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Parental Delinquency

E. F. Samore*

“JUVENILE DELINQUENCY” is a widely discussed subject. Every segment of our society has its experts on the subject, and every expert has a solution. Yet the problems not only increase, but become more and more complex in all strata of our society. The problems have become so commonplace that our society seems to be accepting them as a normal necessary evil about which little can be done.

As a prosecutor or as defense counsel, I have never yet met any parents who willingly admitted fault in these problems. They insist that they have been good parents and that the fault is that of society or of another juvenile who led their child astray.

How did this terrible situation come to be? And what can be done to correct it? Perhaps my experience with the problem in Sioux City, Iowa (a typical American city) can help to suggest an answer.

The principal phenomenon noted by myself and by other law enforcement and sociology specialists may be stated in one short sentence: Parents are abdicating their natural role as *teachers* of *values*—not of standards alone, but of *values*.

In the 1930's there began a new emphasis in education. It was a new approach to “character education,” and was enthusiastically adopted almost everywhere. This theory had two elements. First, because values change from generation to generation, it urged that every child be allowed to develop his own values. Secondly, it argued that, given freedom and love, every child would determine and “find” the “right way” for himself. The results of general acceptance of these theories are all too evident today.

Now, there is another new trend. Dr. Alfred Baldwin of Cornell University aptly stated it as follows:

“The parent must remember that merely to refrain from imposing one's own values on the child is not to assure he will develop his own.

“The parent who does not strongly endorse, even demand, the values he feels important, may actually be transmitting weakness of faith in all values.

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"In attempting not to hamper the development of the child's own values the parent may stunt the growth of any value commitments."

The economic impact of World War II upon the family made the *passive theory* of the thirties doubly acceptable. The mother and the father usually were both employed and were both bringing income into the family. Inevitably this left little time for the usual duties of parenthood. Increase in income raised the material standard of living. Increases in income had one chief effect on the American family. That was to emphasize the materialistic standards by which our society now judges the status of a family. A "Successful" family is the family with a fine house, a new automobile, fine furniture, and so on. More than ever, since World War II, the American family has come to judge its own "success" in purely materialistic terms. In a "sales promotion, high pressure product-advertising" culture such as ours is, the results are easy to predict. These attitudes have brought about a state of confusion of basic values in the minds of parents. If parents are confused and have few ethical values, the effects on the children are even easier to predict.

Some typical present-day cases will illustrate these general points. Thousands of cases could be cited.

10 Typical Cases

(*Case 1.*) A sixteen-year old girl was arrested in our city. She came from a family of ten children in an eastern State. The family background was excellent, both economically and as to religious training. Yet this teenager had dropped out of school at the age of sixteen to take a job in this eastern State in a shoe factory, earning \$1.00 per hour. She soon had quit this job as too difficult, and took a job as a waitress, earning 85 cents per hour. Then she met a 34-year old man and became enamored of him because, as she stated it, "He had personality plus." The man was a run-away convict, wanted for several mean crimes. The girl left her home, rode half way across the country and came to Sioux City, without telling her parents, at his request. Both were apprehended here. The reasons she gave for leaving home were interesting: she simply had wanted a change of scenery, and intended to marry this man. She was sent back home. But before she left she told me that parents were the *best ever*, and that she would "sure be glad to get home." Where was her sense of values, to trade a fine home life for this miserable adventure?

(Case 2.) This concerned a fine teenage lad who had enlisted in the Army. His father was a regular patron of the local pool hall. This boy felt deep disrespect for his father. Recently the lad wrote to the local Juvenile Authorities, expressing concern about a younger brother. He closed his letter thus: "Do me a favor and take care of Tommy for me, will you? Keep him out of trouble, if you can." What more poignant teenage condemnation of society could there be than an older brother's plea to a police department to keep his brother out of trouble, "if you can!" It was very clear that he had absolutely no faith in his parents.

(Case 3.) Was a fine looking nine-year old boy, quite bright and with a very appealing personality. This boy had been apprehended for stealing money from the homes of the parents of his friends, which he would distribute among his friends. He got no recognition at home, so he created situations in which his friends gave him the recognition and attention his home had failed to give him. Then he stole a bicycle in his home city, rode it six blocks and saw another bike that he liked. He took the second bicycle and rode it a few more blocks to witness a Soap Box Derby. While he was there, this bicycle was stolen from him. Upon discovery of this "theft" he immediately went to the Police Station and reported it, demanding return to him of the "stolen" bicycle. This may seem ludicrous, but to this boy it was not. He had absolutely no training as to any sense of values. He sincerely believed that the bicycle he had stolen was his.

(Case 4.) An eleven-year old who is a ringleader of a group of boys who enter homes to steal money. He personally stole over \$500.00 and distributed the money among older boys, seeking to impress them. He got no recognition or affection at home. His mother was divorced and had remarried. Authorities have been in the home at least fifteen times; not once was the stepfather at home. This eleven-year old has an older brother, aged 16 years, with a record of petty larcenies, car thefts, drinking, and running away from home. Other, younger children also are constantly neglected. Our eleven-year old had started shoplifting at the age of six. The history of this family shows a continued attitude of indifference to the children.

(Case 5.) Ten teenage girls were arrested for participation in depraved sex orgies. Eight of the girls came from broken homes. All ten of them thought themselves to be persecuted

and misunderstood at home. One girl, in a letter, boasted to a friend of the great number of promiscuities she had engaged in. Finding no recognition at home, she sought recognition in this manner.

(Case 6.) Two eleven-year old girls, arrested for shoplifting in four local department stores in one day. They had stolen toys, children's clothing, and underclothing. They told the authorities that they had intended to give the toys to their younger brothers. One of their mothers said: "Well, at least they weren't stealing for themselves. They were stealing for their brothers and sisters!" One of their fathers, on being called, came to the police station intoxicated. What a standard of values displayed by these parents!

(Case 7.) A fourteen-year old boy, arrested for stealing automobiles. The police called the boy's home and talked to his mother, who in turn called the father, who was at a local bowling alley. She then immediately came to the police station. Forty-five minutes later, the father arrived. "What took you so long?" the officer asked. The answer was, "I had to finish bowling with the team!" That was his standard of values! All this, in the presence of the boy, giving him a lesson in the values held by his father.

(Case 8.) A young teenager who had acquired a habit of stealing bicycles. When caught, he admitted stealing two. The police asked his mother if she knew that her little boy had been stealing bicycles. She answered, "Yes." The officer then asked her, "Do you know how many he stole?" Her answer was, "Yes, four bicycles."

(Case 9.) One of the parents in my neighborhood took a group of boys, eleven years and under, members of a little league baseball team, to a game. When returning, one of the boys noted that the parent was driving his automobile at forty-five miles per hour in a thirty-five mile per hour speed zone. This youngster immediately called the speed limit to the attention of the parent. The parent's answer was, "It's all right. There aren't any policemen around anywhere."

(Case 10.) One Sunday morning, a worried mother called me at my home to tell me that her sixteen-year old son was in the city jail, charged with intoxication. I immediately went to the station and had a long talk with the boy. He spoke frankly of his offenses, and they were many, admitting freely that he had

been intoxicated. On returning home, I telephoned his mother and told her that her son had not only admitted to being intoxicated, but had admitted a number of other offenses in the past. Her only comment was, "Well, he had a right to get drunk if he wants to."

Current Attempts to Solve the Problem

Most of the current programs to solve the problem suggest a philosophy of despair.

More and more outside agencies are taking over the duties of the parents. The schools have taken it upon themselves to entertain and to furnish recreation to the young people. This is also true of our churches and of our public recreation agencies. The parents are expected to fail to teach their children; to fail to entertain their children; to have their education and entertainment assumed by the school, by the church, and by the public agencies. Family activities are expected to be no longer attractive to the young people.

All this is due to the *failure of the parents* and the weakness of family ties. The more the family fails, the more the family weakens; then *the public* must provide, and must fill the vacuum. The result is less and less family and more and more public interference in the affairs of the family. The result is a vicious cycle. The ultimate result may well be disaster.

Strangely, it appears that parents welcome this trend. It gives them more time for work, more time for personal recreation and entertainment, and more time to enjoy selfish interests.

The American family is the victim of false standards of success. It seems determined to strive for *material success*. We measure the success of our community and the success of a family on almost purely materialistic bases. But there is a vast difference between a "successful parent" and a "successful man." The *successful parent* does not have the problem of juvenile delinquency. It is the parent who strives only for objective economic success, at the expense of the family, who sows the seeds of juvenile delinquency. It is easier to be materialistically successful than it is to be a successful parent. The successful parent must be prepared to make many sacrifices for his child. But the materialistic parent can see *success* far more easily in the form of an expensive house, a big bank account, or recognition in his profession or work. Just read any newspaper's obituary column about

the death of a prominent citizen. See how it emphasizes, in detail, each and every *materialistic* achievement of the person. We do *not* accord distinction to the man upon spiritual standards.

Perhaps the ultimate capitulation of society was reported on June 11, 1959, in the *New York Times*. It reported "a new social experiment," launched with a \$50,000 City program, to organize all the young people in one neighborhood "in organized community activities," as the answer to "juvenile delinquency." This was a pilot project, to be followed soon by others.

In essence this is acceptance of defeat. The *family* is written off, once and for all, as useless in the social scheme, not to be relied on at all.

A Suggested Solution

If Americans are so materialistic—such worshippers of money—then money-worship may be the best instrument for correcting them.

It is hornbook law that a parent is not liable for the torts or crimes of a child—only for torts or crimes actually commanded or *in effect done by* the parent.

Then let us acknowledge that today juvenile delinquency in practical effect usually is actually parental delinquency.

A start has been made in Rhode Island, where parents are *fin*ed for torts of their children, by statute.

Let us follow this stern philosophy to its logical sequence. Punish the delinquent parents by fines, imprisonment, or other civic punishments—for *their own* crimes against their children and society; crimes of nonfeasance as well as of misfeasance. Make *the parents pay* for their own wrongs.

The alternative seems to be the disintegration of our society.