

Children *Killing* Children

■ Akemi Yoshida

A kidnap-murder case occurred in Nagasaki Prefecture of Kyushu, in which a 14-year-old boy kidnapped and killed a 4-year-old boy. The ages of criminals committing brutal crimes have become lower and lower. Laws cannot catch up with this situation. How does the Juvenile Law answer such brutal crimes committed by children? How should we treat the children who commit these crimes? Adults are now being confronted with serious questions. In this article, I would like to think about these issues by citing examples of actual crimes committed by children in America and Europe.

I interviewed some experts on psychology about punishing young perpetrators. Among the experts, it is said that children under seven

years old do not have enough sense to discern between good and bad. Mr. John Cloud writes in *Time* magazine, "When I was seven years old or so, I stole some candies from a general store. As soon as my mother found out, she took me to the store and made me apologize to the manager. I remember that my father hit me with a belt after giving me a lecture. I'm not sure whether I could make a clear distinction between good and bad at that time. But I clearly knew that my father would hit me if I stole."

The six cases listed below reveal that even young children can commit brutal crimes. There is another case that occurred in Chicago in which a 10-year-old child threw an 11-year-old child out of a window to death. In the same year, in addition, two children one of whom was 9 years old lynched another child to death. Thinking of these cases, we commonly wonder why such little children could do such vicious

things. Don't they really have a sense of right or wrong? Are they too young to understand the seriousness of crimes?

Can Children Understand What "Guilt" Is?

Many psychologists hold a common view

that humans naturally learn the basic concepts of good and evil before they enter adolescence, but children under 10 years old are not mature enough to fully understand these concepts. Here is an interesting story reported by Professor Pruett of the Yale Child Study Center.

Children are asked the following question: One child broke a cup by throwing it at his/her sister while another child broke eight cups while helping out in the kitchen. Which child do you think is worse? Most children of around seven years old answer that "the child who broke eight cups" is worse than "the child who broke a cup by throwing it at sister." This is because the former broke more cups than the latter. However, children of around 11 years old can judge that throwing a cup at somebody is very bad behavior. They say that seven-year-old children cannot understand this. According to the reports, the children in Case A were watching TV cartoons after committing the murder and the boy in Case C was drawing a picture next to a screaming district attorney. Thinking of these children, they indeed appear to have no sense of guilt. And yet, I can hardly agree that those children had no sense of distinguishing between right from wrong.

Even the children in the case examples never assumed murder as

Place of Crime

Age of Perpetrator

A: London	Two boys 10 years old
B: Norway	Two boys 6 years old
C: California	6 years old
D: Cameron, United States	9 years old
E: New York	A boy 7 years old
F: United States	A boy 11 years old

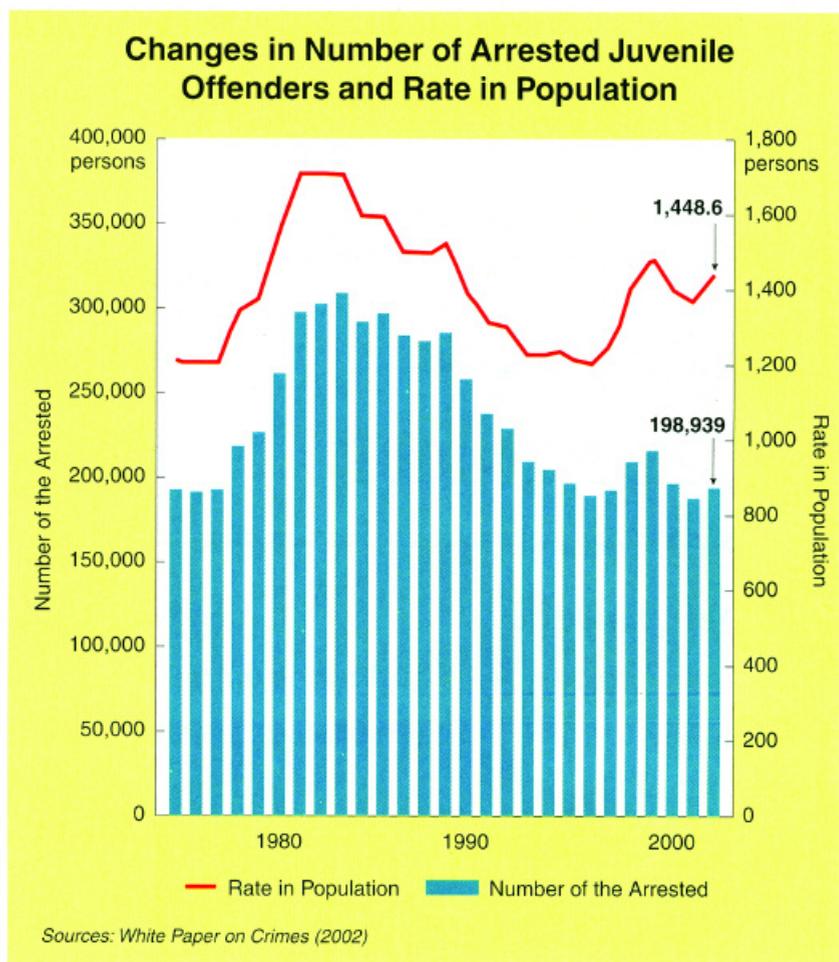
commendable behavior. Otherwise, Cameron in Case D did not hide the used cartridge. For Case B, doctors determined that the boys could have discerned between good and bad at that time.

Then, do they really understand what "somebody dies" means? Professor Bell of Illinois University says, "Even children know that everybody dies someday, but they don't understand what death means." The professor says that he knows many seven-year-old children who think dead people are living in some other place that they don't know of. According to the professor, children's violent crimes depend on whether the children have power to control themselves rather than whether they know right from wrong. Dr. Becker of the New York Psychiatric Hospital says, "It is not unusual for children to have a fantasy in which they become brave warriors. But a problem is that they are not capable of controlling their own fantasies." Then, how can we teach them how to control themselves? How should we punish them?

Teaching What They Should Do

In Case B, counseling was given to the two boys. It is said that one of the boys adjusted to normal daily life after four years of counseling. However, the other boy still has difficulty in adjusting; he has been diagnosed as being in need of further counseling.

Dr. Andersen, the chief psychologist of the Child Prosecution Agency in the local town, explains as follows: "When such a critical situation as this case occurs in Norway, we make efforts to keep children in an ordinary environment to promote their mental recovery." He also expresses concern about keeping children in a detention center for a long time, pointing out that it can cause them to have major trauma. Professor Kasdin of the Department of Psychology of Yale University also



advocates that punishing children is no answer to juvenile crimes.

He says, "Punishment does not teach children what they should do; it only teaches them what they should not do. If children are too young, they might not even understand that they are being punished." Many people say that children who commit crimes do not need punishment. They need love and learning, psychological assessment, and helping hands. However, whether this is enough to prevent juvenile crimes is still open to question. At the same time, it is true that, as Dr. Andersen says, we can't finish up with merely punishing children who commit crimes. Punishment can further damage their mind. Especially for children who receive a prison sentence like the boys in Case A, we will have to provide sufficient psycholog-

ical care. Otherwise, they will have a hard time adjusting to regular life or escaping the accusing eyes of the public after they are released from prison. It is as if they have to serve another sentence as soon as they finish serving out their prison sentence.

The more deeply criminals understand the gravity of the crimes they have committed, the heavier the cross they will have to bear for the rest of their life. In a sense, this can be a penalty heavier than a death sentence. I believe that we can build up some preventive measures by analyzing the background of the cases. We must not spare any efforts to do this. ●

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