

UNDERSTANDING OUR CHILDREN

BY

FREDERICK PIERCE

AUTHOR OF

"OUR UNCONSCIOUS MIND," "MOBILIZING THE MID-BRAIN,"
ETC.



NEW YORK
E. P. DUTTON & COMPANY
681 FIFTH AVENUE

FOREWORD

ALTHOUGH the test of time and experience had proved the correctness of many of Professor Sigmund Freud's theories in connection with the human mind as early as, let us say, the year 1910; and although the ensuing decade was marked by steadily advancing knowledge of the psychology of the unconscious; it has been only within the last few years that educators and parents have begun to see how this new knowledge might be brought into direct service of family and school. In the past, our understanding of a child was always confused by interpreting the young human being, even at the age of two or three years, as essentially a reasoning and moral creature. We now realize not only that reason and morals are matters of slow development but also that there is a tremendous primitive resistance against such development. We now realize, further, that our own primitive unconscious in many instances subjects us to deep emotional involvements with our children, the nature of which is sometimes beyond our power to comprehend. In the light of this new knowledge, it is clear that the wiser and more effective handling of our children depends upon our understanding the unconscious mental processes of

both ourselves and them. One may be tempted to think that this is impossible without an education in general psychology, but a closer examination of the matter shows us that it is not by any means as technical as it might at first seem. The unconscious activities of the mind are principally emotional, and it has been my experience in lecturing upon this subject that the average men and women have no difficulty at all in grasping the essentials and bringing them into active use in family life. The method of approach that I have used in this book is, in the last analysis, one of simple, expository appeal to common sense, with a definite avoidance of technical considerations and scientific terminology. It is not pretended that this work presents all that parents should know, but the material is offered with the sincere conviction that a working knowledge of the principles given cannot help resulting in more adequate understanding and friendly co-operation between parents and children.

FREDERICK PIERCE.

Prangins, Switzerland
September 10, 1925

CONTENTS

	PAGE
FOREWORD.....	vii

SECTION I

FACING PARENTHOOD

In the Psychologist's Office—The Difficult Boy—A Neurotic Fear—The Woman Whose Children Were Getting Away from Her—Mr. and Mrs. N . . . —The Unborn Child—Concerning a Baby's Conscience—What Education Does Not Teach—The Childhood of the Parents—The Unconscious Crops Out.....	I
--	---

SECTION II

THE NATURE OF CHILDREN

What Is a Successful Child?—The Models Found in Other Countries—Our Place in Nature—The Past of Our Minds—The Child's Immediate Heredity—Its Mind Before Birth—The Mind of an Infant—The Mind Patterns—The Root Complexes—Feelings of Inferiority—Compensation Striving—Autistic Complexes—The Love Complexes—The Infantile Fears.....	35
--	----

SECTION III

THE EARLY CHILDHOOD

Three Phases of the Unconscious—Progressive and Regressive Personalities—Types of Play and Stories—The Child's Special Appreciations—The Acquisitive Child—First Principles of Emotional Management—The Family Habits—Teasing—Self-Reliance and Resource-	
---	--

	PAGE
fulness—Methods of Discipline—Satisfying the Child's Curiosities—The Family as a Team.....	99

SECTION IV

PRE-ADOLESCENCE

Preparations for School—Public School or Boarding- School?—The Frail Child—Possibilities of Gland Treatment—Corrective Psychology—Teaching the Child How to Think—The Beginning of Hero-Worship —Habits of Work—Organizing a Day—Training the Will—Training the Child for Religion—Biological Education.....	126
--	-----

SECTION V

ADOLESCENCE AND THE EARLY MATING PERIOD

The Chemical Changes at Puberty—The New Sex Con- sciousness—Glandular Corrections—Bridging Away from the Family—The New Emotional Models—Homo- Sexuality—Mental and Physical Masturbation—The Development of Special Aptnesses—Adolescent Experi- ments—Sublimation—The Early Sweethearts—Parental Jealousies—Effects of Erotic Books and Moving Pictures—Preparation for Mating—Emotional Func- tions of Male and Female—Analysis of the Love Emotion—The Choice of a Life-Work.....	151
--	-----

SECTION VI

METHODS OF MIND MANAGEMENT

Summary of the Material—The Two Wish-Fields of the Brain—Emotion <i>versus</i> Reason—Suggestion and Auto- suggestion—Brain Images—Morale and Habits of Mind —Suggestion in Illness—A Method of Mental Analysis —Conclusion.....	184
--	-----

UNDERSTANDING OUR CHILDREN

SECTION I

FACING PARENTHOOD

IT was nearly five o'clock of an afternoon in late March. The psychologist was sitting at the desk in his consulting room glancing over some notes of the day's consultations. It had been a day of unusually interesting problems. He looked up at the chair on the opposite side of the desk and thought of the man who had been sitting there a few minutes before, a man whose fifteen-year-old boy was becoming, as the father put it, quite uncontrollable in certain directions. The boy was healthy, as the father had described him, tall, strongly built, and with an extraordinary zest for outdoor sports. He had been quite reasonably obedient in his earlier childhood, with a pleasant disposition, a great deal of natural charm, and had done satisfactory work in all of his school subjects except algebra. Then at thirteen, with the onset of puberty, he had become restless, mentally indolent, more and more inclined to shirk school work until he altogether failed of promotion;

in his attitude toward family and teachers he had become at first slightly unruly, then more and more indifferent to discipline, until, a few days before the consultation between his father and the psychologist, he had been expelled from school.

The psychologist had already talked with the boy several times and was convinced that it would be possible to straighten him out. But it was going to take an hour a day for three or four months, because the causes of the rebellion were deep-seated. One had to go far back into the childhood to understand them. The father and mother were above average intelligence and had done the best they knew how in bringing up the boy—but that was just the trouble; in the things which really mattered critically they not only did not know how but they had followed exactly the wrong course. The pity of it lay in the fact that nearly two years of the boy's life were practically wasted and the correction of the badly conditioned emotional reflexes would now be rather a hard, uphill struggle, whereas in the early childhood the mistakes could have been avoided without any difficulty whatever. If the father and mother had known—if!

The psychologist thought of the man who had preceded that father in the chair across the desk, the one who had come in at three o'clock. A fine-looking lawyer in the prime of life, whose sinewy hands, well-set-up figure, and ruddy complexion spoke of athletic exercise steadily maintained the year round. The lawyer had been obviously worried, but in a

sense more angry than worried. He had recently found that if he went above a certain floor in any building he suddenly became bothered by a sort of fear that he should go and leap from one of the windows. This fear did not appear until he reached the seventh or eighth floor, but from there upward it seemed to increase with each story until he had come to dread each morning the going to his office, which was on the twelfth floor. The thing had been progressing through several months. Recently he had consulted his family physician who in turn had referred him to two nerve specialists. But these men after giving him a thorough examination had assured him that there was nothing in the world the matter with him except, as they expressed it, his imagination. They could not advise a rest cure because his splendid physical condition would have made that ridiculous. "They slapped me on the back and told me to go along and forget my fear; as if," he explained, "I hadn't sense enough to do that without being told—if I could!" Once more the psychologist thought of the pity of it. Here again was a conditioned emotional reflex which would have to be analyzed back toward the origin, with the attendant re-education of certain phases of this man's mind, phases of which he was totally unaware, since they were wholly unconscious. The psychologist's experience told him that it would probably take from fifty to seventy hours of the man's time, and his, before that mind would be adequately analyzed and

made safe against compulsions and obsessive fears; and, beyond any question whatever, the roots of the entire difficulty would be found back in the childhood. Adequate knowledge on the part of the parents would almost certainly have saved the man his whole trouble.

And there was the woman who had had the after-luncheon hour at two o'clock. Well-bred, well educated, coming from a background of comfortable circumstances and interesting social activities, she had sought advice several weeks before and had since been coming daily, having settled down to the analytical routine with a final determination to clear up the riddle of her unhappiness and find out how her married life had failed of her hopes and expectations, and why her two children seemed somehow to be getting entirely away from that easy, confiding, mental relationship which she had envisaged as the natural and proper one to exist between parents and children. She loved her husband, of that she was quite sure; and she felt very sure—or tried to convince herself that she did—that he loved her equally. Her description of what she called her troubles had at first been rather vague and uncertain, but the psychologist's experience made it easy for him to see that she was not one of the common "neurasthenics" who trump up troubles when none exist, but a sincere, earnest mind, interpreting correctly that there was something definite the matter with both marital and parental relationships in her home. Of the husband

and the children she had sketched a picture which gradually became quite clear.

Herself coming from a family of several children, she had married a man who was an only child and whose mother had been widowed when he had reached the age of six. The psychologist knew well what this environment had probably done for the husband's childhood. There would have been, unless the mother was unusually wise and used her wisdom constantly to temper her love for the boy, a centering of her whole emotional self upon her child. Fondled, protected, indulged, and constantly looked after with too much of the feminine touch and far too little of the masculine, the boy's natural initiative and resourcefulness would have been checked and hampered in their development, with a loss to the more rugged characteristics which the man-nature needed. From the description of him as husband and father it seemed certain that he had made a strong unconscious struggle to overcome these handicaps, that since his marriage he had been able to get away very largely from his mother's conscious influence, and that he had become quite aggressive and successful in business. But in his love life, after the first year of devotion he had seemed to change, to become somewhat moody, to have periods when for no apparent reason any intimate contact with his wife seemed to bore him—in spite of the fact of his unfailing assurance that he loved her.

The first child, a boy, had been born fourteen

months after the marriage. The husband had been very tender during the wife's pregnancy and had seemed overjoyed when the little son arrived. But within a few months after that the wife had noticed that, although his interest in the baby had not lessened, he would sometimes show something very like irritation when she herself paid a great deal of attention or expressed her intense devotion to the baby. This period, as the woman looked back upon it, seemed to have been the beginning of the change in her husband's feelings for her. Two years later a daughter was born. Recalling the husband's behavior, it seemed clear that this had been the advent of a further change. The girl baby had touched some further spring in the deeper emotional life of the man, and before the child was a year old the wife had observed that it was no longer she herself but the nursery which was occupying the husband's mind as he came home from the office at the end of the day. In some subtle way the baby daughter had partly replaced the mother. Ten years had passed and although the psychologist's pupil did not think of them as having been actually unhappy, yet there had been running through them a certain sense of failure, the feeling that somehow instead of becoming a strongly welded unit the family had gradually divided into two camps, the father and daughter comprising one and the mother and son the other, with strong undercurrents of jealousy, rivalry, quarreling, and bickering between the children.

Disagreement and quarreling had also become frequent between the parents. The woman had admitted this with some reluctance and had assured the psychologist that they had always tried to exercise self-control when in the presence of the children and thresh out their conflicts in the privacy of their own rooms. She had appeared surprised and rather startled when the psychologist had remarked that this of course did not prevent the children from knowing almost exactly the true emotional attitude of the parents to each other, since children invariably know with uncanny accuracy exactly what the parents are feeling and—half of the time at least—exactly what they are thinking. She had been even more startled and at first apparently inclined to feel that she ought to be somehow indignant when the psychologist had further remarked, "Of course, you frequently ended your quarrels by 'making up,' in which process each of you would have accused yourself instead of each other, would ask for forgiveness, would embrace with the feeling that the old devotion might thus be restored at least temporarily, and would finish the episode in the most intimate conjugal relationship." The woman had shown the usual reaction, seeming to feel that she ought to resent this straightforward dealing with facts, as in some way indelicate, at the same time realizing as if subconsciously that such behavior might indeed be significant and have some real bearing on the matters at issue. But as the analytical process had con-

tinued, she had very soon overcome this tendency toward resenting the need for frankness, and had perceived that in complete freedom of discussion lay the one possibility of thoroughly understanding her home problem. She showed a fine capacity for judgment of herself, but frankly admitted at first that, without knowing how she had been wrong, she nevertheless had felt, and did now feel, that she was quite as much to blame as her husband. So far as the marital relationship was concerned, the thing that puzzled her was that although, taken as a whole, it had become distinctly unhappy, she still felt that the original love feeling on both sides was intact. But it did seem to her that two people who fundamentally loved each other should be able not only to live without incessant quarreling, varied with periods of indifference, but also should be able to find in their love a developing force which would make life beautiful.

As for the children, she was completely at a loss to understand what had happened. It was clear to her that she had lost touch with their minds, and she had felt for more than a year that there was real cause for worry with respect to both of them. With the boy she felt rather more closely in touch than with the girl, but even he seemed to have withdrawn from her in many subtle but clearly perceptible ways. Moreover, he was becoming distinctly resistant to discipline both at home and in school and she had observed that he was beginning to choose as his clos-

est companions boys whom she considered quite undesirable. She had discovered that he had learned masturbation from these, she had spoken to his father about it, and the latter, seeming entirely at a loss as to the wisest method of handling the situation, had given the boy a violent lecture on that subject which had met with nothing but sullen silence. The daughter, showing a very different type of character from the son, was developing into a detached, day-dreaming child, with a tendency to spend all of her spare time reading instead of playing, and with a growing tendency not only to evade the truth, when telling the truth might possibly bring punishment, but also to relate things about her companions and their doings which often proved to have been complete fabrications. When later confronted with the fact that these stories had been pure fictions, she would sometimes show a slight discomfiture but no apparent sense of there being anything really wrong about it.

The psychologist had requested that before the children should be brought to him they might be thoroughly examined, both by the family physician, and by a gland specialist, and as a result of this examination it had already been established that the girl had a thyroid insufficiency. Over and above any physical disturbance, however, the psychologist knew that the problem of these two children was actually the problem of the relationship of the parents. Badly conditioned emotional reflexes, as well as cer-

tain important lacks in their own childhood training and education were now spoiling their adult life together and in turn radiating a disturbing and destructive influence upon the emotional and mental development of their two children. Then, too, it was clear that the two children had been brought into the world by a man and woman who had never given an hour of study to the making and training of children. The man would have considered himself little short of insane to launch an important business without any training. The woman would have considered herself unfit to take charge of even a primary schoolroom without preliminary training. Yet these two, like millions of others, had calmly undertaken the production of children and the complete charge of their physical, intellectual, emotional, ethical, and sublimative development, from infancy to maturity, without even a thought of preparing. Matters could be righted; it was not too late. But what a tremendous sum of human happiness must be set down as lost because the science of breeding and rearing of children has been largely neglected by the human race while it devoted its scientific exploration chiefly to making money, making life more comfortable and secure.

A muffled buzzer sounded softly in the corner of the room. The psychologist put aside his notes. His secretary was reminding him that someone was waiting for the five o'clock appointment. He glanced at his appointment sheet, and saw the names "Mr.

and Mrs. N . . .” He touched the button of an answering buzzer which would sound in the reception-room, arose, and stood waiting to greet the two who entered a moment later. They proved to be two very intelligent-looking people, well under thirty, who had been married less than a year and were expecting a child in four or five months. The man was a junior partner in a firm of engineers, and the woman was a graduate of a famous state university of the Middle West.

“We have come to see you,” the young man said with a smile, after they were seated, “not with reference to ourselves, but with reference to a third member of the family who has not yet appeared on the scene.”

“I have begun to fulfill what one of your colleagues calls in his latest book ‘Woman’s Biological Destiny,’ and while we have a splendid doctor to take care of the physical side of things, it has occurred to both my husband and me that babies are born with minds, which we know very little about,” said Mrs. N. “We want to know first whether my states of mind have anything to do with the baby, while I am carrying it, and we want to learn something about how to prepare ourselves for bringing it up. I suppose the first two years don’t particularly count, but after that——”

“On the contrary, the first two years are critically important,” said the psychologist. “Many emotional reflexes are established and conditioned, during that

period, which have a profound effect all through life, and there is no period in the development that is more important to study and understand than this."

Mr. N. expressed surprise. "But surely a baby's brain is really not developed enough to be active—I mean, to remember things afterward," he said.

"Not in the sense of ideation," replied the psychologist. "But emotionally the baby's mind is active from the very first, and when you realize that the earliest stimulations of, and responses to, emotion, become patterns which tend to perpetuate themselves indefinitely, then you see the point not only of studying the second year but equally the first year. This study does not need to be a highly complex affair. There are certain fundamental principles which are really quite simple to understand, requiring no technical knowledge other than that which could be grasped by the average first year student in a high school. The understanding and wise handling of the child's mind from the second year to the seventh is of course a more complex affair, but there again the principles are simple enough, if one will just throw overboard a large mass of tradition and old wives' fables and get down to the facts."

"What do you mean by 'tradition'?" asked Mrs. N.

"I mean that we were all brought up to regard children in some respects as things that we now know they are not," replied the psychologist. "Perhaps the most universal mistake, and certainly one of the