ABSTRACT: During this bicentennial year it is worthwhile to review the history of children who have suffered from mental illness during the course of America's movement from a small colony to a major "superpower." The lesson to be found in the history of these children suggests that perhaps our major priorities were not the mental health of children. Hopefully America's next bicentennial celebration will reveal a more enlightened attitude and concern for emotionally disturbed children.

Most historians would agree that the specific conceptualization of a branch of medicine concerned with the mentally ill child (child psychiatry) is of recent 20th-century origin. But it is of some interest to explore the life of the child in America between the founding of the first English colonies to the present time. While it is possible to trace European efforts regarding a growing concern with child mental health from the 18th century, a more detailed look at the child in American society provides a better perspective in understanding those forces which in the 1900s resulted in Healy's founding of the Juvenile Psychopathic Institute in 1909 and its relationship with Chicago Juvenile Court.

Children and Youth in Colonial America: 1600-1735

Children were regarded as important "tools" of colonization where they might find useful work and benefit their immortal souls. Disease was rampant and death a common experience for children. Perhaps
as many as two-thirds of all children died before they reached 4 years of age. While there were, for many, close family ties with multiple generations in the villages, towns, and cities, there was also a disjointed, unrelated lower-class population, including many children who were drifters with no family ties.

The early middle-Atlantic colonies were settled mainly by individuals instead of families. It was not uncommon for orphans and abandoned children to be shipped as indentured slaves to the New World. The Puritans came to America in families. No complete records were kept, but it is estimated that 80,000 or 2% of all Englishmen left Britain between 1620 and 1642, with children making up an important and significant number of the movement.

The child's position in the colonial family, whether Puritan, Anglican, or other persuasion, was united under one dominant philosophy: the absolute rule of the father in the family. The family served as the educator of the child, with church and school in a secondary role. But the demands of a New World society forced the readjustment of traditional family concepts. Children grew restive under old-world instructions which were not in tune with the realities of life in America. It is interesting to note that large numbers of young people were brought to trial as witches, the most famous being the Salem witch trials of 1692. One might speculate that witchcraft may have been an acceptable way of protesting adult domination in the lives of children.

The plight of the dependent child during the 17th century was unique in that almost no institutions were created for their care. Most typically they would be placed in families if they were of sound mind and body. If not, they might receive relief at home or with physically healthy children be indentured (binding out). The custom grew out of English practice and law whose purpose was to reduce vagrancy and provide a form of social control over dependent children.

Schooling varied greatly with culture and social class. The home was considered the center of education where the child learned his alphabet and some reading and writing. The poor relied on apprenticeship as the only training open to them outside the home. Some of the very wealthy sent their sons abroad for an education. In all schools, one adult (master) taught all subjects and ages. Memorization and recitation were the only techniques used. As towns grew, schoolmasters began teaching surveying, navigation, accounting, and foreign languages. While such methods might seem primitive, it is likely that more Americans could read and write than any other element of size and social structure in Europe.