

The Reeducation of a Pampered Prince

Jean H. Cripps, Ann Tuites, Nancy Blocklinger
Hockessin Friends Pre-School

Many children, even at the age of three, have perfected means by which they can have their own way and control teachers and parents. Unless redirected, such children, already turned toward the useless side of life, may have an unsuccessful school experience and develop serious problems in behavior and learning. Teachers are often at a loss as to what to do to help them. Worse yet, the teacher who does not understand the dynamics of the disturbing behavior may reinforce it by attempting to correct the behavioral manifestations. However, if the teacher has learned to understand the child's behavior and to discover the purpose for his doing what he does, she may be able to redirect the child's mistaken goals (Dreikurs, 1959).

Robert, aged two years, ten months when he first began attending a three-day per week, afternoon session of pre-school was such a child. He cried the first day his mother brought him and the vehemence of his protests increased each subsequent day. His crying stopped each day shortly after his mother left. However, he made no move to enter into any class activities, refusing to take off his sweater and standing just inside the door for the entire session. When the teachers chatted with him, he seldom responded.

The teachers at his school had observed that frequently a child's protests about coming to school were in direct proportion to the amount of concern of the mother about sending her child to school. They had also observed that if the mother became convinced that sending her child would be beneficial and really decided that he was to come to school, his protests usually ceased. Accordingly, attempts were made to reassure Robert's mother that it would be beneficial for Robert to continue to come to school and that his crying did not disturb the teachers or the class and ceased shortly after she left him. However, the mother remained concerned, and when Robert subsequently had to be carried bodily into the school room, she again questioned whether it was wise for him to attend school since he protested so strongly.

Since attempts to allay the apprehensions of Robert's mother had obviously been unsuccessful, it was decided to approach the problem from another angle. A teacher again talked with Robert and mentioned that she wondered why he didn't like school. Since he did not answer, she continued by asking him if he would like to know what she thought. He shook his head, "No." At this point, Billy, who had a temper tantrum every day upon being brought to

school, came up to talk with the teacher. The teacher turned to Billy and asked him if he knew why he and Robert cried every day when they came to school. He said he didn't know. The teacher asked him if he would like to know what she thought. He said, "Yes." She asked, "Do you suppose it could be because you don't like to have people try to make you do things?" Billy said, "No." She then followed with, "Do you suppose it could be that you want to make mother do what you want her to do?" Billy nodded his head and said, "Yes, that's right." The teacher then turned to Robert, who had been listening to this conversation, and asked Billy, "Do you suppose it is the same way with Robert—that he wants to make mother do what he wants her to do?" Robert grinned indicating by his "recognition reflex" the correctness of the teachers' interpretation (Dreikurs 1959, 1968). The next day neither child protested upon coming to school. But while Robert was more relaxed, smiling occasionally and sometimes talking with the teacher, he continued to stay in his corner near the door.

A teacher must understand the purpose of the child's disturbing behavior to be an effective educator, but insight and skill in making the psychological disclosure is only a part of the process. The most important phase is the reeducation or redirection of the mistaken goals. This may require help from more specifically trained personnel such as a counselor. Robert's teachers were fortunate enough to be able to consult such a counselor. Before consulting the counselor, however, it was felt advisable to have a conference with Robert's mother. More information would then be available to the counselor, and the help of the mother might be enlisted.

The reeducation process requires action appropriate to the case by both the teacher and the parent. The parent can become involved in the process through parent-teacher conferences and attending parent study group sessions. The parent-teacher conference can be effective if the teacher has had some training in an effective approach which will prevent the conference from becoming a mere recounting of the child's misbehavior. Such a conference can call attention to the dynamics of the behavior and provide a plan for remediation.

The conference was held with Robert's mother early in the fall conference period. The teacher learned that Robert had received considerable special attention at home. For two years until the arrival of a baby sister, he had had his mother as an almost constant companion. Presently at mealtime he would get special food and extra time to finish his meal. He also insisted that his mother save his lunch for him until he came home from school. Robert was originally enrolled in nursery school because his mother had been pregnant and felt she couldn't cope with him, his ten-month old sister and a baby "at home all day." His mother was very eager to learn what Robert was doing in school. Every day she questioned him attempting to find out about his activities. She volunteered

that every night at bedtime Robert wanted to hear a story about "the little boy who went to school." (The parents or grandparents frequently told Robert stories about the "little boy who," describing things which Robert had done.)

The teacher discussed the progress Robert had made and the benefits to be derived from continuing pre-school. She assured the mother that she need not feel guilty about sending him.

It was suggested that the mother might do some things at home which would help to bring about changes in Robert's behavior. She expressed interest in how this might be done. The teacher recommended that the mother prepare wholesome meals to serve the family. There was to be no discussion of food at meal time or urging to eat. Robert was to eat the food served. If he chose not to, the table was to be cleared at the end of the meal without comment. It was further recommended that the mother refrain from questions and discussions of the daily school activities. When Robert brought up any subject concerning school, the mother was to respond appropriately. The mother could contact the teacher if she had questions regarding school or Robert's progress.

The teachers then consulted a school counselor for help. The counselor suggested that other children might be enlisted to encourage him to join in the activities. This was tried, but Robert refused to participate. Near the end of the fifth week of school, the counselor was again consulted as to other steps that might be taken. It was clear that Robert could not be permitted to do only what he pleased. He had a responsibility to the group if he was to be a part of it. He was not to be forced to participate, but if he did not take part he could not be a member of the group. It was suggested that he be given a choice of joining the group or going to another room. If he declined to join the group, he could be removed firmly but kindly to return when he wished to participate. The teacher was to avoid attempting to "make" Robert do anything and thus get into a power struggle with him. The counselor also stressed how important it was that his mother relate the activities of a normal day for a child in school when asked by Robert to tell him the story of "the little boy who went to school."

The counselor was of the opinion that since the teacher had been successful in developing a good relationship with Robert, a prerequisite to teaching, she could proceed immediately. The next day, as the free activity period came to an end and the youngsters gathered for music, the teacher took Robert by the hand and led him from his corner to the circle. She indicated where he was to sit with the group. He announced that he did not want to sing. The teacher replied that he did not have to sing but that he could sit with the group in any case. He sat in silence and refused a rhythm instrument. After music he was led to the table for juice. "I don't want to eat," he declared. "You don't have to eat, you could say no thank you," the teacher answered. He declined a cookie and did not touch the juice. The same procedure was followed the next day. On the third day, Robert moved from activity to activity on his own. The teacher felt it was time for other participation. Handwashing was next,

followed by other activities in rapid progression. He was now participating fully in group activities, eating, using a rhythm instrument, marching and enacting Mother Goose Rhymes. In addition he was attempting to remove his outside clothes, and to dress to go outside with only partial help from the teacher. He became more friendly with the teachers and talked with the children, but he continued to spend the free activity period standing in the corner. Shortly before Christmas, he had his third birthday, brought cupcakes and was very proud of the fact that he was three.

Robert returned from Christmas recess apparently in good spirits and immediately on his own initiative began working hard to remove his snow clothes and boots without help. It appeared to be good time to attempt to initiate a different pattern for him for the free activity period. Therefore, as soon as he finished putting his clothes away, the teacher took him by the hand and led him to the shelves of puzzles and construction sets. She presented him with a box of Shapees and asked if he would like to use them. When he answered yes, the teacher left him with the box on the table. He assembled the parts and proudly exhibited his "airplanes." He then went on the other activities in various parts of the room. In a few days, he began to make overtures to other children and to play with them. Robert's progress was now comparable to that of the normal pre-schooler. He appeared to be participating happily and spontaneously in all the activities.

Robert's mother was contacted briefly to learn what had been happening at home. She had attended several sessions of a mother's study group based on *Children the Challenge* (Dreikurs and Soltz, 1964), in addition to conferences she had had with the teacher. It was learned that although she had been reluctant to make changes at first, she and her husband had begun to try some "new" approaches. They had done away with the special consideration which Robert had been getting at mealtime and now had no problem with meals. They were now giving him choices where they had previously given orders, and were putting into practice only a few new methods at a time, presently concentrating on training him to dress himself and were being successful. The parents were confident their progress would continue and at the moment felt they would be capable of coping with problems as they arose.

This brief interview with Robert's mother revealed the extent to which the home and the school had been able to cooperate in the reeducation of Robert. The policy of the pre-school was to refrain from reinforcing the mistaken goals of the children. Thus Robert's tears and inactivity did not elicit undue concern and special treatment. The teachers were able to obtain guidance as to how to encourage Robert to start participating when he did not begin of his own accord after discovering that special consideration was not forthcoming. However, equally important were the changes that occurred at home. As the mother's overprotection was replaced by her encouragement of Robert to make decisions

for himself and to take care of himself, his confidence in his ability to handle unfamiliar situations increased and his need for special treatment decreased. When he returned from the Christmas holiday, this was apparent in the way in which he went about removing his complicated snow clothing without any of the former dependence on the teachers. He now felt more able to cope with the unstructured activity time, and was ready to continue on his own following the teacher's initial push toward participation. In fact, he might have been ready to do this on his own initiative. Without the encouragement toward independence which occurred at home, these final steps toward adequate functioning would have been much slower to occur, if indeed, they had occurred at all.

REFERENCES

- Dreikurs, R., Corsini, R. J., Lowe, R. N., & Sonstegard, M. *Adlerian family counseling*. University of Oregon: The University Press, 1959.
- Dreikurs, R., Soltz, V. *Children: The challenge*. New York: Duel, Sloan and Pearce, 1964.
- Dreikurs, R. *Psychology in the classroom*. (Rev. Ed.) New York: Harper and Row, 1968.