

# **THE MENTAL HYGIENE OF CHILDHOOD**

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The mental hygiene of childhood by William A. White

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**WILLIAM A. WHITE**

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MIND AND HEALTH SERIES

*Edited by H. Addington Bruce, A.M.*

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OF CHILDHOOD

BY

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## EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

PARENTS, teachers, school superintendents, school physicians, all who in any way have to do with the upbringing of the young, will find this an uncommonly helpful book, both in its specific recommendations and the sweep of its philosophic grasp. Not only does it emphasize certain fundamental principles usually underestimated or quite ignored in child training, but it provides precisely the kind of survey of child nature most needed by those whose business it is to make education truly effective.

As things now stand the great aims of education are again and again frustrated. The world abounds in human derelicts of all sorts — men and women incompetent to earn a decent living, moral weaklings, nervous and mental wrecks, slaves of vice and crime. So numerous, in fact, have



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the mentally and morally inefficient become that they constitute problems of the gravest social significance. And since in the main they are people who have passed through the educational mill in childhood and youth, it is evident either that the present educational system is somewhere at fault or that there are in these unhappy folk inborn defects which no system of education will suffice to overcome.

Until recently the tendency was to subscribe to the latter view. Under the influence of an unconscious assumption that accepted theories of education were sound, the blame for failure when failure occurred was thrown on the ancestry of the persons who failed. There was much talk of "degeneration" and of "the fatal influence of a poor heredity." Nor has the heredity bugaboo been wholly laid yet, as witness the activities of the so-called eugenic societies that would improve the world by drastic action designed to prevent the "unfit" from "perpetuating their kind." Gradually, however, there has come to ever widening circles a realization that environ-

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ment, and particularly the environment of the first years of life, may after all have most to do in determining the course of adult development, by repressing or accentuating inherited tendencies. And evidence is steadily accumulating to bear this out, as a result chiefly of patient individual analysis of the life histories of thousands of persons who in one way or another — by nervous breakdown, by insanity, by vice addiction, by criminality — have deviated strikingly from the normal.

The author of this book is a distinguished representative of the highly trained specialists who have devoted themselves to this task of individual analysis of deviates from the normal. For many years Doctor White has had exceptional opportunity to study closely large numbers of mental and moral incapables, in his work as superintendent of Saint Elizabeths Hospital, the great Government institution at Washington for the mentally sick; and, before going to Saint Elizabeths, as a psychiatrist in New York, where he was assistant physician in the Binghamton

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State Hospital from 1892 to 1903. The outcome of his researches has been to satisfy him — as similar researches have satisfied all who have undertaken them with thoroughness — that whatever the part played by heredity, the thing that supremely counts in the making or marring of a human life is the influences by which that life is surrounded in the formative years of childhood. As Doctor White expresses it, on a later page :

“We are coming in these days to think of heredity as being much more restricted in its possibilities for limitation. It is true that many students of heredity believe that all sorts of mental qualities may be traced directly from the ancestors. Those physicians, however, who deal with the problems of mental illness see, on the contrary, these peculiarities passed on because, as a part of the child's environment, they are impressed upon it during its developmental period. This view has been emphasized because it has been found possible to largely modify so many personal mental traits. Heredity as an explanation