

REVIEW

WHEN A PARENT IS MENTALLY RETARDED. By B.Y. WHITMAN & P.J. ACCARDO, Eds. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes, 1990. **REVIEW AVAILABLE ONLINE @ www.srvip.org**

Reviewed by Susan Thomas

THIS EDITED BOOK consists of an introduction, 11 chapters, and a conclusion, from 11 contributors (including the two editors). The authors are all from the St. Louis, Missouri area, and are all associated with services to mentally retarded people. The book is divided into five sections: Introduction; Epidemiological Perspectives; Educational Interventions; Children of Parents with Mental Retardation; and Legal and Ethical Issues.

The overall lesson of the book is that, whether they are mildly or severely impaired, mentally retarded parents have much more than ordinary difficulty rearing children. I very much hope readers will not dismiss this conclusion as “out-of-date” just because it comes from a book of 1990. If one understands both the realities of mental retardation, and of child-rearing, the conclusion seems self-evident, and it has stood the test of time. The book cites the following evidence.

- The children of retarded parents do not necessarily end up retarded themselves, but the children do tend overwhelmingly to have all sorts of problems—medical, emotional, cognitive. “Children of parents with mental retardation have a high rate of removal from the family of origin and ... abuse seems more likely to occur with decreasing parental IQ and with increasing child IQ” (p. 123).

- The parents typically have all sorts of other problems in addition to their mental limitations, including poverty, being in irregular arrangements (e.g., the majority of retarded parents are single mothers—of the 28 families enrolled in the Parents Learn Together program to teach men-

tally retarded parents adaptive child-rearing, 25 were headed by single mothers, p. 118), and living with numerous other marginal or incompetent and exploitative persons. “The overwhelming majority of these parents”—i.e., mentally retarded parents—“report significant problems with their children, with their parenting role, and in their role as income providers. Almost none have been prepared in any way for any of these roles. Further, there are few, if any, resources to support them in this effort” (p. 28). Note that this speaks to social roles, and to a lack of measures that would enable people to more competently carry out these valued roles.

- Such parents normatively run into trouble once the children reach school age and then through adolescence if not earlier: “Experience with the limitations of parents with mental retardation shows that it is highly improbable that even with extensive support services they will ever be able to be adequate parents to school-age children and adolescents. When, furthermore, these children themselves exhibit various degrees of cognitive, language, emotional, and behavioral impairments, whether organic or environmental in etiology, then the possibility of parents with mental retardation effectively advocating for and participating in intervention programs for their children becomes effectively nil” (p. 204).

- And there are commonly conflicts between the needs, interests and rights of the children, and the rights of the retarded parents: “A very obvious conflict arises when persons with mental disabilities exercise their freedom to procreate, yet do not have the resources to meet their children’s basic needs as legally defined ...” (p. ix). This being so, it was very gratifying to read that “If adequate parenting is a child’s right, it becomes an adult’s duty” (p. 9), a recognition that when any party is granted a right, it becomes an obligation or a duty of some other party to guarantee it.

One also gets the impression that a number of the arguments and concerns put forth in the book for helping retarded parents to retain custody of their children are in response to earlier practices (as during the eugenic era) that denied to retarded people as a class the rights to marry and to have children. “Even if some logical reasons exist for limiting in some fashion the right to marry for some persons with mental retardation, that does not justify discrimination against an entire class of persons” (p. 156).

Among the more useful recommendations found scattered throughout the book are that (1) ongoing and intensive support, not just one-time or periodic, will be needed by and for many mentally retarded parents if they are to both retain custody of their children and raise them to competent, well-functioning adulthood; (2) the right to marry should not be seen as inextricably linked to the right to procreate and to rear children one has given birth to; and (3) ethical principles should be clearly formulated and provide a context for laws and judicial decisions regarding children and the family when parents are mentally retarded.

Below are some additional noteworthy passages:

“Adults in the community who have mental retardation are having children at a rate comparable to that of childbearing in the general population with no suggestion of any IQ dependent differential fertility rate” (p. 6).

“The feasibility or desirability of adopting both the child and the mentally retarded parent into another family or a group home setting, as an alternative to termination of parental rights, also remains unexplored” (p. 63). Such adoption of both child and parent could be an avenue of assisting the parent to retain at least some aspects of the parental role, and to provide the needed assistance, though the word “adoption” implies childhood, so something would need to be done to adult-image the arrangement for the benefit of the parent.

“A policy that might be constitutionally supportable would be that of preventing the imposition of marital responsibilities on those persons incapable of understanding the nature and obligations of the marriage relationship” (pp. 159-160).

The following three quotes, from different chapters and different authors, all reflect the reality of what mental retardation is and means.

“When caseworkers were asked to identify their most difficult problems with these parents,”—i.e., mentally retarded parents—“poor judgment was most frequently mentioned” (pp. 25-26). Of course, poor judgment is a defining characteristic of mental retardation.

“One of the more difficult aspects of working with parents who have mental retardation is their strong tendency to become very dependent on the help of one or more of their professional workers. They seem to need to assure themselves that the professional cares and will respond” (p. 59). In this instance, the complaint does not seem to take recognition that it is part of the nature of mentally retarded persons to be more than ordinarily dependent, nor of the fact that so many mentally retarded people have experienced such relationship discontinuity that they have good reason to be concerned whether a professional cares and will respond.

“Parents with mental retardation are first and foremost adults with mental retardation” (p. 60), and thus their problems are a direct result of their mental impairment.

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