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THE EFFECT OF CHILDHOOD TRAUMA ON MENTAL HEALTH A STUDY OF
“FLOWERS FOR ALGERNON”

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ABSTRACT

Flowers for Algernon is a novel written by an American writer Daniel Keyes. The novel emphasizes on the importance of extending our care and affection towards children with mentally disability. The protagonist ‘Charlie Gordon’ is a thirty year old mentally retarded man. He always wants to learn new things and become a genius, so that he can make more friends. As a child, Charlie was disregarded by his mother as she wanted a normal child. She often spanked him for not being like everyone else. Her behaviour traumatizes him and also creates an emotional void in his heart. When Charlie becomes an intelligent person due to a science experiment, he could sense lack of happiness and emotional fulfilment in his life. The present paper endeavours to analyse the perils of childhood trauma and abuse on one’s mental health that leads to emotional void throughout life.

Key words: Children, Science experiment, Happiness, Emotional Fulfilment, and Retarded.

Introduction

Flowers for Algernon is a compilation of progress reports of ‘Charlie Gordon’, who has become the subject for a science experiment conducted by Dr. Strauss and professor Nemur. Charlie is a student at the Beekman College Center for Retarded Adults, his teacher Alice Kinnian recommends his name for the experiment. He is always eager to learn lots of new things and wants to become a genius so that he can make more friends. This eagerness to learn made him respond positively to the experiment. At first, Charlie learnt how to spell and pronounce words correctly. He started to read great literary works with help of Ms. Alice and could memorise the important lines within no time. On the other hand he was unable to recollect his childhood memories or even the basic details of it. His mother never loved him, she used to spank him for his every little mistake. She always wanted a normal child and refused to accept him when her husband persuaded that he is normal. Once Charlie asked his cousin to help him write a letter to a girl he liked at school. The letter was full of abusive words and Charlie was abused by the girl’s brother. The hatred at home and bullying at school traumatized him to an extent where his mind refused to store these memories at all. The novel makes us introspect our attitude and become more responsible towards such specially abled children.

Objective

Punishment is often used as a method to impart discipline in children. Whereas, for mentally disabled or retarded children, too much discipline can turn out as a traumatic experience. The objective of the paper is to focus on the issue of childhood trauma and its impact on a child's whole psyche, with special emphasis on children with mental disability. The paper also discusses the importance of providing emotional support to retarded children which makes them blossom with happiness.

Childhood Trauma

Flowers for Algernon speaks about the ill effects of verbal abuse and punishment on the psychology of children especially on mentally retarded ones. In the novel Charlie's mother hates him and always taunts him that he is not normal; he always gets beaten up by his mother when he poops in his pants or when he wishes to be friends with other girls in the school. Often parents or teachers vent their anger on children as they are too young to retort. This attitude of elders may lead to problems of self-esteem, low IQ, learning abilities or other major mental ailments in children. Most of the western countries have banned imposing punishment in schools to create a healthy environment for children. Apart from this factors like Parental disputes, low grades, performance pressure, racism, poor social background and physical deformity must be considered to provide them space to develop their own personality. On the levels of family, school and society we must be more empathetic towards children and try to fit into their world.

Emotional Void

Emotions play a key role in shaping one's individuality. The intelligence Charlie gains further pushes him to find the answers for the unrest within him. He finds it difficult to maintain his friendship with his co-workers in the bakery. He realises that his intelligence made him stubborn which offends his friends. While trying to become intimate with Alice, he imagines another Charlie looking at him. He finally tries to find solace in the company of Algernon, the lab mouse undergoing same experiment as that of Charlie's. Recollecting his childhood memories, he visits his mother only to find that she still hates him. Charlie feels relieved that its not his fault but his mother's inability to love others.

If a child's emotional needs are not addressed he grows up to be socially awkward person or an attention seeker. It is often overlooked that a child needs constant attention and love to become a emotionally sound person. Spending enough time with children and listening to what they experience in day to day life helps us fill the emotional void in their hearts.

Conclusion

Mental health is one of the major concerns of the 21st century across the globe. There is substantial scientific evidence that mental ailments such as Post traumatic stress disorder and Depression are directly related to childhood abuse and trauma. Childhood is the basis of the overall development of an individual, thus it turn out to be the most vulnerable stage in a person's life. Proper care should be taken to nurture children into happy and well balanced individuals. The novel *Flowers for Algernon* clearly depicts how a mentally retarded child is damaged beyond repair due to the abuse he faced in his early life. Modern society must reform itself at various levels where children especially mentally disabled ones are not at the receiving end of any form of abuse or violence. The society on the whole should be patient enough to understand their limitations and accept the specially abled children as one among us.

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