

Pathfinder

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School for Security



Dr. Bettelheim. *Let the rampage save the ego.*

Last fortnight, 34 boys and girls aged 6 to 14, trooped into a small Chicago boarding school where they would attend classes—if they felt like it. If not, they could stay in bed all day.

They would wear anything they wanted to class, regardless of how it looked or fit. They could gorge themselves on candy, cookies and sundaes, guzzle unlimited soft drinks.

A student once tested his freedom by breaking 32 windows in one day. He wasn't punished. On the contrary, the principal explained, "Permitting that rampage made it the turning point in that child's life."

The rest of the nation's school-kids might envy this as the perfect school. But they wouldn't understand. The Sonia Shankman Orthogenic School, operated experimentally by the University of Chicago, limits its enrollment to children so far out of balance emotionally that they must be separated from their parents. Each pupil at the Shankman school has had his or her normal emotional development destroyed by fear and hostility.

The O-School

Hopeless. Students come from all walks of life. Some are orphans, some are from middle-class homes, some from wealthy families. All have been “given up” by the experts—the social-welfare workers and psychiatrists. Where all else has failed, Dr. Bruno Bettelheim, the Vienna-trained principal, takes over. No child of normal intelligence is too big a problem.

Basically, his approach is simple: The child has a feeling of insecurity; he must be made to feel secure. Parents never enter that part of the building where the youngsters live; no child is forced to write to his parent if he doesn't want to. Only ban is on such stimulation as comics, radio, television, movies. The impact of these on a normal child is shattering enough; on an emotionally unbalanced youngster the effect is magnified. Nobody—including Dr. Bettelheim—ever breaks a promise to a child. Too often the children enter the school with a complete lack of faith in promises.

Since it opened in 1944, only about 40 children have been graduated, not enough to yield scientifically accurate results. But follow-ups show that about 80% are doing well.

Foster the Ego. Himself a “graduate” of a German concentration camp (Buchenwald), Dr. Bettelheim met Anna Freud, daughter of psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud. At her suggestion, he took an 8-year-old girl, a schizophrenic, into his home, brought her back to a normal life. The task, he discovered, must be a total operation—embracing all the 24-hour life of the child. Academic instruction cannot be separated from personality development. One strengthens the other.

Says Dr. Bettelheim: “We develop the healthy part of the ego. We never go after the weak part. Every individual has some area of strength. We build on that.”



The “O-School” today.