

GIVE SUBNORMAL CHILDREN MANUAL TRAINING INSTEAD OF BOOK KNOWLEDGE THEY CANNOT GRASP

BY JANE WHITAKER

Her story was unraveled in the Juvenile Court.

She was less than sixteen, pretty, sweet, refined; and yet the charge against her was the appalling one of selling herself for gain and giving the money to her father, who knew how she earned it.

There was also a man who loved her and who honestly wanted to marry her; but she was too young to marry, and so the relations between that girl—a mere child—and the man who loved her were also illicit relations.

And the court began its probe into the cause of such a condition. The cause was not hard to find. The girl had no ability to judge between right and wrong. She was subnormal.

Two years ago she had been sent away from school because she could not be taught from books. Her mother was an epileptic; one of her brothers is also subnormal, though the other brother is exceedingly bright.

The father has been sent to the Bridewell and the girl is in the care of a Juvenile Court probation officer, but the pity of the story is that we have no method of dealing with subnormal girls and boys and men and women.

The word "subnormal" has come into disrepute because of its too frequent usage by high-brow charity workers and reformers when the condition is not a subnormal one, but merely lack of education, lack of opportunity, poverty.

But there are many really subnormal boys and girls; you see any number of subnormal girls in the Morals Court day after day; girls who have the brains of children; who have no ability to judge between right and wrong; who smile in a silly fashion over the mode of life they have chosen.

You find subnormal boys every day in the prisoner's dock. Boys whose brains are the brains of children. Boys who do not realize they have committed crimes and who, if they did realize, would probably still be unable to control themselves.

It is a lack of proper balance and sometimes it is due primarily to the poverty that gave a father and mother no chance to sharpen their own intellects; that forced a woman to go hungry while her child was still unborn; that forced her to live the life of an animal rather than that of a human being at a time when she should have had every care.

Sometimes it is caused by the mating of a man and woman already subnormal, whose children are consequently of the same mould.

But whatever the cause, we have made no provision for the condition. There are no institutions where these boys and girls may be trained.

They cannot master book learning, so the years they are kept in school are wasted. Turned out of school, they have no ability to compete with normal boys and girls in the struggle for existence.

They have no control of their passions and no one to teach them a semblance of control. Their hours are necessarily idle hours since they are not fitted for any special work, and if they work they find no interest in it because they are untrained for it.

They help fill the penitentiaries, because, though we have assumed no responsibility toward them, though we have done nothing to better their condition, we punish them just the same as though they were normal and responsible for what they do.

They fill the houses of ill-fame, because the under-developed intellect means the over-developed physical nature and they are easy prey for the procurers; still more easy prey because there is nothing honest by which they may earn their living.