

My Crusade to be a Better Parent

Like most young people who have had no practical experience in child-raising, I have a few pet theories on the subject. Three chief factors contribute to the basis of my opinions. One is my own shortcomings; another is a fairly objective viewpoint of my mother's tactics. A third factor is my observation of the homes and parents of my friends with as careful an analysis as it is possible for me to make of how the parents have reflected their own attributes and faults in their children. On the strength of all my observations, I shall try to judge the strength of the "elastic clause" which I plan to incorporate in all my theories, because I believe there must be a great deal of room for amendment allowed in any child-raising program. I should be writing for years if I tried to explore every angle of child-raising. It seems to me that only a person who has observed hundreds of children for most of a life time could possibly write a worth-while treatise on the subject. There are, however, three or four points which particularly impress me.

I have always felt that parents should develop an appearance of outward calm and maintain it as carefully as possible when a child is upset or worried. Nothing frightens a child more than an outburst by his parents whom he looks upon as a source of protection when he has problems. If a child can be certain that his parents will listen quietly to his trouble, advise him gently but firmly when necessary, and give him credit when credit is due, he is less apt to become upset or unhappy when confronted with an adjustment to some strange situation. A young child is in and out of puzzling predicaments all the time, even in the course of a routine day. If a parent expects to be confronted continually with some sort of question, argument, or point of behavior, he can begin early to prepare himself to meet any situation quietly. It is easy to point out a child whose parents meet problems calmly, for he follows their example and shows more ability to work out his problems than does a child from a less tranquil home. His parents are giving him the right kind of mental equipment early in life, so that when he is on his own, he will be able to meet any circumstance with composure.

A careful listening attitude on the part of parents can be important in several ways. A child is apt to get things twisted, and by careful listening, parents often straighten him out without adding to the confusion by careless questioning. When a child is inclined to argue a point, some clever parents allow him to use up all his "ammunition" in the beginning, before they present their case, so that he has little to fall back on. Then they can present their decision without the possibility of having to change their minds because the child had later managed to present an important argument. Many parents are inclined to answer a request with an abrupt "yes" or "no", which makes the child resent what he feels is their unreasonableness. To accept authority willingly, a child needs to feel that his parents have cared enough to judge matters carefully and then have abided by their judgments. Parental "fence-sitting" on any matter is not appreciated by children.

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Breaking a child of an unwelcome habit or nipping a habit in the bud is always a ticklish task. I have noticed that the following method is quite effective. A simple "no" followed by an understandable but brief explanation for the reproof and the matter-of-fact assumption

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that the correct form of behavior is the ordinary, every-day thing to do. At the first sign of an unwelcome habit or of a breach of manners, will impress the child without imprinting the correction so unpleasantly that he will become balky. In the matter of reproof, may I say that I feel no kindness toward the parent who pounces upon a child with a "shame on you" when, nine times out of ten, the child is not aware that he has done anything to be "ashamed" of. If he does not understand why he was wrong and since he is never sure that everything he does will meet with his parents' approval, his fear of their reaction may cause him to try to cover up for what he fears may be considered "wrong" and which he must feel "ashamed" for. I find that quite a few parents use this approach with their young children, along with the "wait until Daddy comes home" threat. I should like to see these two phrases wiped from every parental vocabulary, because I think they can do great damage.

I want my children to obey reasonably well, and I think the best way to accomplish my objective is by making reasonable, direct requests. I don't believe in the "would Mother's little darling please---" type of request because I feel that this type is not the sort to make the child feel that prompt obedience is the best policy. I believe in the direct approach with a warm and sincere "thank you" when the work is completed to the best of the child's ability. Many parents make the mistake of expecting their children to maintain a consistent standard in everything they do. When a child is just learning something, it is not to be expected that every performance will be identical. Even after he has thoroughly learned some task, there are many factors outside of carelessness which can cause his performance to vary. These should be taken into consideration and correction made without discouraging him. Few parents realize how easy it is to discourage a child from putting forth his best effort.

By study and thought NOW, I hope to avoid some of the many pitfalls of parenthood. Many more young people, who feel much as I do about starting parent-training early, would like to have more discussion of parent-child problems with competent advisors in our high schools. I think that that is one of the most important projects that we can undertake, if we are to help build a safe, happy, mentally and physically sound America for future generations.