

Emotional inheritance: A dubious legacy

Along with the joy of parenting comes the rather frightening proposition of how much influence you have over your children. Behavioral scientists are building increasing evidence that parents' emotions and personalities, as well as their relationship with one another, have significant effects on a child's development and the events that influence the youngster's life.

Some of the most recent research was reported at this year's American Psychiatric Association meeting in Toronto. Separate reports point to definite links between: depressed mothers and the cognitive and emotional capabilities of their children; certain family types and the occurrence of father-daughter incest; and "super-rich" parents and the effects of their wealth and life-styles upon their youngsters.

Researchers at Harvard, the University of Chicago, Boston University and Tufts New England Medical Center performed a three-year follow-up on the offspring of 12 depressed, 18 schizophrenic and 22 well mothers. The children, ranging from 6 to 12 years of age, were tested with a variety of cognitive and social development measures. The groups were matched as closely as possible for age, social status, intelligence and, in the mothers, chronicity of illness.

Based on the results of those tests, the researchers, headed by Harvard's Henry Grunebaum, report that children "with a depressed mother showed markedly greater impairment than children of schizophrenic mothers and those with well mothers." The tests on which the offspring of depressed mothers fared poorly dealt with attention span, concentration and social functioning.

For the attention portion, the youngsters were instructed to identify and select a certain shape or color from a distracting background. In both time of selection and identification of the correct object, the children of depressed mothers did significantly poorer than either of the other two groups. Similar results were obtained on the concentration test, where youngsters were asked to pick out pre-designated letters on a revolving drum while viewing the drum through a small window. While the performance of the well and schizophrenic mother groups was about equal on this test, the depressed mothers' children were less accurate than the other groups.

The children's social functioning level was determined by interviewing mothers, fathers and the youngsters about areas of school, achievement, relationship with peers, competence around the home, symptoms, hobbies and hopes and fears for the future. The mothers' reports revealed that depressed women felt their children were doing significantly worse than did the control or schizophrenic mothers. Although the children's self-re-

ports were more positive than their depressed mothers', the sons of such mothers were less likely than those in the schizophrenic group to have a hobby or admit to problems at home. Daughters in the depressed group preferred to engage in solitary activities more so than their counterparts in the other groups. The researchers conclude that "long-standing psychotic depression could have a more pervasive impact on parenting, and thus on a child, than schizophrenia, an illness where symptoms may be confined to a single sector of the personality."

In a study of 15 victims of father-daughter incest, Judith Herman and Lisa Hirschman of the Women's Mental Health Collective, Inc., in Somerville, Mass., report certain "common features" within families prior to the occurrence of incest. Major predisposing conditions include an estrangement between the mother and daughter, extreme paternal dominance, the mother's inability to fulfill her traditional parental role and reassignment of some of the mother's major family responsibility to the daughter.

Oldest or only daughters are particularly vulnerable, the researchers report, and the daughter "assumes major respon-

sibility for preserving the integrity of the family. In this situation, she may feel obliged to fulfill her mother's sexual role as well as other maternal duties." Herman and Hirschman further state that the incest experience is psychologically harmful to the woman in later life, frequently leading to feelings of low self-esteem, unhealthy sexual activity, contempt for other women and other emotional problems.

Finally, Roy Grinker of Michael Reese Hospital in Chicago addresses the problems of a "grossly neglected" group: the children of the super-rich. In reviewing the cases of 15 such youngsters, Grinker identifies many of them as "empty robots" and "emotional zombies." He adds that such patients "have scant awareness of self and others, cannot tolerate frustration, are unconsciously so overwhelmed by . . . anxiety, rage, shame or guilt that they operate with every possible defense."

He traces the problems to environments of great freedom and wealth but little consistent discipline or healthy role models. Many traditional forms of psychotherapy fail to help such persons, Grinker says. Among the most promising approaches appears to be one that includes a strong identification with the therapist as a surrogate parent and alternative behavior model. □

UN launches cancer survey network

Some 80 to 90 percent of all cancers are now believed to be environmentally caused. Much of this incidence is caused by smoking, but scientists so far lack the precise data to pin down all factors that are important. Such information can only be determined by studying populations in many countries, living under a variety of different environmental conditions. The United Nations World Health Organization (WHO) last week launched a cancer surveillance network to make such comparative international studies possible.

If a Japanese male moves to the United States, his chances of developing stomach cancer diminish sharply, but he soon runs a higher risk of contracting cancer of the large intestine. No one is quite sure why. Neither do doctors know why black women in California have only half the risk of contracting breast cancer as white women. Studying the life-styles of such people, particularly the chemicals they are exposed to, should help solve the mystery.

In an international press conference via satellite, the director of the WHO International Agency for Research on Cancer, John Higginson, outlined his agency's plans. The proposed surveillance network would gather information from national cancer registries, where available, and directly fund limited surveys in some poorer countries. The emphasis will be on comparing incidence of cancer among people living under many different kinds of cir-

cumstances. High-risk groups for certain types of cancer will be identified and their exposure to suspected carcinogens monitored. Trends in cancer incidence that develop as life-styles change in Third World countries will be given particular attention. Some poorer countries have already expressed interest in the project, since they see cancer as a growing threat when they become more industrialized.

Higginson noted that if such a network had been in existence for the last decade, valuable information would now be available to suggest how serious a threat saccharin really is. The current argument over the artificial sweetener's possible danger as a cancer-causing agent is based entirely on animal studies, and little independent data exists to confirm or negate the supposed threat to humans.

After a two-year start-up period, the program is expected to cost about \$1 million a year; most of the actual data gathering and analysis will be done in participating countries. After five years of full operation, an evaluation will be launched, and Higginson says he expects at that time to have some answers to the puzzling questions about the environment's influence on cancer. The problem, he says, is that "it's hard to define 'life-style' in chemical terms."

In the United States, the National Cancer Institute will be providing data to the new network. □