

The Future of Preventive Psychology in Relation to Parent and Child

By Margaret Lowenfeld July 1937

Mother & Child

Modern clinical psychology urges the importance for the child's whole emotional future of the attitude of the mother to him during the time of breast or bottle feeding, and is finding that foundations for subsequent emotional health can be better laid in this period than in any other.

Four sections of the community are most closely concerned with the management of mother and child during this period: obstetricians, midwives and hospital nurses and the physicians and nurses of infant welfare centres. The proper handling of cases of difficulty in feeding is a matter for expert knowledge, but a vast amount of subsequent misery can be saved by a change of attitude towards the emotional needs of the child on the part of the men and women composing these four services.

At present infant feeding, management and care is regarded from the purely physical angle, and many procedures are undertaken, which, while they achieve their physiological ends, tend to sow seeds of emotional maladjustments in the individual's future life. These mistakes are made not through lack of care, but through lack of knowledge.

The first proposal therefore would be to include in the ordinary training of all nurses, midwife's and children's doctors, lectures devoted to the explanation of the psychological aspects of maternal and infant care, and to include in the final nursing examinations a question upon this aspect of the nurse's work.

Modern work upon anxiety has begun to lay emphasis upon the probability of the first stage pains in labour, and much difficulty in feeding, from the mother's side, as arising from emotional attitudes in the mother in relation to the whole subject of child bearing and rearing. It has been found possible by providing psychological assistance for the mother during pregnancy significantly to diminish her sufferings during labour and to improve her capacity to feed. Here again the actual relief of definite emotional difficulty in relation to these primary biological functions is a matter of skilled training, but much can be done to improve the situation for all mothers by a wise attitude towards the situation, and an awareness of the existence of emotional factors in the physicians and ante-natal nurses under whose care the mothers are during the period of child bearing.

The second proposal I would like to put forward would be the inclusion of lectures on the emotional aspect of pregnancy, labour and feeding, from

the mother's point of view, to all ante— and post-natal nurses and midwives and the inclusion, if possible, of some teaching on this subject in the training of doctors.

While the foundations of a satisfactory emotional life are laid in the earliest months of life and depend in great measure upon the relation between infant and mother, the bases of the child's attitude to education and to society are laid in the years from one to five. The attitude of the mother towards the child's natural interest, firstly, in his own body, and, secondly, in the world around him, is of primary importance for the child's whole future response to life, and ability to make use of his own endowments.

Modern city conditions have removed from children much that is their birth right, and it is of the greatest importance that the mothers, health visitors and nursery school teachers should acquire an attitude towards a child's needs along these lines, and sympathy with his deprivations, which will enable them to make such changes in his environment as will supply him with substitutes for those experiences of earth, water, open spaces, trees, growing plants and animals, of which his city life deprives him.

Here again skilled help is needed to put right the difficulties of children and the perplexities of mothers in those cases where serious damage has been already done, but a great deal of amelioration could be brought about by enlightenment upon these aspects of child life among those doctors, nurses and health visitors who handle the pre—school stage of children's lives. Here, once again, my proposal would be for the inclusion, in the training of these services, of lectures devoted to the psychological aspect of child care and for closer cooperation between these individuals and the doctors social workers, play therapists and students who are working or training to work in the children's psychological centres.

It is the point of view of the Institute of Child Psychology, for whom I speak that body, mind and emotion form a total organism, and that damage to any two of these is done also to the third factor. I have found that it is demonstrable in many cases that severe damage to the whole of the future life of children can be brought about by the ignorant handling of children's emotional life in their pre-school stage. We would plead therefore for the following objectives:

- (1) That pressure be brought upon the authorities controlling all forms of training and education for either the medical or non-medical services concerned with the treatment and care of the pre-school child, for the inclusion in the curriculum of sections devoted to the study of the emotional life of children and particularly we would like to emphasise the importance of the inclusion of this aspect in the Diploma of Child Health.
- (2) The provision of visiting clinical psychotherapists for all centres where training is carried out in child care, or work for children is being done, for the demonstration of the psychological aspect of

their work. Such demonstrations could take place singly at fairly long intervals, and would be distinct from systematic courses of lectures as outlined in proposal (1)

- (3) The provision of fully trained psychotherapeutic physicians with special experience with children, for service in infant welfare centres. Particularly we would like to recommend the inclusion of a section properly equipped with interview rooms, play rooms, etc., for the psychological treatment of children in such centres as, for example, Willesden, which are equipped for all branches of physical care.
- (4) We would urge the attachment of a psychological physician, trained in the treatment and handling of adults, to the ante-natal and obstetric departments of the big hospitals for the service of mothers, as outlined earlier in this paper, in regard to their attitude to turn biological functions.