

EDUCATION OF THE FEBBLEMINDED IN THE HOME

by

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Any plan for institutionalization, colonization, or even social supervision of all the feeble-minded in the community inevitably arouses an immediate storm of protest as to the cost of such a procedure. That it would be costly, there can be no doubt. Dr. Kuhlmann has given us some staggering figures regarding the probable number of the feeble-minded in this state, which, amazing as they may seem, are nevertheless not out of proportion to those available from other sources of a similar nature. Moreover, we must not forget that the level of intelligence required for probable self-maintenance in ordinary society is constantly rising as more and more of the simple tasks which make little demand upon abstract intelligence are being performed by machines. One machine may replace a hundred morons but it takes a man with some intelligence to run it. As the intellectual demands of an industrialized society become increasingly greater, the number of those who are unable to meet the demands steadily increases. In other words, if, today, we consider that the dividing point between probable normality and probable feeble-mindedness falls somewhere in the neighborhood of an intelligence quotient of 70, the chances are that before long we shall need to raise the standard to 75, 80 or even higher as more and more of the jobs requiring brawn give place to those demanding brain.

Because of their overwhelming numbers and the inadequate institutional facilities to be found in most states, society has in general assumed a laissez faire attitude with regard to the individual mental defective up to the point where he starts to make trouble. In the public schools, as both Dr. Kuhlmann and Dr. Rockwell have pointed out, the feeble-minded child who is obedient and docile stands a much smaller chance of being transferred to a special class than does the one who misbehaves. Likewise, it is the feeble-minded delinquent, rather than the one who is neglected and mistreated at home, who is transferred to an institution.

All this is commonly excused on the basis of expense. The special class in the public school finds one of its chief supports in the argument of economy. "Let the home provide for the physical care of the child," so say the proponents of this plan, "and while it is true that the cost of educating him by the special class method will be greater than that of educating him in the regular grades, it will be much cheaper than placing him in an institution and the regular classes will be freed from the drag of having him in the room."

I do not believe that the cost of educating the feeble-minded in the home has ever been adequately considered. I do not refer only to the children who do not attend school. The public school at most cares for children for five to seven hours a day, five days a week, nine or ten months out of the year. Considered on an annual basis, this is about one eighth of their total time or about one third of their total waking time. If we add to this the fact that the home has exclusive charge of training during the formative years before entering school, together with the factor of

irregular attendance which makes a further subtraction from the time spent in school and adds to that spent in the home, we must admit that on a time basis, at least, the part played by the home in the education of the child greatly exceeds that of the school.

How much of the cost of this home training is borne by the community at large? Evidently the answer will vary with the type of training and, consequently with the type of home. For the purpose of this analysis we may divide the homes from which feebleminded children come into three broad groups; those in which both parents are feebleminded, those in which only one parent is feebleminded or in which both parents belong to what is known as the "borderline" group, and those in which both parents are normal.

There is an old and well-substantiated theory about the probable outcome when the blind try to lead the blind. My own experience with the home training given by feebleminded parents to their feebleminded offspring is in full accordance with expectation. Although exceptions exist, it is nevertheless true that the typical feebleminded person is highly unlikely to provide for his children a home that meets even the minimum standards for healthy development. On the physical side, food is likely to be scanty, poorly planned and badly cooked, with meals at irregular hours and served with little regard for sanitation. The home is likely to be located in a part of the city where the children are exposed to many undesirable influences from which the parents, themselves but children, are quite unable to protect those other children for whom fate has somehow made them responsible. Is it surprising that under such circumstances many of the children become delinquent? And can we be quite sure that in leaving these children in their homes we have effected a real economy?

The second group, which includes those homes in which one parent is feebleminded or both belong to the borderline class differs from the first group in two ways. First, and most important, such homes may be expected to include both normal and feebleminded children, whereas in the first group, if the diagnosis of mental deficiency in both parents is correct, normal children are of rare occurrence. Secondly, while the social status of such families is usually low, fairly respectable homes with decent living conditions may sometimes be found among them, if the influence of the normal parent is strongly dominant or the circumstances have been unusually favorable. The suitability of such homes for the rearing of children must, then, be judged on the basis of their individual merits.

The third class, including homes in which both parents are normal but one or more of the children is feebleminded presents a problem of a somewhat different nature. Assuming that the parents are of respectable character and financially able to provide for their children it has been felt rather generally that the feebleminded child should either be sent to a private institution at the parent's expense or be kept in the home at least until after the age of puberty. But what about the other children who are normal? Most of us who have had clinical experience are familiar with instances in which the presence of a feebleminded child in the family has been the source of the keenest embarrassment to the other children, sometimes to the extent of making them unwilling to invite their

friends to the home or of inducing rather serious emotional upsets and behavior maladjustments. While it is not my purpose today to discuss the social problems directly arising from the presence of a feeble-minded child in a normal family, it is not out of place to point out that here, too, a temporary saving may be gained at too dear a cost.

That the social consequences and community expenditures resulting from mental deficiency do not, by any means, stop with the financial support of the feebleminded themselves is a fact that has been long recognized. The inability of the feebleminded to "conduct themselves and their affairs with ordinary prudence" makes them especially prone to fall victim to the unfortunate environmental conditions under which many of them are reared. The high percentage of feebleminded among juvenile delinquents and among unmarried mothers has been pointed out by practically all who have studied these groups. Yet we may well doubt whether the mental deficiency has been the immediate cause of these offenses. In the majority of instances its role seems to have been an indirect rather than a direct one. I know of no evidence that the feebleminded child reared in a respectable home by parents of average intelligence is any more likely to become delinquent than his normal brothers and sisters. On the contrary, many of the feebleminded seem to be characterized by a special kind of plasticity, a readiness to accept without question the standards of conduct, the social mores of the people by whom they are surrounded, and to conform to these standards just as far as their limited abilities enable them to do. Far more than the normal child who soon begins to form ideas of his own about what is and what is not the thing to do, the feebleminded child is the tool of circumstance. Reared in favorable surroundings, he may and in a large percentage of cases does, become a burden upon his family or upon the community at large. But the chances of his becoming an active behavior problem are not very great.

If this point of view is correct, the community aspects of mental deficiency take on a somewhat different aspect. Not only are we concerned with lessening the number of the feebleminded in future generations through sterilization or segregation of the feebleminded in the present generation, but our efforts become centralized on seeing to it that no feebleminded person shall be entrusted with the rearing of children. Science has given us no final answer to the question as to the amount of time that would be needed to eliminate hereditary mental deficiency from the population by means of such a program. Perhaps the most dependable estimate is that of R.A. Fisher published in the J. of Heredity in 1927, from which it appears that approximately 11 per cent of the feebleminded of any generation come from matings between the feebleminded of the past generation and about 89 per cent from the carrier group. Thus in a population which originally contained 330,000 feebleminded, stopping all propagation among this group would yield a second generation including about 293,700 feebleminded, all of whom come from "carriers" who are themselves normal. But reductions in the number of feebleminded in succeeding generations would be exceedingly slow since the reservoir of carriers from which all such individuals would then come, will be affected only slightly after the first generation. It is estimated that in a population in which the original proportion of feebleminded was one in a thousand, it would require about 68 generations or two to three thousand years, not to eliminate hereditary feeblemindedness entirely, but merely to decrease that proportion

from one in a thousand to one in ten thousand, if it were done merely by stopping all propagation among the feebleminded.

But is the reduction in the number of the feebleminded the only benefit which we may fairly hope to gain from such a program? I do not believe that it is and it is my purpose today to emphasize the point that the social problems arising from mental deficiency are to a very large extent the result of the rearing of the feebleminded by the feebleminded. This is particularly true with those of the higher grades, many of whom could be self-supporting, wholly or in part, if they were so trained from the beginning that they would form desirable habits of work, take a reasonable pride in their accomplishments and accept whatever social supervision by properly constituted authorities it may seem wise to impose upon them. This involves wise training from the beginning, training of a kind that is likely to be impossible so long as the feebleminded are reared by the feebleminded under the kind of environmental conditions with which the unsupervised feebleminded are likely to surround themselves.

The biological consequence of permitting the feebleminded to reproduce their kind is something that I think few of us here will seriously question. The desirability of decreasing the numbers of the feebleminded in future generations by segregation or sterilization of the present generation, even though the rate of decrease would probably be far slower than many have optimistically supposed is again a fact which I think we shall all grant. ~~But the sociological advantages resulting from the fact that in preventing~~ the feebleminded from becoming parents we are at the same time preventing them from becoming responsible for the care and rearing of children is a point that has been, I think, insufficiently stressed and that may be quite as significant from the standpoint of lessening the burden due to the feebleminded as is the decrease in their numbers which may be expected to go along with it. It has been my experience, moreover, that it is far easier to make the average layman "see the point" when the environmental aspect of such a program is stressed than when it is recommended on the basis of its eugenic aspects alone, and that one is far less likely to run foul of religious prejudices and concern over the "rights of the individual." Moreover, unlike the eugenic benefits which are, by comparison, slow and uncertain, the environmental advantages would appear in full degree within the first generation after a complete sterilization or segregation program were put into effect. Feebleminded individuals would still be born in large numbers but feebleminded parents would no longer exist. It is not within our power, by any methods now known to science, to insure that all children will be endowed with normal intelligence but it is possible, within the course of a single generation to insure that all children, the feebleminded as well as the normal, will be born to parents who are capable of providing for them the kind of training that only persons of normal intelligence can be depended upon to give.