

# The switchblade mentality and your child

Dr. John Court, B.A., Ph.D.

I am sure you will forgive me if I do not deliver a formal lecture on an occasion like this. It would be easy to be heavy and serious with a theme such as the one chosen for this week, and the title "The Switchblade Mentality" scarcely leads you to expect an after dinner entertainment. I always feel mildly disappointed after speaking on topics like this when kind listeners come up and say "Thank you, I enjoyed that".

This is not the occasion for a complete analysis of the impact of the violent society on children. I propose therefore to rely on impressions from my studies in recent months as I have travelled throughout North America, Britain and Europe. Not all the impressions relate directly to research but arise also because I speak as the father of 2 sons and 2 daughters who by travelling with me experienced something of the violence. I would like to bring these experiences together in a way that will highlight today's special feature — recognition of Mother of the Year — I propose to link my comments around one word — TRUST.

It is a well-established fact that trust must be developed in the very earliest part of a child's life; that a safe, secure relationship with mother or mother-substitute plays a vital part in this; and that failing the development of trust in early life it is exceedingly difficult to offset this handicap later. Indeed the child psychologist Erik Erikson makes the point that if trust does not develop, mistrust will.

The great challenge for a mother is to provide that environment in which trust can develop. As the child matures so he looks to others and to society to determine whether that trust is rewarded. And the child who learns to trust tends to become the adult who is trustworthy.

What then are we to make of the child in contemporary society? Have we progressed in recent years to make the development of children, our investment in the future more secure? Do we find relationships more relaxed, more at ease than they were before the enlightenments of mass education and affluence?

Materially, physically and educationally, one might say that young people have never had it so good. We must not lose sight of these benefits for our children, nor underestimate their value.

## Emotional needs

But what of the emotional needs of children today? These are at least as important as physical well-being or level of education. As I look at the forces at work which bear upon children's emotional needs, I see distinct risks and I believe we have a grave communal responsibility to care for the emotional welfare of the young.

I found that in Britain, where inflation is forcing more and more mothers to go to work to supplement the family income, that the plight of neglected children is arousing a good deal of public concern. Educationists have shown that children left in the care of unqualified baby-sitters and childminders have fallen so far behind in language and communication skills by the age of five that it is impossible for them to achieve normal standards.

Some would say we can offset such problems by paying mothers to stay home with their children. I frankly doubt this is the best solution. If the growth of trust is really important, I am persuaded that the natural maternal instincts will be better fostered if they are not rewarded by payment. The selfless

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*This is the text of an address given to the "Mother of the Year" luncheon held in conjunction with Child Care Week in N.S.W.*

giving and tenderness I have seen my wife give to our children is not something that can be bought or paid for.

Another serious intrusion into the child development of trust is the widespread use of the electronic babysitter, the T.V. We should have heard enough about violence on T.V. having its repercussions to be persuaded that it represents a pollution problem more pervasive and more demonstrably active right now than any yellow cake. Let me take that for granted and mention just two other things about T.V. One relates to American studies of advertising.

## Mercenary Gain

Some advertisers are willing to exploit the young for straight MERCENARY GAIN. They appear not to care if their ads directed to children build up false expectations, leading to disappointment and mistrust. As long as the sale is made the consequences are ignored. A recent survey of children in the U.S. demonstrated that they had built up a basic mistrust in their formative years. Asked: "Do you believe the TV ads. always tell the truth?" — one third of the 5-7's said: "Yes".

Among the 8-10's only 17% said, "Yes"; the 11-12 years group had only 5% who believed in the ads.

Is it too much to suggest that this mistrust will spread to other parts of life, so they will tend to doubt parents, teachers' authority, and one another? (See Liebert & Neale).

Similarly I am appalled that we can accept on our TV screens, commercials for a film which encourages viewers to "enjoy watching perversions committed on the bodies of young girls."

How grotesquely unfair to blame and punish children for their violence, their vandalism, their angry rebellion when they are trained nightly on television to disregard authority, laugh scornfully at adults, and solve problems by violence without any fear of retribution.

It is good to know that the United Nations has now declared that 1979 shall be the Year of the Child. We certainly need to examine ways of moving beyond the mere acknowledgement of the principles of the UNICEF Declaration of the rights of the child.

In Los Angeles one group of terrorist students is called "the Crips". Their trademark is maiming or crippling their victims. "Cripets" are girl members and "Junior Crips" are students at elementary schools. In three years school murders throughout the U.S. rose by 18 per cent, rapes by 40 per cent, robberies by 36 per cent, assaults on students by 85 per cent, and assaults on teachers by 77 per cent.

### Armed Guards

What can be done? The huge sums being spent on armed guards and police operating within the schools is not the answer. It might keep aspects of violence under control but it does not touch the root of the problem. Perhaps the truth lies with the school sociologist who said succinctly: "The problem is within American society itself. We will have to change our adults before we can hope to change our children."

Lack of trust, insecurity, hostility, violence, so the spiral goes. In the U.S. the peak age for violent

same people have shares in the production side. And finally, if things go wrong, the same entrepreneurs are involved in private abortion clinics. All in all it seems likely that the young people will get biased help not always in their best interests.

### Physical Harm

I think of the physical harm that comes to young babies when the parents despair of managing them. It may sound kind to say to a 15-year-old single girl with a baby — "Yes, you can keep it". But when that cuddly little baby begins to yell lustily in the middle of the night, and the girl has no one to turn to; when she is confused and frightened because she cannot cope with her emotions — in her mixture of fear and anger she may do harm to her baby. The problem of baby-battering is on the increase in Australia today with perhaps 1,000 occurrences a week, most of the victims being under 3.

## Much of today's violence

The second principle states that: "All children are entitled to special protection, opportunities and facilities to enable them to develop in a healthy and normal manner in freedom and dignity".

ENTITLED to special protection — yes. Tell that to my teenage daughter who went to school in Los Angeles this year, along with 7,500 others under the constant surveillance of guards, locks, high fences and a helicopter flying overhead for security.

Not long before, an American Senate sub-committee published a survey on school violence and vandalism. In the 757 school districts surveyed — only a fraction of the nation's total — 100 students were murdered last year in rich and poor areas alike.

crime is now 15, and we see a similar trend here to younger crime. My 13 year old son is typically a trusting lad, but it did not help when after 48 hours in school in California he had to be brought home after being beaten up by a gang of 10 young things. Can we blame them, or look to ways of preventing such anger building up? Increasingly the violence of society is vented at younger and younger groups.

I feel many teenagers have cause to believe their trust has been abused in relation to some sex education ventures. In Britain, the same people who issue advice to young people have a financial interest in teenage glossy magazines which often promote a promiscuous lifestyle. And for good measure, when they want contraceptive advice, the

Some argue that freely available abortion would reduce such problems, but there is little evidence to support this. After 20 years of abortion on demand, Japan now has more battered babies, more cases of cruelty to children and more abandoned babies than before the War when poverty was widespread. And in California, a survey found that over 90% of battered babies in a 4-year study were from "planned pregnancies".

No one knows why one person takes out his or her frustration on children and another does not. But to some extent violence runs in families. As Louis Joylon West, Chairman of the U.C.L.A.'s psychiatry department puts it — "There is a remarkable likelihood that parents who batter have been

battered themselves as children". New York City's Dr Fontana sees child abuse not only as a self-perpetuating problem, but as a training ground for general violence as well. "The eleven, twelve and thirteen year-old murderers we see today", he says, "come from violent homes where they were battered."

TIME magazine tells us that: "Children are more likely to turn to crime if parents battle frequently, or if one parent is missing through death, divorce or abandonment . . . much of today's violence is learned in the home".

### Trust

How can our children learn to trust if we betray them so completely that even the home is no longer a safe place? In England I was disturbed to find publicity given to the advocates of the abolition of the age of consent and clamouring for abolition of the laws on incest. Such calls — and we have them here too

vided we give special care to children, and yet on my return to this country I found a bill to control pornography was made the target of cheap party politics and resisted by the Government even though existing penalties (\$300) are the same as for failure to wear a seat-belt.

I remember the sadness of the women police in London reporting on the rise of VD among 13-14 year old girls; a similar reaction in Denmark to the use of children in the sex-trade; and the 100,000 or so boys involved as young male prostitutes in the U.S. As public opinion and governments are now reacting elsewhere to the dangers, we in Australia appear to demonstrate little protective concern about these consequences of exploitation.

Sex, when it is abused, goes hand-in-hand with violence. So now a new journal has just appeared called 'Violent World'. The first issue includes pictures of babies being battered to death and an interview with a man who says he eats children.

No wonder they said in London

stable society. If families have been encountering crises, abolition will solve nothing. We need to be working towards finding creative expressions of family life adapted to the kind of world we now live in.

### Pessimistic

I would be pessimistic for the future if there were not still a vast mass of mothers — and fathers and relatives — who truly care and are increasingly determined to enrich the quality of life for children.

It is vital that we re-affirm the very special task of mothers not as second-rate citizens who couldn't make it in the work-force, but as those privileged to undertake a noble responsibility.

Just before I left England in May, it was my privilege to attend a luncheon in Piccadilly for the launching of a new book, written by one of the best known mothers in England — Mrs Mary Whitehouse. Since 1964 she has fought for the

## is learned in the home!!

— threaten the very basis of family life which has always been protected by a necessary and healthy taboo. They are only logical for those who seek the destruction of the family.

Such inroads into the very sexuality of children are currently fostered by the development of child pornography. This was among my particular areas of enquiry while away. How can we deal with parents who will sell their own children to the makers of pornographic films? And children means maybe 5 and 6 years old, sometimes drugged before being used. Those who claim absolute freedom from prosecution for pornography should note that an estimated 30,000 children a year are used in Los Angeles alone. The libertarian principle applies provided there is no harm to others, and pro-

"Never before have children been manipulated so viciously — or been so encouraged to ruin their lives — by trendy intellectuals and degraded profiteers."

"Today's youngsters are in danger of losing one of their most precious rights — the right to childhood."

How easy it is to be depressing! I would shrink from such a catalogue if there were no positive solutions available to us. Such destructive trends are NOT remorseless and inevitable. For several generations we have been too casual in developing trust, love and security. It has been popular to knock the family as a breeding ground of strife.

I am therefore encouraged to find a reawakening of advocacy for the family as a constructive — indeed, necessary — building block for any

right of children to be children in a hostile environment. No longer is she ridiculed but now widely regarded with respect for her sober assessment of the situation. I think I can do no better than to honour our mother of the year by concluding with the inspirational final words of Mary Whitehouse's book —

"Public opinion long ago condemned and outlawed the exploitation of child labour by nineteenth century industrialists. Yet, today, our society ruthlessly exploits the minds and emotions of young people for financial and political capital. Children are fodder, not for industry but for ideas. They are no longer sent up chimneys but they're pressurised into alien patterns of behaviour to line

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Owens 34 T shirts, 6 pairs of jeans, 3 pairs of Addidas, and 12 singlets he won't wear at any price.

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Consumes 480 packs of chips a year, 280 bottles of Coke, 114 lbs of Monte Carlo's, 119 meat pies but no spinach.

Owens 47 LP's, 95 45's and knows enough about psychology to con his mum into another 10 this year.

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the pockets of unscrupulous publishers, and to further the cause of revolution by stealth.

### Greatest Asset

A nation's youth is its greatest asset. We are poor guardians if we do not ensure their inalienable right to childhood, to mystery to dreams, to tenderness and to love: if we do not realise that by ceasing to provide authority we may also cease to care: if we do not conscientiously maintain the foundations without which the young cannot build anew: if we do not tell them that there is a third way, neither reactionary nor libertarian, which still waits to be explored; and if we do not offer them the riches of our Christian heritage".

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## COMING EVENTS

### Second National Conference on Adoption

Theme: Current concerns and alternatives for child placement and parenting.

Venue: Melbourne University.

Date: May, 1978.

Overseas guest speakers experienced in adoption and related areas have been invited to lead the Conference.

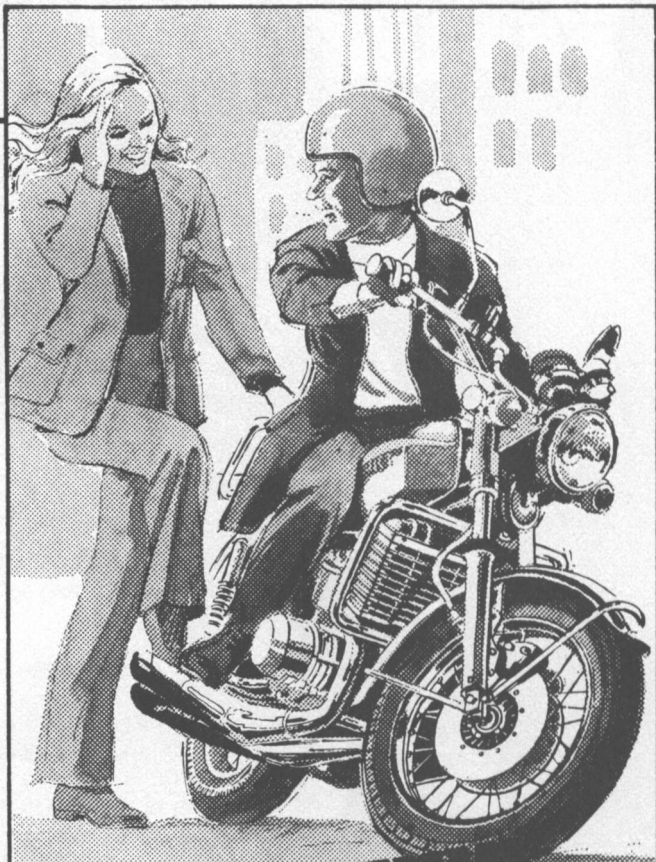
### International Association for Child Psychiatry and Allied Professions Ninth International Congress.

Theme: Children and Parents in a Changing World.

Venue: Melbourne University.

Date: August 19-26, 1978.

The keynote speaker at this Conference will be Dr. L. Solnit contributing author to the well known book, "Beyond the Best Interests of the Child".



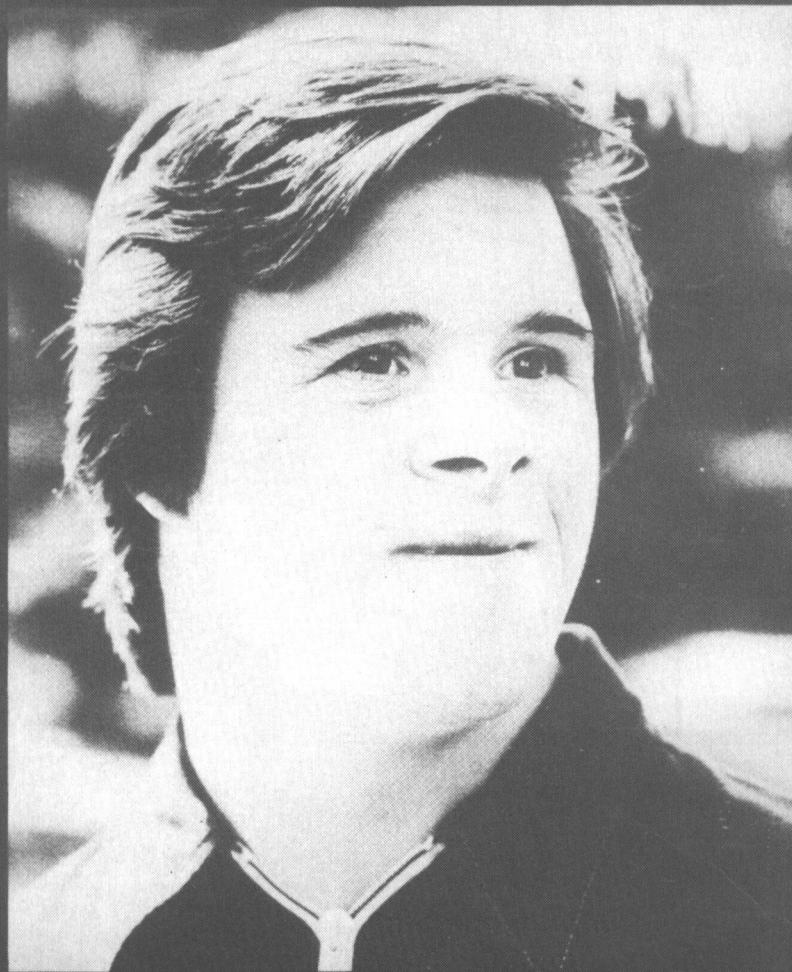
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