

Letters to the Editor

Role of Parents in the Etiology of Infantile Autism

"They are intelligent persons, good citizens, devoted friends. But they are decidedly not from Missouri. If to others seeing is believing, to them believing is seeing." (Leo Kanner, "In Defense of Mothers" p. 14)

To the Editor:

In discussing the role of parents in the etiology of early infantile autism, A. J. Ward, in this journal,* cites an unpublished study by Rothstein, studies by Kanner, "many other studies," and his own experiences, as supporting "the contention that these are people who are lacking in capacity to provide a large amount of novel and variegated stimulation to their children.

His contacts with parents of autistic children have "disclosed the presence of great deal of emotional distance, anger and rigidity." He also claims that "these parents are not sensitive to the feelings of their children and in addition they seem unable to express their own feelings to their children."

The above talk is exactly the kind of character assassination Dr. Osmond is talk-ing about in the same issue of SCHIZOPHRENIA (p. 108-115). It should be only fair, that the victims be offered a chance to

* SCHIZOPHRENIA 2:92-100, 1970.

defend themselves. When a parent batters a child he is brought to court and dealt with severely. The same should happen to a parent who, by being not sensitive to the feelings of his child, causes such severe disability as infantile autism.

But what if the charge is not true?

The early villains in this story, Kanner and Eisenberg, were not sure whether cold, obsessive nature of parents causes early autism but they did nevertheless devote long pages to lurid descriptions of such parents.

A particularly offensive diatribe about fathers by Eisenberg¹ devotes page after page to trivia, more fit for a gossip column of a New York tabloid than a scientific journal; such as, for example, the now famous story of a surgeon who dealt with diseased bowels, tumors, etc., with "little or no curiosity about the person in whom these anatomical problems were housed," and who spent his vacation alone and who would not recognize his child if he saw him on the street, etc.

That such person may be dime a dozen in the competitive business community of USA may be clear to everyone except the sanctimonious Eisenberg. In the little summary note, Eisenberg cautions that the same parents give rise to normal progeny, so that other factors may be implied, "residing perhaps in the child." Only two lines

in the eight page article, practically like the fine print in a deceptive contract!

Also *sprach* Leo Kanner²: "In the whole group, there are very few really warmhearted fathers and mothers. . ." He also claimed that his search for unsophisticated parents of autistic children was futile.

But when a perceptive investigator like Laretta Bender³ suspects that the whole parent story is an artifact of Kanner's psychiatric practice, the reader is left with a feeling that the Herr Professor might have looked for unsophisticated parents by sitting in his office.

Fortunately, the "sophisticated" parents warmheartedly applauded an older and wiser Kanner upon his speech at the annual meeting of National Society for Autistic Children in 1969, where he graciously absolved them of guilt (*nota bene*, Dr. Ward).

Such were the early studies on the role of parents in the etiology of early infantile autism. A great chorus of less talented assassins was to follow. Bruno Bettelheim⁴ sees a specifically directed hostility to one particular child out of several siblings at a critical period of that child's development without bothering to prove the existence of such a period.⁵

Not to be outdone in the ingenious way of getting around the unpleasant fact that the parents are also raising normal offspring, Louise Despert⁶ theorizes that a mother can "psychogenetically differ widely" in treating her children. In her paperback, available at any college bookstore to future nurses, teachers, social workers and psychologists, she sums up like this: "this young woman was compulsive, perfection-istic, narcissistic, immature, frigid, emotionally detached, frightened by body contact, lacking in sensuousness and capable of functioning satisfactorily only on an intellectual level. Her first child was a clear-cut case of early infantile autism."⁷ I wonder what sort of love-goddess must be Louise Despert.

A more recent of the "other studies," by Ogdon,

et al⁸ compares 12 mothers of autistic children with such representative sample of general population as 12 volunteers from a summer swim club. His Rohrschach tests show such abnormalities as lessened ability to postpone gratification (rather than coldness and obsessiveness) which could "hinder normal ego development."

All this in spite of Kanner's gallant defense of mothers⁹. . .

The "evidence supports" is a kind of weaseling characteristic of bad scientific writing. The trouble is that the evidence here also supports a genetic hypothesis clearly stated by Rimland,¹⁰ which Dr. Ward conveniently ignores.

More recently, epidemiologic study by Treffert¹¹ does indeed find a higher socioeconomic status of parents of children with early onset of autism but the author does not draw any wild conclusions. McDermott and co-workers¹² find that early autism is also overrepresented in families of skilled *blue collar* workers and suggest that the coping style of parents may determine the *outward* appearance of child psychosis, an important alternate interpretation, again overlooked by Dr. Ward.

Dr. Ward fails to mention Des Laurier's and Carlson's conclusion that parents of autistic children are quite ordinary people.¹³ Interestingly, these authors found one quarreling couple in their half a dozen sample and were ready to believe Bettelheim's wisdom. All this in a country where almost one third of all marriages fail. Another one of those "other studies."

Ego theorists like Dr. Ward fail to come to grips with such obvious questions as to how the parents got that way. Was it genetics, family tradition or is it the result of too much education? Why is the disorder not sharply increasing with the college population? Treffert studies show rather regular incidence over the five year period of his study.

Also, there is a very good agreement of incidence figures between Treffert (4.8/10,-000) for the state of Michigan and Lotter¹⁴ (4.5/10,000) in England. And how does Dr. Ward account for the sex ratio (boys:girls = 3/1 to 4/1) being similar to aphasia and specific language disorders clearly considered organic?

In physics, a model is discarded when it does not explain a new fact. The ego theorists must explain such new biological findings as the work by Coleman, Boullin and O'Brien.¹⁵ The latter found that the efflux of radiolabeled serotonin from the blood platelets of autistic children is three times faster than from normal controls. The reason for increased driving force for diffusion cannot be a simple physiological correlate of emotions but has to be either in altered binding to intracellular sites, altered membrane permeability or altered binding to serum protein.

As for Dr. Ward's own experiences with parents, one can advance alternate explanations. To me, at least, his turgid style suggests a cold, pompous and insensitive bureaucrat, so that the "great deal of emotional distance" may be normal response by civilized people. What would be Dr. Ward's reaction if Arthur Jensen were his child teacher? If Dr. Ward would care to read Clara Park's book,¹⁶ he may find a description of such bureaucrats and also an ex-

ample of much "variegated stimulation" provided by a mother for her autistic child.

Parents of autistic children have a heavy-burden to carry and many are making heroic efforts to rescue their children. By providing a selfish society with a perfect excuse to deny any help, character assassins mentioned previously make it extremely difficult to create organization which will raise funds necessary for the biomedical research into causes of childhood mental illness.

When a parent cannot find a doctor to look into his autistic child's ears or throat to check for strep infection; when he has to pay some \$800 for dental work under total anesthesia; when he spends four to five nights in a row trying to calm down an agitated child that cannot tell him what is hurting him; when he does all this because he wants to keep his child out of institutions; when he reads¹⁷ of 6 out of 30 dying before the ages of 14 and 18; when a mother is not allowed to see her child in a residential school for two months; when he is called cold, rigid, obsessive, not sensitive to the feelings of his impaired child . . . emotional distance is all he has left for people like Dr. Ward.

For my part, I have the same thing to say as to him as a certain iron-handed German knight.¹⁸

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