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The Rejected Child

by 'CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST'

IT has been said that the 17th Century was the age of enlightenment; that the 18th Century was the age of reason, and the 19th Century the age of progress. It can equally be said that the 20th Century is the age of anxiety and fear of rejection.

Since the turn of the century, we have seen vast technological changes, and man has found himself to be master of the physical universe, in a sense hitherto undreamed. When we compare these technological changes with the advances that have been made in the mastery of human behaviour, we find that a considerable gulf exists. While technologically we are already looking into the future with the harnessing of atomic energy, socially and emotionally we are still being strangled by rigid customs, outmoded ideas, and the patriarchal system of the past. As Emanuel Miller has stated "Man has still the mind of a child and is yet handling the instruments of an adult."

Man today is searching for the knowledge that will enable him to be master of these technical changes, and not, as has often been the case so far, the victim of them! With this gulf, it is not surprising to find that modern man is a prey to anxiety and insecurity, and that he finds himself ill-equipped and rigid against the stresses of modern life.

An example of this is seen in the change from the traditional family of the past, to the isolated family unit of our big urban areas today. This traditional family, although cramped in its scope, did give to each individual member a degree of security and permanence. Each knew what his position was in the family group, each knew that he could only operate within certain clearly defined limits, and each knew that if he observed the conventions and obeyed the regulations, there was a certain and predictable future for him.

The family unit today, however, has to meet constant challenges from the world outside itself — a world which demands adaptability and plasticity, and which rejects as untenable the rigid and the unorthodox. It is not surprising, therefore, that during this period of transition so many of us feel isolated and rejected. "The rise of democracy set men free but it brought into existence a society where a man feels isolated from his fellows, where relationships are impersonal, and where insecurity replaces a sense of belonging." (Erich Fromm).

It is against this background, I feel, that the whole problem of the rejected child should be reviewed.

Modern psychology has made exhaustive studies of man, but perhaps the most important of these studies has been devoted to an appreciation and understanding of childhood. It has been discovered that the root of much adult maladjustment lies in childhood; that early relationships and the problems of early development are all-important.

There has been a revolution in our attitude towards children, and as a result, we have come to view children as persons who have value and interest because of their potential growth; whereas before there has been a tendency to regard them simply as immature specimens to be moulded into the likeness of their parents or of the class into which Nature has cast them.

Because the traditional family of the past based its education of the child on general views as to the correct social conventions, and not on the observation and recognition of individuals, no knowledge of the child as a separate entity was deemed necessary. Education broke with this tradition at the beginning of this century. Teachers were trained to become observant of the child as a unique personality, and were encouraged to help in the emancipation of childhood by giving guidance to parents on the way in which the young needed help in this business of growing up and developing to maturity. Discipline, for discipline's sake, was discouraged.

Although this new development was invaluable, teachers and parents could not, by themselves, have effected a radical change in outlook. This only arrived with the development of a new instrument of research, which penetrated deeper and further into the child's mind. The discoveries of psychology and psychological medicine have given a greater definition and exactness to this pioneer approach. They have shown that the growth of the child's mind is a far more complicated process than was once supposed, and that

much harm may be done to that growth if a method of upbringing is adopted which underestimates the complexities.

More simply, we have come to appreciate today that we are not dealing with a miniature adult, but with a living, growing, developing organism, which lives and exists in close inter-reaction with an ever changing environment and culture.

When we consider that the human infant, for several years after birth, is almost completely dependent on his parents for his physical and emotional needs, it at once becomes obvious that this means close mutual relationships between the child and the parents. We have come to realise too, that desirable attitudes are shown in love and affection for the child, with, at the same time, recognition of the necessity of giving him freedom to build his own independent existence, and we have come to understand too that the quality of parental care which a child receives in his earliest years is of vital importance to his future as a mature adult. If the parental figures deny recognition of his needs as a unique person, if they reject his right to realise his potential, then behaviour pathology is likely to be the consequence.

To assign a single factor as the cause of a behaviour problem is an impossibility. We know certain things about the development of personality and the effects of its disturbance upon conduct. Nevertheless, in the individual case, we cannot depend upon generalities. We must know a good deal about the child and the people with whom he comes in contact. And as I have already stated, among all the factors that are pertinent to the development of personality and conduct, those associated with the home are of supreme importance. The child's relation to his parents and to his siblings (brothers and sisters); the parents' attitude toward each other and toward the child; unsatisfactory material and economic aspects of the home and neighbourhood — all these, and a host of others play important parts in the child's development.

Of the undesirable attitudes which can arise in these relationships, rejection of the child by his parents is perhaps the most important. The most extreme rejecting attitude is one in which a particular child, or all the children, are literally unwanted. Among the common reasons for such an attitude are the increased economic burdens that additional children bring; interference with the activities of the parents and unhappiness in marriage.

The first reason — increased economic burdens — appears to be found more frequently in the lower economic groups, where additional children might mean a serious increase in the difficulties of mere living and existence.

Interference with the parents' activities is more usual in the higher economic levels, where the parents, and more particularly the mother, feel it incumbent upon them to participate actively in social life, clubs, or perhaps careers.

Unhappiness in marriage is an obvious reason for child rejection, as regardless of the cause of unhappiness, once it exists everything connected with it would be distasteful and unwelcome. It is a short step from this attitude to include the children of the distasteful marriage. They are frequently asked to take sides, and thus to become rejected by the opposing parent.

The most common attitude towards the unwanted child is antagonism and resentment. Most parents in this type of situation usually have a high ideal of their duty towards their children, and therefore attempt to conceal the fact that the responsibility for this child is really something intolerable to them. We know, however, how difficult it is to conceal emotional attitudes, and very rarely does the child fail to perceive their hostility. At the other extreme, the antagonism towards the child may be expressed in positive neglect or bodily harm.

Now let us look briefly at rejection from the viewpoint of a child. With our knowledge of early infancy, we appreciate that there is a tendency to strong, positive conditioning to the mother. She is the one who gratifies the infant, baths him, cuddles him and warms him. Hence he comes to love her, to need her, to depend on her — and, very important, to overvalue her as well as his father. As a result, the parents tend to become omniscient, omnipotent, godlike beings, and the young child attributes practically magical powers to them. This in turn, helps to make him feel completely safe and secure, and makes it possible for him to start building up his self-esteem and ego by pleasing these wonderful beings and securing their praise. As long as he feels that they are standing by him and are ready to assist and guide him his self-confidence grows.

But if the parent rejects the child; if he interferes consistently with the gratification of his needs; if he punishes him indiscriminately for having needs — sexual, eliminative, emotional, curiosity etc. — then the child feels not only re-

jected, but also helpless. In consequence, his self-esteem becomes profoundly shaken and uncertain.

At this point, I feel that I must mention that this rejection, however, does not destroy his need to love the parent and be loved by him, nor does it remove entirely the constant seeking for the satisfaction of his needs from the same parent. As you would imagine in such a conflicting situation, new and more complex reactions might be expected to appear, and from our knowledge of behaviour pathology, we have observed that such children exhibit severe anxiety, hostility, guilt and feelings of unworthiness.

Now, I would like, very briefly, to deal with a few of the forms that parental rejection takes. Investigators agree that rejection shows itself in three main ways:—

a. Physical neglect and bodily harm.

b. Harshness, severity, rigidity and cruelty.

c. Over-ambition, too high standards for the child, dissatisfaction with the child as he is.

As you will have noticed, all of these are expressions of either a lack of love for the child, or actual resentment against him. But there are many subtler forms which are associated with the mother's unconscious rejection of the child. For example, we have noticed that rejection may be expressed paradoxically by oversolicitude, where the mother worries so much about the child that she restricts his activities as she puts it, "for his own good", or "for your benefit, my child." Further, she may show a lack of recognition of him as a separate person.

In these examples, the child invariably feels that something is wrong, and as a result feels threatened and insecure. Frequently a child will have a conscious feeling of rejection, even though the mother is completely unaware that she is rejecting him. Another example of hidden rejection is seen in the mother who bargains with her affections. This is the mother who continually offers love as a reward for goodness and obedience, and threatens to withdraw her affection as punishment.

Here I would like to mention, that although physical cannibalism in our Western society has been outlawed for some thousands of years, emotional cannibalism on the part of parents toward their children is still a reality. Parents of this type place their children in an uncertain world — a world in which his basic need for affection and security may at any time be unsatisfied.

We should never forget that so deep and so constant is the child's need for affection, and for being certain and safe about it, that any tampering with it strikes deeply at his psychological stability.

Other mothers try to cover up their rejection of the child by an elaborate show of affection, or by showering the child with the material goods of this world. In such cases, although the mother might not be aware of her motivations, the child is fully cognizant of the fact that he has been rejected. For example, it is not mother's chocolate cake he craves, but mother's love; he may however, steal the former if he cannot get the latter.

In this age of fashion consciousness and streamlined figures, many a mother feels that she is less attractive to her husband as the result of childbirth, and because of the demands of the child, has less time and energy for him. Because of her own insecurity, she feels that she might lose his love, and naturally, though often unconsciously, blames the child and thus rejects him.

Another cause of rejection is when the child is unsatisfactory in some way, for example, physical or mental defect. There is a tendency to reject such a child and, furthermore, to experience a sense of shame and guilt at having given birth to him. Physical abnormality in our society is easier to accept than mental abnormality, and in the case of the latter, many mothers tend either to refuse to face the fact or to reject the child.

Now, I feel that I should say a few words on the results of rejection.

As must be obvious at this stage, parental rejection is the method par excellence of creating insecurity in the child; an insecurity that is likely to persist through life unless something is done about it. Symonds, summing up the studies of parental rejection, finds that the rejected child is likely to be characterised as aggressive, rebellious, hostile, jealous, attention-seeking, difficult in school, hyper-active etc. At the more extreme level he may show such delinquencies as truancy, thieving and lying.

Rejected children may make a psychological protest in the form of difficult behaviour, or they may respond by depression and anxiety. In the first case, which is probably the more healthy from the mental point of view, the child behaves in a rebellious and defiant way. Here, he feels hated and responds by hating, frequently turning

his resentment against authority and on to society. In observation of these children, it often appears as though they are seeking to get rid of a guilt feeling (due to a sense of unworthiness at being unwanted) by making others responsible for controlling their destructive impulses. It is as if they are seeking someone powerful enough to control them and condemn them for their wrongdoing — deliberately seeking self-punishment in order to draw attention and thus compensate for the feeling of rejection.

In the second case, i.e. by depression and anxiety, it is accompanied by feelings of unworthiness and self-reproach. Here the child feels insecure for he has lost his base — the support on which he relies. In these cases, certain anxiety symptoms are common, e.g. disturbance of digestive processes, constipation, diarrhoea, incontinence due to anxiety, sometimes stammering, and psychosomatic complaints like asthma, or more frequently a general moodiness or fearfulness.

D. M. Levy has stated that the essential motivation of the rejected child is a hunger for love, resulting from "starvation" from lack of love. If this is so, then it seems that these results of rejection will only be managed when the child regains hope and feels safe and secure again. Then he needs desperately to build up some firm, loving relationship with some *one important person.*

I mentioned earlier that we must not underestimate the complexities of the child. We need not be afraid of complexity if it is understood; indeed we have noticed that Man has in the long run suffered more from hasty oversimplifications than from confusion over complexities, for oversimplication has led him to assume that he has mastered the problem, when in fact, without being aware of it, he has found only refuge from present difficulties in slogans, formulas, techniques and barbiturates.

We must also not fall into the over-simplification of putting ALL the blame on parents for the neurotic ills of their children. This is not only unfair to parents, but is a disservice to the children because it tends to obscure the importance of the child's own drive and needs, and to regard him merely as a piece of inactive plastic material. We must remember, then, that there are inherent difficulties in mental adjustment which are liable to cause trouble, no matter how good the home.

Further, if the parents are always working on the assumption that something they have done has made the child anxious, they will constantly be on the look-out for some recent and specific action of their own as its cause. As a result, they become tense and anxious themselves, and become terrified to exert any parental influence at all in the development of their children.

In this way, they too can reject the child, and thus foster the very things they are trying to avoid.

I feel that the really important factor in all handling is the "*general attitude*" of the parents, and the way in which the *ordinary details* of life are conducted. I feel further that the crises and decisions which occupy so much time in parents' questions are of far, far less significance than the overall pattern of inter-reaction with their children.

If I am asked by parents as to the best way of handling our new knowledge, I say to them — "First get to know your child as a unique individual, then learn to enjoy him as he progresses along his developmental path to maturity, and finally let him enjoy you, as a human being who is living the pattern of life, dynamically in close collaboration with him."

I feel if we do this, the fear of rejection will lose its intensity.

OUR PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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adjusts itself to the demands of the processes of growth and maturation.

The imposition of a rigid programme and a tight syllabus means that all children are forced forward at the same pace. This will result in failure for some and failure in the initial stages of learning can inhibit future learning.

Is the time not propitious for educationalists in South Africa to look afresh at the primary school as an entity in itself and make a thorough investigation of its scope and function?

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(2) "The Teachers' World", No. 2478, Vol. XCII, May 1, 1957. p. 1.
(3) Report of the Superintendent of Education, Natal, 1952, p. 13.
(4) Ibid, p. 17.
(5) Report of the Overseas Commission, Transvaal, 1955.
(6) Report, Director of Education, Transvaal, 1957, p. 10, 1955, 37.
(7) Reports of the Director of Education, Transvaal, 1952-1957.
(8) Report of the Director of Education, Transvaal, 1957, p. 10
(9) Report, Superintendent General of Education, Cape, 1958, p. 5; Report, Director of Education, O.F.S., 1955.
(10) Department of Education, O.F.S., 1955.
(11) Reports, Director of Education, Transvaal, 1955, p. 9; Superintendent General of Education, Cape, 1958, p. 13.