WHAT OUR CITIES ARE DOING FOR THEIR CHILDREN: BY GEORGE ETHELBERT WALSH

ONE of the most urgent problems the modern city has to face is the need of making such provision for its children that they will develop morally and physically into good citizens. A "childless city" is an inconceivable proposition; yet, if we are to accept the conclusions of some writers, the little ones are not wanted and their presence in the streets constitutes a public nuisance. But no one can quite imagine "race suicide" carried to the extent of totally eliminating all the boys and girls from our cities, so must a solution of the problem gradually work itself out.

In New York especially, the "race suicide" question is of secondary importance to the problem of what to do with the children already with us. A picture of a crowded street in the tenement districts is illuminative. In the foreground and background there are children—babes in the arms of mothers, boys and girls playing in the middle of the street, mischievous urchins climbing fire-escapes or fighting among themselves, half-grown children lazily gossiping or hanging around the corner saloons, all trying to find some outlet for their animal spirits. The middle of the street in some sections is so crowded by children at play that it is almost impossible for a wagon to thread its way through them safely at any speed greater than two or three miles an hour. The toot of an automobile horn is a signal for a general rush for the sidewalks, accompanied by pushing and shoving that endangers the lives of the smaller ones. Through some of these crowded thoroughfares run street car lines, and it is manifestly not so much the carelessness of motormen as it is the fault of present congested conditions that an annual toll of many innocent lives is exacted by our street railway companies.

In summer the condition of the tenement children is rendered almost unbearable. The sultry temperature drives them from stuffy tenements, and the hot pavements scorch and hurt them. They attempt to play a little in the shadow of the brick walls of their home in the early morning and late afternoon hours, but at midday they become languid and slothful. At night they seek the roofs and fire-escapes where they may catch a little of the passing breeze, and through the torture of it all they slumber fitfully until the dawn of another day repeats the story.

The city owes certain debts to the children which are just beginning to be realized. They are not intellectual debts, but physical and moral. The physical debt has been contracted through the
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artificial environment imposed upon the children. The cities have attempted to rob them of their birthright of free and independent expression of their physical natures. They have taken away their playgrounds, their fields and woods, their trout and fishing streams, their very dooryards. The result has been that the children have degenerated morally and physically, and the citizens of the future must suffer as a consequence. The work of restoring these natural rights to the city children must develop through years of planning and farsighted policies, and the children mutely demand it. It was no choosing of theirs that they were brought into the world between brick walls and hot pavements.

CHILDREN, to retain their physical, moral and mental balance, must have breathing and exercising space and a normal development of all their faculties through association with natural conditions. This is the problem which many cities are seeking to solve. Compulsory physical exercise does not always produce the desired results. The physical training in public schools for this reason falls far short of the ideal. The children find no pleasure in it, for to make pleasure out of exercise the imagination must be stimulated. This is best accomplished in games, and outdoor games under congenial surroundings are always the most productive of good.

Taking all the factors together it is the city’s duty to provide open air playgrounds for its children, workshops for the development of their creative instincts, farms and gardens for the healthful exercise in the cultivation of new life, and places of amusement, such as indoor gymnasiums, bowling alleys and swimming pools for recreation in winter. These are the things which the normal country child has provided for him by the very nature of his environment, and the city has robbed its children of them through artificial conditions, and these are the things that must be restored if the children of the cities are to produce types of future citizens the nation needs.

New York is facing the problem acutely. Chicago is only a little better off, and the other large cities are treading the same thorn-strewn road. The park systems are being extended at a great expenditure of public money, and these breathing spaces are being more and more used for the children. Not many years ago the parks of New York City were beautiful places to look at and pleasant strolling grounds, but they were not in any sense of the word playgrounds. Today they are turned over to thousands of children for open-air recreation. Any day in spring, summer and fall, tennis,
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baseball, cricket, lacrosse and other games are in progress in Central, Van Cortland, Riverside and other municipal parks. The old sign, "keep off the grass," is rapidly disappearing. The city is partly atoning for its past neglect of the children by opening the parks for their unalloyed pleasure. The change has in no way injured the parks, but rather has increased their value by making them useful as well as ornamental. In the boroughs of Bronx and Queens provision is being made to accommodate the vast army of children who in the near future will people the outlying districts. New York is spending millions for its parks where a few years ago it spent thousands. It is true that these expenditures are made only indirectly in the interest of the children, but whether they have this purpose distinctly in view or not they must prove a blessing for future generations of boys and girls.

The small parks in the congested districts of the city are of more importance in the solution of the city-child problem than the larger playgrounds in the outlying districts. The few additional "breathing places" on the East Side of New York where open air gymnasiums are established have proved a great boon to the little ones. The river front parks, with their free swimming and bathing houses, have cost the city millions of dollars in the past ten years, but they no more than represent a part of the debt the city owes its children. The contemplated extension of these parks and swimming piers includes also more recreation piers. Indeed, the need of the city is for sufficient recreation piers, river front parks and swimming places to accommodate the whole population of boys and girls. Within the next ten years many more millions of dollars will be expended in this direction.

CHICAGO has had similar experiences with her small parks and recreation centers. The attempt made in that city to provide within the city limits a comprehensive system of small places for the recreation of the poor is the most costly yet undertaken by any municipality. The fourteen recreation centers have already cost Chicago seven million dollars and from twenty-five to thirty thousand dollars annually to maintain each one. In these playgrounds there are clubhouses, gymnasiums, baths and athletic grounds. The attendance on all pleasant days has been so large that the city authorities feel that the money has been wisely invested. The extension of this system of outdoor recreation centers for children is now being considered, and as fast as the money is appropriated new small parks
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will be opened and equipped. Chicago is better prepared to cope with such an experiment than New York, for it has no such narrow congested section as the lower East Side of the metropolis, and the cost of land for park purposes in the poorer quarters is much less.

The question of establishing outdoor recreation centers in the older parts of New York is one that involves an immense outlay of funds, and the solution of the problem must be reached in other ways. One that has been suggested is to utilize the roofs for playgrounds. Half a dozen schools have playgrounds on their roofs, and many commercial buildings have roof gardens and gymnasiums where young and old can play at games at the noon hour. But to make this innovation of real value to the children of our cities the roof playgrounds would have to be planned on a comprehensive scale. At present there are many acres of flat roofs which are wasted. The construction of extensive systems of playgrounds on these by the city would relieve the congestion in the streets below and make the mortality among children far less than it is today. No city has yet made any extensive attempt to utilize the roof space for park purposes and playgrounds, but New York is reaching the point where it must look for more space either above the ground or below. It is not likely that the children's playgrounds will be placed underground and the only other place left is above on the city's roof.

Architects no longer leave out of consideration the question of utilizing the flat roofs, and many of the new buildings designed have model roof gymnasiums and gardens. Some of the model tenements are provided with similar equipments where the occupants can safely turn their children loose to play. A number of new plans of model tenements now under consideration will emphasize the use of the roofs for recreation centers more than ever. These contemplate the building of complete outdoor gymnasiums, gardens and playgrounds for the younger children, including trees and plants, all surrounded by a high wall to prevent accidents. In the summer time these roof gardens of the tenements could be utilized for sleeping purposes, and it is proposed to erect poles thereon so that several tiers of hammocks can swing to the cool breeze. The importance given to the value of outdoor sleeping for consumptives and others suffering from pulmonary ills has led to the consideration of such improvements in the tenements. It is one of the surest methods of combating the "white plague" now so threatening to the densely crowded tenement people.

One of the greatest needs of boys and girls in our cities is the opportunity to cultivate the soil and learn the secrets of nature's
growth and development. The work of making flowers and plants grow has long been recognized as having great influence in awakening dormant faculties in the child’s mind. The country boy is brought up under such environment that he learns from infancy secrets of nature which the city boy of the tenements may never understand. Years ago the present movement to bring nature closer into the lives of the poor children was started by encouraging the growth of flowers in pots and boxes. On a summer’s day one may see the window sills of the poorest tenement houses decorated with flowers and green plants. The fidelity with which some of the poor will tend their few plants indicates their appreciation of even such glimpses of nature. Following this cultivation of plants in the tenements, the public school authorities took up the question of teaching students in the schools the art of flower and plant cultivation from seeds. Some of the schools have excellent gardens in their windows where the children daily get practical illustrations of how nature increases her species year after year.

But this has not been enough, and the school garden has been evolved from the few indoor attempts at window gardening. The school garden has flourished in Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, St. Louis, Cleveland and many other towns and cities. The first school garden was started seven years ago under the auspices of the Boston Normal School. Today there are a dozen such gardens in Boston and the suburbs where boys and girls have the opportunity to do manual work and learn real gardening and farming. The school garden as a factor in village improvement has spread throughout the land, and scores of small towns and villages have established such gardens for their children. At first these gardens were used only during the warm seasons of the year, but now they are kept open from frost to frost and in a few instances attempts have been made to roof over a part of the land with glass, and carry on operations through some of the cold months.

The establishment of such gardens by the different cities is no longer in the experimental stage. Their value has been fully demonstrated, and the cities owe it to the children to make such provisions for their welfare. Topography here as in many other respects is an important factor. New York is more hampered in this respect than most cities, but school gardens planned for the boroughs of the Bronx, Richmond and Queens mark the spread of the idea. More and more will the boy of New York and other large cities have the opportunity to “garden” and “farm” his small place even though it is
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only a few feet square. There are many waste places and empty
fields close to the densely populated districts of the cities which could
be utilized temporarily for such school gardens and the movement
is gaining headway to induce the cities to preëmpt these for the
children.

A number of cities have entered more or less tentatively into the
work of establishing summer camps for the children within their
boundaries. The Fresh Air Fund, which has done such noble work
in the past, is not sufficient for the future. It would prove less costly
in the end for the cities to acquire wild land within a reasonable dis-
tance and establish summer camps for the children where they could
spend weeks and months living in tents and out of doors. These
summer camps under the control of proper men and women would
prove valuable beyond any present estimation. The land could be
obtained at a nominal cost and the city could send its charges there
every summer, especially the sick and weak. Camping, farming and
playing in the fresh air would within a few short months transform
many an undersized and backward child.

These summer camps should multiply in the future as rapidly
as parks and recreation centers have in the past. With them will
come gardens and workshops. It is estimated by philanthropists
who have studied the question that such farms and workshops could
within a few years be made almost self-supporting. The handling
of tools is a necessary part of every boy’s education and instead of
compulsory work in the shops it should be made selective.

The duty of our cities has not been thoroughly appreciated in the
past, but the boys of the future will have a better time of it than those
of the past or even of the present. In return for the immense sums
expended in their interest the cities will get better and stronger chil-
dren. The average type of citizenship will be raised. The moral
influence will be almost as great as the physical, and this will affect
our percentage of crime. There will be less need to increase our
cost of police protection at the present rapid rate and our asylums
and hospitals will not be filled so steadily with the wrecks of humanity.
The normal child is a strong, healthy animal, physically as well as
morally, and anything which robs him of this birthright must be
abolished or its influence counteracted. We cannot abolish the city,
but we can modify its environments so that it will less systematically
and persistently destroy the little ones.