

# The Family As the Threshold of Democracy

ARNOLD GESELL

**T**HE TITLE of our paper was also the official designation of one of the sections of the White House Conference on Children in a Democracy. It is natural that one section of the Conference should have been devoted to the functions of the family. Actually as well as figuratively the family is both threshold and foundation in the structure of democracy.

Democracy is a way of life which respects the rights and responsibilities of the individual. If we wish to find the sources of the democratic spirit we must go into the home, for it is in the home that the individual child first forms his social concepts.

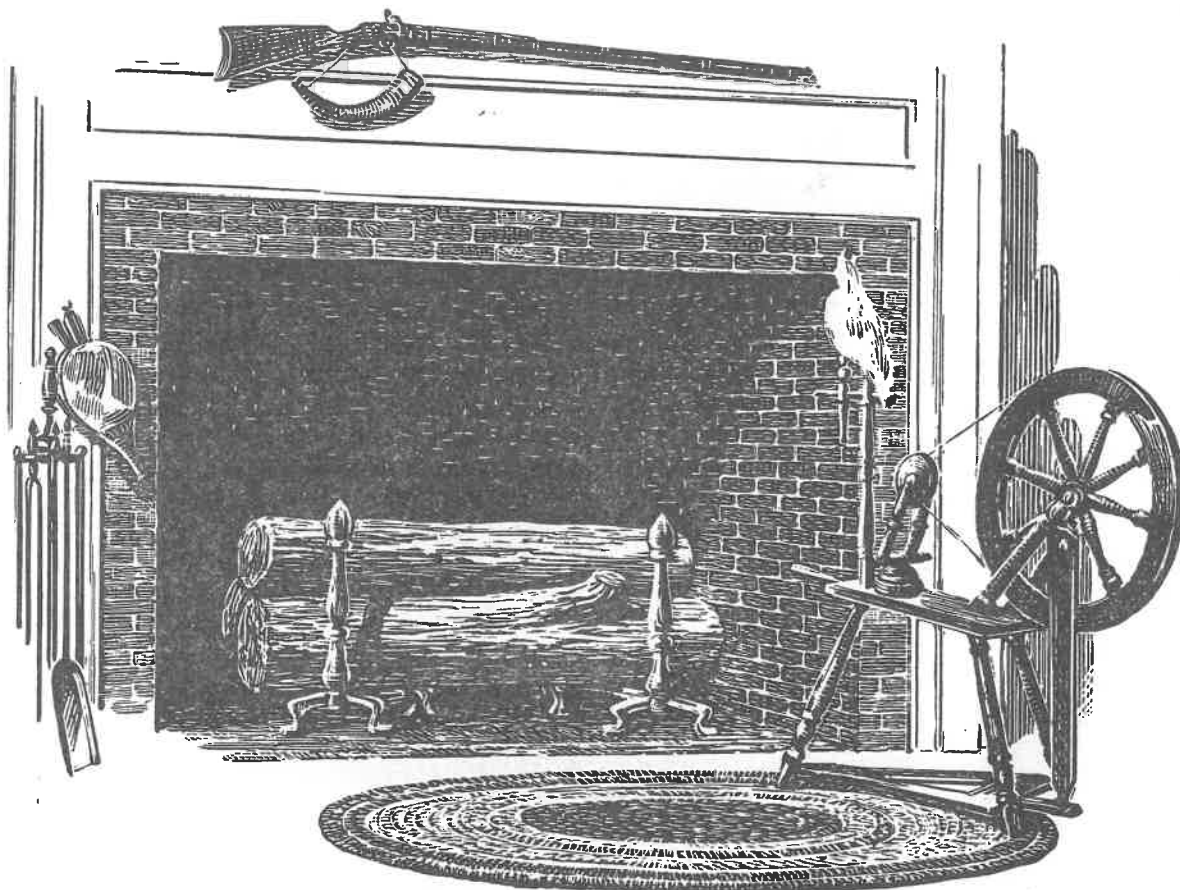
There is no short cut to the goal of democracy. The spirit of democracy comes to growing children through imitation and participation. Adults in their own behavior furnish the models and intima-

**This is the fourth in a group of articles which will present the important findings of the 1940 White House Conference on Children in a Democracy.**

tions of the democratic way. The adults most concerned are, of course, parents and householders.

The emotional development of the child is based on instinct, but it does not take care of itself. The democratic spirit is a fruit of slow growth which needs intelligent guidance long before the child enters school.

How shall the guidance be accomplished? This is the practical question which the readers of the *National Parent-Teacher* will immediately ask. For concreteness we shall discuss six related



subjects, all of which concern the family as the threshold of democracy. Here are the headings:

Considerateness  
Wise discipline  
Law and authority  
Sense of humor  
Concept of growth  
Housing and health

We shall give chief attention to psychological factors, because democracy is a way of life.

**Considerateness** Considerateness is the first essential. The very word considerateness conveys the idea of respect for the dignity of the individual. Considerateness, it has been well said, is in itself a social system. It certainly favors the development of democratic attitudes.

If parents and teachers begin with the assumption that they can make over and mold a child into a preconceived pattern, they are bound to become somewhat autocratic. If on the contrary parents begin with the assumption that every baby comes into the world with a unique individuality, they are bound to become more considerate. For their task will be to understand the child's individuality and to give it the best possible chance to grow and find itself.

Considerateness, as we use the term here, is not merely a social or domestic grace. It is something of an art, a kind of perceptiveness and imaginativeness which enables one to understand better the psychology of other persons. It is an alert kind of liberalism which is sensitive to distinctive characteristics in other individuals. It is an active form of courtesy.

**Wise discipline** Discipline, being a form of government, may be either autocratic or democratic in spirit and in method. It is democratic when it is tempered to the capacity of the child and tolerant of his immaturity. Wise discipline aims not to strengthen the teacher's authority but to strengthen the child's self-control and sense of responsibility. In well-ordered homes harsh methods are entirely unnecessary. In a democratically governed home there are few crises.

When discipline is purely punitive it easily becomes despotic. There are countless homes in America in which mothers, fathers, and other elders in the household use harsh methods of punishment even toward young children: scolding, slapping, cuffing, shaming, and beating.

These primitive undemocratic methods of government have no place in American life. They have not yet been adequately reached by our child protection agencies. They are so grossly inconsistent with the genius of democracy that they should be attacked as a public welfare problem by such organizations as the National Congress of Parents and Teachers.

**Law and authority** A democratic society is based on good citizenship. In the adult this means respect for law, order, and delegated authority. The respect does not rest wholly on fear. Throughout his growing years the child should be inducted into an appreciation of property rights, personal rights, and civic rights. Much of this education will come in the school years, but the foundations ought to be firmly laid in the preschool years.

Even in infancy the child must begin to do two things which in a democracy are not contradictory: he must acquire self-dependence through self-reliance; he must choose to obey the laws of social sanction. At the age of two years the child displays little interest in what other children do or say. He may hug or push them out of the way as though they were physical objects. There is little of social give and take.

But by the age of three years he shows less interest in playing alone. Cooperative activity is beginning to take the place of physical manhandling. He is willing to wait his turn. He shows a more vigorous sense of ownership in his toys, and he will even put them away if he has the benefit of some supervision.

In these early patterns of social behavior we see the outlines of the citizenship of maturer years. These early lessons in civic living are important. They are learned in well-ordered homes. They are strengthened by wholesome experience in well-conducted nursery schools. They are not so readily acquired in congregate institutions. This is an added reason why a democratic government should insist (as indeed the White House Conference of 1909 proposed) that children should not be deprived of natural parental care except for inescapable reasons.

With a mounting divorce rate many American homes are not sufficiently well ordered to provide this normal parental care. They suffer from divided authority, from broken traditions of authority, sometimes from actual tyranny of father or mother, and sometimes from no authority at all. Such homes, when multiplied, weaken the sources of democracy. Wholesome parent-child relationships are the natural medium through which the child becomes adjusted to a democratic state.

**Sense of humor** Fascist government is not distinguished for sense of humor. It is so distinguished for the lack of it that we may well believe that a sense of humor has some significance for democracies. The sense of humor is a sense of proportion, particularly in the field of social values. It detects pretensions, exaggerations, incongruities. It deflates them with laughter, it punctures them with a sympathetic kind of irony. Humor is a play of the mind which is akin to the sense of freedom. Its suppression would be regarded as an

encroachment on personal liberty in a free state. In authoritarian states its civic expressions are subterranean.

Here again we are dealing with a complex psychological temper or trait. So complex is this trait that the beginnings of its growth in the individual trace back to infancy and early life. It is a protection against undue tensions and severities of discipline. Its free exercise in the home is a safeguard. It deserves at least this brief mention along with the more sober aspects of democratic philosophy.

**Concept of growth** Environment cannot generate the progressions of a child's development. Every individual has a unique pattern of growth, with a high degree of inborn determination. This is the essence of his individuality which regimentation would ignore. Only in a democratic climate of opinion can we give full respect to the individual growth factors in infants and children. The concept of growth therefore has an important place in the theory and practice of democracy.

The child's personality is a product of slow and graduate growth. His nervous system matures by stages and natural sequences. He sits before he stands; he babbles before he talks; he fabricates before he tells the truth; he draws a circle before he draws a square; he is selfish before he is altruistic; he is dependent on others before he achieves dependence on self. All of his abilities, including his morals, are subject to laws of growth. The task of child care is not to mold the child behavioristically to some predetermined image, but to assist him step by step, guiding his growth.

This developmental point of view does not mean indulgence. It is instead a constructive deference to the limitations of immaturity. It obliges us to accord more courtesy even to the infant, who is often unwittingly handled in an arbitrary manner because we have failed to understand the processes of development.

Indeed the further evolution of democracy demands a much more refined understanding of infants and preschool children than our civilization has yet attained. Should science ever arrive at the happy juncture where it can focus its full force upon the interpretation of life, it will enable us to do more complete and timely justice to the individual personality in the very young. And this in turn will have a humanizing effect upon the adult population.

The present troubled status of the world confronts us with three propositions: (1) democracy demands respect for individuals; (2) infants are individuals; (3) the science of human behavior and of individuality can flourish fully only in a democracy. These three propositions interlock in a significant way and testify to the social importance of

an adequate science of child development in a democratic country.

**Housing and health** The inequalities of our social provisions for the preschool child are glaring. At one extreme we have the infant born without record and without medical supervision in the overcrowded room of a rural or a city slum. At the other extreme is the infant born in a hospital and surrounded with every known safeguard.

Underprivileged preschool children suffer not only in a physical sense. They suffer psychologically. They feel mental insecurity. In crowded and shiftless homes they develop anxieties and perplexities. They see sights and experience shocks from which more fortunate children are, in decency, spared. Some of the most elementary reserves which lie at the basis of respect for the individual are made impossible.

Overcrowding takes a terrible psychological toll. The newborn infant is entitled to a bassinet. He is entitled to a crib, a pen, and as he grows older, a bed of his own, and a room or a section of a room which he can claim as his own. He deserves this degree of privacy and possession that he may develop a normal sense of individuality. Lacking such a normal sense he will not respect the individuality of others. Much of the crime which even political democracies have not controlled has its roots in disordered homes which impoverish and distort the early mental development of future citizens. Here is another tangible task in preventive mental hygiene.

How can society enter upon this vast task, which if left undone weakens the foundation of democracy? By better housing. Also by steadily widening the infant health protection which has already been initiated both through private medical practice and through community health measures.

Having safeguarded the birth and the nutrition of the infant, we should systematically protect the course of his development up to school entrance. Periodic health examinations throughout the first five years of life can be broadened to embrace mental as well as physical welfare. Developmental supervision will include a socialized form of adult education, a mode of parent guidance designed to improve the psychological care of the child.

*Only through a democratically conceived system of developmental supervision can we attain a more just and universal distribution of developmental opportunity for infants and preschool children.*

The scientific study of child development has already given us new insights into the manner in which the mind grows and takes shape. This knowledge is ready for application on a wider social scale. Science needs deeper application to make democracy a more assured possession.