



The car struck Mary's bicycle, but, despite her injuries, she pedaled home without a murmur.

That's when a child is most active and careless. Even more frightening is the fact that this is the period when other children pose an overwhelming problem.

A doctor told me of a little boy of 5, brought to him in pitiful condition. Bones were broken in his left foot. Both arms were covered with blisters. There were cuts and bruises on his body.

His little friends had discovered he didn't cry when he cut himself or got hit by a stone. Fascinated, they stuck the boy with pins, pinched him till he was black and blue, burned his arms with matches. Finally, an older girl dropped a heavy stone on his foot. And because he was "different," he's going to be a cripple for life.

Since learning of her unique condition, Mary has become a "new person" to me. I used to think she was being stubborn when she didn't cry if we spanked her. And I often wondered how she and Alice could be so different. Mary always took Alice's howls of pain with what I thought was a "hard" indifference. "It doesn't hurt, what are you screaming about?" she'd say when they got injections.

Her condition also explains why she is so much more "daring" than her older sister. Mary will attempt anything—and usually excels in whatever she tries, particularly in sports. The rest of us are definitely on the cautious side. Now I realize that she has never felt our need of caution—because she's not afraid of being hurt the way we are.

MARY, OF COURSE, doesn't feel she's "different" from other children. Never having felt pain, it's as difficult for her to imagine what it's like as for someone born color-blind to imagine what "red" and "yellow" are. To Mary, things she touches, or that touch her, are hard or soft, smooth or rough, and so on. If she touches the point of a pin in the dark, she knows it's a point because it feels so small.

This was not at all clear to me until the doctor explained that the sense of "pain" is entirely different from that of "touch," that we have more than five senses—and that the

sense of "pain" is an extra one.

The cause of insensitivity to pain isn't yet known. But since the sense of pain is lacking all over her body, not just in a localized area, doctors believe the network of nerve fibers and endings is all right—that the trouble lies in some part of the brain itself.

I had never heard of "painsymbolia" before I met Dr. Reuben. But since then, strangely enough, cases keep cropping up. A doctor tells of a man who's been coming to him for years with this condition. An old friend suddenly remembers a relative who was "like that."

And, Dr. Reuben explained, many cases may pass unnoticed simply because the children die—often because of this very condition—before anyone is aware of it. That's why if a child of yours doesn't cry easily under conditions that would seem to be painful, don't decide he's just plain "stubborn" or "brave." It's not pleasant to find this condition in a loved one, but once the condition is recognized the risk can be considerably reduced.

Frequent and regular checkups are imperative, and they must be thorough. Teeth, ears, throat, lungs, heart—everything must be periodically checked to make sure a normally "painful" condition doesn't exist.

X rays will show whether any bones are splintered, or reveal hidden growths. And of course the family should take careful note of any unusual swellings, and see that a doctor examines them at once.

Today if Mary even hints that she isn't feeling just right, she goes to the doctor immediately for a blood count and checkup. He has warned us that to take chances is to gamble with her life.

Painlessness has its blessings as well as its dangers. Mary might easily live to be 90 and be very happy, as well as free from pain. While if she were "normal," she'd suffer pains which all the rest of us suffer in the normal course of living. So in spite of my concern for her, I sometimes wonder whether Mary didn't get the better part of the bargain.

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