

## The Atomic Age

### The Nonlearning Child

### The Parent

NONLEARNER, behavior problem, hostile, violent, restless, apathetic and indifferent are terms used to describe an increasing number of students in our schools today. Veteran teachers say they have never encountered so many youngsters who have so little desire for, or interest in learning. Many of these teachers emphasize the dramatic shift in their roles in the past decade from teacher to policeman.

As a psychiatric consultant to both small rural and large urban school systems, I have become increasingly concerned with these problems and have attempted to understand them so that I might be of more help to teachers and administrators. In both urban and rural schools the common cry of how do we help such disturbed children to learn, when do we return to teaching instead of policing, has impressed upon me how widespread these problems are. In fact, in the very wealthy communities too, teachers are increasingly concerned and

vocal about the rise in the number of nonlearners and behavior problems despite the smaller classes and greater opportunities for individual attention to students.

Everywhere one hears the cry for special classes and special services to meet the pressing and difficult situations which prevail in many schools.

From my vantage point as a mental health consultant I have become increasingly aware that parents, too, are becoming more difficult for schools to deal with. So many parents seem to want the school to take all responsibility for their child. Not only his learning, but his discipline and moral upbringing are felt by some parents to be the school's job. Administrators and teachers alike have expressed dismay at the mounting angry attacks of parents on the school when their child's problems are broached. In recent years I have been asked with greater frequency to help school people to work more effectively with parents who are often either angry, apathetically indifferent or impotently helpless when asked to assume their parental responsibilities to help solve the child's behavior and learning problems manifested in school.

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In recent years a number of sociologists, psychologists, cultural anthropologists and students of infant and child development have been studying these and related phenomena of much concern to our nation and our democratic way of life. These workers have been increasingly concerned with the growing number of delinquent and predelinquent youth, the increase in severe psychotic disorders of childhood and the ever larger numbers of nonlearners in school.

### Multiple Causes

These behavioral scientists seem to agree on several sociocultural factors which may explain some of this behavior.

They point out that our society since World War II has become a very mobile one, roots are not laid down in any community for long, families are fragmented and family ties are fragile. Perhaps because interpersonal ties in family and community are less durable, the major concerns of parents seem to be centered on the acquisition of material evidence of success—as if money and worldly goods will protect them from the fears and anxieties prevalent in a tension ridden world. Parents tend to give children things and money rather than time and attention, another sign of our accent on material goods as a substitute for relationships. These patterns appear to be related to several important socioeconomic forces. Some students stress the effect of the atomic bomb and its threat of annihilation which makes both adolescents and adults feel they must get their pleasures now and at all costs for tomorrow may be too late. A high level of general anxiety results from not being able to think about or to plan for a future in which the individual has some per-

sonal control of his own and his family's destinies.

Another significant stress in our culture is the threat from automation which makes unskilled and semiskilled workers increasingly less necessary in society and begins to threaten even skilled workers. The threat of unemployment and economic deprivation gives many young people and young parents a real sense of having no place in our society and a belief that it is someone else's job to take care of them and their children. With their present level of education and training many parents are unable to provide for their youngsters no matter how hard they try. Discrimination and economic, social and educational deprivation increase these problems for members of minority groups. Such problems make gratification *now* an important way of reducing tension.

Many parents of school age children today were raised during the depression and the subsequent war years which resulted in great insecurity to their parents, divided homes, and little parent-child contact. Many of these parents have not had much love or attention and concern from their own parents, with consequent little encouragement or interest in learning. As a result these parents seem to have little to give to their own children. Their children's behavior and learning problems only aggravate the parents' sense of inadequacy and failure and leave them feeling increasingly helpless and looking to someone else for solutions. They often want desperately to be rid of these problems, hence their anger with school people who call these problems to the parents' attention.

The children evidence the results of these parental attitudes and anxieties early as they also seek immediate grati-

fication and satisfaction of every impulse. The only reason for learning to delay impulsive behavior and immediate gratification is the love and concern of parents who reward such goal directed behavior, so vital to learning, with personal love and approbation. These youngsters early learn to think only of themselves since no one has really been very much concerned with them for very long. Their learning and their welfare are not of primary concern to their distraught parents. These youngsters correctly feel someone owes them something and they are hard put to understand why they should endure the anxiety, tension and hard work necessary to beginning to learn. It is easier to drift and to let others worry about them or deal with them. If their parents' lives are any example or model, the future as an adult holds no rewards for them.

It is small wonder that teachers who have to teach and work with such youngsters find themselves so overwhelmed. The restlessness, temper outbursts, short attention span, hostility, apathy and indifference are difficult to understand as signs of the child's inner turmoil. It is hard to recognize in his violent behavior the student's discontent with himself and frightened striking out for some relief from his own feelings of helplessness, of hopelessness. It is equally hard to see in the youngster's withdrawal into sullen apathy and indifference a defense against the recognition of problems and anxiety. Many youngsters behave as if they had to make sure that no one could reach them behind their protective wall.

Yet there is a desperate hope that someone will penetrate these barriers, that someone will persist past all the obstacles of the youngster's angry, hostile rebuffs to prove they, unlike other adults in the child's past, really care.

That desperate hope is repeatedly evidenced in the intensity of these youngsters' interaction with adults. It is difficult indeed for teachers to live through such painful testing to reach many of these children.

### Role of Therapy

I have become increasingly aware of the important therapeutic role of education for these children. Beginning to do school work does not solve all of their problems, but they do begin to feel themselves to be more competent, effective and hopeful individuals.

The most defended, withdrawn and alienated children with whom many of us have worked, children with psychoses, have proved the importance of educational measures as part of the treatment program. When these children begin to learn even the tiniest bit academically, they reflect this in reduction of their fears about the outer world.

Similarly beginning to learn and to master subject matter in school is vital to the youngsters under discussion. Only through learning can these children begin to feel more secure about themselves in their frightening world. Only through acquisition of marketable skills can they earn a livelihood in our automated society.

For many of these students the relationships with teachers who are concerned with them is vital to their learning. These students begin to believe that someone cares when teachers persist through all their trying protests, hostility and indifference. The relationships which result from such consistent persistence will be most important to them as models of behavior toward others.

A high school teacher told me with

much feeling about one of the toughest and most difficult youngsters whom he taught to read and do simple arithmetic. This hard, belligerent, hostile, burly adolescent tried every trick in the book to discourage his teacher. Every trick but truancy—which meant he was getting something in the relationship with the teacher through the intense struggle.

When this youngster finally understood that his teacher believed he could learn and intended to try to teach him however long it took, he began to try himself and eventually succeeded in learning, with obvious pleasure and delight in his achievement. In his second year with the same teacher, for his basic subjects, he took personal responsibility for convincing the new delinquent and pre-delinquent adolescent nonlearners in the class that learning was important for them and that the teacher was a guy they could trust.

### Improving Conditions

To help such students begin to learn requires small classes and teachers who recognize how important learning is for their pupils. It also requires the utilization of some of the methods developed for retarded, brain damaged and psychotic children. These methods stress the scaling down of objectives both in scope and time, the extensive use of audiovisual and kinesthetic teaching aids and rewarding success with expressions of the teacher's satisfaction and pleasure in the student's every small advance. Such expression of pleasure in the child's achievement, these youngsters have not often experienced before with adults important to them. These evidences of the teacher's pleasure in the student's learning are vital to the continuation and success of the work.

Similarly teachers and administrators who recognize and understand the impasse with which these children's parents are confronted can try to help them be more successful parents rather than emphasize their failures. To do this, administrators and teachers need to be able to verbalize to parents their awareness of how difficult it may be for them to stick with their children around their school work and to persist despite the vociferous objections and efforts to avoid the work. When parents feel that school people understand their problems and travail, they may be more open to suggestions about trying to keep their youngsters at their homework. Often when these parents begin to understand how important their help may be to the child and to his desire to learn, they begin to feel better about themselves as potentially more effective parents, who are actually viewed by the school as important to their child.

The failure of many teachers colleges to recognize the need for new methods to deal with today's problem children continues to handicap teachers. The problems which confront our teachers today need to be realistically understood and assessed by teacher education institutions. They then can help their students learn new methods of teaching these children and of dealing with their parents. They might also help plan in-service training for teachers designed to help these disturbed and difficult students to learn.

In addition such reality orientation by teachers colleges would stimulate a realistic appraisal of what it takes in terms of class size and supportive services to actually make it possible for these youngsters to become effective and useful citizens.

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My communication to earth asking my former commanding officer for advice as to how to proceed with the necessary appropriation papers had not been answered. Perhaps he was trying to get me a grant. Meanwhile I had completed the community survey and made my recommendations that these youth be given a practical course in modern mathematics which they seemed to need if their reading of other peoples' code numbers easily was ever to become possible.

The students continued to come to see me. We played records and danced after we had a few minutes drill in base ten. One afternoon I expressed a wish to find out about juvenile delinquency on the planet. I knew that every once in awhile one of them was arrested for driving his rocket too fast, but I was not familiar with other crimes. As a suggestion I asked them if they knew any instances of people's Plunar Passes having been stolen. They were confused and amazed. The concept was hard for them to understand. I had to explain the process of stealing and demonstrate it by taking a knife out of my man Friday's pocket and putting it into my own. They promised to think about it and write up their reflections for next time.

Much to my regret, though, there was no next time. That very evening I received a rush transfer back to my original unit on Earth. No explanation was forthcoming. I have wondered for a long time why fate dealt with me in this manner. Perhaps my medical officer did not think I could stand the Plunar atmosphere any longer.

One day recently I obeyed an impulse to visit my former commanding officer and to ask him what he thought might happen to the mathematics program I had envisioned for Plunar. He said that he had requested a report, but that it

did not have the information we desired. It did have some personal news that he thought might interest me. It seemed that the clown of my class had mischievously hidden the Plunar Pass of one of the other students who then hadn't been able to get home for dinner on time. The irate parents had enlisted their friends in protesting to the authorities about my mathematics class and they had agreed to investigate it.

I have three more years in the service. No work I can do will interest me like my attempts at giving some worthwhile mathematics training to the young people of Plunar. It is my ambition to return there when my enlistment period is over. Just the other day I realized that those young people had absolutely no concept of our decimal monetary system.

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#### Nonlearning Child—Berlin

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In summary, the tensions and anxieties, the troubles and problems current in our society are reflected in the student and his parents. Teachers today in overcrowded classrooms with many hyperactive, disturbed, nonlearning children face almost impossible tasks.

Recognition of the vital mental health aspects of education for these nonlearning, angry or indifferent students may make it possible to devise the necessary teaching methods already being tried in classes for retarded, brain injured or psychotic children. Reality assessment of these problems would also make it mandatory for small classes and auxiliary services to help an ever multiplying group of children to become useful citizens.

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