



MIND AND HEALTH SERIES

*Edited by H. Addington Bruce, A.M.*

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# THE MENTAL HYGIENE OF CHILDHOOD

BY

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## EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

PARENTS, teachers, school superintendents, school physicians, all who in any way have to do with the upbringing of the young, will find this an uncommonly helpful book, both in its specific recommendations and the sweep of its philosophic grasp. Not only does it emphasize certain fundamental principles usually underestimated or quite ignored in child training, but it provides precisely the kind of survey of child nature most needed by those whose business it is to make education truly effective.

As things now stand the great aims of education are again and again frustrated. The world abounds in human derelicts of all sorts — men and women incompetent to earn a decent living, moral weaklings, nervous and mental wrecks, slaves of vice and crime. So numerous, in fact, have

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the mentally and morally inefficient become that they constitute problems of the gravest social significance. And since in the main they are people who have passed through the educational mill in childhood and youth, it is evident either that the present educational system is somewhere at fault or that there are in these unhappy folk inborn defects which no system of education will suffice to overcome.

Until recently the tendency was to subscribe to the latter view. Under the influence of an unconscious assumption that accepted theories of education were sound, the blame for failure when failure occurred was thrown on the ancestry of the persons who failed. There was much talk of "degeneration" and of "the fatal influence of a poor heredity." Nor has the heredity bugaboo been wholly laid yet, as witness the activities of the so-called eugenic societies that would improve the world by drastic action designed to prevent the "unfit" from "perpetuating their kind." Gradually, however, there has come to ever widening circles a realization that environ-

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ment, and particularly the environment of the first years of life, may after all have most to do in determining the course of adult development, by repressing or accentuating inherited tendencies. And evidence is steadily accumulating to bear this out, as a result chiefly of patient individual analysis of the life histories of thousands of persons who in one way or another — by nervous breakdown, by insanity, by vice addiction, by criminality — have deviated strikingly from the normal.

The author of this book is a distinguished representative of the highly trained specialists who have devoted themselves to this task of individual analysis of deviates from the normal. For many years Doctor White has had exceptional opportunity to study closely large numbers of mental and moral incapables, in his work as superintendent of Saint Elizabeths Hospital, the great Government institution at Washington for the mentally sick; and, before going to Saint Elizabeths, as a psychiatrist in New York, where he was assistant physician in the Binghamton

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State Hospital from 1892 to 1903. The outcome of his researches has been to satisfy him — as similar researches have satisfied all who have undertaken them with thoroughness — that whatever the part played by heredity, the thing that supremely counts in the making or marring of a human life is the influences by which that life is surrounded in the formative years of childhood. As Doctor White expresses it, on a later page :

“We are coming in these days to think of heredity as being much more restricted in its possibilities for limitation. It is true that many students of heredity believe that all sorts of mental qualities may be traced directly from the ancestors. Those physicians, however, who deal with the problems of mental illness see, on the contrary, these peculiarities passed on because, as a part of the child’s environment, they are impressed upon it during its developmental period. This view has been emphasized because it has been found possible to largely modify so many personal mental traits. Heredity as an explanation

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is therefore looked upon somewhat askance because it serves to block efforts at improvement. If a certain trait is hereditary, why! that's the end of it. There is nothing to be done. So frequently, however, something can be done that this explanation is being more and more put aside as inadequate."

In other words, conceding that training and environment can accomplish little in certain cases — for example, in cases of feeble-mindedness resultant from an inborn deficiency in brain-stuff — training and environment nevertheless are decisive in the lives of most people. What a man shall be depends, not so much on what his grandfather or great-grandfather was, as on the manner of his rearing. Consequently what is needed is clearer insight into the basic requirements of human nature in point both of training and environment. Doctor White's effort in the present volume is to assist to that clearer insight. In especial he would aid parents to know their children better than most parents now do, and through this knowledge to

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build more securely the foundations of adult character.

Above all he emphasizes — as I myself have emphasized in my books on “Psychology and Parenthood” and “Handicaps of Childhood” — the transcendent importance of the first years and of the beginnings of education in the home. Infancy, he truly observes, “with all its budding possibilities, all its beginnings, trials, and failures, its blazing of trails and its fundamental formulations (time and space) is the most important period of life. This is the period when all the tendencies which are to be the motive forces in the future of the individual acquire their initial direction; it is the time when the foundations for the future character are laid.” Again and again he warns that it is on the parents that chief responsibility rests for the equipping of their children to withstand the inevitable stresses and trials of the years to come and to lead healthy, happy, successful lives.

Some things that he has to say will surprise, even startle parents. From cer-

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tain of his findings — particularly as regards the sexual life of childhood — they will be inclined to dissent. And indeed it should be said that among the investigating specialists themselves there is difference of opinion as to the part played by the sex instinct in early life. But they are in entire agreement regarding the numerous training errors to which attention is called in the pages that follow, and the avoidance of which means so much to the future welfare of the child. To those who would understand why so many children grow up neurotic, cruel, selfish, obstinate, sullen, cowardly, weak-willed, lacking in initiative, bashful, diffident, or otherwise psychically handicapped; and to those who, having children of their own, or being responsible as teachers or guardians for the upbringing of children, would most surely influence the children for good, Doctor White's book is to be heartily commended.

H. ADDINGTON BRUCE.

## PREFACE

THIS book neither purports to be an exhaustive account of the psychology of the child and of the relation between parents and children, nor does it aim at setting forth only the individual opinions of the author on these two subjects. It is intended to be an examination of them from the point of view which has recently been developed in psychology by that branch of it known as psycho-analysis, and sets forth the conclusions which have been reached by many investigators and which are deemed of importance in illuminating the subject in hand, namely, the mental hygiene of childhood.

In presenting this subject of the mental hygiene of childhood I have believed that the best purpose would be served by emphasizing two conclusions, one concerning the child and one concerning the family. The conclusion concerning the child is

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that, contrary to generally held opinions, it is possessed of a developing sexuality, the roots of which reach back into its infancy. The conclusion concerning the family is also contrary to the opinions regarding that institution commonly held, namely, that there reside within its organization and as a part of its nature certain disruptive tendencies. I have felt that the recognition of these two facts was of the very first importance and have tried to set them forth in a way that would not only help to their understanding, but would also indicate how their recognition, and the incorporation of that recognition as a factor in regulating the life of the child, would be productive of far-reaching results to the advantage of the race.

If this book serves its purpose in securing a hearing for these views, the reader may naturally feel a desire to pursue the subject further. I would suggest to such a reader the few works to which reference is made in the footnotes.

WILLIAM A. WHITE.

WASHINGTON, D.C.,  
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# THE MENTAL HYGIENE OF CHILDHOOD

## CHAPTER I

### *The Child*

**B**EFORE entering upon the discussion of the real subject matter of this book, the mental hygiene of childhood, I feel that it will serve to assist in an appreciation of the principles involved if the reader to start with has a somewhat more comprehensive idea of the child than that usually held, of its relation to the past by heredity, and of its promise for the future by the fullest possible development of all of its powers as an adult. As a rule we do not look upon the child from such a broad platform, perhaps seeing only in some physical or mental qualities or characteristics traits which we recognize as family peculiarities, thus linking the child with its progenitors by

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heredity and seeing in ambition the measure of future achievements. A broader outlook, however, is essential if the full possibilities of the subject of mental hygiene are to be appreciated.

In the first place, the child is generally considered to be an individual with all those characteristics which are implied by that term usually in a very limited application. It will be helpful to examine briefly the concept individual. The child as an individual would be thought of as not only physically separate and distinct from other individuals, but as having for the most part, aside from hereditary traits, only such bonds between it and them as those of passing interests or affections, which might at any time be dissolved. It is generally thought of as a small adult differing mostly in size but having the same sorts of ideas, the same sorts of natural inclinations, and not infrequently being subject to the same responsibilities. To be sure, parents as a rule treat the child as in many ways different from an adult, and in recent years some of these considerations

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have had weight in certain well defined social tendencies, particularly such tendencies as are responsible for the juvenile court. Here it is pretty clearly recognized that the responsibility of the child is not that of an adult, a fact which has been stated for many a year in the statutes of the land, but which has often not been adequately recognized in the actual dealing with children. The juvenile court does recognize this fact in a concrete way, and in addition the fact that the child has certain fundamental rights, a further fact that often shamefully lacks recognition. Adults are prone to see in children replicas of themselves and to think of the child's actions, as they do of those of other adults, as having explanations in thoughts and feelings of the same kind as would account for such actions in themselves.<sup>1</sup> These are indications of the direction of the more particular and grosser fallacies which cover over and obscure the proper recognition of childhood as it is. Let us examine the con-

<sup>1</sup> This is the principle of anthropomorphism, or as we would better term it to-day, *identification*, extended to the child.

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cept child somewhat more in detail and see whether we cannot come to a better understanding of what in reality the child does represent.

In the first place it is a well recognized fact in biology that life is passed on from generation to generation through the medium of a material substance which is known as the germ plasm. This is the substance which the parents contribute to the formation of the child, and which is started on its process of growth and development at the moment of impregnation. This substance not only is to be thought of as material contributed by the parents, but as material which tends to grow and develop into the likeness of the parents — in other words, material which is like them. A simple illustration will demonstrate this. The germ plasm of a horse grows into a horse and not into a dog or a sheep or a cow. Similarly the germ plasm of a sheep grows into a sheep and not into a horse or a dog or a cow, and so the germ plasm of a man grows into the likeness of a man. Not only that, but the germ plasm of