

Realities in Being a Parent of An Educable Mentally Retarded Child¹

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The responsibilities of parenthood are enormous. For the parent of a child who is mentally retarded, additional responsibilities must be assumed. The educable mentally retarded child is first, and foremost, a child. He is more akin to than different from other children. He has emotions not unlike other children's and he is capable of giving and receiving the love and understanding common to all healthy people.

The educable mentally retarded child is one who can profit from education. He has the ability to learn to read, to write, and to think through problems on his own level of maturity. He is not in a special class through the generosity of governmental fiat or because of parental pressure. He is in public school because this is where he belongs. He is entitled to an education not only through moral right but, more importantly, because of his ability to succeed in a special class. He is a child with abilities and these abilities, when creatively nurtured can help him to adjust to the demands of his society. Through realistic special education he can contribute to as well as participate in the endeavors of life.

These are the realities that parents must accept. However, acceptance is not enough. There are concomitant responsibilities that cannot be abrogated. There is a report from Japan hailing an artist considered by critics to be a genius... "one of Japan's great artists" ... "an oriental Van Gogh". Psychiatrists class this great talent, Yamashita, as mentally retarded. Through the years there have been similar reports of equally gifted individuals with less than average mental ability. However, as indicated by the publicity these individuals receive, the retarded talent is the great exception rather than the trademark. The

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realities of experience, rather than the wishfulness for what might have been, must be the source of wisdom as we counsel children. Each individual grows from where he is and not from a pre-determined or desired starting point. The child must be met at his level of development and he must be wanted and loved for what he is and not for what we would like him to be.

It is the responsibility of parenthood to insist that your child be afforded the best education he is capable of receiving. There is a report stating that the cost of Special Education for the mentally retarded is twice that of the cost of education for typical children; however, another writer found that the cost of conducting one week of World War II was greater than the total yearly cost of education in the United States. Parents should look to the schools for guidance and help in rearing their children. The schools should feel confident that the parents believe in the work they are trying to accomplish. As the schools help to guide and counsel pupils and parents, so should parents encourage and support the programs in Special Education. As communities develop programs on the high school as well as the elementary level, so should parents make their voices heard for more special classes, broader programs, and recognition of accomplishments daily evidenced in special classes. As more schools refuse to cast aside their responsibilities after formal education terminates, so should parents support programs of vocational and social placement. The present program should be considered a portent of greater accomplishments and services in the future.

It is the responsibility of parenthood to look on each child as an individual with needs and problems. Each accompanying defect should not be blamed on mental retardation; retardation is not adequate rationalization for not caring and not doing. Hosts of studies on successful vocational and social placement of children years after they have left the special classes refute a concept of resignation and loss of hope. If your child has faulty hearing, do not blame this on mental retardation. Get him proper hearing appliances and/or therapy to

ameliorate this condition. If your child has poor eyesight, do not shake your head and say, "What's the difference. He can't read anyway." Help him to make the best possible person he can of himself. If your child is a behavior problem do not feel that nothing can be done because something must be done. However, do not distort all problems because of your primary concern with the mental handicap. Is your child a behavior problem or does he act as all youngsters his age can be expected to act? Do you judge him by standards of adult maturity rather than by standards of childhood? A New York newspaper quoted:

"Children are now tyrants. They have bad manners, contempt for authority, and show disrespect for elders. Children no longer rise when elders enter the room. They contradict their parents, chatter before company, gobble up dainties at the table, cross their legs, and tyrannize over their teachers".

Socrates made that statement about 2500 years ago.

The power of the brain, about 3 pounds in weight, can be quantified through use of intelligence tests. However, if we had at our disposal 1,000,000 people with an average I.Q. of 150 they very likely would not, as a group, be able to produce a new theory of the magnitude of Einstein's work with relativity. A seemingly insignificant 3 pound brain with a 180 to 190 I.Q. is able to make a more creative contribution than 3,000,000 pounds with an aggregate 150,000,000 I.Q. points. At the other end, we cannot assume that a 50 I.Q. will make only one-half the contribution that the 100 I.Q. makes. We cannot assume a linear or a perfect relationship between intelligence and contributions. As we must defend the Einstein's from group opinion of inferior value, we must protect the retarded from those with inflexible, unrealistic or unfair standards.

During a time of frustration, I received counsel from a great teacher and valued friend. She said to me:

"I believe, like Moses you can turn the serpent into a rod and learn the lessons which will help you all through life. Remember, unless Moses had handled the serpent he would have had nothing but the bite... there is definitely a place for you and the Design for all of us holds nothing but good."

There is a place for your child in society. With the help of people of good will - parents, teachers and friends - your child should be expected to harvest the rewards of living. By understanding his handicaps and assets, he can stand with pride in the knowledge that he has fulfilled his promise on earth. He has made the very best person he can of himself. He is to be admired.