

D. Prenatal Emotional Stress

34. It appears that severe and prolonged emotional stress during pregnancy can have a harmful effect on the development of the fetus and may be a factor in the origins of behaviour problems. The kind of stresses which caused damage chiefly involved serious marital discord, including "the whole gamut of family breakdown When the mother had to endure this kind of thing during her pregnancy, then with almost 100 per cent certainty we find the children born damaged."⁵⁴ Stresses of this kind, "involving severe, continuing personal tensions . . . were closely associated with child morbidity in the form of ill-health, neurological dysfunction, developmental lag and behaviour disturbance."⁵⁵

35. Studies have shown that there is a relationship between emotional stress during pregnancy and an increased rate of Down's syndrome and of minor physical anomalies which result from the breaking down of normal chromosomal material. These have been "repeatedly associated with factors operating in the first few weeks of pregnancy."⁵⁶ Emotional factors in pregnancy also appear to be related to complications at the time of delivery, to prematurity and possibly to later intellectual deficit.⁵⁷ Thus, "it would appear that emotional problems of the mother can create a disturbed physical climate for the child before and during birth."⁵⁸

36. The same insult to the fetus during a crucial phase in development which may result in physical anomalies may also "cause central nervous system abnormalities which reveal themselves in behavioural symptoms."⁵⁹ Such anomalies have also been shown to be associated with early school failure.⁶⁰ A study of nursery children found that the more minor defects a child demonstrated, the more likely it was to be aggressive, hyperkinetic and intractable.⁶¹

37. A recent study of the effects of prenatal influences on infant temperament reveals that there is "suggestive but not definitive evidence that if mothers have psychiatric disturbances or marked anxiety in pregnancy their children may be more likely to have the Difficult Child pattern."⁶² It may be that abnormal conditions of childbearing operate by lowering thresholds to other conditions of stress. The damage done tends to perpetuate itself from generation to generation.⁶³