

## THE DOCTRINE OF "HANDS OFF" IN PLAY

LUTHER HALSEY GULICK, M.D.,

President, Playground Association of America

[STENOGRAPHIC REPORT]

Within the last few years there has arisen a pernicious doctrine with reference to children—the doctrine of “hands off”. It is based on the idea that children grow up wholesomely if only they are let alone. I remember seeing a young mother who had been carefully taught that she must not interfere with her child, but allow it to unfold naturally and wholesomely, as a flower unfolds. I have seen her with tears trickling down her face, watching her baby on the floor; she wanted to take hold of the child, but she had been told “hands off”. The baby needed to be caressed and sung to as much as the mother needed to do it, but this pernicious new doctrine that children should be let alone was interfering with the fundamental instincts of motherhood and the fundamental instincts of babyhood.

Let us examine some of the facts back of this doctrine of “hands off”. When the Playground Association of America was organized in Washington, some of us who were interested in the work were granted an audience by Theodore Roosevelt, then President of the United States. We told him what we were doing, and he made a gracious response. He said: “It is a splendid thing to provide in congested districts of American cities spaces where children may play; but let them play freely. Do not interfere with their play. Leave them alone. Do not meddle.” He has since changed his opinion, but in those words he voiced the general public feeling regarding this whole matter of play. It is the general public feeling that children ought to be let alone, that they will play wholesomely if only adults do not fuss with them.

There was recently a warm debate in the House of Representatives with reference to the playground appropriation for the city of Washington, and in the course of the argument one of the distinguished gentlemen said that it was “as necessary and im-

portant to teach children to play as to teach the little lambs to gambol on the sunny hillside". He merely expressed general public opinion. It was this same doctrine of "hands off"—let the children grow up spontaneously.

One of my friends has a boy about nine years old. From the birth of that boy this doctrine has been carried out. In consequence that boy is a nuisance to himself, to his mother, to his father, and to all their friends young and old, because his instinct feelings have never been curbed. He has never learned to control himself. He has never learned what it means to bump up against another personality and be answered back in kind. He has learned that he can do anything he pleases with people, and that there are no consequences. To be sure, he has learned that if he puts his hand into a flame, it will be burned; but he has not been allowed to learn that if he puts his hand against another individual, he will also be burned. The parents of that boy have done him incalculable harm, because they have not allowed him to learn the great fundamental lessons of human relationships. That boy will go to college by and by, and there he will learn a great deal.

We may take an analogy from the animal world. Professor Scott, of Princeton University, experimented extensively with reference to the extent to which the natural instincts of young birds developed without the aid of imitating the parents. He raised birds from the eggs and gave the young no opportunity to come in contact with older birds of their kind. For example, he took blackbirds' eggs, hatched them in an incubator—brought them up by hand. Those birds never heard the beautiful song of the adult blackbird! They had perfect throats, as the throats of birds go. The only noise heard by those birds, which their throats were adapted to copying, was the crowing of a near-by bantam rooster. Those birds came as near to giving a crow like that of a bantam rooster as the nature of their throats permitted. They had the instinct to make a noise, and the way in which that instinct developed was related to imitation. It is said that the beautiful song of the song sparrow in different parts of this country varies so much that it is possible to identify birds from various parts from the character of the song; and it is believed that this is due to the fact that the young copy their song from the old birds, and that a given song in a given locality perpetuates itself, passing along from generation to generation of song sparrow lives

the peculiarities that have been developed in a given geographical locality.

This is not merely true concerning the song of birds, but with reference to many other things, nest-building, for instance. Some Baltimore orioles were brought up to adult life without having opportunity to mingle with their own kind. The time came for mating and then for nest-making. Those birds had the instinct for making a nest and took the pieces of string and straw, the proper materials that had been provided for them, putting them together in a pile; but after that they were helpless. They did not know the trade of their kind. They had not learned it by that social tradition upon which they, like we, depend. I am told that Scotch terriers in their fights have a special way of grasping the hind leg. It is stated that this is instinctive; but careful observers have noticed that Scotch terriers not brought up by Scotch terriers do not learn this trick, that it is acquired by the puppies through playing with their mother, and that in common with the main habits of every kind of dog, it is passed along from generation to generation by social inheritance.

Eagles fly with wonderful sureness, but—as I learn from scientific sources of information—young eagles, in most cases when the time comes for them to fly, have to be pushed out of the nest by their parents. Then if the young bird is unable to fly, the old one flies beneath, catching the young on his back, helping and pushing it out. Adult interference, meddling again!

The otter is one of the most perfect swimming land animals, and it seems as if its instincts must be adapted to water. But it appears that the young otter dreads water, and that it is necessary, in order that it shall learn to swim, to entice it upon the back of the mother who then plunges into the water. The animal is thus forced to swim against its will; but having acquired the habit, it soon learns to enjoy and appreciate it. The story goes, as told by scientific men, that long ago the otter was a land animal exclusively, but that by force of competition it was driven to pursue its livelihood in the water; that the young still retain the old instincts that belonged to them when the otter was exclusively a land animal; and that those instinct feelings must be overcome. If the otter can surmount fundamental instincts and get to like new things, there is hope for us! Just think, if we could adjust our fundamental instinct feelings so as to enjoy the scream of a trolley car as we enjoy the song of a bird!

It is true that I have selected plastic instincts, and that the instinct which guides the process of the caterpillar in the cocoon—a process which is carried on without practice—is an instinct without social inheritance; but in all the higher animals it seems that the direct measure of intelligence in any given species is the measure of the extent to which the young play and the adults play with their young.

Among savages, children constantly play in the presence of older children and of their parents. Initiation ceremonies are common among all primitive peoples. The boys to be initiated into the great race ceremonies of their kind are taken apart for a month or a series of months to learn tribal secrets, the tribal mode of worship, the sacred language. Do they perform those initiation ceremonies by themselves? No; they are in charge of some man who knows them all and who passes along to the boys this precious inheritance of social tradition that characterizes that people and makes them different from other tribes.

There is in all babies the instinct to talk, but the form of speech that this instinct takes depends upon the language heard. Would it not be curious if my child should grow up to speak Chinese without hearing Chinese spoken?

That is an absurd illustration of this pernicious doctrine that children should grow up without interference. Among savage peoples there is no such thing as the setting apart of children of a given age and having them play in an unsupervised way. It is a new thing which we have invented, much to our detriment, and much to the children's detriment.

To give a modern illustration—a friend of my family spends his summers in a small country community from which most of the active and energetic young men have left for the cities, as is the case in so many country communities. Those left remain for some special reason, or because they lack initiative. In that particular community no games were being played by the older boys. There was no baseball. The young man to whom I refer was a catcher on the Yale University baseball team. He became acquainted with some of those boys, and on one Fourth of July they asked him if he knew how to play. He answered, "Yes". So he got out with them and it was soon evident that he was a good player. They enjoyed playing with him, he organized them, and they elected him captain. When they discovered that he had played in college, he became the great man of the

community. After a while he proposed that they should keep up their organization for doing other things besides playing ball. That young man went to them for several years and reshaped the lives of those young men. He became to them an ideal and was, no doubt, idealized. He led them in those things that made for power, for persistence, for clean, strong play. He gave them things to do—and a model.

That is an example of the carrying of social tradition. That is what the play leader has to do, that is the sense in which we all talk about supervised play. As Froebel taught us—the playing of mothers with their children is the foundation of all education, all religion, all ethics. If we are to let our babies alone—"hands off"—it will mean nothing but calamity.

We are told that the graduates of Yale differ from the graduates of Harvard in certain fundamental respects that I shall not attempt to define. I do not know whether this is true or not, but it is not true that any such differences are owing to the fact that the Harvard professors know more Latin than do the Yale professors, or that the Yale professors know more mathematics or philosophy or chemistry or physics, or any other subject whatever. It is not true that such differences in the characters of the students coming from these two universities is traceable to a difference in the character of organization in those institutions. The character of the boy that is being shaped into the character of the man is developed, first of all, by social traditions, passed along from generation to generation of student life. We are told that in the great public schools of England—Rugby, Harrow, Eton—there are great differences in the standards, ideals, in the character of the students, in the way they look at life. These are due to the way in which those great traditions take the raw material of life and shape it constantly, steadily, and persistently into the form that is characteristic of that institution; and that is the thing, the thing alone, that makes civilized life possible, because civilized life is something other than the mere development of the individual.

I thought I would try to see, if I could find them, some cases of human babies who had been brought up alone, who had been allowed to play freely, but had never been allowed to learn play from adults or from other children. I found two groups, first a group of missionaries' children living separately, who lived with their parents in foreign lands, not playing with the native children

and having no children of their own race to play with. They played with their parents, but they did not get those lessons that come through playing with other children. When that period extended upwards of sixteen years of age, although the moral ideals were developed to a large extent, I failed to find any who understood the significance of team work; that is, they did not learn the tremendous lesson of the subordination of self to the group which is the foundation of modern life. They had learned the results of individual righteousness, but had failed to acquire the fundamental ideas of social righteousness that do not come through studying the pages of a book, but that come only through tradition brought to fruition by action.

The other group consisted of certain orphan asylum children who were received into the institutions early in life and were not allowed to play freely or come in contact with other children. An investigation along these lines has been carried on by Dr. Hastings Hart. One account was by Miss Florence Lattimore, who personally visited over one hundred such institutions for children. She reported that where children were taken young and brought up separately from other children, not being taught games, they invariably did not know how to play. They did not know how to play prisoners' base, hop scotch, or any of the other well-known games. When told to play, they would rush about, push each other, or pick dirt from between the paving stones. They did not know what to do, and why should they? We are social creatures; they had been denied the necessary food of social notions—personal contact with those who possessed the invaluable traditions that make social life significant. It was pathetic; those children were growing up wholesomely in body, but starved in social experience.

Those two groups show, I think, with adequate clearness what it means when we completely keep "hands off". During the last few years we have had two or three pretty bad experiences. Cities have opened playgrounds and have simply said, "There is your ground, play on it." Children have gone there to play; the older boys have become bullies and have driven off the younger, and the young men have made those places their abodes by night, until by petition some of them had to be closed, for they had become a moral menace by night and a physical menace to small children by day.

When the family splits up for its recreation there is danger.

When young people take their pleasures apart by themselves without the wholesome influence of family life, there is moral danger. Only when the family stays together do we have wholesome conditions. Our social traditions are the most precious element of civilization, and of cultivated life. They are the things that distinguish between a refined and well-bred person and a boor.

These great traditions are not carried by the individual, else they might be taught from a book. They are carried by the group. It would seem as if in all our great communities, composed as they are of people from different parts of the world, the community as a whole would inherit the wealth of all the folk lore; but such is not the case. The children in a mixed community have no longer the stories of the North or the stories of the South which they had when each community was composed merely of individual families. When these moved from their homes and lived together, the traditions were lost, because traditions are not carried by individual families. It is the community that carries them. If we were to move a whole community, we should move the traditions with it. That is why, with reference to this great group of subjects relating to play and leisure time, folk lore and children's stories, we in America are so poverty-stricken, for we have broken the chain of social traditions. Mothers do not have those stories to tell to their children which in past generations have been told and passed along from mother to child through the ages antedating history.

Dr. Haddon relates an experience in Borneo during a rain-storm, when he took refuge in the hut of a native. He found a group of persons, waiting like himself, for the storm to cease. Thinking to amuse the native children, he took a piece of string from his pocket, tied it in the form of a loop, put it on his hands and made the "cat's cradle". He then showed them how to "take it off". He was surprised that it was promptly taken off. Then he took it off, and this pastime was continued until he came to the end of his series, after which the native children went on for four or five figures more. It is a long time, Dr. Haddon says, since their forefathers and ours dwelt together and we as children played "cat's cradle" together; but upon no other hypothesis is it possible to account for the development and preservation of this form of play, which is too complicated to have been developed twice in just that manner. The children played

it and taught it to the younger children; they learned it and taught it to the younger children, they in turn to the younger children, and so on for hundreds and thousands and may be tens of thousands of years, in an unbroken chain from the time when their fathers and ours lived together.

Such is the force that carries play, and in America we have broken it. That is why our great folk dances and folk festivals have gone, and that is why we have to teach our children to play. That is why we must make an effort to restore to them that birthright of children's stories. Therefore we need tradition carriers, play leaders—and that is what the directors of the playground are. Do not think of them as stern and arbitrary "bosses", who act as did one in a certain French town where play was to be introduced and the children were ordered to play, and one industrious boy being exceedingly interested in his mathematics was punished by the play leader for not playing right; but think of them as sympathetic carriers of splendid traditions, as social leaders. Without them it would be better to have no playgrounds at all; that has been the experience in congested districts. Through these play leaders there is from generation to generation a transfer of character, as in the case of the young man mentioned, who transformed the young manhood of a country community by his contact with the boys in playing baseball. Similarly the games of playing with sand, swinging and seesaw, dancing in the circle, are the activities through which character is transferred from generation to generation of child life.

In presenting this argument for the need of supervision in play, I have not undertaken in any way to show what kind of supervision is good. There is much supervision that is vicious, that essentially changes the character of play so that it loses its chief value. The child does not exist as an independent integer. He is a part of the social whole. He needs the rest as much as the rest needs him, and these complex forms of control are genuine, though indefinite and limited. These definitions and limitations it has not been my intention to discuss in any way.