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CAN YOU TRUST THEM?

L. Wallace Hoffman¹

Eddie was an irresponsible boy of fifteen. Two weeks ago he had been arrested and placed in detention in the Child Study Institute. The police report showed he had broken into a store and had stolen some money and cigarettes. It was not his first appearance in Juvenile Court. The chief probation officer eyed him searchingly. Eddie's hearing was to come up before the Judge the following week.

"You were on privilege last night, and went to a show. Why didn't you run away when you had the chance?"

"Gee, that was the first time I ever was trusted. I didn't want to let them down like that!"

All of which sums up in a nut shell, the reaction of more than three thousand children to a revolutionary procedure in juvenile detention and gives the answer as to why "the privilege system" is a permanent feature of the treatment process carried on in the Juvenile Court of Toledo. But let us look back a few years and see how it all started.

In September 1937 Paul W. Alexander, newly elected judge, was completing the reorganization of the Juvenile Court of Lucas County. The Detention Home had been one of the sore spots. One of the first moves was the installation of a professional staff. The services of one of the city's leading pediatricians was secured and nursing service was provided by the Board of Health. A psychologist, experienced in the Juvenile Court field was placed in charge of the building, the name of which was changed to "The Child Study Institute." The Director was given two assistant psychologists, a psychiatrist, and an experienced group worker to supervise the children. The social case work necessary for carrying out the program was done by qualified case workers from the Juvenile Court. The entire philosophy underlying the operation of detention was altered. It was felt that the custodial problem was of secondary importance and should be relegated to that position by the method of operation of the program. Of primary importance was the question of studying the individual and working out such programs as might be of assistance to the Court in making a final determination of the case. The question of morale of the children during the period of detention was important. That it was at a low ebb was indicated by the large number of escapes attempted and carried out successfully. Some children had received minor injuries in such attempts—some had been injured seriously. With the reorganization of the

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staff, a positive program to meet the problem of escapes and internal discipline was in order.

In consultation with the chief probation officer and the chief psychologist, the judge determined upon the installation of a privilege system. The idea had been used in correctional institutions with varying degrees of success but never had it been applied to temporary detention. It was argued that adolescent instability combined with the uncertainty of an undecided court case would result in disillusionment if the plan were adopted. A boy or girl facing commitment to an industrial school would run away if given the opportunity, it was reasoned. However all arguments failed to swerve the course of action. It was obvious that old time worn methods of detention lacked a constructive aspect—the proposed plan appeared constructive. It was therefore determined to give it a fair trial.

On September 15, 1937 it was placed in operation. One by one the children then in detention were called in for a conference with a psychologist. The plan was outlined. They were advised that their case would henceforth be handled by both a psychologist and a probation officer. The probation officer would do all of the field investigation. The psychologist would do the examining and testing in the Institute and be available at all times for conference. During the period of detention everything would be done by the court workers to work out a solution to his problem. However his full cooperation was essential if it was to be worked out for his best interests. During the interview he was encouraged to talk and ask questions about the court, its officers, and method of operation. He was shown that the building was not escape proof. The privilege system was outlined.

All children would be eligible for privilege after they had been in detention for one week. Actual admission to "privilege status" would be determined by the psychologist and the probation officer in conference with the Director of the Institute. If admitted to privilege they would be allowed to go swimming on Monday nights, to a movie on Friday nights (passes furnished by the theatres), to a sports event on Saturday, and to their home for Sunday dinner. With the exception of swimming, boys are released without a supervisor in attendance. Girls are accompanied by supervisors on evening privilege. In addition there were numerous building privileges that would be available from time to time. These included acting as dining room supervisor, assisting the supervisors, running errands in and around the building.

"That sounds all right but what do I have to do," was the invariable comeback of the children. "Just this," said the psychologist, "you are brought in here because you have done something wrong. Now the Court wants to help you. If you continue to do these things it will mean more trouble for you and that is what we all want to avoid. I think we can help you. But I think you should stay here with

us for a while. We want to know you better and decide what we can do to help you. While you are here you will go to school during the day. After school you will go to the recreation room where you can play basketball or ping pong, wrestle, box, or work out on the bars. We have a work shop where you can do airplane modeling, weaving, or wood work. If you want to read we have a library with plenty of books. There are a lot of other boys here and we want you to learn to get along with them, just as you will have to learn to get along with boys when you are at home. We want you to help us learn more about yourself. If you will do this you will be given privileges after a week. Of course when you are on privilege you will be on your honor. You will be expected to go to the place where you are sent and to return at the time agreed upon. While you are away from the building you will be expected to conduct yourself in a way that no one could find fault with you. If you violate any of the rules of privilege then you will lose your privileges. If you commit a major violation then all of the boys in the building will lose their privilege, for a week. You see, you have an obligation to the other children in the building as well as to yourself. And one thing more. If anyone escapes from the building then all children lose privilege for one week. When anyone escapes he hurts himself, the court, and all the other children. It's a lot like it is on the outside. When you are home and do things wrong it hurts your family. In here it hurts all the boys and girls in the building. You have to play fair with other people if you want them to play fair with you."

This in essence is the explanation given to the children. It is now repeated to all children brought into the building for detention. But let us go back to 1937 again. From September 1937 to December 31, 1938 six hundred children were admitted to privilege status. All were children awaiting final hearing on their cases. These 600 children were released from the building a total of 3,500 times for periods ranging from one to six hours. Two committed a minor delinquency (theft from parking meters) while on privilege. There were nine other minor violations which consisted chiefly of over-staying the allotted time by fifteen minutes to one hour. Two failed to return to the building and were picked up at their homes the following day. In all there was a total of 13 violations in 3,500 releases. In the first eight months of 1937 there were 30 escapes from the building. During the last four months of the year following establishment of the privilege system there was one escape involving two boys. During the calendar year 1938 there were three escapes. At the end of 1938 an adjustment was made in the program with the result that a somewhat smaller number were eligible to privilege.

During 1939, privilege status was extended to 267 children who were released a total of 2,840 times. There was not a single major violation during this time. The most serious violation consisted of

exceeding the time limits and failing to return on time. This occurred in nine of the 2,840 releases. During the entire year there were only three escapes from the building.

In 1940 three hundred and one children were extended privilege status. They were released a total of 2,687 times. One boy ran away and left town, was apprehended a week later and returned. There were three other minor violations which included smoking, overstaying leave, and visiting home without permission. During the year there were three escapes from the building.

Experience with the plan shows the following:

In 1941, 225 children were released, a total of 1976 times. During the year there was but one escape, one runaway on privilege, one delinquent act and four minor violations.

In 1942, 356 children were admitted to privilege 1901 different times. There were no major and only 9 minor violations this year. There were two escapes from the building.

A total of more than five years' experience with this plan shows the following: Number of children admitted to privilege—1749; Total number of times these children released—12904; New offenses on privilege—3; Minor violations—38; Runaway on privilege—4; Escapes from building—12.

The explanation for the smaller number of children on privilege during 1941 and 1942 is that the building was under quarantine for sixty days each year, which cut off admissions for that period and made it impossible to release children on privilege.

Another measure of the value of the privilege system is found in the improved morale of the children while they are in the building. Discipline problems have almost vanished. Corporal punishment is not used and the children have come to feel that they have a definite responsibility in the maintenance of the building morale, as well as an obligation to the other children in the building. This aspect of group responsibility has made it possible to work more closely with the children and to draw for them an analogy between their responsibility in the Institute and in the community after their release. Privilege has given us the opportunity to observe the individual's reaction to responsibility and has been an important aid to predicting reaction to proposed plans of treatment. It has contributed much to the effective work of the Institute and the probation officers and is regarded as being one of the fundamental reasons why the court over a period of less than four years has succeeded in reducing the number of repeaters by fifty percent.

Yes you can trust them—IF you can trust your own judgment. In letting them know you trust them you lay the ground work for the development of good citizenship and more 'successful cases.'

"Right you are Eddie, you can't let them down and I'm glad we had the courage to let you prove it."