BOOK REVIEWS

This little pamphlet contains articles originally published in The Practitioner during the year 1959, and reprinted as a result of their success with general practitioners. It comprises 12 contributions, each by a dietitian, on a variety of medical conditions. Only two on weaning and gastroenteritis directly concern children, but some of the others, i.e. that on obesity, are also of interest to the paediatrician. They are written in the language of dietitians rather than of doctors, but nevertheless are evidently useful for hasty reference in the consulting room.

At five shillings, the price of a cheap toy, this book, a detailed and clearly-written account of all factors relating to health in childhood, is within reach of every home and should be on every family's bookshelf.

From it, for example, the young mother will learn that play serves many purposes in her child's apprenticeship for adulthood and that not only is play essential for attaining emotional maturity but, to quote the author, it is the normal means of acquiring many adult skills. It is during later infancy, when the child can crawl or toddle and its range of play is increased, that the greatest demands are made on her understanding and patience.

Then, he says, she will have to reach a compromise between allowing the infant freedom for exploratory and messy play on the one hand, and preventing him from damaging himself (or creating too much household havoc) on the other. This is most likely to be achieved if she realizes clearly that his explorations are an essential part of his development, and that if they are unnecessarily and continuously frustrated, both his initiative and his relations with herself will suffer.

"In a cultural setting in which there is very seldom an older child at liberty to help with supervision of the exploring toddler, the demands made on a conscientious mother are apt to be very heavy, and one sympathizes with the mother who finally climbed into the play-pen herself and allowed the infant the free run of the garden."

Creative play merges logically into productive work, and herein lies one of the many problems facing parents nowadays. In most unsophisticated cultures, writes Dr. Ellis, the child will have ample opportunity of seeing both the parents at work. The boy will often start by imitating his father's occupation in a play situation, and gradually be drawn into co-operation and apprenticeship. Similarly, the little girl will first imitate and then help her mother in the home or fields. The more sophisticated countries are rapidly making any similar transition impossible. It is exceptional now, he adds, for boys to see their father at work, and often they have little conception of what he does between leaving home in the morning and returning tired in the evening. An increasing number of mothers of young children are entering full-time employment, so that the girl also may grow up with little first-hand experience of domesticity, home-making, or care of younger children.

Another problem arises from the limited opportunity for productive work for the child before he reaches the age of 15. What is rightly described by the author as the 'appalling exploitation of child labour' during the nineteenth century was followed by a violent reaction 'which has gone to the opposite extreme'. The child is not only protected by legislation against exploitation in industry, but he is forced to spend a minimum of 10 years within a system of formal education which for many children proves unsatisfying and ill-balanced. And with Dr. Ellis parents might well ask 'whether exclusive concentration on full-time education until middle teenage is not in fact depriving the child of the earliest stages of adult responsibility and status, and so retarding some part of his social development. The question might be superfluous if there were not a manifest increase in juvenile delinquency and maladjustment, and at the same time plans for extending compulsory schooling for a further year'.

One further very important factor discussed by Dr. Ellis is the present trend toward earlier sexual development and the consequent shortening of childhood. 'For the girl', he writes, 'it adds to the risks of pregnancy before marriage, and for the boy it lengthens the frustrating period during which he is sexually mature but is not regarded as a adult. The school system which is based primarily on chronological age and intelligence rather than physical maturity is faced with the problem of educating together completely heterogeneous groups of boys aged 14 to 15 years of whom the majority are pubescent, but which contain almost equal numbers of those who are completely immature (non-pubescent) and those who are adolescent. A similar problem arises with girls aged 12 to 13 years. In co-educational schools the two problems are superimposed. Since the child and adolescent require different handling and respond differently to adult authority, it is not surprising that an educational system which virtually ignores physical maturity in its grouping is meeting difficulties which are frequently unsolved and which are passed on to society when the teenager leaves school.'

Health in Childhood, according to the foreword, has been written for the benefit of the 'man in the street' or, one might add, for the parents of the little boy who lives down the lane. It might also come as a timely