SEX IN CHILDHOOD

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MARRIAGE
PERSONALITY AND SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT
THE MARRIAGE CRISIS
THE DRIFTING HOME
SOCIAL PROBLEMS OF THE FAMILY

In Collaboration with

GLADYS HOAGLAND GROVES

SEX IN MARRIAGE
SEX IN CHILDHOOD
WHOLESALE CHILDHOOD
WHOLESALE PARENTHOOD
PARENTS AND CHILDREN
WHOLESALE MARRIAGE
To

ROBERT LATOU DICKINSON

SECRETARY OF THE NATIONAL COMMITTEE ON MATERNAL HEALTH

WHO HAS GIVEN SCIENCE ITS FIRST COMPREHENSIVE
AUTHORITATIVE KNOWLEDGE OF THE MEDICAL
ASPECTS OF SEX ADJUSTMENT
Chapter XIII

Psychic and Social Sex Abnormality

Why Consider Psychic and Social Abnormality?

In recent years there has been so much discussion of psychic sex abnormalities that nearly everyone has come to understand that some individuals have special problems in their sex development or sex adjustment. It is the belief of scientists that many of these difficulties appear in childhood or at least begin at that time. Because of this, it is an advantage for parents to have some knowledge of these departures from the normal. Only so can they recognize when they need special help in dealing with the sex problems of their children.

Fortunately parents do not need in any great detail information regarding psychic sex abnormalities that appear in childhood, but they do require sufficient knowledge to recognize that their child is having some unusual difficulty. In the past parents have seldom had sufficient insight to detect the more serious problems in the sex career of their children and have either been blind to the facts or have attempted through punishment to correct the child's behavior. As a consequence, valuable time has been lost, and sometimes the at-
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...titude of the parent has measurably added to the trouble of the child.

The word abnormality often conveys to the parent unfounded anxiety. It means something in contrast with what is usual and commonly, at least in the field of sex, this signifies arrest or exaggeration of what appears in lesser degree in the career of the so-called normal boy and girl. It is the quantity of the disturbance which makes it out of the ordinary; it is not often that it is something that is altogether absent from normal sex experience. This explains why it is so difficult to draw a sharp line of separation between the two kinds of sex experience.

Anyone who has close contact with thoughtful and conscientious parents knows that many of them unnecessarily worry about the sex problems of their children. No assurance can be brought to these parents merely by telling them that they are likely to exaggerate the problems of their children. What they want is sufficient understanding of the common abnormalities to know when their children are seriously in need of help and when they are merely passing through a common human experience.

Sex Precocity and Sex Retardation

Usually the physiological development of sex keeps pace with the structural development as a whole. At puberty changes of body structure testify to the maturing of physiological sex. This, however, is not always true, and as a consequence...
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many parents ask with anxiety whether their child is precocious or retarded sexually. Most often the worry comes from their belief that the child is precocious.

There are recorded in medical literature some startling cases of extreme biological precocity. One such example is that of a girl who began to menstruate at two and who was pregnant at eight. Variations of this type are clearly pathological and extremely rare. On the opposite side we have the feeble-minded of lowest grade who do not pass beyond the infantile stage of sex development.

These extraordinary types are not the kind that bring doubt to parents. They are worried because it seems as if their boy or girl as compared with associates is developing precociously or is noticeably retarded. It must be remembered in this connection that although body structure usually reveals the maturing of sex, this is not always true. It follows that the girl who outwardly, because of change of body form and growth of breasts and the like, appears to be developing precociously sexually is not necessarily more mature than her friends. It is also not true that a very early development of the sex impulse demonstrates a psychopathic tendency. Very early maturity naturally makes one think of this, and it is held by some that any appearance of the sexual impulse (that is, any expression of the sex consciousness and the desire which normally awaken at puberty) before the end of the seventh year should awaken suspicion of morbid predisposition. Of course, this must not be interpreted to mean that the child who
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merely enters sex play or handles himself this early is expressing psychopathic trends.

There is in normal cases considerable variation between individuals in the development of both the physiological and the psychological sides of sex. Apparently this expresses at times inherited tendencies. Some families seem to develop sexually earlier than others and there seem to be differences in race and possibly differences brought about by climate as well as by diet and other living conditions.

It is certainly true that the influence of an older child who is interested in sex and who may be himself somewhat precocious tends to awaken early the sex life of children who otherwise would probably have developed more slowly. This is a danger that the parent may well keep in mind, for even when it is not abnormal, it is a social hazard to have a child sexually advanced beyond the usual stage associated with his age. Undoubtedly parents are over-quick to suspect sex precocity. Nevertheless, if there seems evidence of this, the child should be examined by a competent doctor and specific advice given the parent who has forced upon him a more difficult guidance than that given most mothers and fathers.

Separation and Inter-Relation of Psychic and Physical

There are two distinct types of sex abnormality—the psychic and the physical. Both of them profit from early diagnosis and treatment. The first type
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is the more common. This is so true that ordinarily the term sex abnormality means some sort of emotional disturbance. From the earlier discussions in this book one can see the reason for this. Some mishap occurs in the developing life of the child which leads to emotional tension along lines of sex, something shocking, something that leads to fear or conflict, which turns the child away from wholesome progress toward sex maturity, with consequences of physical, nervous, or emotional significance.

Occasionally the problem is the result of some physical variation in body structure. Even in such cases the results may most clearly reveal themselves in the emotional reactions of the child or in his conduct. Most often the difficulties arise in the character of the child rather than in his body. The psychic difficulty, of course, may react upon the body of the child leading to functional disturbances, such as loss of appetite, restlessness in sleep, easy fatigue, and the like.

Social Origin of Sex Strain

It is important to notice how frequently the psychic type of sex abnormality appears because of the strain the child experiences in the process of maturing. It is not strange that there are parents who are reluctant to recognize this. They feel that sex gets too much attention. They would like to ignore the topic altogether. In spite of this attitude they seek to have their children grow up and assume greater and greater responsibility.
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 Somehow they feel that the sex side of this matur-
ing process can be safely ignored.

 If such a policy could keep sex problems out of
the life of children, it would be adopted by sensible
parents. Unfortunately for this program, there is
no part of the growing up process which has
greater social significance or may create more
emotional disturbance than that involving sex.
The only thing that comes from the parent’s refusing
to recognize this is that the child is left without
help and guidance as he takes his most difficult
steps toward the life of the adult.

 Undoubtedly centuries ago society was more
simple and primitive than at present. There was
less risk of psychic sex abnormality because the
process of maturing was relatively simple. This
we know from studies of such savage tribes as still
exist. This does not help the modern parent who
must lead his child to the maturity that present
civilization demands and the responsibility which
our way of living requires.

 The assertion that sex strain is of social origin
does not mean that it involves a conflict merely be-
tween individual desires and the social code.
Rather it is a part of the growing up process, of-
fering the same opportunities for inner trouble
that are always possible as the child moves from
infancy to maturity. The emotional disturbance is
as likely to be caused by antagonism between two
different motives or ideals within the personality
of the individual himself as between his personal
impulses and the existing social standards. Along
no avenue leading to adult character is there
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greater danger of disturbance within the self or between the self and society than in sex-maturing.

The influences that lead to difficulty are also likely to come from a variety of origins, among which the accidental contacts of the neighborhood and the circumstances that lead to the having of one associate rather than another must not, because they seem so casual a matter, be forgotten. Frequently a temporary friendship that drifts into a sharing of sex confidences has in the growing life of the child a significance rivaled only by the earlier impressions gathered from family experience.

*Early Sex Difficulty Produces Later Abnormality*

The emotional significance of sex in the developing character of children and the mystery and curiosity and interest that center about it explain why so much is made of it in current discussions of psychopathology. Emotional disturbances of adults, whether or not tied at the beginning with something of sex character, nearly always reveal some element of sex. Moreover, when the life history is traced backward in order to find a clue to the beginning of mental difficulty, there is commonly found in the impressionable years some sort of sex disturbance. Sometimes it is shock, at other times fear, often anxiety, and occasionally guilt due to inability to curb unsatisfied curiosity.

It is not always true that the meaning of these experiences shows up clearly enough at the begin-
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ing to attract the attention of the ordinary parent. Difficulties are more likely to be noticed by adults when they come at the time of puberty, because they are then more likely to be out of accord with prevailing standards or to have such an emphasis that they cannot be ignored. Usually, however, difficulties that show forth in adolescence are rooted in happenings of an earlier period. This explains why those who have the responsibility of dealing with the abnormalities that appear among adults so often interpret the difficulties of maladjustment in the light of childhood happenings, particularly along lines of sex.

Emotional Conflict

Whenever the boy or girl becomes conscious of inner division with opposing impulses pushing conduct in opposite directions, mental conflict, or, as it is more accurately described, emotional conflict, follows. This means more than confusion. It is a painful experience, and if prolonged, as investigators of childhood delinquency have shown us, it is almost certain to bring about some sort of social maladjustment.

The most intense emotional conflicts commonly appear in adolescence. This results naturally because it is at this period that the individual begins to take over a large degree of independence and is most likely to become conscious of the difference between personal inclination and the precepts and expectations of parents and other adults.

Emotional conflict need not be related to sex but
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often, especially in adolescence, it is. Not only is there an irresistible attraction toward sex matters, in part because of the mystery associated with them, but also because this side of life, more than any other, becomes an experience unshared with adults. The child, as a consequence, cannot get the sympathy and counsel regarding his sex problems that his parents usually give him as he encounters difficulties in the process of growing up. Those who psychoanalyze adults for the purpose of getting insight as to the causes of their emotional maladjustments find as a rule that there has been more consciousness of emotional disturbance regarding sex than in any of the other problems of childhood and youth.

Obscenity

Many adults, particularly teachers and parents, are startled and shocked upon discovering apparent inclination to be obscene on the part of children and youth. This reaction of older people is often a misinterpretation of the actual facts. The trouble is that the children have no adequate vocabulary for the expressing of sex ideas, never having been given an introduction to the necessary terms in this particular field. They have had guidance into language and expression along all other lines, and so when they attempt to express their thoughts, to ask their questions, to learn of others, they have to make use of the few words they have heard—terms belonging to the gutter vocabulary which persist generation after generation merely
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because adults deny children knowledge of the scientific terminology of sex.

These outbursts of obscenity which so trouble older people often also reveal an unsatisfied curiosity, a quest for information regarding sex, which parents and teachers have been unwilling honestly to recognize. There is only a step emotionally between this legitimate desire for clearer understanding and a chronic eagerness to exploit sex, which because of its persistence and intensity we characterize, especially if it lingers after early adolescence, as morbid curiosity. However natural and wholesome the original desire for a clearer understanding of sex in its various phases, it has developed through repression and subterfuge into a genuine obsession and an insatiable craving for contact with sex in every conceivable form. Along with this there may go, and often does, a severe self-reproach, so that the life becomes a never-ending battle in which morbid curiosity is forever turning attention toward matters pertaining to sex, while a feeling of blameworthiness follows after. One of the unhappy results of this everlasting division within the self is the sense of anxiety.

Fear and Sex

We are all familiar with the danger of fear experience in children. Of the various kinds of fear, none is more difficult and in the long run more harmful than fear that has become associated with sex. The tension that comes from a constant effort to repress strong impulses which are regarded as
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unworthy desires is a chronic anxiety, a never-ending apprehension.

Fear not only may originate in the child from some kind of sex disturbance, such as the unwise reaction of the parent when he discovers that his child shows interest in something related to sex; it also may in adult conduct take the form of horror or dread of sex. The various ways in which adults through their imagination torture themselves by the attitudes they take toward sex are almost unbelievable. Men and women who show no disposition toward any unwholesome overt act of sex go through life endlessly carrying on an inner struggle, fearing always that impulse will betray them. Much of this conflict belongs to the realm of the daydream, but even though the struggle is a self-created fiction, it paralyzes activity and gives the individual the feeling of never-ending depression.

It is important to notice that older people are much too quick to charge children with morbid curiosity. Curiosity that would be welcomed along other lines is so fiercely frowned upon when it takes the form of sex that the adult conceives of the child as a victim of morbid cravings.

One of the most serious of all sex perversions is sadism. In this mental abnormality sex desire becomes associated with the pleasure of inflicting pain. As a result sex satisfaction is obtained by some sort of violence, and naturally the child is most often the victim. It must not be forgotten that those who are sadistically inclined as adults were
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themselves children. Apparently some of them show from early years such a decided trend toward the infliction of pain as to suggest that this was a characteristic of the personality from the beginning. In other cases, undoubtedly, the events of childhood, even when they do not entirely explain the sadistic trend, have contributed to its growth.

If morbid love of cruelty is suspected in a young child, there should not be delay in getting the child examined by some competent psychiatrist, but nervous parents, unused to the ways of small children, must remember that a certain amount of cruelty is natural in the child of three or four years; it is the persistence and growth of this trait that suggests abnormality. The chronic love of inflicting pain is not a matter to be dealt with as a moral fault, nor can it be eradicated by any program of punishment. It is a mental twist which requires treatment in the very same way that a physical difficulty, such as a crooked back or a growing deafness, demands the attention of the specialist. Every effort should be made to discover the significance of the apparent love of cruelty, for the craving may develop rapidly and even before adolescence has passed may lead to the commission of crime from which the family can never recover self-respect. Fortunately, this is not a common affliction, but no parent or teacher should shut his eyes to the facts that suggest that a child is the victim of this dangerous tendency toward abnormal cruelty.
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Stealing, False Accusation and Sex

It has also been demonstrated that love of stealing and the habit of making false accusation may be and often are motivated in children by some kind of morbid sex craving. Kleptomania has been found, time and again, to be rooted in some kind of sex anxiety, sex conflict, or profound guilt in reaction to one's sex cravings. The apparent purposelessness of the stealing and the wildness of the story told by the pathological liar reveal that the difficulty is rooted in some abnormality, and arely does investigation find this unassociated with sex.

Most people have no understanding of the ease with which false accusations that usually ruin one's character are fabricated, especially by little girls. Children who are not supposed by their parents or teachers to have any knowledge of sex have been known again and again, out of self-made fantasy, to imagine and report in considerable detail the story of sex assault merely because of a peculiar satisfaction that comes to them in this morbid type of daydreaming. The innocence of such children is taken for granted, and as a consequence, as every student of crime realizes, men of the highest reputation who have not even known the children are convicted by juries horrified at the rehearsal of the fictions of the children, or at least are publicly ruined.

No parent or teacher should be quick to accept, without careful investigation, accusations of this sort made by children. Of course, children are
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sometimes victims of mentally unsound adults, but
the stories told by children of such happenings
should never be made public, unless the evidence is
convincing, without thorough investigation for the
purpose of finding out whether the acts were really
committed or were merely invented as a means of
having excitement or morbid sex satisfaction.

_Homosexuality_

One of the most serious sex abnormalities is
homosexuality. This decrees that the individual,
unless he can be cured of his aberration, must go
through life with sex impulses at variance with his
biological structure. Born a male, he has the char-
acteristics and desires of a female; born a female,
she exhibits thoroughly masculine sex impulses.
Happiness under such circumstances is not to be
had. We now know that a large portion of those
thus afflicted, probably a majority, are not thrown
into this confusion by a biological inheritance but
are led to it by experiences of their early child-
hood. Apparently there are cases where the policy
of the parent seems to have had no small part in
leading toward homosexuality. The child is pro-
tected from contact with playmates of his own sex,
is hampered in his physical development, is denied
reasonable sex instruction, and as a consequence
takes over more and more of the traits of the op-
posite sex, and the more this happens the farther
removed he becomes from normal contact with as-
ociates of his own sex, who frown upon him and
discriminate against him at every opportunity.
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That this happens has been the confession of individuals who have sought help for escape from homosexual cravings. Apparently persistent masturbation encourages this tendency, building up a habit of finding satisfaction in sharing the vice with members of one's own sex. This is one of the reasons why it is so important to deal rationally with masturbation in the ways that have been suggested in an earlier part of this book.

One precaution of the greatest import must be taken by parents who are anxious to protect their children from any degree of sex abnormality. Too much stress must not be put upon individual occurrences with the idea that a single experience may forever blight the sex life of the child. It is the general development, the day by day progress, rather than isolated events that determine the sex destiny of the developing personality. The parent has no reason for the feeling of panic he often expresses when he discovers that his child has had some sex mishap, shock, or contact with an evil-minded associate. Wholesome sex is never gained or lost by a single battle; victory comes through a well-directed campaign which goes forward from the first days until at last the child no longer depends upon parental guidance.