


 61
 REFORMING DELINQUENT CHILDREN.

ADDRESS DELIVERED BY J. J. KELSO, TORONTO, AT THE THIRTIETH NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF CHARITIES AND CORRECTION, ATLANTA, GA. MAY 8, 1903.

FEW subjects are more important and none can more worthily occupy our attention than the proper care of neglected and dependent children, especially those who through petty delinquencies are in danger of drifting permanently into the criminal class. The destiny of children is controlled by early training and environment, and life with all its possibilities may be made or unmade by the circumstances surrounding the boy or girl when he or she is merging into manhood and womanhood. The superintendent of our Industrial School said not long ago that he very seldom received a thoroughly bad boy. There were mischievous boys and boys who from lack of proper advantages or from extra ebullition of spirits had got off the right track, but there was rarely a case where the boy was sufficiently bad to be classed as in any degree hopeless or incorrigible—and this has been my own experience. Children look to the future with eagerness and hope, and they are ready to respond to any call upon their faith or activity. Taken in the right way and by the right persons, the boy or girl who has gone astray, broken the law or given evidence of waywardness, can, if separated from hurtful environment and association, be reformed, or at least given an impetus toward reformation, almost instantaneously and without the necessity for years of special training and drilling in an institution. There is such a thing as an instantaneous awakening of the soul to the realization of higher and better things by the magnetic influence of one soul reacting upon another. If we earnestly desire the reformation of a child, and let the child feel and know that we have such a desire, the response will in almost every instance be prompt and sincere.

To illustrate what I mean let me tell the following incident: Years ago when I first entered upon philanthropic work I was conducting a Fresh Air excursion on the lake for some two or three hundred neglected children. There was one girl about fourteen years of age who had given a great deal of trouble; she was bold, defiant, profane and quarrelsome, and at last after a serious dispute with two or three of the workers, a request was made to

me to have her put off the boat before it started. The girl, knowing that an appeal was being made, stood a short way off awaiting the decision with a hard, sullen look on her face. After hearing



the complaints I told the ladies I wished to make an experiment and asked them to watch the result. I then went over to the girl and said to her: "Mary, we have just been talking about you, and we have decided that you are getting so big now that we will make you a member of the committee. See," I continued, "here is a badge which will show that you are one of the managers, and I will pin it on your dress." At first she could hardly grasp the new idea, but in a few minutes large tears came to her eyes and rolled down her cheeks. Without taking any notice of this, she was given a special work to do, namely, to distribute milk to the younger children, taking care that

they were all served before the older boys and girls. This task she took hold of with zeal, and for the remainder of the day was a model of propriety. As the boat neared the wharf in the evening she came up with a beaming face, and, after being complimented on her good work, she said: "Do you know, Mr. Kelso, I did not get a drop of milk myself, although I was thirsty." "Well now," I replied, "I am glad of that." Looking up with surprise she wanted to know why I should be glad, and I explained I was glad because her forgetting herself showed that she was so busy helping the children that she had no time to think of her own needs. "And now, tell me," I said, "were you not happy doing that work to-day?" and she replied very heartily, "Yes, I never was so happy in my life before."

Finding this policy work so well with this particular girl, I tried the same plan with four or five large boys, who were causing much annoyance, appointing them caretakers of the supplies, with the result that they not only gave no further trouble, but were a decided help in many ways. Froebel's system of educating the child through his activities is the true solution for the waywardness

of youth, and it will be found that success in child-saving work can be attained, and can only be attained, by making the children active agents in their own reformation. Show the children that you respect and trust them, and provide them with useful employment, especially giving them, where possible, work to do for others.

Some years later, when I accepted my present position as superintendent of neglected and dependent children of Ontario, an opportunity occurred for trying a simple plan. Word was sent me from a town, some fifty or sixty miles away, that there was a neglected boy, who had been arrested several times and sent to gaol, and that he should really be committed to the Industrial School, but the local authorities opposed this, because unwilling to pay for his maintenance. Finding that the boy had been driven to wrong-doing, as in the case of so many others, by defective home life, I requested that he be sent to me, and I would be responsible for his future. The boy came

along in due time, closely guarded by a constable, whose parting remark when leaving the boy in the office was, "Better keep a sharp eye on him or he will get away from you" After waiting a few moments to allow the lad to collect his thoughts, I looked up and said, "Well, Joe, what do you think is going to be come of you now?" He replied with pathetic indifference, "The reformatory, I guess." "No," I said, "not the reformatory, if I can do anything to keep you out of it;" and going over to him I said: "Joe, do you not think there is something better for you than the reformatory—don't you think if I will be your friend, and help you, that you can get along without either the gaol or the reformatory?"



Then I explained exactly what I would do for him—that I would get him a boarding place, some good clothes, and after a time, when he was rested, would

get him a home in the country, where the people would take a genuine interest in him. This was something new altogether, and more to his taste than his former treatment, and over his sullen countenance came that indefinable, indescribable glow of a soul awakening to high and noble aspirations. It happened that in the boarding home to which I sent him there was a girl about seventeen or eighteen, who was very sympathetic, and who found that Joe's feet were very sore from the constant friction of a pair of ill-fitting boots. She washed his feet and bound them up after getting him to promise that he would not try to walk for two or three days. This kindness completed his subjugation, and during the remainder of his stay he could not do enough to show his gratitude. In three or four weeks he went to a home in the country, and though now grown almost to manhood he has never been in any trouble, nor has he cost the community a dollar for his maintenance. Our whole attitude toward these children must be one of encouragement, showing them how good they may be rather than how bad they are. We must secure their good-will and co-operation in their own salvation, appealing to the soul, which exists in every child, however much he may have been neglected and mistreated. Institutional training which does not influence the spiritual nature may only serve to make a child more obdurate and expert in wrong-doing.

In the years that followed many other children were dealt with in the same way of drawing out their best instincts, and almost without exception they appreciated the confidence reposed in them and were extremely anxious to show themselves worthy of it. This is a class of work that has many trials and much anxiety, for it cannot be done in any haphazard way, but the results are well worth it all, and if time permitted I could recite to you story after story of children who, if their original sentence, or contemplated sentence, to reform schools had been carried out would have aggregated two or three hundred years of confinement, and who by a different system have been provided for without ever seeing an institution, at almost nominal expense and to their own permanent benefit.

This leads me to speak of the injustice of hastily committing children to reform schools for trivial offences. I remember once being in the police station when a mother came before the magistrate to ask that a fair-haired, innocent-looking boy of eleven should be committed to the Industrial School, because he was not only very bad and disobedient but because he had actually beaten

her on several occasions! Enquiry, however, revealed the fact that she was about to be married again and one of the conditions was that the boy should be got rid of. Last year a case came to my notice in which a father had his son arrested, sent to gaol and ultimately committed to the reformatory for five years as a vagrant, vicious lad. His mother was dead and his step-mother did not want him. That the boy was not so very vicious may be judged from the fact that he was a regular attendant at Sunday school and his teacher regarded him as one of her best boys. Making enquiries concerning his absence she found him locked up in the gaol, where he had been taken on a warrant sworn out by his father. Second marriages mean much of misery for children of the first contract and they are a fruitful cause of the neglect and dependency of children that engages the attention of societies and institutions. Parents should not be lightly relieved of their responsibilities, but if the child is being so neglected and ill-treated as to make him a public charge or a menace to society, the solution is not a reform school, but a home in the true sense of the word, where he may receive free scope for his energy and something of kindness and affection.

There is a great lack of patience on the part of police officials with boys who have broken some of the numerous laws and ordinances that govern every well-regulated town. The reformatory is the easiest way to get rid of a troublesome lad, and often the spirit of revenge and punishment is given more weight than the consideration of the boy's future welfare. In the past hundreds of children have been hurried off to institutions who could have satisfactorily been tided over the danger point if only a different method had been pursued. I do not advocate by any means allowing such boys to go unmolested in their lawlessness, but the application of probation methods, such as procuring employment, transferring them to another home, or insisting upon parents exercising more control if they wish to retain the guardianship. Character cannot be developed so successfully in an institution as in the outside world, and like the forced plant that dies when exposed to the free air, the boy or girl who has been brought up in an institution is in great danger of falling when the institutional support is withdrawn. In too many instances also the children, after several years of careful training, are returned again to the degraded home surroundings from which they were rescued only to be dragged back by unworthy relatives to the misery and vice from which they were for a time delivered. The more popular a

juvenile institution becomes the more dangerous it is, for it sets up a false standard, not only before slothful parents, but before municipal officers and magistrates who think they are doing the child a favor to commit him. Owing to their popularity some of the leading juvenile institutions in the United States have a roll call of from 500 to 800 boys. In Ontario we aim to keep the institution subordinate to the family home. No matter how earnest and zealous the superintendent may be he cannot avoid a certain routine in the institutional life that will have a deadening effect on the young people under his care. Even a child-saving society or charity organization, or any other kind of a philanthropic body, will gravitate toward a machine-like movement unless there is a frequent revival of interest and the constant introduction of fresh life



and advanced methods. I can at this moment recall a very large and popular society the entire work of which is performed by two or three persons, while in the first year or two of its existence there were from fifty to seventy-five active volunteer participants. These have given up the work entirely, or have drifted into other enterprises, simply because they gradually realised that there were paid officers to do the work and these did not desire much volunteer help.

Officialism is the bane of any good movement and any philanthropic organization that fails to utilize the great moral forces of the community, that like a mighty Niagara are only waiting for the call to usefulness, is simply acting as a buffer between the helper and the helped and would be better out of the way.

The juvenile court and the probation law going hand in hand are engaging public attention everywhere just now, and with wonderful unanimity of opinion they have been accepted all over this continent as among the greatest agencies for good yet devised. The movement is good because it is natural. It aims to employ the volunteer worker, to elevate and improve the home without

breaking it up, to place the homeless child in a family home, and in every other way possible to follow the simple rule of friendly and brotherly co-operation. Children cannot be forced into goodness any more than a baby can be forced to go to sleep. They have to be led by gentler methods and gradually taught by their reason to appreciate the good and avoid the evil. Children should always be praised when they perform any meritorious act or have striven to accomplish anything. To be complimented and praised encourages them to persevere, and incites them to still greater and better things. There has been too much of scolding and punishment instead of the encouraging word and the helping hand. A mother one day told her little boy that he was to play in the front yard and was not to go outside the gate. The little fellow saw no hardship in this until he went outside and beheld his little companions playing some distance off. He walked to the gate and looked wistfully at them, but came back and tried to amuse himself alone; three times he went to the gate with the temptation growing stronger each time. At last he could resist no longer and sped away to join his play-fellows. On his return his mother called him in and said she would have to punish him for his disobedience, and explained to him that she had been sitting at the window and had seen him go to the gate two or three times and at last run off. The little fellow turned and said, "Mother, did you really see me go to the gate the first and the second and the third time?" "Yes," the mother replied, "I did." "Well mother," he said, "why didn't you tap on the window and help a fellow out." Was there not a cutting rebuke in this for the mother who was more anxious to punish the child for wrong-doing than to tenderly and lovingly prevent him from getting into trouble, and is there not something that each one of us can learn from the incident that will aid us in our work for the children.

We are all the product of our environment and live the life that is shaped and moulded for us in our early years. The boys and girls of our wealthy and prominent citizens, as well as the children of the poor, are made out of the same material, and it depends on the moulding they receive in youth what they will become later on. The children of the rich make mistakes and often transgress the law, but there is always sufficient influence at hand to save them from the error of their way, while the children of the poor have but few friends to take their part, otherwise they, like the others, might live down their wrong-doing and with names untarnished attain to positions of usefulness and honor.

This is a work that is full of hopefulness, for it has to do with the beginning of things where well directed effort is almost certain of reward. It offers an unlimited field of pleasant and profitable employment to the volunteer workers who realize the possibilities of good in the saving and reclamation of unfortunate children, and it means to the community relief from the burden of pauperism and criminality that is the sure outcome of indifference toward neglected childhood. A noted tramp, who was spending his life in evil and idleness, was suddenly changed into a sober and industrious citizen at a lodging house meeting in England. When asked by his acquaintances the cause of his remarkable change, he replied, referring to Lord Shaftsbury: "He just put his hand on my shoulder and said, 'Jack we'll make a man of you yet'." Back of those few words was the earnest yearning after a lost soul and the magnetism of sincerity that rarely fails, and as a result the whole current of a life was changed. With the same spirit animating us in child-saving effort failure need never be feared, and young lives will certainly blossom out into careers of usefulness and honor.

