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Who is Responsible for the Child?

By MINNE ELISABETH ALLEN

I HAD been sitting at my desk for some time, reading the previous articles on the responsibility for the child and writing down some ideas that occurred to me, when my seven-year-old boy came into the room.

He glanced at my desk and said: "Are you writing a letter, mother?" I told him that I had intended to express my thoughts about a very important question and I gave him the magazine, telling him to read the title, "Who is Responsible for the Child?" He read it aloud twice. Then he looked up at me with his loving smile and said with firm confidence: "You!"

The child's verdict; and yet, when I was asked to give a mother's point of view on the question in connection with the above mentioned articles, my thoughts turned back to my first day as a settlement worker, when I held my own first child in my arms.

I had attended a hearing in the juvenile court and had made several investigations of some incidents which had happened within a few blocks of the settlement. Utterly sad conditions in the everyday life of the unfortunate child held me in deep depression at first. Later it gave way to the question: "Why does society tolerate such conditions?"

With this question on my lips I stood before our leader, the president of the settlement. He pointed to a board above his head, on which he had written: "The old maid aunt, who found in a dark wood. Glowing like fire, it burned itself deeply into my soul. "Men culpa"—my fault.

Yes, it was my fault that this child, whom I had never seen before, had gone wrong. For I was one of those who made up society that had tolerated such misery and unwholesome atmosphere, in which no being could grow into a life of strength, righteousness and happiness.

I had not thought of this experience for many months. That it was recalled on this particular occasion indicates that—first of all—I hold everyone responsible for the child, regardless whether he or she is a parent, an old maid aunt or a bachelor. To the same degree that our physical, mental and moral development have been promoted by that immeasurable sum of factors which contribute to the making and shaping of our own small or big ego, to the same degree this ego is responsible for the physical, mental and moral development of other individuals.

The old maid aunt, who found "the good fortune of a child" in a "wide, clean orchard and polly wog ponds and plenty of wholesome letting alone" will have to provide such occasions for any child that she thinks to be lacking in the qualities derived from such surroundings, even if she should have to lay aside books and pencils to take up a rake and clean the orchard or to feed the polly wogs herself.

The bachelor will have to furnish the soil, in which his "so-called homely virtues" can grow, whenever he sees a child "first or two.

It is this "spiritual parenthood" to which Dr. Cessna refers in his kind and wise introductory article, that holds out to both the old maid aunt and the bachelor the duty and the privilege of being responsible for the child.

Because "only in some sort of parenthood, natural or spiritual, one does attain his highest social and spiritual experiences," parenthood entails the highest degree and the greatest amount of responsibility for the child. For me it is not a crushing responsibility, as Professor Betts expresses it, but a wonderfully inspiring, stimulating one. It means constant self-education, mental and moral growth, uniting devotion to the improvement of everything, so as "to make the world a better place for our children to live in." Father and mother alike share in this responsibility, which is concerned with the welfare of all children, not merely with that of their own offspring.

Co-education, woman suffrage, equal opportunities and equal rights for men and women have tended to develop the spirit of comradeship and cooperation between the sexes to a degree heretofore unknown. Comradeship has become the characteristic feature of the youth movements everywhere. It has remedied the home life of those who have experienced its rare possibilities. Men and women endeavor jointly to fulfill all the duties that are called for by house and garden, nursery and study. Late qualities have thus been set free in our young men, who have revealed astonishing talents as homemakers, baby-specialists and kindergarteners.

A course on the main problems and the general principles of homemaking and child rearing should be no less a requirement for each college graduate than a course in civics and government. Incidentally, dear bachelor, the Iowa Home-maker would then no longer be a "Journal devoted primarily to the ladies." It might become a quite common campus experience to find the boys discussing the latest issue of the Iowa Homemaker with the same enthusiasm that the girls display about the New Republic's latest political prophecies.

The knowledge of the main factors that contribute to the life and influence of the home, the community and the nation and the value of the works of such a society as Marietta Johnson expresses it, would promote the children's all around development in the best possible way. Cooperation would shorten the time spent on everyday household duties and would enable both father and mother to participate in the improvement of the community life. Home and school are the two main lines upon which the life of the child moves forward, furnishing his education and instruction.

It is quite obvious that father and mother determine the character of the home life. It ought to be just as obvious that fathers and mothers should not be responsible for the type of education which they want the schools to impart to their children thru wisely chosen and well-organized instruction. Simplified and efficient household management, based on family cooperation, will make it possible for each father and mother to become sufficiently informed about all those matters of the community life which are closely related to the well-being of their children, such as schools, libraries, parks, wholesome means for recreation, sanitation, good roads.

There is nothing in our life that might not turn into a source of happiness or harm for our children. Thus everyone should feel responsible for the child in his sphere of influence. Everyone should actively support such measures as will insure to each child its right to education, to play and healthful living conditions. Everyone should exercise spiritual parenthood and obedience to that eminent pedagogue, Friedrich Froebel:

"Come, let us live for our children!"