

THE BRITISH JOURNAL OF NURSING

WITH WHICH IS INCORPORATED
THE NURSING RECORD

ETHEL GORDON FENWICK, S.R.N., HON. EDITOR 1888—1947.

No. 2203. Vol. 100.

MARCH, 1952.

Price Sevenpence.

Editorial.

A New Approach to a Vital Question.

THE APPALLING CASES OF REAL brutality to children and the impression that crimes of this nature are, of late, too leniently dealt with, has aroused a wide-spread agitation for the administration of sterner penalties for cruelty to children.

The attention of the Council of the British College of Nurses, Ltd., was drawn to this subject at a recent meeting, reported in the last issue of THE BRITISH JOURNAL OF NURSING, and the members, therefore, as all lovers of children, will rejoice to learn of the address delivered by Lord Goddard, the Lord Chief Justice (reported in the *Daily Telegraph*) to Magistrates at the opening of Dorset Assizes on January 16th—on this disquieting matter, he stated, they should refuse to deal with cases of real brutality to children under the Children and Young Person Act, but insist on a charge under the Offences Against the Person Act, the law is quite strong enough to deal with these cases and needs no alteration. What is wanted is a change in administration.

"If you have charges under the Offences Against the Person Act you can send a defendant either to Quarter Sessions or Assizes where an adequate and proper sentence will be given." The Lord Chief Justice considered neglect cases on a rather different plane, and said, "I often wonder whether the suggestion of my friend the Bishop of Lichfield could be adopted—tuition for mothers—he points out that sending a woman to prison achieves nothing."

If some provision could be made whereby a mother could be ordered—sentenced—if you like to go to a place where she could be taught how to bring up her children properly and make a home for them, it would be a great deal better than passing prison sentences.

The Lord Chief Justice sympathised with the Magistrates in the difficult problems involved when passing sentence "who know that if they send a father to prison it can only mean National Assistance for the mother and children. If they send a mother to prison, there is nothing but institutional treatment for the children, which I know you all desire to avoid if you possibly can." In a letter to the *Manchester Guardian*, Geo. Benson, Chairman, Howard League for Prison Reform also writes "On this vital problem of cruelty to children in which two distinct types of offence are involved, first, the deliberate infliction of pain or other form of ill treatment and secondly, neglect." On the latter offence, Dr. Charity Taylor, the Governor of Holloway, contributes a most valuable study in the Report of the Prison Commissioners for 1949—of 89 mothers who passed through her prison in 1948-49. She

states, "it is a doleful picture, not of cruelty but of inadequacy. Thirty-five of the women were given intelligence tests, and of these 27 had I.Q.s (intelligence quotients) ranging from 80 to 52, in other words from subnormal mentality to gross mental deficiency.

"The neglect of their children is only a part of a general social failure of these women due to low intelligence, poor social environment in their early years . . . They cannot cope with ordinary social and domestic life . . . It is of great importance that in nearly every case of neglect the act complained of is one of omission and not commission. In almost every case the woman loved her children, even if she found them a nuisance."

Concerning these disturbing facts, the Chairman of the Howard League for Prison reform is convinced that punishment and particularly imprisonment is futile in these cases and advocates probation under a probation officer specially trained to teach such as are teachable how to run a home, and he further points out:—

"There is also another and serious aspect of this problem which should lead us to question the present methods of dealing with child neglect. Those acquainted with Dr. Bowlby's '44 Juvenile Thieves' and his recent work 'Maternal Care and Mental Health' (obtainable through H.M. Stationery Office) will be aware of the danger involved in removing young children from the most inadequate homes to institutions, however benevolent.

"Evidence is rapidly accumulating to show that the separation of a child under five years of age from its mother is, psychologically, an extremely risky step, even if the mother is inadequate.

"Suitable and permanent foster-parents are safer than institutions, but the supply is woefully insufficient.

"Every endeavour must be made to prevent any break in the mother-child relationship. This must be preserved by the education of the mother and the improvement of the home. It cannot be too strongly stressed that in the first years of life separation from the mother, even for a comparatively few months, may be disastrous. Finally, may I add that it is also far more economical to teach the mother than to maintain her in prison and the children in institutions!"

In the suggested new approach as to the best methods of dealing with cruelty to children and child neglect, coming as it does in convincing accord from these illustrious persons, so well qualified to judge, and representative of the Law—The Lord Chief Justice; the Church—the Bishop of Lichfield, who it will be remembered is a descendant of that great benefactress to suffering humanity—Elizabeth Fry; of medicine—Dr. Charity Taylor, Governor of Holloway; and the chairman of the Howard League for Prison Reform, what better authority could we have!

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)