

YOU ARE YOUR CHILD'S BEST TEACHER

Rev. George Kelly

IT CANNOT be repeated too often that you are your child's most important teacher. As an adult, he will reflect your influence to a greater extent than you probably imagine—just as you reflect the personality of your own mother and father. Even if you refused to exercise your God-given responsibility to train him, you would leave your imprint upon his personality nevertheless. For instance, a father who deserts his family while his child is still an infant leaves an impression upon the youngster that will never be eradicated; he says, in effect, that parenthood is not worth the trouble and that a father's obligations are more than a man should carry. The storekeeper who calls it "good business" when he cheats his customers by selling inferior merchandise teaches his child that honesty is unimportant. The mother who tells smutty stories need not deliver a speech downgrading purity; her actions, more effectively than words, teach this principle to her child. And against such influences of the home, it is highly unlikely that the corrective teaching of church or school can prevail.

You have an awesome responsibility, therefore, but also a challenge—a challenge to which you will rise magnificently if you realize the benefits to humanity that can be achieved if you live by true Christian principles. As we have noted, your influence as parent will extend not only to your children but to your children's children and down to many other generations yet unborn. Your simple acts of devoted motherhood or fatherhood may assist untold numbers to heaven—or your bad example may be the force which may lead them to hell.

What your child needs. In order to become an adult who will honour God and serve his fellow man in the way God intended, your child needs the sense of security that can come only from your unquestioned love and kindness. When a baby is born, he enters a strange environment—one newer and more different to him than Mars might be to the first space traveler. Before birth, your child was sheltered, warmed and fed in an automatic process. Then his world abruptly changed: he became an individual thrust from his warm, protecting shelter and forced to encounter cold, hunger and suffering. Never again on earth will he enjoy the sense of peace and well-being that he experienced in the womb.

The newborn babe needs food and shelter, of course. But even more, he needs a substitute for the security he has lost. This need can be satisfied in a physical way at first—for instance, when he is held close to his mother's body. Later, as he develops a sense of physical freedom as an individual, it must be supplied psychologically through love.

In his book "Your Child's World," Dr. Robert Odenwald, the psychiatrist, states that your child's need for security will be the most important part of your relationship with him. His behaviour in later life will reflect whether you have provided or denied it, and how much maturity he acquires as an adult will depend directly upon how much security you give him in his early years. "You can best foster a feeling of security in your infant or young child by giving him uniform, sympathetic care," Dr. Odenwald states. "Paying loving attention to his needs, like holding him and rocking him, creates a steadfast continuity which makes him feel secure. One of the first things you will discover about your child is his urgent demand for consistency. Take him from the crib to which he has become accustomed, change some characteristic of his feedings, misplace his favourite toy, get someone new to care for him for a short period, and he may wail for hours. Is this an early evidence of perverseness on his part? No. It is evidence of his desire for security and his deep unhappiness when it is not provided for him."

As your child develops, you can make him secure by constantly letting him know that you are interested in him as a person, and that you want him and love him. Few parents would openly admit that they do not love their child; yet many reject their offspring by their actions. Some couples find that a young child interferes with their pursuit of pleasure: they cannot go to many dancing parties or stay out until early morning when an infant demands their attention around the clock. Others may subconsciously resent the fact that they no longer can spend as much as they would like on liquor, clothes or automobiles; they must tighten their purse strings to support their baby. Other couples are immature and see the infant as a threat to their hold upon the affections of the partner.

When these resentments exist, the parents may not express them openly; it is not the “polite” thing to do. But they may develop attitudes which express their true feelings. One such attitude is perfectionism. Those who would not dare reject their child in an obvious way—such as by leaving him upon a doorstep—can set up standards of behaviour with which any human being would find it impossible to comply. Typical perfectionist parents usually have only one or two children; they often are more concerned about what other people will think of them than about what is truly right, and they tend to be unable to give freely of themselves emotionally. They upbraid their child for disturbing the sterile neatness of the living room, for shouting or singing in the house, or for returning dirty after playing outdoors. These parents are really saying that what their child does naturally—and what any normal child would do—is not suitable behaviour. By setting up artificial standards, they do not allow him to develop in a normal way and thus they undermine his confidence in himself as a worth-while individual—the very basis of his security.

Other parents stifle their child through over-protectiveness. Such parents also are saying that their child cannot be trusted to handle by himself the normal situations of everyday living which others of his age tackle with their own resources. Visit a public park on a Sunday and you will see over-protectiveness at its most appalling. A young child wishes to run on the grass, but his mother holds him back because she fears he might fall and hurt himself. Eight-year-olds playing a game are constantly warned not to throw the ball too far, lest they run out of the parents’ sight and thus risk getting lost. These are extreme examples—the kind which often bring the child involved into a psychiatrist’s office years later, as an adult, when he lacks the initiative to perform even common tasks on his own. Fortunately, few parents are guilty of such extreme behaviour, yet lesser varieties of over-protectiveness—the kind summed up in the word “Mumism”—are more common than most persons suspect.

You are overprotective when you implore your young child to eat his dinner every night for fear that he will not get proper nourishment. If you withheld food between meals and let him hunger for a few days if necessary, he soon would eat what is offered at mealtime. You are overprotective if you constantly warn him of dangers such as falling which are a normal risk in children’s games. Likewise, you are overprotective if you repeatedly beseech your teen-ager to wear his rain-coat when it rains; after a few urgings on your part, it would be better for his full development as a self-reliant individual if he contracted a cold as a result of his failure to wear them and thus learned from his own experience. For by constantly reminding your child to do what is a reasonable responsibility of his age, you indicate that you lack confidence in him and thus undermine his security.

It is obvious that a necessary chore when done for a young child may be sheer over-protectiveness when done for an older one. When your two-year-old plays in front of your house, common prudence dictates that you remain close by, because he lacks the experience to know that he must not run into the street and possibly into the path of an oncoming car. But to sit by for the same reason while your nine-year-old plays is sheer over-protectiveness. Thus, to function effectively as a parent, try to understand what may reasonably be expected of your child at various stages of his development. Many excellent books have been written by child psychologists which indicate what the normal youngster can do for himself at different ages.

Understanding your child. A second need of your child is to be understood in terms of his own native talents and capabilities. God makes each one of us different; our nervous systems may run from extremes of restlessness to extremes of placidity. One child may be born with a physique that demands constant physical exertion. Another may prefer to spend hours in one spot, if not in one position. One child may have a native curiosity which may some day make him an outstanding scientist; another may be bookish; a third given to play-acting. As was noted earlier, you should first accept your child for what he is. Then you should try to understand his particular needs which result from the fact that he is who he is. This is of great importance if he is to have a wholesome environment in which he can develop his fullest potentials.

Modern experts make much of the necessity of understanding your youngster. They are correct in this attitude. If two-year-old Eddie constantly demands attention after the birth of a younger child, it is helpful to parents to realize that his conduct is probably caused by his fear that his parents are giving to the newcomer the love which he wants for himself. If

your eight-year-old constantly picks on younger boys and is acquiring a reputation as a bully, it helps you if you realize that he probably feels frustrated in some important area of his life and is venting his frustration upon those who cannot fight back. If your thirteen-year-old daughter defies your wishes and applies rouge and lipstick when out of your sight, it may aid you if you understand that she is expressing her wish for greater freedom, and perhaps feels that you regard her too much as a little girl.

All too often, however, parents who understand why a child does a certain thing also feel that they must accept the action. This is a complete mistake—the kind of error that soft-hearted social workers make, especially in dealing with juvenile delinquents. You should understand why your child acts as he does so that you may be able to satisfy those emotional needs which he is seeking to satisfy by his improper conduct. If his actions reflect his sense of insecurity, find ways to give him a feeling of being loved and wanted. If his actions indicate his struggle for independence, provide outlets that enable him to express his own individuality without harming others. If his conduct indicates a belief that he is treated less fairly than your other children, devise ways to prove that he shares equally in your love.

But because you can explain why Johnny acts that way does not mean that his objectionable conduct itself should be tolerated. There is probably a reason why every sinner in history has performed his shameful act. But that does not make the act justifiable. The man who kills in a fit of passion may have been goaded into it; yet society rightfully demands that he pay a penalty. The bank robber may have been frustrated as a child; but if his lawyer advanced such an excuse before a judge, he would probably be laughed out of court. Therefore, when you seek to understand your child, do so not to excuse him but to gain knowledge that will help you direct him along the course of proper action.

Directing your child. Your final and fullest test as a parent lies in helping your child reach the potential of which he is capable. You must show him the way to go, and to do so you must know the way yourself.

Your child's goal is a happy, holy adulthood in which he serves God and man. He will make much progress toward this goal simply by following his natural urges to grow physically and mentally, and by observing you in your everyday relationship. But he should also be directed formally toward his goal by your direct teaching. Three principles are involved:

1. You alone have this authority to teach. It is your right given by God as an attribute of your parenthood. Moreover, no one can take it from you, so long as you fulfill your obligation to exercise it. Christian society has always recognized that the authority of the father and mother is unquestioned. For instance, in most states of the Union, a child is legally subject to his parents until he is eighteen.

2. Respect for authority is earned, not imposed. Children will always respond to authority when it is just and when they respect the parent who exercises it. They will ignore or disobey authority when it is unjust or when the parent has forfeited their respect. A father cannot expect his child to obey his rules if, for example, he consistently passes red lights and commits other traffic violations and thus shows that he himself disregards the laws of society. Likewise, your child will respect you only when you show by your actions that you respect him.

3. Your authority must be used. One "modern" father decided not to teach his child anything about God so that the child could choose his own religion himself when he grew up. This man could just as well have argued that he would not try to inculcate any virtues; that the child could choose between honesty and dishonesty, between truth and falsehood, or between loving his country and hating it. Precisely because you are more experienced, you must decide on all matters affecting your child's welfare. You would not wait for him to decide when to see a doctor to treat his illness; you would call the doctor as soon as you decided that his services were necessary. You would not allow your seven-year-old to choose a school; you would make the decision without even consulting him.

As your child develops, he should exercise an increasing amount of authority over his own actions. When he is eight, you will decide which Mass he should attend on Sundays; when he is eighteen, the decision probably will be his. When he is seven, you will exercise a strong control over his reading matter; at seventeen, he himself will exercise a choice.

Allow your child to make decisions for himself on unimportant matters first. In questions involving the important

areas—his religious duties, choice of school, etc., give freedom slowly and carefully. For instance, your teen-ager might be free to decide whether to attend a sports event on a Sunday afternoon, but he has no freedom to decide whether to attend Mass on Sunday morning.

How to instill obedience. You can teach your child to obey if you proceed in the proper way. Most youngsters want to remain on good terms with their parents and will do what they are told to maintain that relationship. Their disobedience often is due either to their ignorance of what is expected of them or to their desire to test whether the parents mean what they say. Obviously, your child's misbehaviour through ignorance of what you expect of him is not a deliberate attempt to circumvent your will and cannot be considered disobedience; and if he is promptly punished for stepping beyond the limits of conduct you have set, his experimental disobedience will cease abruptly.

Many childish actions that may seem to be disobedient are actually not that at all. A mother asked if her ten-year-old daughter would like to set the table. The girl said that she would not. The mother shook her head, remarking that the child was truly disobedient. The mother was mistaken: her daughter merely gave an honest reply to a question. When you want your child to obey you, tell him plainly that he must perform a specific action. Only then can you justifiably expect him to do as you say. If you ask him if he would like to do something or if you merely discuss a possible action without making your position plain, he may reasonably conclude that he may follow a course other than the one you advocate.

Children should not be slaves, to be ordered about at a snap of the finger. They must often be allowed freedom of choice, and should be permitted to raise reasonable and respectful objections if they feel that your instructions are not altogether correct. In doing so, they merely exercise a prerogative of individuals with minds of their own. But when an important issue arises and they must obey without questioning or quibbling, let them know that you expect strict obedience.

As children grow older, they can be appealed to more and more by reason than by stern orders. A soft approach—suggesting or requesting, rather than commanding—is usually more effective. If you create a home atmosphere of mutual confidence and loving trust, the need to issue strict commands should diminish almost to the vanishing point by the time your youngsters enter their late teens.

Forming good habits. Your need to direct your child's actions should also diminish in proportion to his age. It will do so if you establish good habits of living which enable him to fulfill his obligations as a matter of course. By instilling good habits, you can impress upon your child that he has obligations to God and family; that authority demands his respect; that he must be reverent at his religious duties, co-operate in the home, and sacrifice his own interests where necessary for the welfare of others.

By developing good habits in many different areas of life, your child will strengthen his character. He will get many of these habits simply by watching you. From you he should learn to accept his responsibility toward Church, country and family. He should begin the habit of contributing to the support of your pastor at an early age, and be responsible for putting a small sum in the collection plate each Sunday. He should be taught to tip his hat in reverence when he meets a priest or sister. He should also bow his head when he hears the name of Jesus. Many similar habits can be developed.

In the home, he also can learn habits of responsibility at an early age. As soon as he is able, he should do some work around the house as his contribution toward family living. The boy or girl of seven may set the table for dinner or remove the dishes after it. A youngster of nine or ten can help vacuum the floors and keep his own room in order. The older girl can wash dishes and prepare meals occasionally. The older boy can maintain the lawn and wash the car. By performing all these tasks in a regular fashion and without being bribed to do so, your children learn the habit of contributing to the common welfare.

Habits can be inculcated so that they become part of the daily pattern of living. The youngster who is taught to say his morning and night prayers will soon say them automatically, his parents will not have to remind him every day. Similarly, the youngster who is required to do his homework every evening after dinner develops a regular pattern of performance. It

will become an automatic process. When he arrives at high school, he will be able to take responsibility for his studies entirely.

The art of self-denial. One of the most important things you can do for your child's development is to teach him to practice self-denial willingly. If he is to become successful as a human being, he must learn to deny himself immediate pleasures to achieve a future good. We must all deny ourselves to achieve eternal happiness in heaven. So too on a worldly level. The husband and wife who fail to deny themselves at least some material pleasures during their early years of marriage will reach old age penniless and dependent upon others. The student who cannot deny his impulse for pleasure when homework assignments must be done, pays the price ultimately by failing in his studies and finding that he cannot achieve a suitable station in life.

Learning to say no is therefore the most important single lesson that your child must learn. During his lifetime, he must say no to temptations that besiege him on all sides; he must say no to discouragements, defeatism and despair; if he is to reach any stature in the spiritual or even worldly order, he must say no to urges to take things easy, relax, or give up the fight. For this reason, parents who try to do everything for their child ultimately do nothing for him; by preventing him from developing self-discipline and the ability to say no, they prevent him from acquiring the most important attribute of a complete person.

How can you teach your child to practice self-denial? Mainly by setting up rules for his conduct and behaviour and adhering to them firmly. When you do this, you make him aware of penalties that he must pay unless he controls impulses of one kind or another. Must he be home for dinner every night at 6 P.M. or lose desserts for a week? He must then say no to playmates who urge him to play another game of ball that will last beyond the designated time. Must he maintain a certain scholastic average or spend extra hours at his books each day until the next marking period? He will then learn that it is easier to deny himself to achieve passing grades now than to make greater sacrifices later.

The concept of self-denial appeals to youngsters. It represents a challenge—an opportunity to prove their mettle as strong-willed boys and girls. When they learn how to win over their lower instincts, they prepare themselves in the best possible way for the greater challenges and battles they will face as adults.

Five principles of discipline. No laws can be effective unless penalties are imposed when they are violated. So too with rules governing your child's conduct: You will be unable to direct him properly unless he learns that undesirable conduct will cause more pain than it is worth.

The idea of disciplining a child is viewed with disfavour by some modern experts. In their progressive view, the child should be free to express himself, and "parents who hamper this self-expression hamper the development of his personality." Enough years have passed so that we can now examine the adult products of this progressive school of discipline, and we find that the general results are not good. Children who are permitted to do as they please without a control system to govern their actions tend to become insufferably selfish, thoughtless of the rights and needs of others, and incapable of exercising the self-discipline which adults need to live harmoniously together.

Fortunately, the let-them-do-as-they-please school of child training is rapidly becoming passé. Most authorities now recognize that a child not only needs but also wants checks over his actions. Even in adolescence, the so-called "age of rebellion against parents," youngsters have affirmed many times that they prefer to be guided by rules of conduct and expect to be punished for infractions. In fact, teen-agers often complain that their parents are not sufficiently precise in announcing what will and will not be allowed.

Since children vary so greatly in temperament, along with their parents, it is probably unwise to set down hard and fast rules of discipline. However, five general principles can be adapted to fit most circumstances.

1. Keep in mind what purpose your discipline is intended to serve. You should discipline your child mainly to instill in him proper methods of behaviour and to develop his ability to control himself in the future.

This principle implies that you must subjugate your own personal feelings, likes and dislikes when exercising them

might not serve a useful purpose. To illustrate: A father has often slept late on Saturday mornings while his young children raced about the house making noise. Usually he merely rolled over in bed and put a pillow over his head to keep out the sounds. One morning, however, he awakened with a headache while his children pounded their drums. His first impulse was to reach out from bed and spank them. But a second thought convinced him that his children were behaving properly in the light of their past experience, since they had no way of knowing that this was different from other Saturdays. Therefore, the father spoke to them reasonably, telling them that their noise disturbed him. If, after his explanation, they had continued to pound their drums, he could legitimately punish them to stress not only the importance of obedience but also that they must sacrifice their own interests for the good of others.

The child who knows that his punishment is dictated by his parents' love for him will become a partner in the punishment—at least to some extent—because he realizes that it is for his own good. That is why wise parents sometimes permit their youngsters to choose their own punishment when they have violated rules. The youngster who recognizes the need for punishment and who willingly accepts it takes an important step toward the goal of all his training—the disciplining of himself, a process which will continue until death.

2. Let the punishment fit the crime. In applying this principle, try to put yourself in the child's place. A four-year-old girl was playing in a side yard with several boys of her age. A neighbour observed her exposing her sex organs to them and reported the fact to her mother. The mother raced to the yard, grabbed the girl by the arm, dragged her into the house and beat her with a strap, raising welts upon her back. This mother should have realized that her daughter lacked the experience to know that her action was not proper. Moreover, the punishment was entirely out of keeping with the offence. It was based on the mother's own sense of shame and not that of the child. It was an exercise of hate—not of love.

What offences call for physical punishment? In the view of most experts, very few. However, reasonable corporal punishment, sparingly used, can be more effective than some educators like to admit. If a child's actions might cause physical harm to himself or another, his punishment should be strict enough to impress upon him the dangers of his actions. For instance, a child of two does not understand why he should not play with matches or cross the street without an adult. If he reaches for matches or steps from the sidewalk, you might spank him because this is the only way he can learn a vital lesson. The very young child measures good and bad in terms of his own pleasure and pain, and since most of his experiences are still on a physical level, physical punishment has its place. But wherever possible, love and affection should hold the foremost position. When your child resists the temptation to touch matches or cross a street unaided, use praise to assure him that he is doing the right thing. Spank him if nothing else works.

Some psychologists make much of the possible harm done to a youngster by physical punishment. But the Bible's teaching that "He that spareth the rod hateth his son" (Proverbs, 13:24) indicates that physical punishment, as such, does not harm the child emotionally. When it is accompanied by indications of hatred, it is undeniably wrong. But the parent who applies the rod in a calm way and as evidence of his desire to help the youngster's development probably does not do lasting hurt. On the other hand, some of the most brutal punishments—the kind that leave wounds for years, if not for a lifetime—come from words. One little girl was never spanked by her father. But whenever she did things which he found objectionable, he shook his head and commented that she was certainly "a queer one." The girl is now a woman of fifty, and her father has been dead thirty years, but his attitude still rankles deeply. She believes that it reflected his unwillingness or inability to understand her.

It should not be necessary to punish girls physically after they reach the age of twelve. Many teachers believe, however, that teenage boys can be held in line by—and respect—authority exercised in a physical way. Girls usually respond more readily to deprivations of privileges—being denied permission to visit friends on week ends, to attend parties, etc.

3. Punish only once for each offence. One advantage of corporal punishment which is often overlooked is that it usually "clears the air." Once it has been applied, parents and child generally feel free to forget it and go on to other matters. When their punishment is less decisive, parents may tend to keep harping on the offence—and the child never

knows when it is going to be thrown up to him again.

To apply this principle, make sure that your child thoroughly understands what his punishment will be. For instance, if you decide to deny him desserts for a week, tell him so at the outset; do not keep him wondering from day to day when the punishment will end. And do not harp on the offence after the punishment ends. Let him know that when he pays for his conduct he starts with a clean slate.

4. Be consistent. Your child deserves to know exactly what kind of conduct is tolerated, and what will be punished. Unless he knows this, he will try to find out how far he can go. If you tell him that he must be home at 8:30, he will be uneasy if he arrives at 9:00 and is not called to task for being late. Next time, he will be tempted to remain out until 9:30, and he will continue pushing the hour ahead until you step down firmly. If you berate him for arriving home at 9:00 after he returned at 10:00 the night before without comment from you, you will leave him thoroughly confused as to where the limits actually lie.

To be effective, your rules must also be fair. One child should not be punished for actions which another commits with impunity. In one family with seven children, all know that they will lose their allowances for a week if they are not at home for dinner at a designated time. One evening one youngster came home late with the excuse that the bus was delayed. His mother said that she would not punish him. The father then insisted that the boy lose his allowance, because he knew that once any excuses were accepted, the parents would be besieged with them and the entire system of fairness for all would break down. As this example indicates, parents who do not apply rules consistently actually perform a disservice to the child.

5. Investigate before you punish. In order to discipline your child properly, you must necessarily know the facts in the case. Otherwise you do not know what purpose your punishment should serve. Parents may easily misinterpret a child's action. Sometimes he does things which are wrong because no one has told him not to do them and he does not know whether they are approved or not. Be especially careful before punishing a child involved in a quarrel or fight with another. It is often difficult to find out who is at fault, since both children usually contribute to a squabble to greater or lesser extents.

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