
We're Hurting Our Kids by Robbing Them of Responsibility for Their Actions

By James C. Enochs

Educators are conditioning the young to believe that the normal problems of living can be endured only with the help of a paid professional. The vicissitudes of growing up and getting an education are pounced on by the "helping professionals"; are given scientific labels; are explained with shallow incantations and catchwords; and given the appropriate cluster of symptoms (which can be measured and identified only by the specialists), terminate in special programs.

It is time to face the possibility that the practice of substituting instant sociology and pop psychology for common sense has gotten out of hand.

"The schoolhouse," writes Martin L. Gross in his book *The Psychological Society*, "has become a vibrant psychological center, staffed not only by schoolteachers trained in 'educational psychology' but by sixty thousand guidance workers and seven thousand school psychologists whose 'counseling' borders on therapy." With so many people eager to ply their trade, schools filled with youngsters doing all manner of odd things become fertile fields. Before

Teachers can help students learn to take responsibility for their actions.

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we took ourselves and our offspring so seriously, we did not exaggerate the importance of such behavior. We simply dealt with it. After all, odd behavior is one of the hallmarks of youth. It is no great mystery; young people just don't know any better until some sensible adult corrects them, usually several times.

Symptoms and Excuses

In recent years, the focus has shifted from *what* the child has done to *why* he did it. Random acts become significant incidents—harbingers of greater, more awful things to come—and are carefully entered into the anecdotal record with appropriate gravity and psychological speculation. Tests, inventories, and case studies become “instruments” to probe for deeper meaning. We eschew the obvious and arrest our native good judgment while we search for primal forces hidden in the labyrinth of childhood or adolescence. Everything is a symptom of something else, and an excuse is handy for everything and everybody.

Psychiatrist Karl Menninger, in *Whatever Became of Sin?*, writes, “Notions of guilt and sin which formerly served as some restraint on aggression have become eroded by the presumption that the individual has less to do with his actions than we had assumed, and hence any sense of personal responsibility or guilt is inappropriate.” This news must have come as a relief to the aggressor—and to the helping professions. Menninger says, “The idea that particular behavior was the result of numerous determining events and forces led to an increasing doubt about its easy control and modification.” Just what the psychologists have been telling us: Nothing is easy; nothing is what it seems to be.

By increasing doubt about the

control of behavior and by propounding elaborate theories about its origins, psychologists have managed to bamboozle parents, children, and teachers into a state of dependency that guarantees a perpetual bull market for the head brokers. This is exactly what University of Rochester historian Christopher Lasch talks about in *The Culture of Narcissism* when he writes, “Men and women no longer manage even to raise their children without the help of certified experts. The atrophy of older traditions of self-help has eroded everyday competence, in one area after another, and has made the individual dependent.” Lasch calls it the usurpation of family functions by the “therapeutic state.”

Culprit or Victim?

Perhaps a graver message lies behind all this: If people are absolved of their responsibilities, they are *willing* to give up their independence.

Students are no exception: They welcome a process that is open-ended and focuses on the reasons for the deed rather than on the deed itself. This process painlessly shifts them from being the culprit to the victim. I am reminded of an eighth grade girl who told me she had “flipped off” her teacher and then volunteered that she had done so because of “low self-esteem,” which made it impossible for her to resist “peer pressure.” I am sure she expected her offense to be buried and forgotten in a blizzard of personality inventories.

Many parents, especially those who have gone to college or watch Phil Donahue, find such an approach compatible with “where their heads are at.” You see, they are “into” author R. D. Rosen’s world of “psychobabble.” All this is a trendy haven for failed parents. Laurence J. Peter of Peter

Principle fame put it wryly: “When a mother hasn’t enough willpower to discipline her children, she calls her weakness child psychology.”

Platitudes and Clichés

Schools and the helping professions must take some of the blame for this, but none of it could go on without the willing collaboration of parents. They are in awe of psychology; the very word has a gratifyingly scientific ring. Better still: Parents can participate. Psychological jargon is imprecise enough to cover a multitude of inanities, and its use is so commonplace that anyone can play without fear of being found out. Most of these mothers and fathers have taken hundreds of hours of noncredit television courses taught by Merv Griffin, Garry Collins, Dr. Joyce Brothers, and local television “personalities.” The platitudes and clichés are repeated over and over like catchy jingles for toilet paper and detergent. Soon everybody has mastered the idiom. Such words as “paranoia,” “neurotic,” “traumatic,” and “phobia” are ladled into super-sincere sentences about “parenting,” “sibling rivalry,” “puberty,” “life cycles,” and “identity crises.” It has become a kind of C.B. language for the middle-class parents who have kids but no pickups.

I suppose, then—in a society whose grown-ups write to Ann Landers to ask how they can get their children to write thank-you notes or to stop staying out all night (and millions more read the “Dear-Anxious-in-Marin” answers)—it’s not surprising that such folks are sitting ducks for the psychology peddlers when something goes wrong at school.

The current generation of young adults with school-age children was, as Gross notes, “the first to

be raised as the childhood 'patient' of scientific parenting." As '60s teenagers and college students, members of this generation came to believe that self-indulgence was the highest form of human potential, that any personal rumination about their feelings should grip adult attention and evoke words of wonder and discovery ("That's heavy").

Willing Collaborators

But why, one wonders, do teachers and administrators become willing collaborators in a process that mocks common sense and is so at odds with the real business of education? Part of the explanation no doubt lies in the fact that they are members of the larger society permeated by pop psychology and are subject to the same influences as the parents. Another reason for the collaboration is the teachers' and administrators' own professional training. It is shot through with "educational psychology" and special courses on adolescence, early childhood, personal assessment, sociological foundations of education, and methods classes. James D. Koerner, author of *The Miseducation of American Teachers*, and the late James B. Conant, in *The Education of American Teachers*, both have mustered substantial evidence to show that the education of teachers includes nearly as much—and in some cases more—psychological training as preparation in the subject matter to be taught.

I believe other forces also are at work. The process does have the triangular shape all educators espouse; parent-child-school. The people in charge do seem to be speaking in some highly technical tongue, and they are generating lots of paper. Surely this is good stuff. Teachers and administrators are easily impressed by "experts"

who have a fistful of tests and a mouthful of jargon. We are uncertain; the experts are positive. We are fearful we might hurt a child; the experts are confident they will help him. We are faced with a moral choice; the experts have only to pronounce a diagnosis.

To advance a commonsense opinion when the other guys appear to be talking science invites being thought of as some unwashed primitive. So the teacher and the administrator give in, and off goes another kid into some special program. Special programs are the handmaidens of helping professions.

Expanding Programs

A Parkinson's Law of sorts is at work in education: Create a special program with categorical funds, and the need for such a program will expand to consume all available openings. "Symptoms" (that is, placement criteria) are malleable abstractions. No special program ever has died for lack of students. The programs are like Frankenstein's castle: Many people are seen going in, but nobody ever comes out. To some, this might be an indication that the programs don't work; no one is fixed or rehabilitated. But others with more at stake see the phenomenon as proof of the need for such programs, so they urge expansion.

By shifting the focus from the *what* to the *why* of an act, the helping professionals are able to convert children from individuals responsible for their behavior to "victims" of their behavior. The experts now have the key—victims—with which to unlock the lode of special funds. One need only be a victim of something—even the victim of being born mentally gifted—and the extra bucks will flow in your direction.

High-sounding Rationalizations

Other factors at work are even more troublesome because they seldom are contested within the profession. Educators embrace the experts because they provide high-sounding rationalizations for the schools' failings. If a child has something called a "learning disability," the schools can't be blamed for not teaching him to read in 12 years. A recent study indicates that approximately two-thirds of all children in learning disability classes are disabled in reading. If a child is identified as having a "behavior disorder" or, heaven forbid, is "hyperactive," we can wash our hands of the little troublemaker and ship him off to special education class. So much for that problem.

What these children really might be suffering from is an iatrogenic ailment. Lest you think I have been caught up in the gobbledygook game I am criticizing, let me explain: Iatrogenic is one of those medical euphemisms meant more to conceal than reveal. It simply means an ailment induced by a physician. It is a sanitary shift of blame from the person responsible to the helpless patient. It covers a botched job by convincing the victim something is wrong with *him*—not us.

Who's to Blame?

Indeed, we have more than one way out: If the psychologists can't help us, we can count on the sociologists to exonerate us. It is easier to blame low test scores and student failure on the socioeconomic background of the students than on a lack of commitment by some teachers and administrators. But when you think about it, it is an awful thing for a child to be in the presence of adults who, day after day, year after year, don't expect

him to learn. And it isn't any less awful because some smarmy adult tells the child it's not his fault.

I would like to suggest that not every behavior problem or every unlearned lesson is grounds for rushing a child off to be studied. Some behavior problems require nothing more than a little discipline. Some children don't learn their lessons because they are lazy, because they procrastinate, don't pay attention, or lack self-discipline—or because they know they

really don't have to. Some adult somewhere always is willing to take them off the hook. And, of course, sometimes children don't learn their lessons because their *teacher* is lazy, procrastinates, or lacks self-discipline—or because the teacher, like the child, knows he won't be held accountable because someone somewhere always will take him off the hook.

In short, kids, parents, teachers, and administrators don't always do what they should do. None

of them, however, should be absolved of their responsibilities by immediate recourse to psychosocial guesswork. Nor should those who advocate such a course be allowed to parade the practice as a humanitarian impulse while those who question it are made to feel uncaring and insensitive. □

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COMPUTING WITH CLASS



Care and Feeding of Your Computer

IT'S A DIRTY BUSINESS

One of the major sales points for Pet Rocks some time ago was how easy it was to care for them. (In case you missed them, Pet Rocks were small, roundish untamed natural objects that were very hard and extremely durable. They came packaged in attractive cartons with air holes that doubled as their permanent places of abode. Each carton had a bed of straw or shredded paper and came with a rather extensive care and feeding manual.)

Computers, like Pet Rocks, also require minimal care. To the degree that computers become more versatile, however, their care

requirements escalate. This column will concentrate on an important aspect of your computer's environment: dust.

Although this problem is inevitable, it can be controlled. Aside from cosmetic considerations, dust is a natural enemy to computers and disks for reasons you might not have considered.

You probably know that computers generate heat, though you may have attributed this phenomenon primarily to the picture tube in your screen. However, a far more important heat-related problem is generated by integrated circuit chips inside the computer unit itself.

This heat, of course, is quite natural and would cause few difficul-

ties if it could do what it does naturally—go away.

How does this heat build up? A simple analogy will illustrate. As a child, did you ever roll yourself up in a bedsheet as tightly as you could—just a simple, thin, cool bedsheet? What happened? You overheated. Imagine how hot you would have gotten if you had rolled up in something thicker, like a quilt or blanket.

As dust accumulates on your computer's chips, it forms a blanket, causing the chips to overheat. If you or I get a temperature of 103 or higher, we get concerned—we say, "I'm burning up"—a figure of speech. However, computer chips really *do* burn up, requiring an expensive trip to the

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