

Obituary

**Carl Fenichel
1906–1975**

The death of Carl Fenichel on September 25 in his home in Brooklyn deprived the children of New York, as well as their families, of one of their most devoted and effective servants. Since 1953 the League School for Seriously Disturbed Children has provided education and training for many hundreds of children and has supported and counseled the families to which they return at the end of the day.

The year 1953 was a difficult time to start a day school for disturbed children. Psychogenic explanations of childhood mental illness were taken for granted among most American child psychiatrists, and many of them asked, in effect, "Why work with children during the day and send them back to the families that are disturbing them?" Yet the League School grew and the children learned; some were even able to move to public school. The program's success was a strong argument for the view that mentally ill children need not be separated from their families in order to progress. Carl Fenichel was one of the first to believe that parents can themselves learn to work with their ill children, and to act on that belief.

The school opened with a staff of two, a four-room brownstone house, and two very miserable little boys. It now occupies a large and modern building and serves more than 100 children. There is a continual stream of visitors from many countries, and teachers trained in the League School have spread widely the school's governing conviction that every child can be helped, and that it is worth while to do so. Even the child who does not find his way to school or work must be prepared with skills and interests that will enable him to lead in an institutional setting the best life of which he is capable.

Carl Fenichel's conviction was that good education *is* therapy. The school's method is to treat every child as an individual, to evaluate him thoroughly, and to concentrate upon him the resources of a skilled and dedicated teaching staff solidly backed by social workers, psychologists, and psychiatrists. The best way to see how this is done was to walk around the school with Carl. The children came to him, he knew each one and what

to say, whether or not to touch him, how loudly to speak. The impression one gained was of light, order, activity, and discipline.

Discipline for the disturbed child is more than a system of rewards and punishments, of rules and regulations. It is neither punitive nor hostile. Nor is it an instrument of power used by the teacher to dominate a child and make him docile, submissive, or subservient. Controls and limits are used not to *block* but to *free* a child for more effective learning and functioning. Discipline means channeling a child's energies and drives toward constructive goals. It means reducing the child's confusion by setting up clear and reasonable limits that help a child understand exactly what is expected of him (Fenichel, 1974).

Carl's mind was lucid and strong, combining perceptive human sympathy with great powers of organization and persuasion. He wrote as he spoke, clearly and with confidence in himself and his achievement, but without a trace of pretense. He did not think he knew the answers, though he believed that it was from work such as that done at the League School that answers emerge. His writings always contained a few polemical barbs (and there were more in manuscript that editors tactfully deleted) directed at those whose doctrinal certainties had led them to oppose his methods.

This journal has lost a member of its editorial board. For those who knew him, a friendship has ended that none will forget. For the children, their families, and teachers who were his pupils, it is the end of an epoch.

*David Park
for the Editors and Board*

REFERENCE

- Fenichel, C. In J. M. Kauffman and C. D. Lewis (Eds.), *Teaching children with behavior disorders: Personal perspectives*. Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Books, 1974.