat treat of dynamics we know are important; they have to do with the formation of the personality with which we are so much concerned; at moments they strike home. What's more, in the clinical treatment of sick personalities, they seem, in a significant number of instances, to work. We are tempted.

Whatever technical explanations may be offered for our simultaneous abhorrence, some suspicion may be well grounded. The clinical method does not adduce the best scientific evidence. It is subject to unrestricted distortion in interpretation. It is difficult—perhaps false—to draw generalizations from it, and we need valid generalizations for mass action. Furthermore, the therapeutic treatment of the sickness that results from untoward experience need not necessarily identify all the aspects of that experience. Social and cultural factors may be totally ignored, as one may treat a tuberculosis patient successfully without being aware that the incidence of his disease correlates highly with poverty. And we are primarily concerned with the conditions for health.

Moreover, we are baffled by the basic notion that there are motives hidden not

only from the eye of the beholder but also from the awareness of the mover. As experimentalists we are concerned only with what can be changed and controlled; what lies outside this periphery has no meaning. The ultimate accessibility of hidden motives by arduous means has been fairly well demonstrated. But—perhaps as creatures of the culture—we are impatient of the process and would prefer to look the other way. Only, as experimentalists, we cannot.

So much for our temptation and our hesitation.

With all this over and done, there still lies before us all the extremely difficult task of translating for our situations and purposes what we do accept out of the emerging view of man and his growth. This holds for doctors as well as for teachers, for social workers and parents, for group workers and for all those to whom people turn for counsel and guidance. It holds, too, for anthropologists, sociologists, economists, political scientists, and all students of the behavior of man. None of them is finding the going easy. What is worse, each tends to go his separate way.

Small wonder then that we come together in groups to scrutinize, to assess, to sort the sure from the doubtful, to fit together what goes together, to think and plan creatively for our own special fields or for all fields together—many times, in different groupings and contexts, but with the same great general ends always imperatively in mind.



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