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Medicine: The Child Is Father

When Austrian-born Leo Kanner migrated to the U.S. in 1924, child psychiatry did not exist. Today it is a respected and flourishing subspecialty, thanks more to pioneering Dr. Kanner, 66, than to any other man. Last week professional colleagues across the continent were reading his modest but unapologetic spellout of his life work, "Child Psychiatry—Retrospect and Prospect," in the American Journal of Psychiatry.

It was in 1930 that Dr. Kanner founded the Johns Hopkins Children's Psychiatric Clinic, but it took a long time, he notes, for academic psychiatry to get over the old idea that "children were essentially miniature adults." The biggest impetus to changing this notion came from Dr. Kanner himself. He wrote the first textbook on the subject, simply entitled Child Psychiatry, which rated massive reviews (more than three columns in TIME, July 15, 1935) In 1941 Author Kanner took his case directly to the people with a book for laymen, In Defense of Mothers,*— revealingly subtitled: "How to Bring Up Children in Spite of the More Zealous Psychologists." "And More Blah-Blah." In this book Dr. Kanner said: "There is no raid shelter from the verbal bombs that rain on contemporary parents. At every turn they run up against weird words and phrases which are apt to confuse and scare them no end: Oedipus complex, inferiority complex, maternal rejection, sibling rivalry, conditioned reflex, schizoid personality, repression, regression, aggression, blah-blah, blah-blah and more blah-blah." By contrast, Dr. Kanner exhorted: "Let us, contemporary mothers, together regain that common sense which is yours, which has been yours before you allowed yourselves to be intimidated by would-be omniscient totalitarians." A follower of the late great Adolf Meyer (1866-1950), who founded the eclectic Hopkins school of psychiatry, Dr.

Kanner is no worshiper of Freud. He wrote: "If you want to go on worshipping the Great God Unconscious and his cocksure interpreters, there is nothing to keep you from it. But do not let your children pay the penalty for your own excursions into the realm of fancy. For there is nothing more fanciful than an unproven, arbitrarily decreed 'psychology,' sublimely removed from life as it is lived, scornful of facts and real occurrences, and depending instead on a dreambook type of 'interpretation' of a mythological Unconscious." Never Tell a Lie. It takes either a natural mother or a highly specialized expert to get close enough to a child to find out what is

going on in his mind, normal or not. And Dr. Kanner is such an expert. His technique is disarmingly simple: be friendly and sympathetic; never lie to a child; never belittle his intelligence.

This approach has worked with the vast majority of the 20,000 child patients Dr.

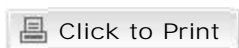
Kanner has seen in 31 years. But there is one type of child to whom even Dr. Kanner cannot get close. All too often this child is the offspring of highly organized, professional parents, cold and rational—the type that Dr. Kanner describes as "just happening to defrost enough to produce a child." The youngster is unable, because of regression or a failure in emotional development, to establish normal relations with his parents or other people.

He becomes withdrawn into himself. For this condition Dr. Kanner coined the term "infantile autism." It corresponds roughly to the old, and now outmoded, concept of childhood schizophrenia.

For it, there is as yet no uniformly effective treatment. When one is worked out, Dr. Kanner is more likely than any other living man to be its originator.

Father of two (each of whom has made him a grandfather), he belies his retired status as a Hopkins professor emeritus, keeps busy teaching, seeing children with difficulties, and writing. Unable to resist a little joke, Dr. Kanner says of his ophthalmologist son: "We're both in the 'I' business, only he spells it eye and I spell it ego."

*Charles C Thomas, Springfield, 111.; 167 pp. Fourth printing 1958 (\$3.50)



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