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Social-Medical Problems of Youth —

VIEWPOINT OF THE JUVENILE COURT JUDGE

THE HONORABLE BEN J. SHEPPARD, M.D.

(Editor's Note: This article has not been edited. It is being published as taped when given at the Conference on Medical Care of the Family in Chicago, November 5, 1965. The author is a doctor, a lawyer and a judge with the wit and the home-spun philosophy of a Will Rogers.)

I am away from the "ivy halls" and I'm just judging. We have a big juvenile court, a domestic relation court in Miami. We have a population of more than a million which is nothing to Chicago.

So I speak from practicalities only—I've dealt with youngsters over the last six to seven years since I became the judge of the juvenile court. I was the Medical Examiner for Dade County for three years and I took care of the county jail until the time I became the judge, so I've had a spectrum of dealing with delinquent and non-conforming children.

One of my pet phobias is the word teenager. This is something I decry—I decry because I believe it has psychiatric connotations, and the kids feel they have to act in a certain way as they would act when you speak about a twelve billion dollar yearly spending by this group of adolescents; children act this way. The thing

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that bothers me most in my work is the breakdown in the family morals and family morale because I see children in court who are 95% from the culturally deprived, if I can coin a new phrase, culturally deprived areas and 5% from the upper brackets. I practice in Coral Gables which is where the economics structure is much higher and do most counseling with children.

Now if I were to tell you that in the last four weeks I had four fifteen to sixteen-year old girls brought in by their parents and these girls were pregnant (this is into my medical office because they wouldn't come into the court) I wouldn't be exaggerating. I've had four young girls from so-called good families; I've had youngsters from the Coral Gables area in court for shop-lifting, stealing bobby-pins, stealing handkerchiefs. Parents could well afford to buy the store. This is the thing that bothers me. Where are we falling down? Where is the family falling down?

I've come to the conclusion that the only thing to say for the free choice of husband or wife is that the husband or wife seeks the psychological equivalent. I feel very definitely that I would like a return to the old European system where the parents at maturity have selected the husband and selected the wife. The percentage of teenage divorce and separations is well over 50 to

60%. We're attributing maturity to these youngsters which they do not have.

Now I wish I knew the answer other than "with the family." When I received a list of points to discuss one of them was the increase in crime and matters of like nature, and why are we having the high rates of delinquency. I wish I could answer that especially from the families where we should expect better. I think very often of a television show I saw recently in which Jackie Gleason (who is about the only one I watch — everybody in Miami watches Jackie; we have decided to give him the town; he's our most important import) said something that I couldn't help but remember. He said when he was a boy and the family went out, the entire family went out as a group, and he was laid on the bed to go to sleep. When he woke up at 1 o'clock in the morning and probably found twenty overcoats on top of him, this was when the parents came to take him home.

Now I feel very definitely that the cause of delinquency, and its increase, is centered about the family. There is something in the relationship between the parents; there is something in the relationship of the child to the parents, the lack of communication, the breakdown in the line of talk that leads to this adolescent seeking his own friends and seeking to get away from his family. The automobile has become sort of a caste symbol; you've got to have a car to be anybody.

I recently had a very horrible

experience in Coral Gables where one of the mothers wanted me to use our influence to get her child into one of the so-called service clubs in high school. She'd gone to the principal and she'd gone to the School Board, not to protest against these elite sororities but to get her child into one of these sororities, and I wanted me to use my influence to see if I couldn't get the principal of the school to permit this child to join this group because if her child didn't join this group then she would not be dating, she would not be asked out. She would be a social outcast in a school of about 4,500, one of our better schools. About 600 children belong to these clubs. I sat down and explained to her that my older girl (when she first came to Coral Gables in '47 she didn't have much in the way of high schools) had finished public school at St. Teresa's and transferred to Coral Gables High. She went through Coral Gables High and went through medical school. My original plan I must tell you, my original plan when I took my law degree. My wife was the nurse and my older daughter was going to be a veterinarian and my younger daughter was keeping company with a mortician, so I thought the whole group would move to a small town and we'd have it licked. Nobody could break in on us — particularly if you were in the life insurance business.

I explained to the mother carefully that my older child had gone through the same school and had never had the advantage of a club. This same woman's older boy

had been in more police difficulty than I could possibly extricate him from; and I spent many a night extricating him.

One term was used that is used constantly in our detention home, and that is the term "head shrinker." These children in our detention homes and in our youth hall are afraid to go to a psychiatrist; and they resist it. We have a guidance clinic attached to our children's court; they resist it and fight it. They say, "Why do I have to go to see this head shrinker?" Those are the exact terms which we hear five and six times a week. Why do I have to go to see this head shrinker?

I ask myself very often, why do we send them? We send them because of parental attitudes, and I'm sure the Doctor will agree with me that when parents come into court they tell me all their child needs is a psychiatrist. I had a case recently involving two boys who attacked two other boys from Miami Beach. They saw these two youngsters walking home from a sandwich shop and with a big heavy belt around their fists, proceeded to waylay these two young adults and hammer them with the heavy buckle. The mother and father of one insisted that all that child needed was psychiatric help. In order to placate them and to keep peace with their attorney, I arranged for a psychiatric interview; but I can assure you this boy is going to the training school regardless of the psychiatric results, unless a psychiatrist tells me frankly this

child's a psychotic which I doubt very much.

Why is it that our sense of values is so destroyed? I had a case of rape on a fifteen-year old girl in court several weeks ago, in a high school in South Miami. The boy was there with about six witnesses who were willing and ready to swear that they had been intimate with this girl; therefore it could not have been rape, they claimed. Unfortunately the father was a prominent business man and our laws are so antiquated that when we do have these transgressions the juvenile court can't do anything because this was a young adult involved; we have to transfer it to the criminal court, and the criminal court lawyers because of the darn newspapers, news media, will not hear anything in chambers, especially if they're up for re-election. So rather than face the publicity which would come with a case like this they dropped the charges against this boy and as far as the cure, the girl is being sent out of town to a school so that she will no longer be confronted with people who know about the incident.

I wish that I could pass some sort of law as I see it in my community now, where there would be but one working parent and that one parent would be home at all hours to be with the children. Unfortunately, the two cars, the two television sets, and all that sort of thing necessitates the both parents working, and one of the most misused evils of our time, the baby sitter, has come into prominence. "I've got my child with a good baby

sitter; then I can take off for a week or two and never mind my youngster." I put the baby sitter right alongside the television set as being one of the evils of this era.

I don't think kids have changed very much in the last years. We're trying to recognize, we're making up problems to solve for them but I can remember, I was born and brought up in New York City and I can remember the groups who hung around and were paid to swoon every time Frank Sinatra came to the theater in New York City. We had our groups; we had our families; but I can say this: On weekends or on Saturdays and Sundays the family went out as a unit. The family went to church as a unit; the family picnicked as a unit; and the family was together.

If I were to be asked the prime cause for juvenile delinquency the first and uppermost cause in my mind is the breakdown in family communication and relations and mutual respects—that's the first and uppermost cause in juvenile delinquency, the breakdown.

It was stated that children want to know that they are loved. This is the truest thing that has ever been said. They want to know that they are loved and they are secure. I do not feel that any child minds being punished when he knows that the one at the other end of the stick is someone who loves him. They hate for it to be

someone that does not respect and love.

I have no penicillin nor penicillin shot for juvenile delinquents. The greatest thing that has come out of Washington State of the few things in the last few years, has been the development of the pre-pre-school kindergarten in my opinion. The development of the pre-pre-school kindergarten. And I think this is going to help our youngsters when they start in the age of three and get the environment that they can't get from the homes normally. I feel that very strongly seeing as I do that 75% of my case load in court comes from families in the deprived areas where there is a mother only and the mother being the only support. We are very backward in Florida in one respect—I am advising all our dependents to move to California because in Florida all you can get is \$81 a month, AFDC. I'm telling them all to go to California because you can go up to \$250 or \$260 a month. Some of them are taking my advice. I think it would be cheaper for Florida to subsidize them and send them. My cure for juvenile delinquency amongst this group that I see now, my cure for juvenile delinquency is a very difficult one but I can see it as a cure, and that is the termination of parental rights at birth, colonization in one of our states under the direction of the government, and then starting all over again. If you can sell that, I'll vote for it.