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Medicine: Frosted Children

Psychiatrist Leo Kanner used to stand up for parents. He championed them against the experts, said that it was unfair to blame the mother or father every time something went wrong with the child. Last week he told the American Ortho-psychiatric* Association in Manhattan about no parents whom he could not defend. He had examined their offspring at the children's psychiatric clinic which he heads at Johns Hopkins.

The children looked all right: Dr. Kanner called them "well-formed, well-developed, rather slender, and attractive." Many were bright, too. A two-year-old boy could identify all the pictures in Compton's Encyclopedia; a three-year-old boy could name all the Presidents and Vice Presidents of the U.S., recite 37 nursery rhymes, rattle off 25 questions & answers in the Presbyterian catechism.

Diaper-Age Schizoids. But there was something wrong with all of them: they were apathetic, withdrawn, happiest when left alone. They shrank from anything that disturbed their isolation: noises, moving objects, people, often even food. They had what Dr. Kanner calls "early infantile autism"; it is, he thinks, a diaper-age form of the mental disease called schizophrenia (split personality), which may develop before a child is a year old. How did they get that way? Dr. Kanner took a hard look at their parents.

At first glance, the parents, too, seemed fine; they were just the kind of people who, birth-controllers say, ought to have more children. Except in one case, there was no known insanity in their families. The fathers were scientists, college professors, artists, clergymen, business executives, psychologists, psychiatrists. All but five of the mothers had gone to college; all but one had been active, before or after marriage, as scientists, laboratory technicians, physicians, nurses, librarians, artists.

Cold Perfectionists. But there was something wrong with all of them. They showed a "mechanization of human relationships," described themselves and their spouses as undemonstrative. There was, Dr. Kanner found, "no glamor of romance in premarital courtship, no impetuousness in postnuptial mating." He saw only one mother hug her child warmly and bring her face close to his; many of the busy fathers hardly knew their children.

The parents wanted to do the right thing by them; but their idea of the right thing was "the mechanized service of the kind which is rendered by an over-conscientious gasoline station attendant." The children, says Dr. Kanner, were "kept neatly in a refrigerator which didn't defrost."

Were the cold parents freezing their children into schizophrenia? Dr. Kanner did not say yes or no; but he has found no case of infantile autism among children of "unsophisticated" parents. Said he of his pathetic patients: "Their withdrawal seems to be an act of turning away . . . to seek comfort in solitude."

* Orthodontists straighten crooked teeth; ortho-psychiatrists try to straighten warped minds, specialize in children's behavior problems.



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