

Country Holidays for Mentally Deficient Children.

SOME RECENT DEVELOPMENTS.

NOT many years ago any proposal which involved the taking of a group of mentally defective children straight from their homes* for a holiday in the country would have been received with scepticism by reason of its practical difficulties, with incredulity as to "the use of it." Such an experiment had never been tried; it might so easily end in disaster; the children would fret for their mothers and perhaps be seriously upset; they would not, in any case, appreciate the experience and would gain no benefit from it comparable to that which would be gained by normal children. In short the whole thing would not only be too risky, but the risk would serve no useful purpose.

In some such terms as these would the rejection of the proposal have been urged, and similar arguments would still hold the field had not a few ardent voluntary workers and an enterprising Local Education Authority undeterred by considerations of "risk" and by the possibility of failure, created the precedent that was needed and so razed one at least of the barriers that formerly blocked the way.

We incorporate in this article four accounts of holiday camps and "School journeys" that have been organised for defective children this year. Two of them—one carried on directly by an Education Authority, the other by a voluntary agency with an Education Authority's approval and co-operation—concern Special School children only and represent the continuation of similar ventures on previous occasions. Two of them are reports of experiments hitherto untried—the provision of Camps for low-grade ineducable children and young adults, and these are of an interest not only in themselves but as shewing how far-reaching the activities growing out of Occupation Centres may be and as vindicating the value of Occupation Centre training, for without this as a preliminary any experiment of the kind would inevitably fail.

The story of these "joyous adventures" in Mental Welfare we give in the words of those most concerned with them.

Birmingham Special School Children's Summer School.†

For the fifth year in succession, Birmingham Education Committee is carrying on a Summer School on the Welsh Coast.

This year the house is at Towyn; it is a simply furnished house with 9 bedrooms and 2 good sitting-rooms right on the sea-shore. There are each year 8 groups of 24 children each including 4 groups of mentally defective, 2 groups of physically defective, 1 of deaf and 1 of partially blind. Boys and girls go alternately and all schools ballot for the chance of going and dates of departure.

Each group stays for a fortnight and is accompanied by 2 teachers (or in the case of cripples 1 nurse and 1 teacher). A lady House Mother is in charge during the whole period assisted by a cook. The house is let to other people during the August holiday.

* We are of course aware that there have for a long time been camps and holiday homes in connection with Homes and Institutions for defectives but with these this article is not dealing.

† Contributed by Miss Bridie, Supt. of Special Schools, Birmingham Education Committee.

The G.W. Railway allows special concessions in fares, and by travelling on Wednesdays when traffic is at its lowest we can always get a through reserved coach.

Each child brings one change of raiment and is asked to contribute 12s.

A modified Time Table is followed and definite school work is done although as far as possible in the open air and correlated with surroundings and with the educational excursions that each group makes. Proper registers are kept and the attendances are recognised by the Board of Education for purposes of grant.

The Committee has gradually acquired by purchase or by gift a considerable amount of equipment including all household linen, army blankets for sleeping out, gramophone and records, teachers' and children's libraries, rackets, bats bathing costumes and all kinds of games for wet and fine days.

The total cost of the Summer School to the rates works out at one-thirty-sixth part of 1d. in the £.

I am convinced that there is no part of our work for defective children which has had such a startling and yet lasting influence on their whole lives. It is more than a holiday; it is a new life and the re-adjustment to environment under such conditions is in itself a real education.

I shall be glad to give information on any point to anyone who wishes to carry out a Summer School.

Summer Camps for London Special School Children.*

Through the Ben Rathbone Holiday Fund, the Lilian Greg Committee were able to organise four camps for London Special School children this year, thereby enabling over 100 children to have a fortnight at the sea-side.

(a) 30 Senior boys from the Cloudesley Special School went with their masters to Littlestone, a large camp accommodating several parties at once. Here the boys mixed and competed with boys from normal schools in sports and concerts and had a very interesting and happy time.

(b) 28 senior girls from Colebrook Row Special School went to St. Leonards with one teacher and two voluntary helpers. They were at a Holiday Camp House with a large garden where most mornings were happily spent and in the afternoons they went to the shore for bathing and paddling.

(c) 20 girls from Riley Street Special School, Bermondsey, went to St. Leonards Holiday House with their own teachers. The funds were mainly provided for this by the teachers who had planned and saved for the holiday for over a year.

(d) 28 little boys between 9 and 13 years were taken to Dawlish in Devonshire where a large Army Hut was available. This was in the nature of an experiment and proved most successful. They took their own cook and it was found possible to feed the boys like fighting cocks at a cost of about 6s. 6d. per head per week. They bathed, paddled and dug in the sand to their hearts' content and in addition were much feted by people living in the neighbourhood who arranged motor trips and tea parties for them. They had the time of their lives and it was well worth going so far afield as the boys made many new and good friends. The physical improvement was marked, many gaining 2 lbs. in weight and one boy as much as 4 lbs. 8 oz. in the fortnight.

There is no doubt that the most satisfactory plan is to run one's own camp where the conditions can be sufficiently good for delicate children. The camp life and work does so much in training the children for team work and in the value of order and discipline. The catering can be adapted to the children's needs and likes, and meals can be made to fit in with expeditions.

The cost for the camps works out at about the same figure; the longer journey to Devon being counterbalanced by smaller cost of food, etc. The cost was £1 per head per week to cover all expenses, including staffing. The L.C.C. made grants of £20 for school journeys (a) and (b) and £10 for (c) and for the non-school journey (d) gave a loan of blankets, mackintosh capes and first aid box.

The parents in all except 6 cases, paid 10s. contribution, a better average than we have ever had before.

There is no doubt the fortnight's holiday is well worth while; the conduct of all the children was excellent, and given trained workers life need not be too strenuous for children or supervisors. Besides the physical improvement due to the good food and fresh air the children became more alert and responsive, and these effects do not wear off altogether when they return to town and school.

* Contributed by Miss Elfrida Rathbone.

West Lancashire Association's Camp for Occupation Centre Children.*

The West Lancashire Association for Mental Welfare has just held its first Camp Holiday for those attending the Occupation Centres in its area.

Through the kindness of Mr. A. Lee, of Birkenhead, we were able to get quarters for our children at the Rest Home, Dyserth—a village in Flint on the hills behind Prestatyn, and some two miles from the coast; the Rest Home is a group of wooden buildings, converted Army Huts, to which a large and airy Dining Room has lately been added.

We had intended taking only a little group of younger children, but finally—such was the enthusiasm for the holiday—we found ourselves a party of 46, of which 22 were children under 16, one of these being Martha a little normal girl who came to look after her small brother—20 were defectives between the ages of 16 and 24, 3 were mothers each coming with their child, one aunt of a defective, and one normal sister of a defective. We were given to understand, by those who know, that such a mixture of sexes, ages, grades of defect, and relatives, was likely to be a somewhat formidable task for the six helpers in charge, but from the very first day we found ourselves the happiest party imaginable, and our very variety seemed to make for success.

The sleeping was very carefully arranged, and there was either a mother or a supervisor in each hut—the big boys sleeping in a corridor, divided off into rooms, two bunks in each, that was unconnected with the other bedrooms, and under the supervision of the Secretary and Head Supervisor.

The food provided for us was excellent and unstinted, and meal times were much looked forward to; we found the small meal in the Centres was the greatest help in getting good behaviour at these times, and we felt quite proud of our manners.

During the day we were never short of things to do; there were many lovely walks—the big boys went for long walks and did some climbing, the bigger girls, with one exception, were not fit for this, but went shorter walks together, while the little ones, and those who were lame or very awkward, sat on the verandah, or played in the 6½ acres enclosed round the Camp. We took with us our football, cricket ball, and stumps, and a little cricket set, as well as some cane and raffia for handwork. All of us, however, managed to get to the top of a high hill where we sat and played, and sang songs. Everybody too got down to the shore twice, where nearly every one paddled, and five of us bathed; one day we spent the whole day on the shore, eating our mid-day meal down there.

The weather was so beautiful during the holiday that we were able to be out the whole time except one evening, and the first part of one morning—these times were spent in basket making for the older boys, chalking for the little ones, and drilling and games in the big Dining Room for everyone.

All this reads like an "organised holiday"; it was that but much more. It was an experience of happiness, of freedom, and of good-fellowship, and it seemed to us of the beginning of real development for many. There was at first a kind of shyness of the country and of the unusual space, for several of these children had not been further than the city they live in, but in a day or two they were quite at home. There was so much to learn. On the hill a voice was heard saying "these mountains take years off your life"—in the sea "it's cold miss, don't they warm it"—on the shore "I want to leave the room, what shall I do teacher?" out for a walk "You can pick wild flowers for nothing."

Some of the children, and two of the bigger boys were quite uncontrolled in their habits, and we had difficulties both day and night; in these troubles we found our mothers of the stuff of which heroines are made!

We found out so many things about our children too; incidentally the most troublesome boy at the Centre was the best of all at the Camp—he liked to get away a little by himself sometimes, and was full of interest and happiness in everything—in the country he would almost pass for normal, for he is a country child. There was a town boy too—he was a little homesick all the time for his street corner and its gossip.

Our Supervisors find that the holiday has made a very real difference in the atmosphere of their classes; all know each other so much better and have so many experiences in common—no small thing surely among those who are so often solitary and anti-social.

The total cost of the camp (for 52 people) was £63 7s. 7d. for the week, of which £47 5s. represents the cost of maintenance and £12 19s. travelling. A grant of £5 was received from Pearson's Fresh Air Fund and at the time of writing private subscriptions amount to £51 5s. 9d.

*Contributed by Miss Florence Andrew, Org. Secretary, West Lancashire Association for Mental Welfare.

Agnes Western Occupation Centre Camp.*

This camp, for the children attending the Agnes Western Occupation Centre in Finsbury, was held at Oxted, Surrey, during the first week in June. The premises consisted of 5 army huts, situated in a large field, four of the huts being used for sleeping accommodation and one as a kitchen. There was a sixth hut with water laid on set apart for use as a wash house, and a big barn with a concrete floor was available for games on wet days. The Camp belonged to the Y.W.C.A. who had an officer in charge responsible for the catering and cooking.

The party consisted of 4 girls and 13 boys with 3 helpers all day and a fourth (a man) at night. The children's ages varied from 8 to 19, and the majority of them were of imbecile grade.

The journey was made by char-a-banc from the Centre to London Bridge Station, then by rail to Oxted, and there we were met by a motor lorry which took all but four of the biggest boys up to the Camp, 2½ miles away. Each child had its own kit done up in brown paper and well labelled, and from the beginning each helper was responsible for certain children, both in the daytime and at night.

The weather was very bad, only one day being really fine, and the activities of an open air life were as a result considerably curtailed. The first night was badly disturbed by a very heavy thunderstorm and torrent of rain which beat down on the tin roofs of the hut but, by means of repeated suggestion that "the thunder was jolly and that the flowers loved the rain," the children were not only quite calm but the next night during a less severe storm they were heard repeating this to each other and they accepted the storm as part of the holiday. The children slept remarkably well and there were no signs of crying or homesickness. They had straw mattresses on the floor and pillows stuffed with straw. The food was good, with unlimited milk and butter from the farm and though we had been told by the parents of numerous things the children could not eat, we had not the very slightest trouble and no sort of food was refused.

We managed to get them out for quite long walks when the rain was not too heavy, and on Sunday to take a party to church both morning and evening. The Vicar was much struck by the children's good behaviour and not only came to see them the next day but invited them into his beautiful garden when he regaled them with sweets. Indeed we were everywhere met by similar kindness. When the children were going home the proprietor of the village inn gave each one a packet of biscuits, and even the boy who brought the milk showed his sympathy by vehemently refusing a "tip" on the ground that "they want it more than I do."

At first the children hovered round us and would not leave the vicinity of the huts, but gradually this dependence and timidity disappeared and in a day or two they could be left to their own resources whilst we had our meals undisturbed. By the end of the week this growth of resourcefulness was a marked feature of their behaviour and they would spontaneously divide themselves into groups and organise their own games. Some would play football, others would wander away to pick buttercups, and others again would delightedly amuse themselves with a little wooden cart and some spades, one being the horse, one the driver and the rest workmen mending the road.

The value of the Occupation Centre training showed itself particularly in the spirit of helpfulness that prevailed and the children swept out the huts, set and cleared away the meals and washed up in a really businesslike way.

Owing to the generosity of the Y.W.C.A. in letting us have the Camp at a greatly reduced charge, the cost per child amounted to an average of only 19s. 10d., for the week, making the total expenditure inclusive of travelling and staffing, £16 17s. 9d. The parents, though all very poor, contributed over £6 towards this and the remainder was covered by donations, including one of £4 5s. 0d. from the Children's Fresh Air Mission.

Despite the bad weather conditions everyone concerned felt that the experiment was an unqualified success. The parents were amazed at the healthy appearance of the children when they returned, and the one cause we had for regret was that the time was so short. Next year we feel strongly that an effort must be made to extend it to a fortnight.

We place these reports before our readers in the hope that they may inspire further experiments of the kind, both official and voluntary so that the time may come when no Special School or Occupation Centre Committee will be satisfied unless all the children under their care have at least an opportunity of a communal country holiday with all that it implies of health and comradeship. The fallacy of the contention that such experiments are energy mis-spent because the M.D. child does not sufficiently respond to them, has now we think been demonstrably proved. And in his capacity for such response lies the measure of his need.

*Contributed by Mrs. Anderson, Case Secretary, C.A.M.W.