

**THE
NERVOUS CHILD**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649249473

The Nervous Child by Edith C. Johnson

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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EDITH C. JOHNSON

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NERVOUS CHILD**

UNIV. OF
AMERICAN HOME SERIES
NORMAN E. RICHARDSON, Editor

THE NERVOUS CHILD

BY
EDITH C. JOHNSON



THE ABINGDON PRESS
NEW YORK CINCINNATI

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

WHEN a child is naturally predisposed to nervousness he constitutes a particular problem for his parents. In such cases, one of their first duties is to avoid stimulating these unfortunate inborn tendencies. Nervousness may be transmitted from parent to offspring. The fact that this is done unconsciously in no way lessens its reality.

In discussing this important subject of social heredity, a modern writer describes an interesting experience:

"I came on a nest of the wild duck in a marsh as the young birds had just emerged from the eggs. The mother duck flew off and disappeared in the sedge, flapping a wing to which she pretended injury. I stood by the nest for some hours and watched the young birds. The greater number were already active and displaying an interest in their surroundings. They began to try to get out of the nest, and I took them one by one in my hand and placed them in the water, where in the stillness that reigned they splashed and twittered and enjoyed themselves. They showed not the slightest fear of me, nestling from time to time on my feet, and turning intelligent eyes upward to look at me, evidently quite ready to accept me in the fullest confidence as their guardian.

"The wild duck had been in these marshes for untold ages. She had been here even in the days when the woolly rhinoceros left its remains with those of the cavemen in the adjacent hills. During all this time her kind had been one of the most universally hunted among wild creatures. The spent cartridges of the modern sportsmen strewed the bog around. Yet here were her offspring just entering on the world and showing no sign of any kind of any inborn fear of this the hereditary enemy of the species.

"After a time I moved away some distance to

watch what would happen. The mother bird returned and alighted nearby. The little ducks rushed toward her as she called. I could observe her. She was chattering with emotion. Every feather was quivering with excitement. The Great Terror of Man was upon her. After a short interval I advanced toward the group again. The mother bird flew away with a series of loud warning quacks. The little ones scattered to cover, flapping their short wing stumps and with beaks wide open cheeping in terror. With difficulty I found one of them again in hiding. It was now a wild, transformed creature trembling in panic which could not be subdued.

"It is in this way, and under conditions of the strongest emotion, that the accumulated experience of tens of thousands of generations of the species is imposed on young birds. Once having received it, within a few days, even within a few hours, they pass into another world from which they can never be reclaimed. In the numerous experiments with wild ducks which I made, the following conclusions stood out without any exception. The little ducks, hatched out from the eggs taken from the nest, or taken themselves from the nest the first day after hatching, knew nothing of any fear of man, and they never acquired it afterward if brought up with domestic birds. But when once the Terror had been transmitted to them through the social heredity of their species they could not afterward be tamed. When brought up by a foster-parent the young wild ducks acquired that exact relationship of friendliness to man which the foster-parent displayed and which differed considerably according to the birds used as foster-parents."—Benjamin Kidd, *Science of Power*, Chap. X.

With her unusually clear insight into child nature, Miss Johnson has set before the parents of nervous children the most common errors to be avoided. The nature of nervousness is so well described that her practical suggestions for overcoming it will be

THE NERVOUS CHILD

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easily understood and applied. The study is necessarily brief and introductory. It is not an adequate guide in all cases. It does point out, however, the nature of those types of nervousness that require treatment which only specialists can give.

NORMAN E. RICHARDSON.

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THE NERVOUS CHILD

'Tis easier to prevent bad habits than to break them.—B. Franklin.

Prevalency of Nervousness in Children—Causes of Nervousness in Children—Symptoms of Nervousness in Children—Need of Special Treatment—Treatment of the Nervous Child—The Regular Life—Removal of Physical Defects—Environment of Peace and Harmony—Cultivation of Right Habits and Virtues—Guarding the Imagination—Analysis of the Child's Dreams—Activities and Interests—Love of Nature and Religious Training.

PREVALENCY OF NERVOUSNESS IN CHILDREN

HOW many a mother, when her child has been restless, irritable, sulky, or otherwise badly behaved before "company" has turned to the guest and said, apologetically, "Mary's terribly nervous," or "Tommy's such a nervous child." Then, according to her own temperament, she has spasmodically scolded and shaken the child, or has allowed it to tug at her and slap her, whine or wail, with occasional mild reproofs inserted parenthetically into her attempted conversation with the guest. In either case, neither the guest, mother nor child enjoyed the visit, and each probably came out of the ordeal with nerves much the worse for wear.

The child who had so unpleasantly dominated the scene was, doubtless, a "nervous" child. Nor are such cases isolated or rare. The bane of American life is the production of nervous people, evidenced even in early childhood. Norsworthy and Whitley, in their recent *Psychology of Childhood*, state that "about 5 per cent of children of school age are neurotic, meaning by that that they are sufficiently far down the scale of nervous stability to make them susceptible to emotional complexes which will interfere with good adjustment to the outside world."

The very fact that so many children are nervous

leads many a mother to accept this condition as a matter of course—a phase in the child's development. Instead, it should be recognized as a danger signal which, though not morbidly to be feared or dreaded, should be looked upon as ample cause for special observation and treatment. The parent who knows the chief causes which produce nervous children, will be able either to ward off such tendencies or to make their appearance an impossibility.

CAUSES OF NERVOUSNESS IN CHILDREN

The greater number of nervous children are probably born with a predisposition to nervousness which is a part of their *inheritance*. Intelligent parents who recognize the possibility of such an inheritance can do much by educational means to overcome this tendency. Besides disciplining themselves to self-control, they can learn what to eliminate from and what to insert into the child's environment in order to prevent injury to the nervous system or to strengthen during infancy a system that is inherently sensitive.

In this period of life heredity and environment overlap. In fact, all through early childhood imitation of parents and others in the home is so strong an educational influence that doubtless much that is sometimes attributed to direct inheritance is really due to imitation. Various factors in the environment, then, may be causes of the child's nervousness.

Of these, one which has become recognized as of growing importance is that of *unhygienic living*. The brain and the body are mutually dependent upon each other. Each must be healthy, or mental power and activity will be low. The brain gives vitality to the body and controls the processes of digestion, respiration, and circulation. A healthy condition of the blood, which feeds and nourishes the brain, is impossible without proper food and enough of it, sufficient exercise in the open air, and plenty of sleep.