THE ONLY CHILD

A STUDY OF ALL CLOSED CASES
GIVEN FULL-TIME STUDY AT THE
CHILDREN'S MEMORIAL CLINIC
FROM JANUARY, 1925, THROUGH
DECEMBER, 1931.

EVELYN H. McKEE
THE ONLY CHILD

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CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTION

Alfred Adler in his *Understanding Human Nature* sets forth his concept of the family constellation. In it he recognizes the needs and peculiar problems of the oldest child, the youngest child, the second born, and the only child. Adler further states that, regardless of the individual differences manifested in the case of every human being, there are certain traits noticeable in a child according to the position he occupies in the family group. Frequently, Adler says, if the observer is expert, he can catalogue individuals according to this viewpoint and is able to recognize whether an individual is a first-born, an only child, or the like.

Among this group the only child has his own peculiar position. Adler's description of the only child and his relation with his parents is summarized briefly as follows: The only child is selfish, petted, protected by his parents, and wrapped up in his own affairs. The child, however, has no part in making himself the pampered individual he is. "He is at the utter mercy of the educational methods of his environment." 1. Likewise, parents themselves have no choice in the matter, since they are forced by the circumstances to place all their educational zeal upon

the child, who becomes dependent to a high degree, waits for
someone to point the way, and is in constant search of sup-
port. Being the center of attention at all times makes the
only child feel that he is a very important person; his posi-
tion is so difficult as to make mistaken attitudes almost in-
evitable. If parents understand the dangers of the only child's
situation, there is a possibility of preventing many of these,
but they themselves are often extremely cautious people, who
have experienced life as a great danger, and who, therefore,
approach their child with an inordinate solicitude. "The
child in turn interprets their attentions and admonitions as
a source of additional pressure. Constant attention to health
and well-being finally stimulate him to conceive of the world
as a very hostile place. An eternal fear of difficulties arises
in him, and he approaches them in an unpractised and clumsy
manner because he has tested only the pleasant things in life.
Such children have difficulties with every independent activity
and sooner or later they become useless for life. Shipwrecks
in their life's activities are to be expected. Their life
approaches that of a parasite who does nothing but enjoy life
while the rest of the world cares for his wants." 1.

Plüger also sees the only child as a special problem
and presents much the same scepticism about his welfare. He
says that "a very small family, especially one where there is

1. Adler, Alfred. Ibid. p. 155
an only child, will often have difficulties of its own, from which larger families may be relatively free. There can be little doubt that, in the case of the only child, the emancipation of the individual from family influences may frequently present more than the usual amount of difficulty." 1.

Another of the theorists, Eva Neal, says that because of the undue attention usually given the only child, he is commonly found to be jealous, selfish, egotistical, dogmatic, aggressive, domineering, and quarrelsome. Since he possesses these traits, he is unpopular, and as he grows older he finds it more and more difficult to fit into life with his fellow-beings. There is another type of only child, she says, not so easily recognized by parents. This is the child who is exclusive, over-sensitive, shy, unsocial or highly introspective and imaginative. Neal agrees with Adler in his contention that the only child cannot be considered without taking into account his relationship with his parents and the type of training given him by them. The parents may be too indulgent, protective, and over-solicitous for his well-being. 2 Again it may be his almost exclusive association with grown-ups; he has never had anyone to share his possessions and pleasures. Until he reaches school he is the center of all attention, an individual apart, disregarding all else but "self." 2.

These three theorists have depicted a rather gloomy picture of the only child. They, however, have no basis for their conclusions except their own personal observations.

1. Flugel, J. C. Psycho-Analytic Study of the Family, p. 222
Students of science, on the other hand, have made actual statistical surveys and tests of only children, and have compared them, in some instances, with control groups of apparently well adjusted individuals. In these studies much happier results are in evidence.

William Healy found in his study of one thousand cases of repeated delinquency there were only one hundred nineteen cases of only children, or a little over 10 per cent. He adds that "those who draw conclusions that conditions which surround an only child make for delinquency specially must note relatively small figures on that correlation." 1.

Sallie Cowell, who made a study of ninety-one runaway children from broken homes in Richmond, Virginia, found that seventeen children, or 19.8% were only children, which is a slightly larger correlation. She comments that, even though this might lead us to believe the only child to be the most frequent type of runaway child, the "only child's difficult emancipation from parental authority, probably resulting in a complete breaking away from home, often does not take place at all, because of the concentrated attention of the parents upon the child, making him dependent to such a degree as to render impossible any emancipation whatever." 2.

In 1936 there was published a summary of a study in which four hundred sixty-five young men were given the Colgate Mental Hygiene Tests. Of this group eighty-one were only

2. Cowell, S. B. *A Study of 91 Runaway Children From Broken Homes*. Page. 22
children, and the results showed no indication that the number of deviations from the normal was dependent upon the number of siblings. In other words the only child had no more marked tendencies toward abnormality than the child from families where there were a varying number of siblings.

In 1929 Anne Ward completed a thesis on the only child. It was a study of one hundred only children living at home with both parents referred to Child Guidance Clinic. The study was based on material collected at the Institute for Child Guidance, New York. Her conclusions are as follows: "It was first found that only children were notably younger than clinic children as a whole. The possible reasons for this were that parents would be over-concerned and so refer them earlier; that the parents were of a more intelligent type and would recognize difficulties sooner; and that only children tended to adjust as they got older and so were not referred.

"The only-child groups also ranked higher in intelligence than the total clinic group. This was explained by the children coming from superior homes, having older parents, and being stimulated by constant adult association.

"The problem behavior shown by the only children were very similar to that of all the clinic children living at home with both parents except in the manifestations of stealing, lying, and truancy. The smaller frequency of these three problems among the only children could not be explained wholly on the basis of age differences but was thought to be due to their living in more sheltered
environment where their wants were usually over-supplied and their contacts limited.

"As compared with a control group of three child families the only children showed a higher percentage of restlessness and over-activity, crying, nail-biting, and school difficulties.

"Adverse factors affecting the study of groups were not thought to be more numerous than those under which other children lived. The fact, however, that they were added to the original hazard of being an only child and that their full weight fell on one child made them of greater significance." 1.

With these conflicting opinions and data in view, it is the purpose of this thesis to attempt to find if the only child does present specific and peculiar problems. To accomplish this it is necessary to get a general picture of the only child with regard to his family background, his antisocial personality traits, behavior patterns, and habits, and the success or failure of the treatment used for his problems and, in general, to acquire more knowledge about the nature of the only child.

The study was made from records of the Children's Memorial Clinic. "The Children's Memorial Clinic is a Community Child Guidance Clinic for the study and treatment of the whole child. Because of this fact the Clinic must present in one organization the techniques of medicine, psychiatry, psychology, and social work, and an understanding of the work in many related fields, such as education, recreation, character-building and training, etc. Its staff consists of a psychiatrist, a pediatrician, two psychologists, a nurse, three psychiatric social workers, a laboratory technician, a secretary, and two clerical assistants. With this group of specialists working as a single unit, problems are studied from many different angles, and a better understanding and more adequate solution reached than is ordinarily possible when one technique alone is used.

"The Clinic accepts for study children under eighteen from the City of Richmond and County of Henrico, who are
referred by the public, private, and parochial schools, the
thirty-nine Social Agencies of the Community Fund, the Juvenile
Court, and private physicians. The children to whom the
Clinic ministers come to its care because of disordered
habits, troublesome personality traits, or unacceptable
behavior. These difficulties are looked upon as merely
symptoms, as the outward manifestations of underlying dis-
turbances, which may be found, in the last analysis, in
the mental, physical, or social spheres, but which are in-
terfering with the harmonious adjustment of the child to
his environment." I.

Although this material is not presented as a complete
scientific study of the only child, and although it is not
undertaken with the idea of proving or disproving any theo-
ries about the only child, if that were possible, it was,
however, with such theories in mind that the study was be-
gun. The cases examined include all those which were given
full study by the Clinic Staff at the Children's Memorial
Clinic in Richmond, Virginia, from the time of its opening
in January, 1925, through December, 1931. There were pre-
cisely fifty cases of only children, forty-nine white and
one Negro. Because of the diverse problems entailing de-
tailed explanation that such a difference is rare, color,
social status and background would cause without revealing
any illuminating conclusions and because of the overwhelming

I. Coghill, H. Do. The Clinical Approach To the Problem
number of the white records, and not from any prejudice, the Negro case was eliminated. Consequently the data in the forty-nine white records were used for this study.

Of the four hundred and sixty-three full study cases at the Clinic there were fifty, or 10.5%, only children. That these children received full study means that they were given complete examinations in the four phases which experience has shown to be necessary for understanding the individual. The routine physical examination is used with particular reference to present disorders, and the psychological examination is a study of the measurable abilities and disabilities of the patient. The environmental situation and the background of the individual is revealed in the social history, and the psychiatric examination is an estimation of the total personality. From these data a specific plan of treatment is worked out.
CHAPTER II

FAMILY BACKGROUND

Underlying our interpretation of these records is the assumption that behavior traits have a natural evolution in the life-history of the individual, developing in the process of interaction between the individual and the successive situations in which he lives. The character of this process is determined both by the nature of the organism and by the condition of the cultural situation to which the individual must make an adjustment. A child is born endowed with certain physical characteristics, reflexes, mental capacities and undefined tendencies to act. Furthermore, he is born into a social world in which certain cultural forms, social activities and group expectations already exist. "Through participation in the activities of this social world, beginning in such intimate groups as the family, the play group, and the neighborhood, the original activities of the child are conditioned and organized and come to assume the character of well-defined attitudes, interests, and behavior trends." 1. In this same connection a New York State Mental Hygiene Department pamphlet says "Misbehaving children generally acquire their

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1. Shaw, Clifford R. The Natural History of a Delinquent Career. p. 224
bad behavior from influences in their surroundings rather than through inheritance, and bad behavior, as a rule, does not develop suddenly. It is the result of a long series of unfavorable influences. In bringing up children it is fairly safe to assume that they have more than an even chance of developing into useful and capable men and women if they are given the proper opportunity. Some are more intelligent and more ambitious than others. Some may be born with sensitive natures, nervous temperaments, and other disabilities, but these traits may exist regardless of what the parents are. . . . Parents should not regard misconduct necessarily as inherited, or as something in the child which is to be controlled by punishment. It is generally a sign of unfavorable factors either in the physical condition of the child, or in the surroundings at home or in school."

Since the early environment is a major determining factor in molding the personalities of children, it is necessary to analyze the more outstanding factors in the family background.

In the forty-nine cases used as a basis for this thesis, forty-four were of American stock, and five were of Jewish descent. There were thirty-five Protestant, four Catholic, and two Christian Scientist families among the

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1. New York State Department of Mental Hygiene - Leaflet No. 6.

"Do Children Inherit Bad Conduct?"
American group and the religion of three families was not recorded.

In tabulating the economic status of the parents the classification used by the Children's Memorial Clinic was followed.

**TABLE I.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Per Cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>affluent</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfortable</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marginal</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependent</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>49</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By affluent is meant having a large income and accumulated resources. Moderate means having accumulated sufficient resources to maintain the family free from financial strain, and comfortable means having accumulations sufficient to meet short time emergencies. By marginal is meant living on the earnings, but accumulating little or nothing, or falling into the dependent class in case of emergencies, while dependent is defined as
lacking in the necessities of life, or receiving aid from a charitable organization, or from persons outside the immediate family. 1.

Economic uncertainty is often cited as a major cause of personality disturbances in children. In this instance, however, three cases are entirely without financial insecurity. Two of these were living at home with both parents, and have always been accustomed to such circumstances, while the third, who was thirteen years old, was in an adoptive home, so that it was possible for her to have known some insecurity of this type.

The major portum, or 51.6, of the group fell within the moderate and comfortable categories, which assures them of normal security. While fourteen families are in the marginal group, there are only two which were dependent. It is commonly thought that "only" children belong to families financially independent and, since two-thirds of the group studied fall into that class, there is some ground for the supposition. At least, the conclusion can be drawn that, since only two of the families were dependent, economic independence is a constructive factor in improving the problems of children.

The following table shows the parental occupations of the forty-nine cases studied: 2.

2. Tabulated according to the United States Census Classifications.
TABLE II

Parental Occupations of the Groups Studied.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Father</th>
<th>Mother</th>
<th>Total Per Cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trade</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Service</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerical</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic &amp; Personal</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In six records the occupation of the father was not listed. In four of these the mother was supporting the child. While in one of the others the child was in a correctional school for girls, and the other remaining case was in a foster home. In three cases where the father and mother were separated and in three additional cases in which divorce had been secured, the mother was working. Except for these ten instances in which it was necessary for the mother, partially at least, to support the child, and in one instance where a marginal income necessitated the mother’s working outside the home, the matter of the occupation of the mother was one of choice, which was true in nine cases. In four of these nine cases, the
the mothers were professional women, while three held good clerical positions, and the remaining two were engaged in a trade. It is noted here that the absence of the mother from the home was one cause for the behavior difficulties present in the children.

It is seen from the table that twenty-seven of the forty-three occupations ascertained for the men, and that 43% of those for the entire group fell in the professional and trade groups. Such is expected, however, since the largest proportion of the families belong to the moderate and comfortable groups, economically speaking. The fact that the greater part of the parents belong to the trade and professional classes can probably be explained on the grounds that members of the upper or middle strata of society have fewer children than those from the lower levels, and so are more likely to have an only child. The fact is further explained by noting that parents from this group will more readily recognize incipient problems and will trouble themselves to consult authorities on the matter.

The next table shows the marital status of the parents.
### TABLE III.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Per Cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmarried</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separated</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father Dead</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother Dead</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both Dead</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Recorded</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>49</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is noted that in twenty-seven, or 56%, which is the largest number of the cases, the parents were married and living together. In the case of the unmarried mother, the father was dead, and in the case of the separations, four of the six were living apart with the idea of divorce in mind. In one of the remaining cases, a readjustment was hoped for, but there was definite discord present, while in the last the father had disappeared. There were four parents who had previously secured divorce, and in the seven families where the father was dead, two had received divorce before the death. In one of these instances, the mother had guilt...
feelings because she refused to see the father before he died. In the three cases where both parents were dead the children were in foster homes.

Since Table IV shows that 44% of the children in the group studied are from broken homes, conflict homes, or otherwise abnormal homes, it is clear that this is a factor playing a large part in the problem situations evidenced in the children studied. It must be remembered, however, that, although in the 44%, or in twenty-two cases the absence of normal family relationships contributed to the personality disturbances in the children, and may indeed have been a greater factor than the only child situation. In 56%, or twenty-seven cases the child was at home with both parents, and consequently other causes must be found to explain the difficulties manifested.

One additional item with regard to the parents has not been considered and that is why there was an only child in these families. The information was in very few cases satisfactory, and in reviewing them it was felt that often the reasons stated were rationalizations. In the twenty-seven families living together, and in which having children would have been possible, there were seven where physical cause was given; the physical cause being stated as miscarriages, or deaths, or that the mother was too ill to have more. In one instance the mother had married late and was too old to have any more children and seven parents said they could not afford to have
more children. In three the mother was working and was more interested in her job than in having children, and in two the parents stated they did not want more children. In both of these latter, however, the father and mother had separated after the rejection came out. Thus in only eighteen cases in which having more children was possible could the cause be determined.

Thus it is seen that the physical and the economic causes were paramount. It must be remembered, however, that the physical cause could be more easily ascertained and that the economic was probably a rationalization.

The accompanying graph shows a composite of the ages at which the applications were made. The age figures are grouped into four sections, each covering a span of five years. It is noted that eight, or 16%, of the study-group fell between the ages of three and six, that fifteen, or 31%, fell between seven and ten, that twenty, or 41%, were between eleven and fourteen, whilst only six, or 12%, were between fifteen and eighteen. In the eight cases falling in the first group, seven were in school, three being in nursery school, two in kindergarten, and one in first grade.

There is some explanation for the ages of referrals falling into these groups. In the first place problems in the older child, and in any other child for that matter, are not recognized until fairly control and a sense of...
CHAPTER III

ANALYSIS OF THE GROUP.

In the group of forty-nine only children studied there were thirty boys, or 61.5%, and nineteen girls, or 38.5%. This difference correlates with the sex ratio of the entire group of full-study cases at the Children's Memorial Clinic, of which 60% were boys and 40% girls. For that reason, no special classification will be made along the lines of difference in sex. The ages range from two and half years to eighteen years with the median falling at eleven years and two months.

The accompanying graph shows a comparison of the ages at which the applications were made. The age figures are grouped into four sections, each covering a space of four years. It is noted that eight, or 10%, of the study-group fall between the ages of three and six, that fifteen, or 31%, fall between seven and ten, that twenty, or 41%, come between eleven and fourteen, while only six, or 12%, come between fifteen and eighteen. In the eight cases falling in the first group, seven were in school, three being in nursery school, two in kindergarten, and two in first grade.

There is some explanation for the ages of referral falling into these groups. In the first place problems in the only child, and in any other child for that matter, are not recognized until fairly marked and a source of
Graph I

Age Groups At Which Children Were Referred

- Ages 3-6: 8 cases
- Ages 7-10: 15 cases
- Ages 11-14: 20 cases
- Ages 15-18: 6 cases

Strong are these interests that the boy or girl is influenced more than ever before by opinions and standards of conduct of the group.
annoyance or concern to those in contact with the children. In the second place, problems of the only children studied in this thesis appeared, except in one instance, after the children became associated with groups outside the home. This fact might at first seem to indicate that as soon as the child becomes associated with these outside groups the problems would appear, and the child be referred, but, as has been previously pointed out, personality difficulties are not recognized in their early stages and referral is postponed until there is definite cause for alarm. On the other hand, the child may be able to cover up the real depth of his difficulties to some degree when they first appear. The fact that the largest per cent of the cases fell between the ages of eleven and fourteen and that the majority of these were boys is perhaps indicative of the more adventurous and aggressive characteristics in boys, and, therefore, their manifestation of independence at an age when it is normal for the adventurous gang spirit to appear and for the complete break with cramping home ties to begin. Brooks says in this connection that "early adolescence and the years immediately preceding it are the years when boys take to gangs. During this time the boy's or girl's interests continue to widen so that they include more persons outside the family. So strong are these interests that the boy or girl is influenced more than ever before by opinions and standards of conduct of
companions. Chums often have more influence than the father and mother." 1.

It is well to add also that approximately 55% of the children referred at this age were referred by the school, and that the major difficulties were those of disobedience, lying and stealing.

The next table indicates the sources of referral in the group studied.

**TABLE IV**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Per Cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Minister</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juvenile Court</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Agencies</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physician</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>49</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One referral was made by a minister, and only two of the total number were referred by the Juvenile Court. Both of these cases were boys, one fifteen and the other twelve years of age. The first one's father had deserted seven years previously and the mother was working out of the home.

Long hours out of the home resulted in very little contact with the boy who was charged by the court with staying out late at night and being incorrigible. The twelve year old boy's father was a chauffeur, who before his death had a court record, and the mother was a cashier in a cafeteria. The boy had practically no supervision and had become a gang leader. He was charged with truancy, lying, and stealing.

Two of the four cases referred by other agencies were sent by the State Department of Public Welfare. They were also boys, both fourteen years old. In the case of one the father was an army officer who was away from home most of the time, and the mother was a school teacher, who had been very solicitous of her son. He had been expelled from school at the age of twelve and was at the time of referral rejecting and disobeying his mother, lying, using obscene language, and stealing. The other was the illegitimate child of a judge and a servant girl. The boy had been placed in an orphanage and later in several foster homes. He was diagnosed as epileptic, was stealing, lying, and using vulgar language. The third case referred by other agencies was a girl fifteen years old whose step-father was a street-car conductor and whose mother was a practical nurse. The girl was in a correctional institution having been suspended from school for stealing money. Her stealing had continued and was accompanied by lying and sex activities. The