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Scott E. W. Bedford

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## HOW CAN CHILDREN BEHAVE IF PARENTS MISBEHAVE?

SCOTT E. W. BEDFORD, PH. D.<sup>1</sup>

A lot is today written and said about the wild young people and their behavior. Give me your attention as something is written about the wild actions of parents, because the behavior of some of them is questionable; the worst of it being, they are supposed to know better and set the example for their children. The contagion of a bad example seems, at times, as virulent as a biological infection. We cannot always find out the behavior of adults; but in the case of those who came to the attention of the United Charities of Chicago in the recent study of 184 families we got tab on them.

By way of introduction to the subject of the virulency of an adult example, consider the following cases:

Ralph W., a Polish child, was 14 years old and the eldest of 8 children when his father, while drunk, attempted to kill his second wife who was Ralph's step-mother. After he had left her for dead, insensible on the floor, he shot and killed himself. The mother had received many previous beatings, but ones with less tragic endings. While she was in the hospital recovering from her injuries, the children were placed in temporary homes, but they were so fond of their mother that they ran away and came back to their old neighborhood trying to find her. Neighbors cared for them until the home was reestablished.

Shortly after the mother's return, Ralph began to give trouble. He seemed to assume the position of the male head of the house (and with the position, some of his father's objectionable behavior). He stayed out late at night and refused to give an account of himself; he threatened to beat his mother and talked of killing her, when things did not please him. He bought a small gun which he carried until it was taken from him by an officer of the Juvenile Court.

The following is a picture of the environment of one child who became delinquent:

Veronica, at seventeen, is a dirty, rouged, powdered little factory girl with long earrings and other cheap jewelry. She and her mother have been reported by the neighbors as frequently entertaining men callers at night. Because of the nature of the home conditions, the Juvenile Court has placed in institutions, the three school children of the family.

The childhood of the girl was spent in three small rear tenement rooms. There were never less than six persons in the family, which

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<sup>1</sup>United Charities of Chicago Research Secretary.

always meant two persons to a room. There were no sheets and pillow-cases. The family's food habits were so poor that the younger children needed operations on their legs to correct the results of their rachitic condition. After a noisy, drinking father had deserted, her mother lived with another drinking man, to whom she was never married, and who afterwards deserted, too. Veronica, the oldest child, did not start to school from her Polish speaking home, until she was ten, so was in a classroom with children four years her junior. She went frequently with Anton, a younger brother, to the South Water Street market to pick up discarded vegetables and fruit, but they did not stop with the discarded ones, and often picked up others. She was arrested once for taking sixteen pounds of butter. She sometimes begged in hotels.

The mother protested that she wanted the children to attend school regularly; she did not want them to go to the market, and said she spanked them for doing so. Her protests may be discounted, because of the fact that she gave them the carfare for their trips and received the food they brought home.

Veronica was aware of the moral conditions in her home and knowingly referred to the younger illegitimate children as "the foundlings."

Disregarding Veronica's heredity, we seemed to have enough in her environment to make delinquency inevitable. The factors in Veronica's environment were:

- Immorality of the mother—or behavior.
- Room crowding.
- Poor neighborhood.
- Poor food habits.
- Lack of English.
- Late entry in school.

#### ADULT DELINQUENCY OF BOTH PARENTS

In the three instances of adult delinquency of both parents, two of the couples had lived together illicitly; in the third family, both the father and mother begged persistently. In one family both parents exhibited personality difficulties, refusing all plans for the upbuilding of their very anemic and underweight children. The man was a good workman, only occasionally unemployed.

#### BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS OF MEN

The behavior problems of the men were:

Imprisonment .....	5
Non-support .....	6
Intemperance .....	16
Desertion .....	12
Dishonesty .....	1
Sex delinquency.....	2

### IMPRISONMENT

In the 5 cases in which imprisonment was the main problem, one was a false charge and in another the man protested he had not known the tires which he bought, were stolen. One was for a confidence game, one for robbery with a gun, and one man, while drunk, shot and killed a boarder in the home. Only the last man was recorded as intemperate, but two of them were abusive to their wives; the other three were reported as pleasant and kind at home. Two of the men were buying homes at the time of their imprisonment.

#### *Non-support*

Non-support was the main problem in six families. Three of the men had periods of unemployment; three were intemperate, two gambled, two were quarrelsome at home, one was abusive to his family, and one deserted for awhile.

One of these men, capable as a bookkeeper and auditor, with a wife and eight children to support lost his position because he failed to observe office hours in spite of repeated warnings.

He seemed quite unconcerned about his irregular work. He was fond of adventure and travel, had gambled heavily but said he no longer did so. He was careless of his personal appearance. He refused a position at \$175.00 a month because he felt the work was worth more. He admitted his faults, was a graduate of an English College, and had married a housemaid. His wife, easy-going and good-natured, refused court action when her husband did not work for three months. He preferred to have aid on a loan basis and has partly repaid it. (He is now working at \$200.00 a month.)

#### *Intemperance*

This was the main problem in 16 instances, all among men. Nine of these men subjected their families to physical abuse, beating the wife and children with leather straps and even cat-o'-nine-tails, and in one instance, beating the wife to insensibility with a baseball bat.

Three men were disagreeable at home, frightening the children and driving the older children from the home as soon as they were able to work. When not intoxicated, one was agreeable, being described as pleasant, talkative, and helpful at home; while another, a generous, likeable man, practiced petty larceny when intoxicated. One of these men passed fraudulent checks, usually to the saloon keeper, and another was deceitful and evasive and used an alias to escape detection.

*Desertion*

In 12 families desertion constituted the chief problem and here, the Polish and American born predominated, 9 out of the 12 being of these nationalities.

Reports from the family, relatives, landlords, Unions, and employers gave a picture of their characteristics, for the men were seldom interviewed by the case worker.

Six men, when at home, were quarrelsome and abusive of their wives and children. (One father swore and used obscene language before the children, so that his wife, a good mother, refused to take him back on his re-appearance.)

They were chronically in debt, indifferent concerning their bills, and of irregular work habits: . . .

Mr. P.; a young American, married his Bohemian wife after a short acquaintance at the factory at which they both worked. The girl, who had been in America six years, was quiet, hard working, and respected by her factory mates, and her neighbors. The man was restless, irritable, and lazy, working irregularly and gambling. The marriage took place, in spite of warnings to the girl from her friends and employer. Mr. P. deserted when his wife was six months pregnant with her second child. He returned at Christmas when the baby was born, but left again two months later. Mrs. P. seems well, is an excellent housekeeper and mother. She is thrifty and industrious and well liked by her neighbors. She plans to take her husband back, if he returns, to give him "one more chance."

## OTHER ADULT DELINQUENCIES

Three Americans and two Italians were delinquent in other ways than already mentioned. One American was dishonest in business, and the other two were sex delinquents. The delinquencies of the Italians were cruelty to the family and rape of the step-daughter.

An American, Mr. M., had had two years of university work and was married to a high school graduate who had had additional business college training. He was irresponsible and deceitful; deserted his family and philandered with other women, even bringing one to live in the home for awhile. He appeared easy-going and good natured. His wife, though hard-working and sensible, did not seem to resent her husband's objectionable qualities, although not unaware of them. Her tolerance and the affection the man inspired in his wife and children were the cohesive factors in the family. When Mr. M. became ill with incipient tuberculosis, he refused the sanitarium care offered and left for California with a friend who was motoring. It was the social worker's impression that his eagerness to leave Chicago was explained by the fact that he wished to escape some of the women he had previously known.

He has been able to do out-of-doors foreman work ever since his arrival in California, and has bought a cottage which he had ready for the family when relatives sent them out. According to latest reports, he has settled down and is working regularly.

#### BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS OF WOMEN

The women's behavior problems were:

Personality difficulties.....	2
Sex delinquencies.....	5
Manufacture of moonshine.....	2
Desertion .....	1

In the two instances where the main problem was personality difficulty of the wife, one of these women was erratic and abusive, and an inveterate quarreler with the neighbors. The husband was a steady workman, with a good record, buying his own home.

The other woman was a gentle, pleasant woman, much loved by her children. She spent most of her time in bed, saying she was too weak and nervous to attend to her household affairs; she was slovenly, and brooded over the disappearance of a very brilliant daughter. She appeared to be a religious fanatic and awaited the judgment day which she felt was near. After her husband left her, she spent long hours in prayer, with a paroled insane man who had lived at her home awhile. Her young daughter, a high school girl, was not protected by her mother from his unwelcome advances. She also harbored her drunken brother, who was found tied to his bed, shouting and cursing.

#### SEX DELINQUENCIES

There were five instances where the main problem was sex delinquencies of women. In one case it was the oldest daughter of the family, who had three illegitimate children. The family was English and Irish, the father old and unemployed, the mother a poor house-keeper and of questionable morals. One widow was sexually promiscuous, while three other women lived with men to whom they were not married.

#### MANUFACTURE OF MOONSHINE

Two Polish women manufactured and sold moonshine. One was a widow; the husband of the other was tubercular, being in the sanatorium much of the time.

#### DESERTION

One woman who had endured her husband's occasional abuse and continuous niggardliness for ten years, became infatuated with a neighbor, the father of six children. Together, they fled from Philadelphia, he

deserting all his children and she deserting an infant and a seven-year-old boy, and bringing a little five-year-old with her. She explained that in the excitement of leaving, she did not think of them, but this little one was "playing around."

She and her companion established a home in Chicago, assumed an alias, and endeavored to conceal the facts by elaborate deceit. . . .

A deserting Italian mother took with her two of her children, leaving her husband because of his unkindness to her.

#### JUVENILE

In the 184 families studied, delinquency was present in 23 homes—24 boys and 6 girls. The ages of the boys ranged from 9 to 17 years; of the girls from 9 to 16 years.

Truancy and stealing were the delinquencies of the boys, which occurred most frequently. The boys also stayed out late at night, begged in front of theaters, ran away from home, worked illegally, and one boy spent much of his time in pool rooms.

By way of conclusion, it may be said that if children are ungrown adults, and while children, they get their examples from the adults they know most intimately, their parents, and if these parental examples are unworthy, then how can society condemn these individuals, either when they are children or adults, for their unsocial behavior? So how can we expect children to behave if parents misbehave?

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