

A Former "Good" Mother Speaks

Ruth Chados

Picture me—one Ruth Chados—wife of one, mother of three, part time secretary, part time religious school teacher, part time student, part time public relations coordinator for non-profit organizations, full time female person and one former "good mother."

That's me today. Not quite three years ago much of my world revolved around the "happy home." I delighted in the cleanliness of our home and took a great deal of pride in the fact that I was considered a super cook and baker. There were many moments when everything was dazzling clean, something yummy was in the oven, and a picture book apple pie was cooling on the counter. And, there was I, delighting in everything within eye range and fantasizing over my acceptance speech when I became the recipient of the "Mother of the Year" award. It's no joke, I expected it!

Then, from our local elementary school came a notice inviting parents to participate in a discussion group based on *Children: The Challenge* by Dr. Rudolph Dreikurs. Sounds fascinating, and of course I was going. A "good" mother never passes up the opportunity to display an interest in what's happening in her child's school. And so, for obviously the wrong reason, I became a part of the Tuesday morning parent study grouping. Sharing with a dozen women, what was to me, a brand new concept in child rearing methods.

How fascinating it was to discover that no matter how varied our backgrounds; regardless of our ages, race, color, national origin, a single parent, working parents, grandparents living in the same household and anywhere from 1 to 12 children at varied age levels, we all had the same hangups. We were all so very busy being mothers!!

Enthusiastically I did my reading homework, but discovered the excitement to be in the weekly group discussion. I had very little difficulty recognizing the concept of equality and realized that much of this already existed in our household. Long ago, B.C. (before the course) I realized quite by accident (isn't it amazing how miracle drugs, great inventions and the like are stumbled upon by accident), but I did realize

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by accident, how ridiculous it was to spank a child. As a mother of 17 years, I can truthfully say our children have never been spanked. If spanking relieved any frustration, it was not compensated by the guilt that was felt afterward. If I needed to release such emotion, didn't my child have to as well? What did it ever really accomplish? It was never related to the original and it made us all so unhappy. Thus, by accident, it was simple logic and the beginning of creating an atmosphere of cooperation.

Being a chatty person, communication is our way of life. As parents, we had displayed a genuine, consistent, feeling of cooperation and how fortunate we are that it had been returned. Simply stated, we like our children and they know it. We never experienced bedtime or mealtime horrors, temper tantrums, or embarrassing behavior. Some of the difficulties related by the other mothers, during our group discussions, truly came as a surprise to me. What seemed to be their routine, daily problems were totally non-existent in our household.

Did that make it perfect for me? NO WAY. Did I need the course? DEFINITELY. It shocked me to read that because I was doing for my children I was depriving them of a learning experience. I was confused and somewhat upset to learn that "doing for them" fulfilled my needs.

At an early age, because I so enjoyed spending time with them, all three children were capable of handling any situation, from meal preparation to general housekeeping. If necessary, they could well have run the household. Yet, they had no set pre-arranged chores. Their obligations, in my mind, were their achievements and educational attitude in school, along with their cooperation at home. My obligation, in my mind, was to make it as pleasant for them as possible. So happily, I baked toll house cookies, cleaned their rooms and their clothing, helped with their homework, served as their social secretary and their chauffeur, and tried to block whatever I determined was an unnecessary obstacle in their way. DEFINITELY I NEEDED THIS COURSE.

I read. I discussed and even argued. I couldn't possibly understand how cooperation and equality existed in a program that said their rooms could be messy. I had a great deal of difficulty (and still do) in accepting the fact that their rooms were just that. Their rooms and my house is our home. DON'T DO FOR YOUR CHILDREN WHAT THEY CAN DO FOR THEMSELVES is now firmly implanted in my mind and, more importantly, I totally agree. If I were a creative person, I'd probably make a fortune selling that quote as a print sampler, to be hung, of course, in the bathroom.

So, where was I? Rapidly approaching the conclusion of the first course and I've made several discoveries.

1. Norman could have written the book and how I'm kicking myself now for not realizing how right he was when I was so totally involved and he said, "butt out."

2. My children are confused. They had experienced 14, 12, and 6 years of "good, good mother." How odd for them to now cope with this friendly, smiling Mom who says the strangest things. "I really understand how you feel and I'll gladly discuss it with you, but I know you'll work it out." They resented it. Saw it as a put-down. They didn't want to work anything out that, under prior circumstances, I would have done for them. I had to keep friendly and keep cool. I fully believed the concept and wanted to give it every opportunity to work.

While many things were so pleasantly smooth in our home, the difficulties revolved mainly, or so I thought at the time, around the oldest child. Art, at six, had established a pattern of a sometimes difficult under-achiever in school, negative and down on himself. Doing for the child, pressuring the child, even encouragement were not the answers. I saw his actions as a reflection of my parenthood and set extremely high standards for both of us. Almost eight years later, these very same areas of difficulty still exist. He didn't outgrow them and they didn't magically disappear. Yet don't jump to the wrong conclusions. This child, the same negative, difficult under-achiever in school, the oldest child in the family, is the most reliable, dependable and cooperative at home. He's refreshingly honest at all times, a constant source of encouragement to his two kid sisters, and possessed with a fantastic dry wit, making him a pleasure to live with. Because of the fact that this is not an exaggeration, I am sure you can well understand my bewilderment.

Shelley is the baby in the family—to all of us. Her royal highness lives with four people who truly delight in her charming, soft spoken, gentle personality. We were totally unaware of how WE had established that special place for her. Two years ago, at six years, she had never opened a car door by herself, never drew the water for her own bath, never made or unmade her own bed. Of course, she was capable, she just didn't have to. Somebody, anybody, would gladly do it for her. And her reaction—one of sheer delight, no tantrums, no demands, never a tear. She smiled a lot and said thank you constantly. It was her way of life and she accepted it perfectly and naturally.

How then did I respond as the individual within the group? By recognizing that what was good within our family relationship was very good. What needed improvement was ME. A SHOCK. This program, dealing in child rearing concepts, was not a miracle method of magically changing children. It was in fact a rude awakening to many very obvious facts that I, as a mother, had totally overlooked for

years. The first course has now ended. Even with total awareness of the concept, I moved very slowly ahead, being sure that I fully understood what I was doing before expecting acceptance from the children; and I had Norman's full support. I offered each child my sincere apology for invading their privacy over the years. Many, many new practices were established in our household—a method of sharing responsibility. Both Art and Shelley were surprised and encouraged in the satisfaction they soon found in “doing for themselves.” Yet, in some instances, all three children were quite annoyed. After all, their maid service was being removed after many years of faithful devotion. Still, to everyone's surprise, the annoyance balanced with advantage; doing the unexpected became such an element of fascination. They could no longer predict my every move and thought. They also realized that, while I no longer would assume full responsibility for their personal needs, neither did I have the right to now comment about everything in which they were involved. What a switch that was. By choice, the children either read certain sections of the book or listened with interest if and when I related something that I felt to be of significance. We all realized that equality is not so hard to achieve if you truly have the desire to see its merits.

If I had difficult moments, they made it easier. Possibly the greatest advantage of having older children at the time of a change. They often suggested, if I became pushy, that I had the choice of rephrasing my remark or going to my room. If they were disappointed in my current answers of encouragement, rather than my previous answers of involvement, they supported me in jest by suggesting that my answer was a direct quote from Chapter 6. It was slow, but it was working and with that came the end of course one and onto the very stimulating *Raising a Responsible Child* by Dinkmeyer and McKay.

Once the concept of the first course is understood, accepted, and put to use, it becomes the very necessary foundation for accepting the second course. Course one, in my opinion, approaches the concept most flexibly. Course two, in my opinion, clearly defines the do's and don't's. While I do not have the qualifications to analyze my behavior, I was drastically affected by the involvement in course two. I took this extremely seriously and often felt physically and emotionally drained. I questioned my background, my values, my standards, my parenthood and mostly—MYSELF. In part, because of the latest development in our household—

The older and younger children were responding to the changes—though not always favorably. And were did that leave the middle child. There, smack dab in the middle. At a very early age, Stacey, two and a half years younger than Arty, thrived on being fantastic. The constant over achiever, we reached the point where we

called her perfect report cards, year in and year out, DULL. But now a drastic change was in effect.

If Arty was no longer getting our reaction for his negative, why should Stacey continue to perform on the positive? It was a very difficult time. A time when I felt the entire concept to be, not only wrong, but harmful. Sure we had removed the pressure from Art, but that didn't miraculously make him a better student. Yet, it was harming Stacey's marks, her pleasure in education, her attitude in general, and every door in the house, which she suddenly took to slamming.

Through the constant encouragement of the second Tuesday AM Group, I reappraised my values. What really came first? A contented child or a good mark? A child's own self-confidence or a parent's put-down? How I, the parent, saw the child or how the child saw herself? Above all, who owns the problem, they or I? I reaffirmed my belief in the concept and passed on to the family the support, acceptance, and encouragement so vitally necessary for the successful working of the program. It was not easy but the balance of *difficult involvement* and the *reward of removal* were always present.

You know that feeling, one thing goes wrong and everything seems to be wrong. Even my mother had a say in the matter at this point. She too was very confused over my "new ways." When you're brought up by a lovely, bright woman, who unfortunately judges people by how clean they keep their kitchen floors, go explain why you no longer make your children's beds. So I did one better. I gave her the book and quoted excerpts from Dreikurs' "The Courage to Be Imperfect" speech. It's never too late to learn. She takes pride in her new found knowledge, uses it often, and regrets not realizing many of these points sooner. Though occasionally she does slip back by commenting that I'm doing okay, even if she did do everything wrong.

Time passes, first course, second course, third course (Step), and the opportunity to be a study group moderator. It's been a marvelous experience. Of course, it's not perfect. But we have learned a great deal, all of us and we do indeed have the courage to be imperfect.

Art's now driving an elderly car which, when it won't start on these chilly mornings, gets me uptight. I told him of my reaction, to which he cheerfully replied, "That's my problem—don't watch me when I'm leaving!!" Know what—he's right. Back to the bathroom. In today's crazy, mixed up world, overloaded with keen competition, drug use and run-away teenagers, I'm thankful that our guy enjoys being with his family and shares his thoughts with us regularly. I realize that, not his, but my values were distorted.

Stacey truly loves to excel and came back to being her bubbly enthusiastic self in a short period of time. She's fantastic company and has marvelous insight. Her strength of character is most refreshing with no peer pressure and no phoney airs.

Shelley is a confident young lady. She has grown greatly from my taking this course and the result is an eight year old totally responsible, capable of making her own decisions and requiring no supervision. She is aware and constantly fascinated by attention getting young people. She is equally aware of overly involved parents and recently commented that the course is badly needed by the Brady's and the Partridges.

Where are we now? A family of five who respect each other's values and differences. We communicate and cooperate. There are no set rules. The concept is outstanding but it must be fully understood before one can expect results. If you the parent hesitate to put something into practice; if you the parent have doubts as to its merit, how can you possibly expect your children to accept it? I no longer have preconceived notions or values established for my children's future. It took years to undo the "my son, the doctor" syndrome; but that doesn't miraculously remove those moments when someone else's grass does look greener—a nine year old neighbor who could win a popularity contest, a fifteen year old cousin who plans to study law. Sure, you say to yourself, it isn't always what it appears to be. So you try to react intellectually and realize that you can find a great deal of comfort in the fact that our children relate to others with compassion and understanding. Through that, they will find satisfaction and contentment. Hopefully, and if not, it will be their problem, not mine. But, if I can't contribute the needed encouragement, that's my problem, not theirs. Their ultimate future is theirs. I cannot take credit for their successes and will not be responsible for their failures. We have worked out a method that still lets me bake cookies and clean parts of the house; but no longer am I taken for granted. I have removed myself from the preconceived stereotype role of mother. I have discovered—with surprise—that, when given the opportunity, the children derive the very same satisfactions for their tasks completed.

I've been asked, would I have liked this program better if I had it when the children were babies? My answer is NO. Certainly the children would have greatly benefited, but I couldn't have possibly appreciated it so much if we had not had the opportunities of doubt, as well as the chance to share it fully with the children. There had to be the negative to fully appreciate the positive.

I present my views as a basis of encouragement. I've changed a lot of my thinking, not only as a mother but as a person. Remember the

old Dick Van Dyke Show with Dick as Rob and Mary Tyler Moore as Laura? I was particularly impressed with one segment many years ago when Laura was asked to fill in for Sally at the office. She typed brilliantly each and every day, always looking as fresh as a daisy. She served gourmet caliber dinners to Rob each evening and kept a perfect home. The story line builds on the total perfection of this one person, and reaches its climax one day in the office when Rob and Buddy are stuck on the joke ending and Laura contributes that perfect punch line—which was just about what Rob wanted to do—one perfect punch!! In a very emotional scene, he describes how difficult it's been for him living with a most perfect person. She tearfully reveals the frustrations of her own difficulties. Napping through lunch to give herself enough strength to stay up all night, cooking and cleaning after Rob falls asleep. It shocks Laura to discover that Rob resented this perfection. She only wanted to please and yet he resented how well she functioned, without ever requiring anything. "Good mothers" function in much the same manner. Do our children resent it? From a weekly situation comedy, came a most valuable lesson. Dr. Dreikurs says so much pertaining to this very perfection in his speech. For me personally, it's most difficult to change those values instilled in me as a very young child and how I resent them now. Hopefully, the awareness of them will prevent me from passing them onto my own children.

A whole new world opens when you realize that the listener is appreciated. When it no longer becomes necessary to prove your value with something of a "can you top this" attitude, and you no longer feel the need to tell someone else that they're wrong just so you can be right.

Our children may not necessarily accept our standards and may even, as in Rob's case, actually resent them. Our role as parents becomes increasingly more difficult in our own confusion. Surely our children must have standards of respect for laws and courtesies. Hopefully they will have ambitions and goals acceptable by today's society. The confusion does lie with us, the parents, who, for the most part, do not know how to go about encouraging children to establish those acceptable values. Our own hang-up begins with "what is acceptable?" Where and when should we be involved and where and when is removal/encouragement necessary? I agree with Dr. Oscar Christianson that we cannot expect a child, or anyone else for that matter, to make a sensible and drastic decision in their adult life if they have not been encouraged and respected for their decision making at a very early age. *Uninvolvement does not mean disinterest.* Encouragement and acceptance become the key to the parent's role. That key which opens onto the children's world, not the parent's.

Advice? If you haven't spent time with your children, do so now. I've been accused of bribery because I requested uninterrupted time periods when my children were quite young. Set a timer and then return the courtesy by giving them equal uninterrupted time. The unpopular family chore is often shared by mutual time arrangement. Bribery, compromise, bargaining? Call it what you will. When something must be completed and everyone participates, around our house, we call it cooperation!

Establish family meeting or set a time for regular communication. Without preaching or lecturing, don't hesitate to let your children know how you really feel—that deep down personal gut feeling. They want to know. They'll respect you for your honesty as they really listen. Then you do the same. They, better than us, recognize a concept of equality as opposed to inconsistencies and authoritarian methods. The most offensive of all put-downs is to underestimate them. It's unfortunate that some parents do not know their children. Their humor and understanding is unbelievable. Don't regret it when it's too late. They grow so rapidly. Take it from a mother who stands just about five feet tall and is physically outgrown by two out of three.

References

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