MENTAL HYGIENE AND SOCIAL WORK

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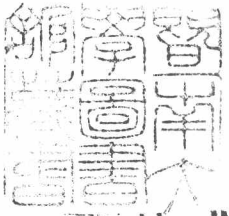

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PREFACE

THE Bureau of Children's Guidance was established by the New York School of Social Work in 1921 as a part of the Commonwealth Fund Program for the Prevention of Delinquency. The special function of the Bureau within the program was to conduct a child guidance clinic for the study and treatment of children presenting problems of behavior and to maintain within the clinic facilities for the practical training of social workers preparing for psychiatric social work. In the following pages an attempt is made to describe the work and results of the operation of the Bureau of Children's Guidance and the Department of Mental Hygiene at the School of Social Work during the period of five and one-half years covered by the Commonwealth Fund Program. This report is not an analytical study of the problems of children as studied at the Bureau or of the treatment of such problems. It is rather a descriptive account of the work of the Bureau as a center for the treatment of problem children and the training of social workers.

As a treatment center for children, the Bureau was established with the conviction that among the various facilities for such treatment there was room for an experiment with a child guidance clinic adequately equipped but free from the necessity of caring for more cases than it could handle without sacrificing its own standards either of training or of service. Its intake, therefore, was definitely limited. For each of the cases under care it provided the best program of study and treatment of which its staff was capable. This statement is made with recognition of the standard of excellence which it implies and with recognition also that the

measurement of the Bureau's results shows a much higher percentage of failure than the staff would like to have recorded. The reasons for recording no higher measure of success are disclosed in the report itself. It is sufficient here to state that the failures seem to have been due partly to the normal limitations to be expected of any staff composed of human beings, partly to the necessity of exploring the way in a comparatively new field, and partly to the inadequacy of our present knowledge of human personality and its functions.

It is the belief of the staff that the percentage of failure is much less significant than the relatively high percentage of success. The Bureau was part of a movement which has since spread rapidly. This child guidance movement has to its credit an altogether remarkable record of success in dealing with the emotional problems of children and parents. Within the comparatively few years of its existence those engaged in the movement have added substantially to our knowledge of human personality and its difficulties and to the possibility of sure-footed practice in dealing with them. To the development of this equipment for child guidance we believe that the Bureau has made a contribution. It is the purpose of this report to suggest rather than to demonstrate the nature of that contribution.

The training of social workers as a movement is older in the United States than is child guidance. One of its most difficult problems as a form of professional education has been the organization of field work which would have high educational value. One of its most significant recent contributions has been the development of the subject matter of mental hygiene for its curriculum. The establishment of the Bureau of Children's Guidance within the New York School of Social Work provided an invaluable opportunity to experiment with methods of field work instruction under its own auspices and with methods of correlating mental hygiene and the other subjects

in the curriculum of a school of social work. Part II of this report is a discussion of the training methods of the Bureau and the mental hygiene curriculum of the School which it is hoped will be suggestive to those interested in the professional education of social workers.

The report has been prepared as a descriptive rather than an analytical document. Its preparation was approached by the staff of the School in a scientific spirit but its emphasis has been more upon the practical aspects of the treatment of children and the training of students than upon the scientific implications of psychiatry, social work, and pedagogy. Some exception to this general statement of the character of the report will be noted with respect to Chapters II and III. In these chapters an effort has been made to present the scientific basis of child guidance from the psychiatric point of view as it was conceived at the Bureau. These two chapters present in necessarily brief compass the basic conceptions of mental hygiene as the staff of the Bureau conceived them and as such present the necessary background for understanding both the work of the Bureau with children and the training of social workers in mental hygiene at the School. For the benefit of those readers who may be interested in the details of the organization and program of the Bureau, a brief conspectus of its organization, operation, and relationships is presented in Appendix A.

PORTER R. LEE

September, 1929

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PART I

CHILD GUIDANCE

Chapter I

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CHILD GUIDANCE

DURING the period of its operation the Bureau of Children's Guidance received applications in behalf of eight hundred twenty-two children, of whom five hundred ninety-one were carried by the Bureau through a period of sustained treatment. These children were brought to the Bureau by teachers, parents, social workers, clergymen, kinsmen, friends, and others,[1] all of whom felt some degree of responsibility for them, all of whom recognized the seriousness of their troubles, and none of whom felt adequate without help to discharge their own responsibilities toward them.

The children who thus became known to the Bureau were of all ages, from those just past infancy to some on the threshold of maturity. They were confined to no one economic class, to no one social stratum, to no one nationality, to no one religion. Economically, their parents ranged from poor to well-to-do. In social status they represented families without consciousness of caste and families to whom the preservation of social position was an important consideration. The groups included Jews, Catholics, Protestants, and some without religious connection. The children themselves ranged in intelligence from dull-normal to superior, and their parents apparently represented as wide a range.

The causes of the difficulties of these children and their parents were frequently deep-seated. Again and again the effort to explain these difficulties led into areas of human

[1] Sources of reference and other data regarding Bureau cases will be found in the tables of Appendix B.

relationship and emotional entanglement, the nature of which the layman rarely perceives. The difficulties themselves, however, were not at all unusual. They represented the same types of bewilderment, unhappiness, and misconduct which are familiar to every human being who meets life with his eyes open.

The statements of their reasons for referring children to the Bureau made by those who have sought its assistance contain nothing that is new to parents and others who have responsibility for or acquaintance with children.

Gerry Newman[2] was described by the visiting teacher who brought him to the Bureau as an intelligent child, attractive and friendly. He was, however, destructive, over-active, and cruel to younger children whom he attacked by kicking, pinching, and striking. The visiting teacher was of the opinion that he had been spoiled by his mother.

Sam Sullivan was brought to the clinic by an harassed mother because his extreme nervousness, his tendency to lie and steal and his poor work at school presented problems beyond her power to deal with.

Florence Cutler was described by her mother as unhappy at home because of her hatred for her step-father and the feeling that her mother no longer wanted her there. She was considering leaving home if she could find a place where she could assist with the care of children and be permitted to continue her education.

Mrs. Durham was worried about her son, Donald, eight and a half years old, and had written to an official of a governmental department at Washington, which publishes a magazine for mothers, asking him for advice in regard to the boy. When she came to the Bureau, at the suggestion of the Washington official, she said that Donald had had a recurrence of enuresis since a serious illness a few years ago and about the time he began school. She had taken him to many specialists for examination and had tried to handle the situation in every conceivable way but without success. She felt that she was on the edge of a nervous breakdown because of her helplessness. She had punished him, she had pleaded with him, she had tried to interest him in the things that normally appeal to growing youngsters, all without result. She stated that she would

[2] All names used are of course fictitious.

like to write a poem or a play, or an article to young mothers in order to recount dramatically what she had done for her boy. She read to him when he was about three until her voice left her, so that he would be happy. She practically kept him in a cage so that he would not be exposed to germs from other children. "I have done everything," she said dramatically, "that a mother could do."

The pastor of a church asked for help with Fred Ingram, a fourteen-year-old boy, adopted by his aunt and uncle. He had been badly mistreated and neglected by his step-father with whom he lived after the death of his mother several years before. His adoptive parents had tried to help him but he was unresponsive and forgetful and had unexplained fits of giggling.

Jasper Isaacs was referred by his school teacher. He had failed in his work the previous term and was having to repeat the grade. His marks were worse that term than they were the one before and his mother was deeply concerned over his failure. She threatened suicide when she heard that he might miss his promotion. The boy's conduct had always been satisfactory and he had presented no problem at that time except that he was failing in some of his school work. In the last six months, however, his personality had changed. Instead of seeming happy and interested in his work, he sat in school with a worried expression and seemed preoccupied most of the time.

Grace True was referred by a social worker connected with a settlement which the girl attended. It was stated that at the settlement clubs the girl had attracted attention to herself by unseemly behavior, such as stamping her feet and refusing to obey directions, making faces and spitting at the club leader, hitting children and using bad language, all of which she practiced with slight provocation. Since finding her mother dead in bed with her one morning about a month before she was referred to the Bureau, her wildness had seemed more pronounced and her behavior more incorrigible.

Mrs. Upham referred her daughter Kitty. Kitty was an adopted child much loved by her foster parents. She would run away, however, and was difficult to control. Mrs. Upham wanted help in learning how to handle her.

We present these literal quotations from the Bureau's records to show that the problems of the children under treatment as they were recognized by responsible adults are not

different in character from the problems of childhood everywhere. Moreover, they are typical of problems with which parents were grappling successfully in many cases long before child guidance appeared as a professional service. Furthermore, in many of the families from which these children came are other children who present no special difficulties. It may be taken for granted that the Bureau was called on only after parents, teachers, and other responsible adults had exhausted their resources for dealing with the behavior problems of these particular children. Whatever their success may have been with other children in these situations they had apparently reached the conclusion that the solution of the children's difficulties was beyond their powers. It is probably not too much to say that these harassed parents, teachers, and others believed, whether rightly or wrongly, that the conduct of the children, unless it could be corrected, forecast at the very least an unhappy future with a strong likelihood in many instances of mental breakdown or delinquency.

With regard to the five hundred ninety-one children who, as already stated, were carried by the Bureau through a period of sustained treatment, a careful appraisal of results following upon this treatment was attempted. In the judgment of the Bureau staff, arrived at by a process which is fully explained in Chapter V, treatment in a large majority of these cases was successful or partially successful. In other words, after the appearance of the Bureau as a factor in these situations, some measure of success was achieved, whereas the combined resources of parents, teachers, and others up to that point had recorded a preponderance of failure. This is an ex parte judgment of success made by the group having the greatest professional stake in the work of the Bureau. It represents the feeling of the staff about their own work.

Great as was the stake of the staff in the work of the Bureau, however, it was certainly not so great as that of the

children and their parents. After making this analysis of success and failure, we asked ourselves the question, "Would the parents of the children agree with this judgment?" The contact of the Bureau with the parents throughout the treatment of the children was close. It provided, in many cases, ample evidence of their confidence in the Bureau and of their satisfaction with the results of its treatment. In an effort to secure more light upon the judgment of the parents, the staff made, just before the Bureau closed its doors, an effort to test the reactions of parents to their experiences with the Bureau. In a limited number of cases, all of which had been under treatment for six months or longer, a special effort was made to record the judgment of parents in some detail. The result of this effort was evidence that the judgment of the parents regarding success and failure in the treatment of the children agreed substantially with that of the Bureau staff.[3]

The implications of success and failure from the point of view of scientific interest in the problems of conduct are indicated in Chapter II. The implications of success and failure in terms of human happiness can be established in less scientific terms.

In attempting to arrive at the parents' evaluation of the Bureau's work the staff was not seeking appreciation for the Bureau's services, though they were not oblivious to such appreciation when it was expressed, as it frequently was. They were much more interested in the contrasting frames of mind of those whose children made a successful adjustment. Whereas at the beginning of contact with the Bureau these parents had commonly been bewildered, anxious, self-condemnatory, bitterly discouraged and apprehensive, or vindictive, a gradual change had taken place in them during the period of treatment—a change characterized by growing confidence, security, relief, and happiness. It is not, of course,

[3] See Chap. V.

meant that a prevailingly gloomy group had been transformed into a spontaneously happy group; but a strong drift in this direction was apparent.

One need be a human being of no more than ordinary sensibilities to appreciate the tremendous relief, the confidence-breeding suggestion which there is for an harassed parent who has struggled for self-control in learning from one whom he regards as an authority that to keep one's temper in the face of irritating conduct in children is something more than a virtue, that it has positive therapeutic value to a youngster who is trying to find his way through a welter of emotional difficulties. Whatever ethical idealism may tell us, moral conduct is maintained by human beings more often because it has a positive value in human life than because virtue is its own reward.

At the beginning of this chapter, we quote a number of statements made by parents at the outset of their contact with the Bureau which illustrate the nature of their problems with respect to their children. No scientific analysis of these problems, however, suggests the cost in anxiety, strain, and suffering which they imply for the parents and children concerned. Society's interest in the problem of child behavior is commonly expressed in terms of the prevention of delinquency and of other forms of anti-social conduct, or in terms of the equipment of the child for the responsibilities of adult life, or in terms of a better discrimination by the race in the use of its own ideals of human conduct. There is, however, a human concern with the implications of conduct that is different from any of these considerations. Every human being has an urge towards the kind of happiness which comes when those interests in which he has a stake are satisfying to him. In none of life's interests have parents any greater stake than in their children. Parents seem destined never to be without some measure of anxiety over