

DEAFNESS IN CHILDREN

(Written for "The Listener" by DR. H. B. TURBOTT, Director of the Division of School Hygiene, Health Department.)

RECENTLY I saw two little girls, about six years of age, both almost completely deaf. They had had their deafness discovered early and had been under the care of a teacher of the deaf for several years. They were happy normal girls, who answered questions intelligently from lip reading. I could not but wonder whether every deaf pre-school child is getting the special help needed to overcome that great handicap.

The trouble is one of recognition. Most parents fail to recognise deafness till the third year. The baby makes sounds in the first year. The mother is very close to the baby for the first year and a-half and he may be able to copy some sounds with the very faint hearing he may possess. Or he may be making sounds automatically which the parents interpret as the beginnings of speech. So all seems well for a while. Again, during the second year he seems to follow sound—his head turns as one approaches, so even though he is not getting on with speech, the parent is reassured, forgetting that sound vibrations, and not hearing, may enable the child to appear to hear. Sight helps a child to overcome deafness, too.

How is a parent to tell whether a toddler is deaf or not? If a child is not saying a fair number of words by the time he is 15 to 18 months old the parents should know that something is wrong. Do not put off with the thought of "backwardness in speech." It may be backwardness, but if the child is bright and intelligent and speaks little or not at all, deafness must be remembered and no time lost in clearing up the point. An ear specialist should be consulted. Should he confirm fears of deafness, there is certain help available.

Once you know your little child is deaf you must act. Write to the Director of Education, Wellington, reporting that you have a deaf child, the deafness being confirmed by an ear specialist. That Department hopes some day to have nursery schools for the deaf, where pre-school children can get sound early training. As in the meantime it cannot take your child into a nursery school, it will do the best possible in substitution. The Education Department will arrange for teachers from its schools for the deaf to visit the homes of young deaf children, and to advise parents on

(continued from previous page)

His brows contracted in concentration. I waited hopefully. A few seconds later his ears started moving nearer the top of his head as his smile widened.

"Don't tell me you've seen it," I gasped.

"After forty years!" he confessed ruefully.

"Hip hurrah!" I shouted, but after the first excitement passed I felt rather flat, rather like Alexander after he had conquered the world. I had made the only convert I cared about and something had gone out of my life.

the many problems ahead of them. This personal contact between teacher and parent has proved invaluable in a great many cases, and the possibility of these home visits should not be missed. In the meantime the parent of a deaf toddler or pre-school child should treat that child as though normal—be sure to speak often and freely to him, encourage any attempts at speech. You do not want a dumb child. So forget his deafness and bring him up in exactly the same way as any brothers or sisters.

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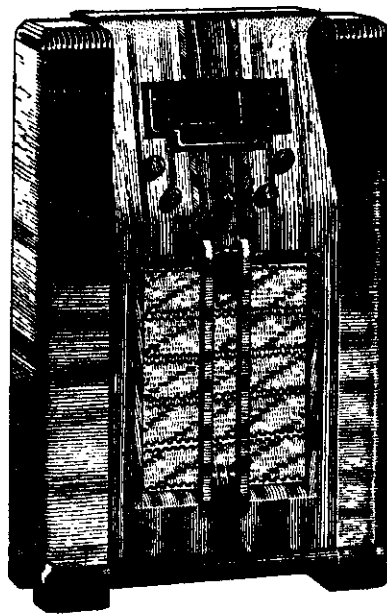
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