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ADMISSION AND DISCHARGE OF CHILDREN

MONOGRAPH II
TO ACCOMPANY ROUND TABLE PLAN
FOR TRUSTEES OF INSTITUTIONS
FOR DEPENDENT CHILDREN

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The Round Table Plan has been prepared to assist boards of trustees of institutions caring for dependent children in their administrative duties. It comprises eight studies, or round tables, each of which is devoted to a vital problem of institutional management.

To discuss the questions raised, the Department of Child-Helping of the Russell Sage Foundation is preparing a series of eight monographs, one to accompany each of the Round Tables. Monograph I, "The Job of Being a Trustee," by Dr. Hastings H. Hart, is the first of the series. The Round Table Plan and the Monographs can be obtained from the Department of Child-Helping at five cents a copy.

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ADMISSION

The admission of a child to an institution is a matter of grave importance. It is important from the standpoint of the board of trustees. They have committed to their charge an institution equipped and furnished to confer certain benefits and to accomplish certain purposes. It is maintained by the generous gift of the founder, or by the self-denying contributions of many donors, or by funds provided by taxation. The capacity of the institution and the means for its support are strictly limited. The trustees have laid upon them a sacred obligation to choose such beneficiaries as will enable them to accomplish in the best possible manner the beneficent purpose of the institution. Faithfulness to their trust demands discriminating selection in order that the advantages which they have at their disposal may not be wasted upon those who do not need them, or those who are physically or mentally incapable of profiting by them, or those who might be better cared for by the adoption of some other plan or by commitment to some other institution.

The admission of a child to an institution is important from the standpoint of the child because it means his transplanting from the environment of a family home into the group life of the institution, and this decision is likely to affect his entire future development. When one looks into the sweet confiding face of an orphan child and realizes that the child is in no way responsible for the misfortune which has befallen him, and that his whole future is hanging upon the wisdom and devotion with which the self-imposed task is performed, the situation is one to awaken a deep sense of responsibility and of humility. As social workers we assume to go into a family and interfere with its most sacred concerns and to decide whether the parents shall be allowed to bring up their own children, or whether

they shall be taken away by the strong arm of the law and placed in the hands of strangers. It is necessary that someone shall assume this momentous responsibility, but this task may not be lightly assumed by anyone who is a lover of his kind. For some children institutional life, for a longer or shorter time, may be desirable or even indispensable. For others it may not seem the most desirable thing but may be necessary, owing to the peculiar circumstances of the case. In other cases, institutional life may be both undesirable and unnecessary because it is possible to secure the best interests of the child by providing for him in a family home—his own home, if it is a fit place or can be so renovated as to make it a fit place; or a foster home, if one can be provided which will meet his peculiar needs.

PRELIMINARY CASE STUDY

In order to decide just what treatment is needed by the child, it is necessary to make a diagnosis, and this diagnosis can only be made efficiently through a careful and intelligent "case study." This case study must be made by a trained and competent observer with the assistance of experts in medicine and psychology. It will involve a study of the family history of the child, including grandparents, parents, brothers, and sisters, in order to determine the facts of heredity and of home and family influences affecting the child. It will involve also the environment, education, and training of the child himself.

Efficient case study requires a complete medical examination, quite as thorough as would be required for life insurance. It should include the condition of all of the organs and functions of the body including eyes, ears, nose, throat, skin, and teeth, and a complete record should be made of the results. For all children above the age of three years there should be a psychological examination by the use of the Binet-Simon tests for the purpose of ascertaining as nearly as possible the mental endowment of the child. These tests should be checked by the observations of superintendents, matrons, and teachers who may have had the child under extended supervision. In the case of older children it is desirable to use additional tests, which have been devised for the determination of "border line cases."

Physicians and psychologists are learning to distinguish between those mental defects which are born with the child or are acquired

in early childhood and which constitute feeble-mindedness in some one of its grades, and those defects which result from neglect, cruelty, malnutrition, adenoids, imperfect hearing or vision, and which are presumably remediable by treatment. Psychological tests may reveal the existence of mental defects but do not determine their causes. While feeble-mindedness may be clearly and definitely recognized in the great majority of cases, there is a considerable number of cases in which the question can not be settled offhand but only after careful and extended observation. Sometimes unpromising children make surprising development under favorable conditions. It is a great injustice to class a child as feeble-minded until all doubt as to his condition has been settled; on the other hand it is a great unkindness and a great extravagance as well to nag and worry a feeble-minded child in a fruitless effort to develop in him mental faculties which he does not possess.

STANDARDS OF ADMISSION

Each institution must determine for itself its own standards of admission, and those standards must be adopted in view of the needs of the community in which the institution is located. The usefulness of many institutions has been greatly impaired by setting up standards which excluded the very children who were most in need. A very useful institution in the state of New York and a similar one in Pennsylvania are institutions which stand ready to take and care for children whom nobody else wants. On the other hand many juvenile reformatories are greatly handicapped by the presence of large numbers of feeble-minded children who are not really delinquent, do not belong with delinquent children, and who need an entirely different training and education from the normal delinquents.

APPLICATIONS FOR ADMISSION

Applications in behalf of children may be made by parents, guardians, or relatives. They may be made by representatives of churches, philanthropic organizations, or juvenile courts. It is wise to scrutinize applications because they are sometimes made by people who have neither the authority nor the wisdom to act in such cases.

The decision as to the admission of the child may be made by a court or public officer as in the case of public reformatories for

children, or of state homes and county asylums maintained at public expense, where the institution is required by law to receive such children as are duly committed. In institutions not supported by public taxation this responsibility is usually placed upon the board of trustees and is delegated by them to an executive committee, or a committee on admission, or to the superintendent.

In some institutions, prompt admission without red tape is very important; for example, a hospital or detention home for children should be ready to receive a child for temporary care on five minutes' notice with the understanding that the question of its permanent disposition will be decided later by a competent tribunal. The Chicago Home for the Friendless gives discretionary authority to its superintendent to admit a woman, or a child, or a woman with children for temporary care, not exceeding one month in duration. When an application is received from a responsible individual, or an agency like the United Charities or the Children's Home and Aid Society, the superintendent makes an immediate decision, subject, however, to reversal in case the applicant proves to be unsuitable. In other institutions, where the stay of the inmate is likely to be extended, perhaps for several years, or where the institution is designed for a particular class, carefully defined, an immediate decision is impracticable, and a wise decision can only be made after an elaborate case study such as has already been defined. In such institutions it is necessary to delegate to someone—usually the superintendent—authority to receive inmates at least until formal action can be taken by the board of trustees or its committee on admission.

OBSERVATION BEFORE PERMANENT ACCEPTANCE

Observation for a preliminary period is often necessary in order to determine whether the child shall become a permanent inmate of the institution. In such cases it is desirable to have a clear understanding with the original applicants in order that they may not be disappointed in case the child can not be retained.

DISCHARGE

TIME OF DISCHARGE

Most institutions have a definite limit as to the discharge of inmates "on reaching their majority," or "at the age of fifteen," or "on reaching the age of seventeen." In practice children are usually sent out before reaching the prescribed limit. This is desirable in order that the institution may exercise a wise, friendly guardianship and supervision until the child shall have become established in the community. A distinction should be made between the sending out of a child from the institution and the "discharge" of the child. Properly a child is discharged when the legal guardianship of the institution terminates. Usually this is long after the time when the child passes out of the doors of the institution.

The discharge of the child may take place when he reaches his majority, or if the child has been placed in the institution by the authority of his parents, his discharge will take place when he is restored to his parents. If the child has been committed to the institution by a court, the power of legal discharge is determined by law. It may rest in the court, in which case the child is legally discharged by order of the court. It may rest in a state board of control or a state board of children's guardians, in which case the action of that board will be necessary to effect a legal discharge. It may rest in the board of trustees of the institution, in which case the fact of legal discharge should become a part of the records of the board.

INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

The fact should not be overlooked that the institution is both legally and morally responsible for children who are its wards, whether they are inside or outside of the walls of the institution. In too many cases it has been assumed that when the child was sent out of the institution and was located in a carefully selected home, the obligation of the institution was discharged. On the contrary when the superintendent and officers of the institution have labored and prayed over a child for one, two, five, or ten years, and have expended \$500, or \$1,000, or perhaps \$2,000 in his education and

development, it would appear that they have an interest and an obligation which ought to stimulate them to watch over and befriend him in order that all of their labor and expense shall not be in vain.

By virtue of the guardianship which the institution has acquired, either by the action of the court or by the action of the parents or guardian of the child, authority is given to the institution to provide for the future of such children as are not returned to the guardianship of their parents. Many institutions have authority to exercise watch-care and supervision even over children who are returned to their own parents.

The only cases in which the institution can escape responsibility for the child after he leaves the institution are those in which the child remains in the institution until he is of full legal age and is entitled to act as his own guardian.

DISPOSITION OF THE CHILD

The child sent out from the institution may be disposed of in several different ways. The child may be given to a family for adoption. It will still remain under supervision until the legal decree of adoption is issued by the proper court. It then becomes the ward of the adoptive parents and the responsibility of the institution ceases.

The young child may be placed in a home to be cared for by the foster parents at their own expense but without the intention on their part to adopt the child as their own. In such cases the obligation of the institution to safeguard the interests of the child continues until it reaches its majority. Visits should be made by competent and responsible agents at suitable intervals, and correspondence should be maintained with the foster parents, the child, the school teacher, and the pastor, in order that its welfare may be assured. In many cases such children are cared for with as much affection and fidelity as if they had been legally adopted but, in placing children in this way, the institution should carefully reserve the right to remove the child at their discretion if at any time it may appear to be for its interests to do so. Formerly the practice prevailed widely of placing children on an indenture contract, in which it is agreed that the child shall receive proper food, clothing, care, education, moral training and religious privileges, and that the child shall re-

main as long as the foster parents fulfil the conditions of the indenture. Experience has proven that it may be quite apparent that a child ought to be removed and yet impossible to prove an actual breach of the contract. It is now generally agreed that no such contract should be made without the right to remove the child at discretion, and in practice nearly all of the best institutions and societies have ceased altogether to execute indenture contracts. At the same time they are exceedingly reluctant to remove a child who is even reasonably well-placed for the reason that the transplanting of the child is a severe and dangerous process.

A child may be placed in a home to work for his board and go to school, or he may be placed at wages, remaining, however, under the guardianship of the institution. No children need more faithful watch-care and guardianship than those who are placed in the homes of strangers who receive them with a view to the advantage that may be gained from their services. There is always danger that the child will be overworked, or deprived of social privileges, or that he will not be properly guarded. Even well-meaning foster parents are liable to be thoughtless and to fail of their full duty. Only faithful visitation by a visitor who is friendly both to the child and the foster parents can insure his welfare. If a child is attending school regularly and is well-clothed and housed and in proper associations there is no occasion to worry about wages, but if he is no longer in school and is putting in his whole time in useful work, wages should be required and measures should be taken to have some portion of the wages placed in the savings bank for the future benefit of the child.

AGENTS FOR PLACING-OUT AND SUPERVISION

One of the most imperative duties of the institution is to provide proper agents for the placing-out and supervision of children. The selection of homes is expert work calling for a high order of intelligence and conscience, but the fitting of the child to the home, the determination of the question whether a given home is adapted to a given child, is a much more difficult and responsible task. The visitor requires tact and intelligence to secure the goodwill and cooperation of the foster parents on the one hand, and to secure the confidence of the child on the other hand. Difficulties and misunder-

standings often arise between placed-out children and foster parents. These difficulties can usually be adjusted by prompt and wise action, but many children have lost their homes for lack of prompt attention from the institution when some emergency has arisen.

It is of course impracticable for a small institution which has only 10 or 20 children in family homes to employ a competent agent for full time. It is customary in such institutions to impose the work of the agent upon the superintendent or the matron or the school teacher. This plan is uniformly unsatisfactory for the reason that those officers usually have already sufficient duties to employ their time and because, however efficient they may be in their own proper task, they do not usually have the special qualifications which are required for this work.

This difficulty may be met in either of two ways: the institution may combine with some other institution or with a charity organization society in employing a competent agent to work part time for each institution. The difficulty with this plan is to find the organization which is ready to enter into such an arrangement. The second plan is to arrange with some competent children's aid society, children's home society, or children's bureau to become responsible for the investigation of homes and for the placing and supervision of children. This plan has been successfully adopted in several states. In the state of Maine, for example, the Maine Children's Committee was organized by the co-operation of the different institutions for children. Each organization was at liberty to call upon the Committee to investigate homes, to place out children, or to visit and report upon children already placed. The arrangement was such that the institution could, if it chose, verify the Committee's work by sending out a representative of its own. It was arranged also that each organization in the state would report to the Committee any applications for children which they were unable to fill.

In the state of New York the Catholic Home Bureau places and supervises children for some 20 different Catholic institutions which do not find it practicable to maintain placing-out agencies of their own. In the state of New Jersey similar work is done for about 10 Catholic institutions by the Catholic Children's Aid Association of New Jersey. The Catholic Home Bureau in New York and the Catholic Children's Aid Association in New Jersey are not

conducted by Brothers or Sisters but by laymen who are paid a living salary.

In the state of Pennsylvania the Children's Aid Society of Pennsylvania becomes responsible for the placing and investigating of children for directors of the poor in many counties. Similar work is done in the state of New York for many county superintendents of the poor by the State Charities Aid Association.

AFTER-CARE

Every institution for children should make it a matter of conscience and pride to keep track of those who have formerly been in their care. It is a great satisfaction and encouragement to learn of those who have "made good" and who have become useful members of the community. On the other hand it is instructive to know of those who have not succeeded in life, with a view to ascertaining the reason and discovering how the work of the institution may be modified in order to secure better results in the future.

The institution stands "in loco parentis" to the children who are committed to its fostering care. This parental relation is not a mere matter of legal form, it is an actual and concrete responsibility. It means everything for the happiness, success, and prosperity of the child. It is a responsibility which must be carried soberly, conscientiously, and in the fear of God.

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