Mental Hygiene in Childhood

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We will consider mental hygiene in the broad sense of regulation of environmental influences with the direct object of the preservation of mental health, or the prevention of mental and nervous disease. Mental and physical health are so intimately related that any consideration which neglects to include general hygiene fails to grasp the subject in its entirety. Again, it is impossible to discuss separately mental hygiene and education. Education, according to the new Standard Dictionary, is "the systematic development and cultivation of the normal powers of intellect, feeling and conduct, so as to render them efficient in some particular form of living, or for life in general." In further explanation, it is stated: "It includes not only the narrow conception of instruction, to which it was formerly limited, but embraces all forms of human experience, owing to the recognition of the fact that every stimulus with its corresponding reaction has a definite effect upon character." From this definition it would seem that mental hygiene and education are synonymous terms.

Nervous stability in modern life is the exception rather than the rule. Ernest Jones states,¹ "Neuroses constitute, perhaps, the most widely-spread form of disease. Persons quite unaffected in this way certainly form the minority of the

¹Read at meeting of Alienists and Neurologists, Chicago, July 10, 1915.
Much unhappiness and misery, loss of social efficiency and crime, as well as minor antisocial conditions, as eccentricity, faddism, crankism, etc., are preventable and the prevention to a large extent rests with those who have supervision of the individual during his early life, particularly parents and teachers. The ignorance of many of these regarding child hygiene, particularly as relating to training, mental discipline and character formation is appalling. This would seem to be a legitimate field for advice on the part of the family physician, but the opportunity, even when given, is most often neglected, though there is no more important phase of preventive medicine.

The old trite proverb to the effect that it is useless to lock the barn door after the horse has been stolen is particularly applicable in nervous and mental conditions. The time for the application of mental hygiene is in childhood, when the material to be molded is still soft and pliable, while habit may be made servant rather than master.

It has been said that the education of the child should begin with the grandparents. This is, to an extent, true, for the forces of heredity, though obscure, must be reckoned with. Certain varieties of behavior, as reflex activities and instincts, either exist at birth or arise later independent of experience. Colvin says: "No form of behavior is absolutely created by the environment. Education does not bring into existence something out of nothing. Education modifies what is already present in some degree; it selects and preserves certain modes of expression, eliminates others, and again recombines into new complexes the elements of behavior found in still other relations. If the organism does not possess at birth definite means of reacting to its environment, it would soon perish in the struggle for existence. It never could be educated." We must not be too hasty, however, to attribute solely to heredity faulty modes of reaction without first taking into consideration the environmental forces of example. Traits and characteristics may reoccur in children and grandchildren, or even more remote descendants, and still not be due to heredity. Lack of emotional control may be passed on from generation to generation simply because it has become the usual and accepted mode of reaction to situations of stress, and because the deterrent effects of discipline, education and proper hygiene have never been properly utilized. In some families it would seem that faulty feeling tones of discouragement, pessimism, and discord are imbibed with the mother's milk. What chance have impressionable children for normal development under such circumstances? Heredity is made the scape-goat for faults and conditions which would admit of easy correction were it not for the indolence, indifference and irresponsibility of parents and others. Johnny may have his grandfather's quick temper, but does his father encourage self-control? Jane may be as unstable emotionally as her grandmother, but does her mother show her how to meet occasions of stress with reasonable fortitude and overcome childish outbursts with calm understanding and forbearance? That many disorders of environmental reaction are due
rather to faulty example and defects of training than to purely hereditary causes is shown by the distinct changes in character with relief from nervous symptoms following psychotherapy and re-educative measures of various kinds.

Clark, after long, continual study, decided that "out of the sum total of nervous affections the special physician was called upon to treat, the majority of them were functional and had their origin for the most part in those who possessed illy-organized physical and mental habits." He believes "that in a few years sufficient careful studies of the more common forms of the psychoneuromyoses will have been made so that we may lay down rather specific and general rules in parental and school education for the proper bringing up of neurotic children so that the neuroses may be less frequent or at least much easier handled when the psychoneuroses do occur."

I do not wish to ignore the fact, as apparently do many of our medical psychologists of the present day, that developmental hypoplasia, congenital or acquired, is the foundation upon which the superstructure of psychic mal-adjustment is reared. The neuropathic constitution is not a figment of the imagination. Hence the more need for a broad conception of mental hygiene, sufficiently broad to embrace every agency and measure that can be utilized to contribute to the well-being of the individual.

While a matter of considerable difficulty to begin the education of a child with the grandparents, it is possible to begin with the parents, and it should be within the province of the physician to advise prospective mothers and fathers how to so modify their own habits of conduct as to best conserve the interests of their offspring. Eugenics, while an interesting and in many ways useful study, is not and will likely never be an exact science, capable of general application. While admitting that it is unwise, and worse, for the epileptic, the feeble-minded and the insane to beget children, to insist upon an absolutely clean family history as a condition for license to marry would mean a nation of celibates, of perjurers, and of profligates. Like the Irishman’s camel, "There ain’t no such animal." In this connection I am reminded of the nouveau riche who gleefully detailed to a friend the large sums he was expending to have a genealogist search out his family tree. Some time later the friend inquired how the search was progressing. "Sh!" said the rich man, "I’m paying hush money now." So far "eugenic marriages" and "eugenic babies" have shown no superiority over the old-fashioned kind. In one instance, it is said, the expected "Superman" turned out to be a girl. A reasonably healthy man and woman living under normal hygienic conditions with fairly clean family records, stand a pretty fair chance of having children mentally and physically healthy, provided they receive the proper care during the entire period of development.

It is the custom to estimate the age of the individual from the time of his birth, when he begins a separate independent existence. He is, however, capable of being influenced by environmental conditions from the earliest moment of conception. The great difficulty in determining whether causes be purely hereditary or environ-

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mental lies in this fact, and ignorance of this fact is the reason for much unmerited blame being placed at the door of heredity, especially by those agitators whom a little knowledge has made dangerous.

Of the environmental causes capable of exerting their influence early in the life of the individual, alcohol may be taken as an example. Studies on the part of many well qualified observers tend strongly to prove that alcoholism even of mild degree in the parents, especially at the time of conception, has a markedly deleterious effect upon the offspring. (A very potent argument against vinous bachelor and wedding suppers; and in fact against tippling at any time during the marital state.) Although there are some scientists as Professor Karl Pearson and his associates in the Francis Galton Laboratory of Eugenics in the University of London who hold that alcoholism per se does not result in deterioration of the physical and mental powers of the offspring, others possessing the advantage of long clinical experience continue to hold the opposite view. Dr. Hyslop, for instance, in his presidential address to the Society for the Study of Inebriety, very conservatively states that there is evidence supported by experiments on animals, that alcoholism tends to increase the number of births, but to render the offspring weaker. Epilepsy, mental weakness, insanity, deafmutism, stunted growth, and other states transmitted by heredity, are apt to be not only intensified, but make their appearance at an earlier age when parental alcoholism is a factor. It accentuates the downward trend of psychoneuroses, and with each successive generation the offspring become alcoholic or degenerate at a relatively earlier age. In families prone to degeneracy, alcohol appears to Dr. Hyslop to put the finishing touches. It sets alight the existence of neuroses and psychoses which might be on the wane, and renders the offspring more liable to the transmission of the degeneracy not only in parental intensity, but in manifestation at an earlier age.

After conception the environment of the mother becomes that of the developing child. Diseased states of all kinds have a vitiating effect upon cell development. It is thus the duty of the expectant mother to prevent contagion by avoiding contact with illness of any form. Again, certain unhealthy habitual states of mind, as depressive or disruptive emotions and feelings, apprehensions, fear of disease and fixed beliefs in fictitious disease, illogical doubts, scruples and anxieties; habits of thought; such as constant introspection, concentration of the attention on the physiological functions of the body, etc., bring about disorder in function of various organs. The possible effect upon the child of derangement of bodily function should be sufficient to cause the mother to adhere strictly to a régime assuring an existence free from emotional turmoil, by controlling her anxieties, moods and other faulty habits of thought. Equilibrium is with difficulty attained when the co-operation of the husband and other members of the family is lacking. Pity and extravagant sympathy are harmful, but tactful consideration and understanding will do much toward making the period
of pregnancy one of comfort and joyful anticipation. The *bête noir* of expectant mothers, by no means limited to the ignorant, is the supposed influence of maternal impressions. Many women pass miserable hours fearing their child will be "marked" or deformed because of some pernicious sight, dream or thought. The public should be instructed that maternal impressions have no scientific basis and belong entirely in the category of "old wives' tales." Monstrosities and other defects of development are relatively common and fall into definite, natural and simple classifications. Coincidence may be multiplied, but direct scientific proof is lacking. The only danger to the child lies in the modification of maternal bodily functions engendered by the fear itself. It is said that Greek women of ancient times in order to ensure cheerful impressions had their apartments filled with beautiful statues, paintings, and tapestries, and that this was one cause of the physical beauty of the race. The period of labor should be approached with courage and fortitude, as an ordeal it is true, but one which has been safely passed by other millions of women, by many cheerfully. It is wonderful how utterly forgotten is the suffering when the new-born babe is placed in the mother's arms. It is natural that there should be a desire to escape pain at this time. But when such escape is purchased at the possible risk of permanent injury to her child, such desire becomes not only selfish, but little short of criminal. Narcosis of the mother through powerful drugs cannot but affect the organism which is still supplied by the same blood.

Risk to the child does not terminate with birth, as morphin and similar drugs are excreted in the mother's milk for some time after their administration, with resulting danger of damage to the delicate nervous system. "Twilight sleep" and other forms of narcosis so broadly exploited by certain lay magazines is not justifiable upon any ground in the labor of normally constituted women. When conditions are abnormal it is for the obstetrician to decide.

Bottle-fed babies result from stress of social life, cosmetic reasons, imagined inability, lack of sustained effort and—in a very few instances genuine inability to nurse. Taylor says, "The chief enemies to breast feeding are social demands, fashion and accommodating physicians." Still believes that convulsions are much commoner in hand-fed infants, and I have myself noted the frequency of bottle feeding in children giving other evidences of nervous instability. Bendix states, "The young mother should be told that it is her sacred duty to nurse the child, and the physician should exert all his energies in assisting her to this end and he should protest with equal energy against the not uncommon inclination to avoid this duty for social or supposed aesthetic reasons."

Under normal conditions the new-born infant spends the greater number of his hours in sleep. He is quickly tired by the unwonted stimulation of his sense-organs, awakening from time to time in response to various stimuli, as hunger and pain, he quickly falls into repose as soon as the disturbing influence is removed. The first few months is an important period in regard to
future nervous and mental stability. Undue stimulation through rapidly succeeding sensory impressions can not but lead to neural exhaustion with far reaching harmful effects. Though sensation is the basis of all mentality, the various sensory stimuli should follow one another in orderly succession rather than in a heterogeneous jumble. I am not of those who hold that the infant should lead a purely vegetative existence, with attention only sufficient to ensure bodily growth. Motherhood, and for that matter, fatherhood too, is entitled to some enjoyment of the wonderful new being for whose existence they are responsible. It is small wonder that some mothers delegate the care of their babies to paid employes if such care is to be limited to the absolutely necessary natural needs. Loud noises, brilliant lights, rapid movements, rocking, dangling, ticking, etc., should be avoided, but it is carrying the Spartan idea too far to deprive the parents of all fondling and caressing. The indissolubility of maternal caresses and the idea of motherhood is shown in most pictorial representations of this relation, and in the best known Madonnas. May not the human Christ touch have come through the human Mother touch of His early years?

The automobile, the street car and train, the moving picture show, the phonograph and pianola, the high power electric light and many other conveniences and tribulations of urban civilization have their influences in over-stimulating and exhausting the delicate nervous system of the young child, and the frequency with which children, even of parents who should know better, are exposed is surprising. It is small wonder that we are a race of neurotics. Early over-stimulation leads to precocity, and precocity to early deterioration. On the other hand, careful and well-directed application of sensory stimuli during infancy and early childhood is a powerful aid to natural development. Sensory training cannot be too early begun, but must be adapted to the delicate nervous mechanism of the individual and never must it interfere with sleep or rest periods, or be carried to the point of exhaustion. Crile has shown that exhaustion from any cause may lead to impairment and actual destruction of brain cells.

The fond mother instinctively uses simple methods of sensory training when she clasps the infant to her breast, affording him the sensations of warmth, softness and pressure; when she inserts her finger into his palm to be clasped by the tiny fingers, a reflex act that early makes its appearance; and when she dangles a rattle or shining object before his eyes; aiding in the establishment of co-ordinate movements.

Early infancy is not too early to begin the inculcation of orderly habits of thought and action, of utmost importance in character formation. Habit is not dependent upon intelligence, and in some forms may be instituted early in the mental life. Feeding at regular intervals, followed by regular periods of sleep should be established in the first few weeks. The infant, from birth, should be accustomed to being placed in his crib while awake and to go to sleep without rocking or other aid. Training to proper control of the rectum may be accomplished by intelligent effort.
as early as three months. It is possible by the
ten or eleventh month to train normal children
to indicate a desire to empty the bladder. Too
much cannot be said in depreciation of the use
of the rubber pacifier and the habit of thumb­sucking. Infection by disease germs and inter­ference with the development of anatomical
structures are not the only dangers which result
from these habits. Not only do they absorb the
attention to the exclusion of other sensory im­pressions but they have a sexual significance as
well. Regular habits established in infancy
should be carried through childhood into adoles­cence and youth, with modifications suitable to
varying ages and conditions. Bathing, like other
measures belonging categorically in the domain
of physical hygiene, may be made an important
phase of mental hygiene. The psychical effect of
a sense of physical cleanliness is evident to all;
but there are other important advantages in reg­ular bathing. The pride of the proverbial Eng­lishman in his morning "tub" is not without
foundation. It takes courage to jump out of a
warm bed and subject one's body to an icy spray
or plunge. It is the requirement of this very
element of courage that renders it so useful. The
cold bath tends to engender a feeling of confi­dence, of power and self reliance, distinct from
its effects of stimulation of metabolism, nerve
tone and excretion. The daily shower may be
initiated as early as eighteen months. A word
of caution is necessary, as it is not advisable to
suddenly introduce a delicate, enervated child to
the rigor of the cold shower. He should be first
prepared by a course of rubbing and sponging.

Regular open air exercise, begun in infancy by
keeping the child out of doors as much as pos­sible during both waking and sleeping periods,
should be continued, even at some sacrifice of
conventional indoor occupations and activities. A
love of open places, of fresh air, and the phenom­ena of nature will be fostered which will go far
toward maintaining mental equilibrium later in
life. Open-air sleeping, though considered an
uncomfortable fad by those whose horizon is
bounded by four walls, is a powerful aid in es­tablishing and maintaining mental balance. Fear
of the dark, of thunder and lightning, and of be­ing alone tends to disappear when a day of
healthful activity is followed by a night in the
open under the stars. If the fundamental primi­tive fear instinct alone, as Boris Sidis11 believes,
is the source of all psychopathic maladies, it
should be the first aim of mental hygiene to cul­tivate those traits of character which would lead
to its subjection.

Among the bad habits early acquired by chil­dren is that of fancied aversion to particular
articles of food. This may have occurred through
over-indulgence, through unpleasant sensory im­pressions upon an untrained taste, or merely
through imitation of an older individual. Adults
should early learn to place a curb upon their
tongues and actions in the presence of children
and should never for an instant forget that they
are the models upon which lives are being pat­terned. I have seen a hungry child allow his
plate to go untouched for no other reason than
that an older member of the household had done
the same at a previous meal; and refuse articles
for which he had a real fondness, because a guest the day before did not "like them." I have made it a rule at Wildwood Hall that no member of the household shall voice a dislike of any article of food, or shall refuse it when offered. Eating of it is not compulsory, it may be picked at a bit and allowed to remain on the plate, but without comment. The statement of the child that she doesn't like this or that is met by "0, here everyone eats some of everything put before one." It usually is not long before the despised dishes are among those most relished.

In the development of normal mental life, much depends upon the early recognition of the value of pleasant and unpleasant feeling tones. It is the affective consciousness (feeling) that gives value to experience. To pure intelligence the object of knowledge is cold and colorless. "On the other hand, feeling gives a warmth and glow to experience; it reveals a world filled with worth and pulsating with human values. In normal experience these two aspects of consciousness are properly balanced. Our feelings do not completely dominate us, neither are we indifferent to the changing experiences that surround us. In abnormal states, however, this balance is no longer preserved." Simple feelings may lie anywhere between pleasantness and unpleasantness and are prominent factors in the more complex states of consciousness known as emotions. As a part of emotional experience arise sensations from changes in various bodily functions, as respiration, circulation, elimination, etc. An emotion that has run its course often passes over into a permanent passive attitude termed a mood.

This mood may become the path of least resistance for further emotional upheavals. An in-born tendency similar to the mood in its manifestations is the temperament. Mental hygiene should aim at the development of strong pleasant feeling tones in connection with activities and duties which make for improvement. Williams states, "the essence of psycho-prophylaxis, as of psychotherapy and education, is to associate useful activities with agreeable feeling tones, and to disassociate from useless or injurious acts the agreeable feeling tones that may have been acquired." The activity itself is not of necessity one which gives pleasure to the individual; in fact it may have connected with it strong tones of decidedly unpleasant nature. Thus, certain sorts of work may be irksome and unpleasant at first, but are persisted in because the results are of benefit to the individual, until later the work itself gives pleasure through the expression of normal self-activity. The cold shower may be approached with premonitory cold shivers, the result of an unpleasant feeling tone derived from previous experience of the momentary shock, but pleasant feeling tones arising through memories of the sense of exhilaration and well-being after the rub-down, assume the dominance and serve to carry the individual through the ordeal with fortitude.

There is a natural tendency for pleasant feeling tones to strongly associate themselves with activities and modes of conduct habitually and repeatedly performed, and for disagreeable feeling tones to lose their potency. Disobedience of parental admonition when first practiced is ac-
companied by strong emotional disturbance, fear of detection, dread of punishment, remorse, shame, etc. With repetition of the act, however, the emotional accompaniment becomes less troublesome, and the agreeable feeling tone, for the experience of which the act was first undertaken, assumes its place. To reinstate obedience it is necessary to surround the disobedient act with unpleasurable feeling tones. Corporal punishment is but rarely of value; usually doing more harm than good, especially when administered by an angry parent or teacher who unconsciously acknowledges his own insufficiency by resorting to this means the real purpose of which is to act as an outlet for the uncontrolled emotion of the adult. In the child it engenders fear, loss of respect and affection, and a feeling of resentment which may persist into later life, marring for all time the confidential relationship which should exist between parent and child. In most breaches of good behavior deprivation of some pleasure eagerly desired or enforced solitude will be found efficacious. In older boys, constitutionally defective in ethical sense, or whose ethical sense has developed awry by reason of faulty early training, a resort to physical force may sometimes be necessary but never in the form of flogging. Ancient chivalry was founded upon some excellent principles, one of which was the individual's personal responsibility to the injured person or to a self-nominated champion; but always with opportunity for self-defense. A method I have successfully used, is to first explain to the boy that he has been guilty of an act which of necessity affects another person or group of persons and that as he goes through life he will in such situations find there is someone ready to take the part of the injured one. He is then told that he and I will put on boxing gloves and fight until he has been punished sufficiently to impress that fact upon his mind. If the boy has any manhood in him, he puts up the best defense of which he is capable, takes his punishment without complaint, acknowledges his fault and promises to guard against a repetition. If he loses his temper the punishment is made more severe until he comes to realize, that to lose self-control is to add weakness to weakness. Especially at the period of adolescence does respect for physical superiority outweigh precept. This alone, if there were no other reason, is a potent argument for male teachers at this time.

This paper has already assumed such length as to preclude any but brief consideration of two most important phases of mental hygiene, i.e., formal education and sex hygiene. These subjects will be more fully discussed at some future time. In regard to formal education, I merely wish to make the assertion that modern educational measures tend to lose sight of fundamental individual variations in temperament, in ability and in ultimate purpose. There is over-emphasis of stereotyped measures perhaps suitable to the average child, but not to the one varying from the average in physique or in capabilities. Mere memory is made all-important, while the reasoning faculties are largely allowed to lie dormant. The curriculum is over-crowded, the time allowed for wholesome physical and mental rest, too little. Teachers and school authorities have too little
knowledge of child hygiene in general, and mental hygiene in particular.

Sex hygiene has become a veritable hysteria of agitation, with a morbid emphasis upon the manifestations of abnormal sexual psychology and venereal disease. The only real interest of many exploiters of sex hygiene is a morbid one, while others, honest in purpose and well meaning, because of celibacy, temperamental incapacity or unreasonable prejudice, have warped and twisted conceptions regarding the sexual impulse.

By the process of projection "prudery detects wrong where no wrong is" and under the guise of intellectuality, sociology or modernism allows thoughts regarding sexual matters to enter consciousness under proper chaperonage, as it were, permitting frank and open discussion of matters which by all canons of good breeding and good taste would be taboo.

These remarks are not directed against nor are they meant to discourage those who in a truly scientific and humanitarian manner are seeking the truth regarding sexual immorality in the young, but rather against those propagandists who insist upon their instruction in matters the full significance of which is beyond their understanding. I am strongly of the opinion that sexuality in all its forms should remain, in so far as is possible, a closed book to all children until the age of puberty at least, and that at that period whatever simple instruction is necessary should be given by the parents and by no one else. They should be familiar with the sexual significance of apparently trivial and innocent manifestations, the importance to the individual and to society of a well balanced, even if strong, sexual nature, and should be taught to detect early aberrant impulses and tendencies. Though we may fail to subscribe in their entirety to the views of Freud and others regarding the sexual significance of infantile and childish proclivities, an understanding of the basis of his arguments cannot but lead to an acknowledgment of their force, in some particulars at least. Premature eroticism most often has its origin in causes controllable by the parents and community and proper control would eliminate the need for early formal instruction in such matters.

I have in this paper attempted to show that mental hygiene is not a mere metaphysical abstraction capable of practice only by the chosen few, but that it is capable of reduction to the terms of common every-day life and that in its application every individual and event making up the environment of the child exerts an influence for present and future good or evil.

To suggest that mental hygiene be considered in this broad sense is my excuse for offering to such a gathering as this much that at first thought must appear trivial.

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