

Miracle of the "Secret Children"

S. I. School Is Rousing Minds of Retarded

(Second of two articles)
By DICK OWEN

THE major problem at Willowbrook State School for mentally retarded children concerns itself with a program that literally restores "dead" children to life. To do this herculean job properly it is essential that the school get the child as young as possible. This fact has evidently been getting far-reaching notice. There are 1,000 of these one-time "secret children" now in cribs at Willowbrook. The moment they are admitted the process of rehabilitation begins.

To understand just how complex this problem is, here is a typical example of what the school on Staten Island has to face. A girl infant was admitted. She would lie curled up in a ball, motionless day and night. She was crippled. She wouldn't respond to any stimuli whatever. She was like a vegetable—she had life but gave no evidence of it.

The first thing Dr. Harold H. Berman, the director, ordered was gentle manipulation of the child's arms and legs. Nurses' aids moved the tiny limbs up and down, up and down for hours every day.

LITTLE PHRASES THAT TOTS UNDERSTAND

The aids kept up simple chatter, little phrases that children understand. After months of this, the girl was taken from her crib and placed in a support box. This helped her to stand upright. Small bands strengthened her legs.

At first the tot's head would roll from side to side because of weak neck muscles. Gradually the muscles took on tone and she could control her head movements. Then she was taken from the support box and held as she took a few simple steps. (The aid holds the child and at the same time bends down and gently moves one leg forward, then the other.)

This went on for four long years.

Today that child, once compared to a vegetable, can say simple phrases. She can walk, dress and undress, go to the bathroom by herself. She understands simple commands and plays happily with others. (She is one of the happy youngsters shown in the accompanying photos.)

LIVING-DEAD AT 15; NOW HE'S MARRIED

This goes on every day. Berman and his psychiatrists watch every little progress and add to the training whenever the child's I.Q. shows development.

Many children come to Berman at advanced ages. But invariably they have to be coaxed out of their

apathy toward life. A boy of 15 came to Willowbrook in a state of complete indifference to existence. He was given careful training for four years. His response was almost miraculous. He is now married and self-supporting. He even drives a car.

Very few children can make such a wonderful recovery. Berman points out that one must never lose sight of the fact that the brains of these children are permanently injured. But what the school aims to do is to utilize all the mental possibilities remaining to a child.

If ordinary courses fail, Berman will try anything. He had a boy of 12 who would sit in a corner all day and just rock. He posed a real problem. One day the boy was given a trumpet to fool around with. That did the trick. They got him to join the band. Today he not only plays well but he is a friendly, normal youngster.

(Training mentally retarded children to play musical instruments calls for ingenuity. Among the 49 boys in the brass band, many cannot read English, but all can read music. It's done by musical director Vince Lombardi, who draws a cat on the scale for the note C, a dog for the note D, etc. They even have a girl's class where the youngsters learn to play the violin.)

SOME PAINTS SOLVE PROBLEM

A teen-age boy who had retired into himself was remade almost overnight. This boy would have nothing to do with anyone. He was surly and resentful of attention. All the usual methods failed. One day someone gave the boy some paints. The response was magic. This boy's paintings in oil now adorn many of the school's buildings and visiting art critics have bestowed genuine praise on the lad's talent.

While Berman and his associates, of whom he is tremendously



(NEWS photos by Joe Petrella) In rehabilitation center, boy (left) practices lacing on an oversized shoe. Later he'll be able to lace his own shoes. Girl in background threads bobbins on string to teach her use of formerly useless hands. Boy with back to camera puts different-sized blocks into their correct holes in a board. This teaches the child how to recognize shapes. Child (right) opens a canvas book and learns how to manipulate snaps for securing his own clothes.

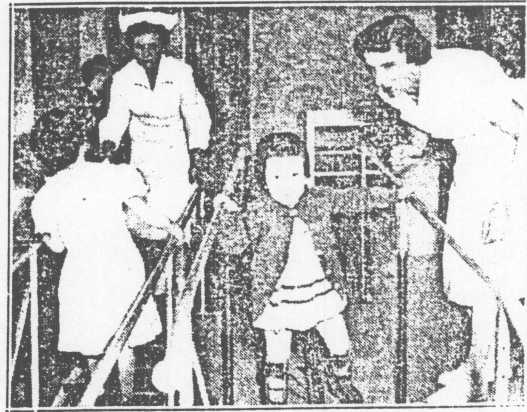
proud, feel that they are making progress at Willowbrook, he still needs a research center where the entire problem of mental deficiency in children can be studied and attacked.

Just what does cause the trouble? Medicine still doesn't know. The damage is done during pregnancy. Something happens that results in injury to the child's brain. It is known, for instance, that if a mother gets German measles during the first three months of pregnancy, there is a chance the child may be affected.

SEE NUTRITION A BIG FACTOR

In an experiment with mice, carried out by Dr. Theo H. Ingalls of Harvard, it was found that lack of oxygen in the mother caused mentally defective offspring. Thus a similar deficiency in a human mother could produce similar results in her child. She could be affected perhaps by remaining in a smoke-filled room, such as in a night club, for several hours.

Dr. George Gold, pathologist at Willowbrook, says an important part of his research is in chemistry with special emphasis on metabolism (the building up and breaking down of tissues). "Along these lines," he says, "a very important subdivision is the study of the ability of the individual to break down or utilize certain essential nutrient materials." Children and mothers must be studied



(Child (left) strengthens weakened leg muscles by walking over device which makes her pick up her feet as she progresses. Center board for tot (right) keeps her little legs apart as she learns to walk.)

to see what foods they can assimilate and what they cannot.

Past research indicates the following possible factors are involved in contributing to mental deficiency in children; heredity, a possible factor; mal-delivery that results in brain injury, drunkenness, and of course any severe injury to the mother during pregnancy.

Berman says that everything is suspect, even a slight sniffle. The pregnant mother, in his opinion, should follow a routine of mild exercise and keep in very close touch with her doctor.

In view of the lack of any definite knowledge, Berman needs funds for research.

"I can get all the equipment I want," he says. "There are many kind-hearted, interested people who will give of their money, or work in projects to raise funds to purchase any promising piece of equipment, even an electronic microscope."

HEAD STRUCTURE TESTING PROBLEM

"But research requires a person with an idea he wants to pursue to its ultimate solution. It is a special type person, with a burning desire and the ability to correlate even the most minute fact into the full picture. He should be permitted to work at his own time and pace, without outside pressures and duties. He must be paid and the pay must be commensurate with his position.

"This means a lot of money. If we get that money the researchers will be available."

Among the stupendous tasks facing the researchers are children

born with deformed head structures, accompanied by body crippling. One might suppose that an autopsy would reveal that the brain damage in this particular form of deficiency would be the same in all cases. But it's not so.

In cases examined after death, one child had a brain upside down; another had part of the brain missing; another had only half a brain.

In other words, there seems to be no pattern from which the researchers can get started.

Here, too, research turns to study of animals. For example, methods of performing heart surgery that was once thought to be impossible were perfected after intensive study of reptiles' hearts. The animals may yet furnish some leads to the causes of mental deficiency in children.

One further point that Dr. Berman makes clear: a mentally deficient child is not an insane child. Mad persons, he explains, are people who were once sane. They become sick from a variety of causes and they can be cured. This is a word they cannot yet employ at Willowbrook.

The school is supported by state funds and Dr. Berman points out that it now costs \$4,000,000 a year to operate. "And," he adds wryly, "there are other worthy causes besides ours, you know."

Regardless of the money problem, however, he insists that at Willowbrook the present program will be developed more and more so that these "secret children" will find they have a place in the world. "Above all," Berman says, "they will be made aware that they are surrounded by persons who are trying their best to aid them."



A set of paints and brushes started this boy on road to recovery. He is painting a Christmas scene on door of his ward. Youngster with the trombone is also a fine soprano. He is a member of the school's 40-piece brass band.

