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Breath-holding attacks—Dickens 1864

I wonder if the first description of breath-holding attacks in the toddler age group should be attributed to Charles Dickens? In chapter 16 of *Our mutual friend*, published in 1864–5, is described a cottage where Mrs Betty Higden, a poor widow, is fostering Johnny (pet name Toddles) who is an orphan. The child's age is not given but his speech is described as being 'little more than monosyllabic'. An elderly couple who are looking for a child to adopt approach the cottage just as Johnny overbalances, topples into the street, and begins to cry. There follows general embarrassment and confusion, which '... it was impossible to explain on account of the orphan's holding his breath, a most terrific proceeding, superinducing in the orphan lead-colour rigidity and a deadly silence, compared with which his cries were music yielding the height of enjoyment. But as he gradually recovered ... smiling peace was gradually wooed back to Mrs Betty Higden's home'. This vivid

description suggests that breath-holding attacks were well known to Dickens, and that he knew they were more alarming than serious.

Paediatric interest is maintained. Later in the novel the child develops a different, more serious illness. The foster-mother refuses to let him go away until she is told 'we want to move Johnny to a place where there are none but children; a place set up on purpose for sick children; where the good doctors and nurses pass their lives with children, talk to none but children, touch none but children, comfort and cure none but children' and so he is admitted to 'the Children's Hospital' in London. Was this The Hospital for Sick Children, Great Ormond Street, which had been founded by Charles West in 1851, 13 years before the novel was written?

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