

Why Children Are Murderers

Psychiatry

By MARJORIE VAN DE WATER

Psychologists, psychiatrists, physicians, judges, teachers, parents, and social workers have all been enlisted in the campaign to search out the elusive causes of child crime and to devise methods of prevention and cure for this evil. Many interesting theories have recently been advanced, but it is difficult to find any two authorities who agree as to the principal cause and the best method of treatment. The reason for this divergence of opinion among experts probably lies in the fact that so many different factors enter into the situation; there is no single cause which leads children astray.

The youthful killer may be insane or emotionally unstable. Dr. L. Grimberg, after a clinical study of five hundred delinquents or, as he says, "criminals in the making," makes the following statement:

"More importance ought to be attached to the emotional aspect than to the question of the mentality. It is not sufficient to determine the I. Q. and classify the delinquent accordingly. It is true that the means at our disposal for the determination of emotional stability are as yet crude, but they have given definite and satisfactory results. There is really no reason why the law should not require the use of all the scientific methods available to determine the status of an individual, when that individual comes under the jurisdiction of the law for a criminal offense. . . .

"The driving force of our actions is not the intellect. In reality, the intellect is the controlling power. The driving forces are our emotions, and their stability is determined by the condition of our endocrine system."

Dr. William J. Hickson, Director of the Psychopathic Laboratory, Chicago Municipal Court, after a twelve-year study during the course of which over 40,000 Chicago criminals were examined, has come to the conclusion that most crime is committed by individuals who are emotionally unstable. He believes that a great many are victims of dementia praecox.

Dementia praecox is a disease of youth. Dr. Nolan D. C. Lewis, a psychiatrist at St. Elizabeth's Hospital, a U. S. Government hospital for the insane, believes that the dementia praecox patient is born with



SCHOOLS THAT GIVE A CHILD A CHANCE to "show off" in worthwhile ways remove the temptation for him to "show off" by rebelling against authority. Science recognizes this juvenile craving for attention as one of the major causes of child crime

the disease and that it may develop into an active phase at almost any time after birth. Definite cases have been observed as early as six years. The most likely time for the disease to become active is at the age of 14; it may come earlier than that, and frequently does not appear until much later. Unfortunately the onset of the active phase of the disease is often very sudden, and the child so seized is likely to surprise his parents and friends by suddenly making a violent attack upon a playmate or even committing murder. He would act upon a sudden impulse, with no previous warning, and perhaps with no provocation for this event.

Unfortunately, too, the early symptoms of the disease are not easily interpreted by the parents or teachers; they would be plain only to the trained psychiatrist who could give the child a thorough mental and physical examination. The child who is a victim of this disease is not ordinarily wild-eyed or raving. He has not those characteristics which are commonly associated with insanity. Quite the contrary. He becomes gradually but increasingly indifferent; he loses interest in even the most vital matters; all finer feelings

are lost; and he will show no emotion at the most tragic of occurrences.

It is this type of child who may some day commit a brutal, cold-blooded crime.

Another type of juvenile murderer is feeble-minded. The child of dull mentality contributes considerably more than his share to the total of juvenile crime. It is estimated that about two per cent. of the total population are of low mentality. If the feeble-minded were no more prone to criminal tendencies than those of normal intelligence, one would expect the same proportion to hold in criminal institutions. Investigators who have given mental tests to prisoners indicate, however that the proportion of feeble-minded among criminals is between 13.5 per cent. and 31 per cent. Even allowing for lack of cooperation among the prisoners tested, and taking into consideration the fact that probably the brighter criminals stand a better chance of escape from the law, we must consider the feeble-minded a greater crime risk than the normal person.

When the dull boy commits murder, it may be (*Turn to next page*)

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that he has been led into the situation by someone else. He is easily influenced, and will follow slavishly the dictates of a gang leader no matter to what end they may lead. Usually he has no adequate comprehension of the consequences of his acts. He certainly cannot be held responsible for what he does in the same sense that a normal child of equal age could be.

It is difficult to say that either feeble-mindedness or insanity is the cause of criminal tendencies, for undoubtedly many cases of both disabilities exist in harmless, well-behaved individuals. Students of heredity, however, recognize a definite relation between feeble-mindedness, criminality, alcoholism, and insanity. Often combinations of these tendencies appear in generation after generation of the same family.

A case which recently occurred in Alliance, Nebraska, is an illustration of a crime committed by a feeble-minded child. The boy, who was twelve years old, stole a two-months-old infant from the automobile of the baby's parents with the intention of killing it. He took the baby into a vacant lot, stripped it, and was hunting about for a suitable implement with which to chop off its head, when he was caught and saved from committing this dreadful deed. The boy, at 12, was in the second grade in school—five years behind normal boys of his age.

Fortunately, the very dull boy is easily distinguished by those having the care of him. Mental tests are available which will give at least a rough indication of the degree of ability with which any child can meet the problems ordinarily solved by others of his chronological age. The child's progress in school is usually a good indication of his mental ability, although this cannot be relied upon to make fine distinctions between individuals. The failure of a child year after year to progress from one grade to the next usually points to mental retardation.

The dull boy when detected should be given special care from his earliest years. He should be cared for as one would care for a child of his mental age; he should not be expected to assume the responsibilities ordinarily undertaken by those of his chronological age. He should be kept busy and interested at simple tasks which he can find pleasure in doing, and should be kept away from evil influences. With such intelligent care and supervision, he can usually



QUICKENED HEARTBEATS, quickened breathing are the normal reaction to emotion-stirring situations; murderers emote differently. This new emotion-tester's written record enables science to make telltale comparisons

be brought up to be a useful, constructive citizen, unconscious of his handicap.

The child slayer may have a physical defect. Dr. Max G. Schlapp, director of the New York Children's Court Clinic, and Edward H. Smith, in their recent book on "The New Criminology," place a large share of the blame for crime on the abnormal functioning of the ductless glands. These glands, which include the thyroid located in the neck, the pituitary at the base of the brain, and the adrenals on top of the kidneys, regulate the chemical composition of the body and the growth of the whole body, including the brain structure. The over-functioning or under-functioning of any one of the glands in a child may cause the upset of his whole personality. For example, the over-functioning of the thyroid makes a child high-strung, nervous, and erratic. If it fails to function the child is dull, fat, indifferent, and in many cases idiotic. The mentality and the emotions are both affected by diseases of the glands.

Epilepsy is another physical defect which probably contributes largely to child crime. When the physical effects of the epileptic fit are severe, the person affected is helpless and therefore unable to cause any

harm, but Dr. Schlapp points out:

"There will be times when he will experience all the psychic effects of the disease without the physical symptoms. That is to say, he will get confused, lose control of himself, grow dizzy, lose his memory and commit the strangest acts, including ferocious murders. These attacks are of an amnesic character, for the patient usually has no memory afterwards of the event which befell him while under the spell."

The child killer may be perfectly normal. He may have become a criminal merely as the result of faulty training.

The fact that in the case of one of the child murders, the tragic incident occurred while the parents were attending a murder trial at the county seat is very suggestive. One may well imagine the conversation over the supper table, the many details being discussed, and the intense interest displayed by the parents in the crime. Such situations are, unfortunately, not rare, yet this atmosphere gives the young child the impression that crime is the sure way of attaining fame—that murder is the ideal manner in which to secure the center of the stage. Most children are dramatic. Most children have the tendency to act out the the dramatic (*Turn to next page*)

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stories they hear. Most children are anxious to secure the attention of adults and their associates in school.

Prof. Robert T. Rock, of Catholic University, who gives psychological and psychiatric examinations to juvenile delinquents and other problem children in the District of Columbia, reports that many of the children with whom he comes in contact are quite normal healthy youngsters. Their trouble is just that they have never been taught, by either precept or example, true ethical values. One boy says, "Why should I work to earn money? My brother never worked, and see what a fine car he has!"

Those who have studied the child in the light of the new psychology tell us that the young boy or girl receives only the smallest part of his education in school. He is learning from us during all his waking hours, whether we are on guard or not—perhaps principally when we are not. Probably very few parents would deliberately tell a child that it was right to evade and disobey the law, and afterwards to lie and cheat to avoid punishment. Yet in too many cases a very young boy riding on the front seat of an automobile can watch the speedometer and see his father driving above the legal limit, he sees him ride past signals in an effort to outdistance the pursuing policeman, and finally hears him lie glibly to the officer when he is overtaken. The child is like a sponge in absorbing such experiences, to be influenced by them throughout his whole later life.

Educators now believe that children begin to learn at a much earlier age than we have supposed possible in the past. Long before they can talk, they are watching the parents and receiving impressions that will later influence their behavior. A father who comes home drunk and frightens his wife by a loud voice, domineering manner, and the display of small cruelties, may give his infant son the impression that this type of behavior is ideal. In later years, although he retains no conscious memory of such incidents he may exhibit the same behavior in his relations with a younger sister or young playmates.

This sort of unconscious imitation of others is called by the psychologists, "identification." We can *consciously* imitate only one person at a time, but we can identify ourselves with any number of people. Their

habits, mannerisms, ideals, and ways of thought may be adopted and made a part of us. In this way we may become a composite of all the characters who throughout our lives impress us and rouse our interest, whether the characters exist in real life or whether they are found in fiction or in the motion pictures.

Sometimes the teaching is more direct. How often we hear the expression "I'll kill you if you do that!" used carelessly before young children!

Then there is another method by which even the most well-intentioned parents may give children the wrong start. Psychologists have found that one of the first traits displayed by the young infant is the desire for attention. Probably nature has given this longing to human infants as a substitute for the ability to shift for himself which is the gift of the young of the lower animals. Certainly the lusty howl of the infant is a powerful weapon for forcing elders to produce the necessities of life. At first he uses it just for this purpose, but at a surprisingly early age he finds out that when he wakes up feeling bored or lonesome, a good strong cry will bring someone running. If this is kept up, before long he realizes that when he is good his elders go on about their own affairs and leave him alone. When he is bad, he immediately secures the coveted attention—the taking up out of his damp, wrinkled crib, the rocking, petting, and all the other known devices for soothing. The wise parent will give the child attention at certain regular intervals, preferably when he is not crying, rather than when he cries for it, thus breaking up this association of bad behavior and pleasurable results. The unwise parent will continue the same "education" throughout the childhood and boyhood of the son.

The school may in some cases contribute its share toward placing the "bad boy" in the limelight that he so strongly desires. When the boy does his school work as he should and turns in the right answers and behaves in an orderly fashion, he is unnoticed because he is like so many of his fellows. As Dr. Wilfrid Lay, a child psychologist of the new school, says, "It is an unfortunate fact that the early tasks of the school are generally those in which he (the child) is almost unable to express any individuality different from other children's. When, for instance, the

same ten examples in arithmetic are given to a class of forty children, and the forty sets of answers have to be exactly the same for each child, there is little scope for individuality. If the child wishes to be individual and make his work his own and different from other children's, he must have different answers to the examples—answers which are called *wrong!*" From the wrong answers, the child may progress to wrong behavior, and in the end he may devote his whole energies toward excelling his fellows in wickedness. He then becomes the central figure in his little world. He is called to the principal's office. He becomes the subject of repeated conferences and meetings of teachers, parents, neighbors, and friends. He is taken to court and allowed to tell his story to a new audience. Perhaps he even gets his story and his photograph into the newspaper. Finally he is sent to a reform school where he learns that after all he is only an apprentice in crime, and then he sets out with new zeal to improve his technique in wrong-doing.

Crime in children is not a disease in itself. Rather it is like a fever; it may be symptomatic of any of a score of diseases that affect the mind and body and soul of the child. Those who are called upon to deal with the child offender should look behind the particular misdeed, as the physician looks beyond the eruption on a child's chest. We may then be in a position to cure or remedy juvenile delinquency as well as we now can cure the measles.

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Plant "Camels"

Botany

When it comes to living without water, there are "camels" of the plant kingdom as well as of the animal kingdom, declares Dr. F. L. Pickett, head of the botany department of the State College at Pullman, Washington.

This botanist has discovered ferns and mosses in the semi-arid regions of the northwest that will live indefinitely without moisture, he says. While the ordinary plant will not grow without at least a four or five per cent. moisture content, these ferns and mosses may have their water content reduced to one-tenth of one per cent. and live in this condition indefinitely, he has found.

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