Fact-Finding for the White House Conference on Children and Youth

by Melvin A. Glasser*

The Midcentury White House Conference on Children and Youth, to be held in Washington in December, will stress for the first time in Conference history the child's mental health and personality development. A Technical Committee on Fact-Finding has been bringing together and integrating what is known on the subject for the Conference. The scope of this material and the questions to be considered are outlined by the Executive Director of the Conference in the following article.

WHY do some people face the problems of life with strong healthy personalities while others are so hampered with personal difficulties that they defeat themselves before they start? How much do we really know about such personality differences? What do we know about the conditions that produce them? What can we do to prevent personality crippling and bring up a generation of healthy, happy men and women?

These are the questions that will occupy the Midcentury White House Conference on Children and Youth, to be held in Washington during the week of December 3, 1950. The Conference will try to bring together our present knowledge of personality development now scattered through many different branches of study. In so doing it should make clear what aspects of the problem need further research. The Conference will also draw up conclusions to guide the actions of parents, teachers, child welfare workers, and all others dealing directly with children and will plan community organization for those phases of the problem that require more than individual understanding.

There has been a White House conference on children each decade of this century. The first four were concerned chiefly with the child's physical well-being—his medical, nutritional, and economic needs. Each of the conferences contributed to the welfare of children in this country. The establishment of the Children's

Bureau, the Federal programs for maternal and child welfare, and much of our present-day standards in child care can be traced to these conferences.

It is understandable that the emphasis in the 1950 Conference should be on mental health, or personality development. There has been increasing interest in this subject for the last generation. The reason may be that we are more and more aware of how much personality difficulties contribute to other types of problems—medical, social, and economic. Or it may be because personality difficulties themselves are increasing in our highly urbanized and mechanized culture. In either case, the recent advances in the physical sciences that are forcing the whole world into one community make it imperative—now more than ever before—that the citizens of the world be healthy-minded, good men and women. The physical problems still exist, but they are widely recognized and the steps that need to be taken to combat them are relatively obvious. The problems of mental health are not so clear, or so well known, and therefore present an appropriate field for such a pioneering group as the White House Conferences have always shown themselves to be.

Finding the Facts

The National Committee planning for the Conference has appointed a Technical Committee on Fact-Finding to review the situation. A fact-finding staff, working under the direction of Helen L. Witmer, is re-

sponsible for bringing together and integrating whatever is known about personality development today, looking for answers to a great many questions that will have to come from many different kinds of specialists.

In the first place, what is a healthy personality? What kind of personality do we want our children to have? Questions of this type are obviously too broad for any one specialist to answer. But in forming our own answers, we can get much help from the anthropologists. What is the relation between personality and culture? What kinds of character are admired, or what kinds make for happiness, in what situations? What kind of family organization, or what kind of child-rearing practices, produces what kind of individual?

Other questions must be taken to the psychologists. What ages are most important in character formation and what types of experience? How much of a child's character is due to parental attitudes? Can the schools, or any outside agency, help a child to make a good adjustment to a bad home? What kind of mistakes do well-meaning parents frequently make? The questions of what to do about mistakes after they have been made must, of course, go to the specialists in mental health.

There are questions that must be answered by the specialists in physical medicine. What influence does the mother's physical and mental health have on the character, or nervous system, of her unborn baby? How does nutrition, glandular development, a special disease, or a special handicap affect the child's attitude toward himself and his world? Do certain conditions call for special treatment, over and above what is necessary for the child's physical recovery?

Still other questions must be put to the sociologists. What is the effect of poverty on personality develop-

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ment? What is the effect of above-average wealth? Is physical hardship, or over-protection, a l w a y s harmful? If not, at what point do they become harmful? How much of what appears to be the effect of poverty or wealth is actually due to community attitudes?

The questions that must be put to the social-psychologist are endless. What effect have national, or local, standards of excellence on character development? How do these standards differ among the various geographic, ethnic, and economic groups that make up our Nation? How do prejudice, discrimination, and segregation affect the children toward whom they are directed? How do these attitudes affect the children who hold them?

There are relatively few branches of study that may not have something to contribute to this problem. The family is basic and strategic. Religion and the church have their vital role to play. The schools, which are usually the child's first contact with the larger community, are obviously important. But there are also the courts, social services, health services, recreation groups and clubs, and employment services.

The factors that contribute to a child's personality undoubtedly lie in his physical condition, the personal atmosphere of his home, his relation to the community, the type of community he finds himself in. All these aspects of the problem must be understood before we can plan for healthy personality development. The fact-finding staff has the job of bringing together as much of this information as possible so that we may see where we stand.

Planning for Action

When all the facts are in, the most important thing brought to light will probably be the gaps—the unanswered questions—that will show us where further study should be made. But there will also be information on improved procedures that could be put into practice at once. To direct such research or organize such practice is beyond the power of any one committee or organization. What is needed is a Nation-wide, cooperative effort involving many groups and countless individuals. It is expected that the Conference will stimulate this type of work, which will be carried on by local organizations throughout t h e whole decade of the 1950's.

At the request of President Truman, the Governors of all States and Territories have appointed White House Conference committees. T h e s e groups, in turn, are stimulating local discussion, inquiry, and activity throughout the country. Such committees have been at work for some time in every State and Territory, and an Advisory Council on State and Local Action is an integral part of the Conference structure.

In addition, several hundred national organizations devoted to the interests and welfare of children are setting up discussion groups, evaluating their programs in the light of the Conference theme, and initiating projects and studies closely related to it. Young people are at work on all aspects of Conference activity and are coordinating their interests and contributions through an Advisory Council on Youth Participation. There are also 37 Federal offices that are making studies and generally contributing their resources of technical skills and experience to the Conference activities.

When the Conference meets in December the findings of all these groups will be brought together. In the light of all the information before them, the several thousand participants will formulate principles, draw up recommendations, and suggest lines of post-Conference action. And it is hoped that these same groups will carry the recommendations back to their local areas and assist in putting them into practice.

Notes and Brief Reports

Size of Firms Covered by Old-Age and Survivors Insurance, 1945–48

The majority of the workers covered by old-age and survivors insurance are employed by large firms of 100 or more employees. From 1945 to 1948,[1] however, there was a shift toward firms of smaller size, together with a slight decline in the relative importance of t h e larger firms as measured by the number of employees and average wages paid. During this period the number of employing organizations increased at a faster rate than the number of covered employees.

[1] All data in this discussion pertain to the first quarter of the year.

For the pay period ending nearest the middle of March 1948, about 2.6 million employing organizations[2] reported the employment of an estimated 35.8 million workers in jobs covered by old-age and survivors insurance (table 1). As compared with the number for the 1945 mid-March pay period, the number of firms had increased by about 29 percent.[3] The number of employees had increased by 3,002,000, or 9.2 percent. In the 1 year from 1947 to 1948 the number of

[2] The terms "employing organization," "employer," "firm," and "concern," are used interchangeably in this discussion; they refer to the legal entity filing the tax report.
[3] Excludes employers with covered workers at some time during the first calendar quarter but with no employees in the pay period nearest March 15.

firms went up 4.2 percent, and the number of employees increased 2.1 percent.

The postwar shift in the composition of American industry toward firms of smaller size is illustrated by the marked increase—580,000, or 30 percent—from 1945 to 1948 in the number of firms with .fewer than 50 employees. For firms of all sizes the increase amounted to 589,000.

Firms with 8–19 employees experienced the greatest percentage increase in number of firms—39 percent—although firms with 1–3 employees had the greatest numerical increase—314,000.

Because these data[4] on size of concerns reflect the number of persons

[4] Data like those in table 1, classified by industry, State, and county of the employing organization, are tabulated by the Bureau of Old-Age and Survivors Insurance.