

# THE RELATION THAT EMOTIONAL MAL-ADJUSTMENT BEARS TO NERVOUS SPEECH DISORDERS AND TO DELINQUENCY

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WHILE many parents recognize the fact that serious disturbances in home routine may affect sensitive children, few have analyzed the far-reaching effects of the more subtle influences at work in every home. The purpose of this article is to explain the relation of such influences to the production of nervous speech disorders and to delinquency.

We must first differentiate between speech defects and speech disorders. By defects of speech we mean undeveloped speech, such as:

1. The substitution or omission of consonants (called articulation defects).
2. The retardation or absence of speech.
3. Organic mal-formations of the nose and throat tract which interfere with speech.
4. Voice defects, organic and non-organic.
5. Enunciation defects — sluggish and indistinct.
6. Foreign mispronunciation.

Most of these can be corrected by proper teaching methods.

The speech disorder, however, is entirely different. It is an intermittent appearance of spasmodic movements of the speech organs, and is only experienced under certain stress. The patient wishes to make a favorable impression, but, governed by

a set of ideas that have been developed through certain past experiences, he is afraid of speech failure. This matter will be more fully discussed later in this article.

#### ORIGIN

Stammering originates at two periods. The first is sometimes brought about by the rush of ideas and the fumbling of the articulatory organs in the attempt to build up speech in the beginning. This stage is often "outgrown" or adjusted, however, if not complicated by emotional conditions resulting from wrong handling of the disorder.

The other manifestation may occur after speech has been correctly learned, and appears anywhere between the ages of three and ten. While considerable research has been done regarding the origin of this type of disorder, such as investigation of left-handedness and its effect upon speech, this article is confined to the consideration of the emotional factors that contribute to the manifestation of stammering.

The nature of this psychological condition is conflict caused by violent disturbances in the child's emotional life, due to his inability to adjust himself to discordant personalities surrounding him. Since the majority of the emotions are expressed through speech, it is natural that emotional conflict should be expressed through the speech tract in the form of the struggles which we generally see in stammering.

There is, however, a silent form of stammering that shows no spasm, but the internal conflicts are just as severe. The patient is suffering from a complete psychic inhibition. The only correct treatment for this condition, whether visible or silent, is a complete re-education of the patient and a changing of the environment by securing a modification of home attitudes. In cases where the early causes are not now operating the re-education of the child is often sufficient. By re-education we mean the changing of his ideas toward his speech control and the development of confidence in the presence of other people.

## CAUSES

The following are some of the conditions that we have found responsible for the production of emotional mal-adjustment in the cases which we have been treating:

1. *Lack of understanding.* In many cases parents have no understanding of the emotional life of a child. Perhaps this is due to the fact that practically all our early memories are submerged and adult standards have entirely supplanted the fanciful life of childhood. The attitude of many parents and teachers that the mind of a child is like an empty vessel that should be filled completely with adult ideas, and their lack of respect for the child's opinion and intelligence, tend to inhibit the development of these qualities.

2. *Inconsistency.* The showing of irritation and anger at slight causes on some occasions, and overlooking the same offenses or overcoddling at other times, creates an emotional atmosphere of insecurity similar to the fear of physical falling. Figuratively speaking, this is like living over a volcano, the child never knowing when an eruption is going to take place.

3. *Laxity.* In homes where no character training is given, where selfishness is allowed to develop and no consideration taught for the rights or feelings of others, there is developed in the child only a limited capacity for making life adjustments. This often causes him to get into trouble, and is the beginning of delinquency.

4. *Dependence.* Waiting on the child, doing things for him that he should do himself because he is so slow, or because it is less trouble, undermines his self-reliance and makes him clinging and dependent.

5. *Dominance.* A domineering attitude on the part of either parent, insistence upon forcing his ideas, prejudices and opinions upon the child, often results in the production of fear and inferiority, a loss of initiative, or the inability to become self-reliant. In other cases, this treatment produces the rebellious, stubborn, or negativistic type of child.

6. *Too Closely Planned Schedule.* A too closely planned schedule for the child, pushing and crowding by over-ambitious parents, robs him of the opportunity to develop initiative and decision. A certain amount of leisure and freedom is necessary in the life of every normal person.

7. *Dynamic Personality.* The effect of a too dynamic personality in either parent, when exercised constantly in the home, makes the child feel inferior and colorless.

8. *Over-Anxiety.* Over-anxiety by one or both parents, expressing constant fear for the child's health or safety, often produces similar fears and an unduly anxious and timid attitude on the part of the child.

9. *Quarreling.* Quarreling between parents and sarcastic criticism directed toward each other is extremely distressing to many children, and if extended over a protracted period is almost certain to produce some type of nervous disorder.

10. *Comparison and Partiality.* Prodding one child by praising another in the presence of both, or partiality shown to a more clever or beautiful child, often creates jealousy and keen resentment on the part of one, and egotistical tendencies on the part of the other.

11. *Disorder.* Children in homes where there is no system or order, no regularity of meals or hours, and where everything is done in a haphazard manner, are not only affected by the ensuing confusion and irritation, but are deprived of the advantages to be derived from the habits of a well-regulated life.

12. *Wrong Discipline.* Attempts to discipline a child by ridicule or shame, by tears or taking advantage of his affection, by threats of the bogeyman or policeman, or by punishing the child over-severely while very angry, defeat the very purpose for which intended, besides undermining much of the child's confidence and self-respect.

13. *Unwise Confidences.* Parents seeking sympathy by confiding too much of their troubles (financial or domestic), or fears regarding health, awaken in the child a premature dread of meeting life situations.

These and many others of the usual family-life reactions acting upon sensitive types of children have been found to form the basis of the deep emotional conflicts which manifest themselves in nervous speech disorders.

The school also has a strong influence in the molding of the child's life; both the influences of the other school children and, more important, the personality of the teacher. In many cases a strict teacher is associated in the child's mind with a stern parent, and the fear and tension thus generated becomes a permanent thing in the child's consciousness. When teachers can be trained to detect the symptoms of mal-adjustment and to give the case some study or refer him to the proper clinic for study, many of these conditions can be corrected early. Some of the symptoms are nervous actions, lack of interest, truancy, petty crimes, and other forms of delinquency, or any behavior that makes him different from the other children.

If the child could be taken at the first manifestation and the causes studied and removed, he would probably never become a fixed stammerer; but since the public does not understand that this manifestation is but a symptom, they jump to the conclusion that it is a speech defect and discuss it in the presence of the child, often scolding or insisting that the child repeat again and again the word over which he stumbled. This fixes the association in the child's mind, and causes him to become speech conscious. Soon the uncertainty of speech ability is developed; later the fear and dread of failure, and finally the certainty of failure. By the time the last stage is reached, it is almost impossible for the child to control the stammering condition.

Other emotions are added to these: a sense of inferiority, loss of confidence, a feeling that he has been cheated out of his legitimate life opportunities, social, domestic, and economic, and a desire to retire from the world and its responsibilities.

The majority of people observing the nervous manifestation think that nothing can be done about it, but leading mental hygiene authorities define nervousness as the protest of the child against conditions that are too hard for him. The nervous

actions are the symptoms, and the cure lies in complete retraining methods.

Our re-education methods consist in building new ideas, new emotions, and new habits, so that these constructive patterns instead of the old conditions dominate the individual.

The stammerer is first shown that the difficulty is not in the speech tract, but in a set of fear ideas that have been causing the spasms. He is taught to relax completely, mentally and physically, and to establish a smooth, quiet control of himself and his speech. Confidence and poise are built up by many means.

Not everyone appreciates fully the value of encouragement, praise, and understanding, but those who adopt these methods know that the child flourishes in this atmosphere of warmth and affection, and his best qualities are developed instead of the arousal of antagonism, rebellion, and other reactions which cause problems in child development. In other words, since the child is highly suggestible, we should stress the things we want to see developed, rather than scold the child for his shortcomings.

The following is quoted from an article by Kathleen Norris in the *Ladies' Home Journal* (December, 1929) entitled, *Are Children People?*

"One extremely successful mother of my acquaintance used to praise the selfish baby for unselfishness, and the passionate three-year-old for self-control. She used to tell the mischievous member of the group that she marveled at the way he was beginning to control his naughtiness, and congratulated the absent-minded little daughter upon becoming thoughtful. And they firmly believed themselves to be what her generous love would have made them, and became these things as time went by.

Try rational, friendly explanation, try companionship. Look at the troubled little face before you and say to yourself, "She's not a child, she's a person. She's not an imbecile dependent, she's a friend. I mustn't ever make her conform to a rule that I wouldn't observe myself."

What a pity it is that parents and society should punish these unfortunate victims of the very situations which they have created through their own lack of understanding. Resistive attitudes are generally caused by wrong treatment of the child on the part of adults. When we consider behavior as a *symptom* and that back of this symptom lies a series of causes, we shall be able to treat what is known as mal-adjustment with much more intelligence.

The California State Department of Education, after surveys which uncovered the vast number of children suffering with this speech disorder, established a State Bureau with a Chief, two field assistants, and teacher-training facilities, to spread the work of correction over the State. Any parents desiring information on this subject may write to the office of the Bureau at 435 Powell Street, San Francisco.