

Training the Child for Self-Discipline

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To the etymologist, the definition of discipline is the art of making disciples; to the military man, discipline means subjection to authority or training to unquestioning obedience; to the teacher, as expressed by Frank E. Baker in *Progressive Education Magazine*, it is "restraint, either external or self-imposed, on the conduct of an individual or group for the accomplishment of an end assumed to be good," while to the parent, according to Blatz and Bolt in *Management of Young Children*, discipline is a "progressive control by which we learn to meet new as well as old needs of the social situation," meaning that there is one kind of control for the two-year old, another for the school child, still another for the adolescent, and many types of control for the adult. The staff members of the Child Study Association of America define it thus: "Discipline is an educational experience through which the child is guided into ways of living, fruitful in the long run of the greatest satisfaction to himself and others." The writer's personal definition is: Discipline is direction and restraint imposed by rules formulated by the family in council, involving a persistent search for and use of the logical consequences of each one's behavior as it affects the orderly, daily schedule of life in the home and the community. As this paper proceeds the family council idea will be explained and developed.

Theories of child training have changed greatly within the last fifty years. There has been a gradual shift from the traditional or autocratic attitude of the past to an experimental viewpoint which has developed in two different directions, namely, into a truly democratic and cooperative type of discipline and into a state of anarchism or child-control of the situation.

According to the traditional, autocratic attitude, society decided what was best for the children and the parents devised ways and means of forcing them into the socially accepted molds of conduct. This resulted in "instant and unquestioning obedience"; also it resulted frequently in unhappy individuals filled with rebellion toward all authority and in some cases in individuals who had lost their initiative and were unable to make decisions on their own. However, in the majority of cases it probably worked out very well and fitted the more patterned culture of that period, but with the changes that have taken place, it doesn't fit the culture of American life today.

There may be a place for unquestioning obedience in a child's life today but it fits only in case of emergency situations when the urgency and directness of the parent's commands are such that they are likely to be obeyed anyway, because of the tone of voice in which they are given.

Consider the qualities favorable to habitual obedience. They are suggestibility, imitation, and especially love of approbation—all passive traits and, in excess, detrimental to a child's maximum development. In the writer's experience a girl of twelve was much admired by her parents and their friends because she was so "perfect," docile, well-mannered, pretty, and quiet; but she succumbed to the suggestions of a bad companion as readily as she had to those of her mother and became a youthful delinquent.

In contrast what are the qualities antagonistic to habitual obedience? On this side of the ledger one must list curiosity (the core of learning), initiative, and persistence—all positive and active. Because of these facts thoughtful parents tend to discard the traditional, autocratic methods of the past. They have lost faith in them.

Unfortunately many parents in turning from the past have gone to the extreme of discarding any consistent discipline. The children have taken over; they dominate the home, doing what they please when they please, and the condition of anarchy which results would be humorous were it not so tragic. It is easy to understand how this catastrophe comes about. Since Pearl Harbor in particular many people have felt increasingly insecure about their whole way of life. Hating dictatorships, they have reacted to "glorify Freedom" without the realization that freedom implies the acceptance of responsibility. It is short-sighted to interpret freedom as non-interference, for¹⁰

Freedom is not abandoning the child to his own impulses on the assumption that he can find his own way best when unguided. It is rather a state of grace to be attained by years of effort and learning. It is the outcome of discipline, rather than an alternative to it.

Pearl Buck says,

If China has been absurd in her reverence for the old, in the United States we have an equal absurdity, which is for adults to grant rosy cheeks and hard young carelessness a sort of timid, admiring obedience. I believe in equal rights for everyone, of every generation, and I do not think that there is any virtue in giving deference to youth because it is youth. For a parent to say amiably, "Do as you please, of course, and let me know how much it will cost," is an injury to a child from which he can scarcely recover.

Jane, a girl of fourteen, is a good illustration of the effect of freedom of this kind on the child. She comes to school dressed like a movie star,

but she can make no lasting friends. While her mental test shows that she is much above average in ability, she is below grade in everything but reading. During study period she sits surreptitiously reading *True Romance* or a movie magazine. She often sits staring dreamily into space, incapable of satisfactory functioning in a useful activity because she has never known discipline. Seeming half unconsciously to realize that her parents have failed her, she has a thoroughly hostile attitude toward them and this she carries over to her teachers. At present Jane is attending a special school for truant girls and much effort is being made to reeducate her attitudes and goals. It is too soon to predict the result.

The third type of discipline for our consideration is the democratic, cooperative type which leads as soon as possible to self-control and self-reliance.

Our sociologists say,¹⁶

The very preservation of our domestic institutions and of the liberties we value most depends ultimately on the ability of the individual citizen to achieve self-discipline.

Some years ago the psychology laboratory at the University of Chicago carried out a series of experiments on the most effective means of guiding conduct. Children from six to twelve years of age were chosen for the experiment and their parents were instructed to try the following methods on them:¹⁰

- (a) Verbal directions—the child is told what to do in simple positive terms; e.g., “Billy, I want you to put your wagon away.”
- (b) Don’ts—the child is told what he is not to do; e.g., “Billy, don’t leave your wagon in the street.”
- (c) Threats—the child is told that he will be punished in some way; for example, “Billy, if you don’t put your wagon away, I’ll tell Daddy.”
- (d) Punishments actually administered—the child is spanked or denied privileges.
- (e) Explanation of cause and effect—the child is given reasons for acting in a certain way; for example, “Billy, put your wagon in the basement, because it may rain tonight and the rain will cause your wagon to rust and to run poorly.”

The results of many trials of each method showed that some ways of dealing with children were more successful than other ways.

- (a) The least effective way consisted in telling children in simple positive terms what to do.

- (b) Only slightly superior results were obtained by telling children what not to do. Instructions of the "do" and "don't" type usually did not attract children's attention sufficiently to obtain action.
- (c) Threats and warning had somewhat better immediate effects, but the results were not lasting. Threats were effective only when parents put words into action immediately.
- (c) Punishments were more effective than threats because parents let their actions speak for them instead of indulging in talk.
- (e) The most successful and lasting way of obtaining obedience consisted in accompanying the instructions with adequate reasons for the desired action. Thus the simple description of desirable conduct with a statement of the underlying reasons gave the best response both in immediate and permanent results.

The value of "reasoning" is based on two facts, that the child has a mind and ability to discriminate; also that a description of desirable conduct with the reason increases his knowledge and this underlies self-direction.

The difference between the autocratic and the democratic types of discipline can be pointed out by these questions: the first asks, "How can I get the child to do what I want?"; the second, "How can I direct and teach the child so he will learn to accept responsibility for his own behavior?"

As the gist of this paper will be taken up with trying to answer the second question, nothing will be done at this point except to state the question and to summarize the three types of discipline which we have discussed. See Table 1.

The parent's role in the democratic method of discipline is one of leadership. Prestige rests not on age or social position, not on wealth or physical strength, but on the actual power the parent has to practice what he preaches, to manage the household arrangements in orderly fashion with easily accessible places for everything, with a daily schedule for rising, eating, working, napping, playing, and going to bed. If the mother works out at the beginning of the child's life a schedule, based on general advice of doctors and experienced parents, but tempered to fit the rhythm of her individual child's needs (sleeping, hunger and waking), she has the right start on her schedule. In addition if she plans natural or logical consequences for wilful deviations from this schedule, her baby will, as he grows, develop the idea that certain actions work out for his comfort and satisfaction and that other actions deprive him, and possibly others, of something desirable. The earlier this idea takes root the sounder the basic character because this method implants the principle of doing the act because it results in well-being and satisfaction in itself and it prevents the growth of the idea that he must perform an act to "please mother" or

TABLE I
THREE POSSIBLE TYPES OF DISCIPLINE¹⁰
(Democracy Begins at Home)

	AUTOCRATIC	ANARCHISTIC	DEMOCRATIC
<i>Procedure</i>	Demand unquestioned obedience	Freedom to carry out own desires without regard to others	Promote self discipline, or, freedom with responsibility
<i>Source of Authority</i>	Adult or "outer" control	Child a law unto self "No" control	From adult to child as the child achieves "inner" control
<i>Educational Value</i>	Guides immature children. Control of emergency situations	Resourcefulness Extreme individualism. Disregard for others	Learn to think for self Learn to work with others
<i>Effect on Personality</i>	Dependency Submission Rebellion	Insecurity Unhappiness Lawlessness Crime	Ability to make wise decisions for self, with due regard for others' rights
<i>Citizenship Training</i>	Leads to rule by force or a master mind. Dictatorship	Results in disorder, social chaos Anarchy	Helps each person to be a responsible, contributing and cooperating member Democracy

because he'll be spanked if he doesn't. Doing things to "please mother" or because he'll be spanked if he doesn't leaves the child with no standard of his own and the "wrong" or unwise act will result if no mother is around to praise or spank.

From another angle the parent's role in a democratic home requires the parent to "grow up." An immature person can't handle the job. It is the hardest type of discipline there is to initiate and carry through because

it often calls for a radical reconstruction of ourselves and for more thought and effort than we have ever put into any previous job, but with such an incentive, the well-being of the child, what parent will not rejoice at this second opportunity to "grow up" emotionally and intellectually?

Certain attitudes of mind do much to make the task easier for the parent. One is the attitude we commonly hold toward the action of an equal whom we respect and admire. We assume, however unfortunate the results, that the person meant well, had a desirable goal in mind, even though the attempt backfired, and we think not of blaming but of helping, of trying to understand what the whole thing is about and of being of service, if possible, to "save the pieces" or "clean up the mess." Transfer this attitude to the inevitable misadventures of a child and you will receive in return heart-warming confidence and loyalty, and will build a relationship that is of priceless worth.

A second parental attitude which advances the maximum development of the child is one held by all true educators, i.e., that of regarding mistakes as learning opportunities. Too many of us adults are loath to try new things because we are afraid of making a mistake; we expect ridicule to follow. This fear "cramps our style" and is a false notion. Mistakes are not to be feared, they are inevitable; they are our "Stop and Think" signs. When a child begins learning a new skill, tell him, "You may make all the mistakes you need to." If he makes many and seems upset, reassure him by saying, "Don't worry, we all make mistakes," for unless a child knows that mistakes are normal and necessary, he loses his natural initiative. Moreover, he never develops the thrill of adventure in tackling new problems and in carrying-through until he has profited by the inevitable mistakes and the skill is won.

In every discussion on child training, the subject of spanking or whipping comes up. Formerly spanking was the most common form of punishment used by parents. At the time of the White House Conference a survey was made of 3,000 families. It showed that spanking is still frequently used at the age of three years, is less often used from three to eleven years and is rarely used after that. Also it showed that the better educated parents used spanking as a deterrent less frequently than the others. C. M. Louttit in *Clinical Psychology* says,¹¹ "Because of the lack of any demonstrated value in whippings and because they are seldom commensurate with the offense it is best to avoid them entirely." Anna W. Wolf in *Parent's Manual* writes,¹⁶ "By and large we find that those parents who do not reach control through external punishment, get along best. Their choice requires them to bring more thought and intelligence to the task of understanding the forces that underlie behavior." That is the trouble; spanking and whipping are too easy and too temporary in their results, while the long range consequences are far from helpful in many cases, for²

A little child exposed to severe physical punishment must feel much the way a grown-up would feel if he met some terrifying natural force, such as a hurricane, an animal terror—a violent emotional experience that can have no educational value. And since the force used against the child is attached to people who are his source of safety and the objects of his love, it is all the more confusing to him. He cannot strike back. He cannot even permit himself to hate his parents for if he does he feels guilty.

It is true also that if a child has received punishment, he may feel that he has paid for his misconduct and can now start over again to repeat the performance.

There are other punishments which sometimes have a worse effect on the parent-child relationship than spanking or hitting. Among these are nagging, which may train a child to be deaf to all a parent says, or develop in him a sense of inferiority; or aloofness, disdain, indifference, which are apt to leave the child with a feeling of being disliked and alone; or the thoughtless habit of telling a child that you don't love him because of something he has done. Hold the attitude, "Of course I love you and always will, no matter what you do, but this action makes us both unhappy. How can we keep it from happening again?"

Beware especially of punishment in connection with eating and toilet training. Here natural consequences should follow in a matter-of-fact way, but no punishment; rather encouragement.

It is too bad parents cannot see how funny they look and sound when they fly into a rage and attack a child with a hairbrush or belt, the hand or a stick. Punishment under such conditions, if frequently administered, is as dangerous as dynamite.

The common dangers of retaliative punishment may be summed up as follows:

1. A child tends to fear the parent who habitually punishes him. If he is afraid of what the parent will do, he may lie to save himself. Lying easily becomes a habit.

2. Resentment and hostility are frequently felt by the child toward the parent who habitually punishes him. Inhibiting such emotions is likely to arouse guilt feelings; expressing such emotions makes the child aggressive and destructive.

3. Punishment often causes an inhibition of natural curiosity and needful activity and can turn a child into an unhealthy day-dreamer.

The writer previously mentioned the family council plan of developing a discipline thoroughly democratic and cooperative. This plan may start with the young couple, then when each child becomes old enough he will join the council. The plan in essence is simply this: the setting aside of a definite time to "talk over" any sore or troublesome spots in

the family routine which retard both the smooth running of the household and the maximum comfort and happiness of any member of the family. At council meeting, which should occur regularly once a week, each one knows that he will have his chance to bring up any matter of importance to him which affects the others, with whatever plan he has to suggest to improve the situation. In order to keep the meeting comfortably short, it is well to adopt the procedure of allowing each one to comment on whatever suggestion is made, then to take a vote. The majority decision goes for one week but the subject can be taken up again at the next meeting and new suggestions tried until something is worked out which is unanimous. Also, it is advisable to limit the number of problems which can be taken up in one session or else to limit the time of the meeting. Each family unit works out its own provisions so that the council doesn't degenerate into a monopoly by one person, or drag out into a bore. A chairman and secretary are necessary for every meeting, while a treasurer is appointed in many families and a certain per cent of each member's salary is put into a family fund for special projects. The chairman keeps things moving along, calls for the vote and summarizes decisions so the secretary can write them on the council blackboard. These agreements or decisions remain on the blackboard for the week in plain sight of the whole family and serve as the only reminder, for one of the advantages of the family council is that all nagging, scolding or reminders are eliminated throughout the week. The agreement either works or it doesn't and the "whys" and "what should be done about it" can be discussed at the following meeting. Anyone can take criticism once a week with a likelihood of profiting by it but criticism in daily doses dwarfs most personalities.

Decisions made by the family in council apply to all members of the family—except such decisions as apply to specific growth needs of the children, different at different ages, as going-to-bed time, taking cod liver oil, etc. If a member doesn't want to attend council meetings, don't urge, just explain that attendance is optional. However, decisions apply to all and each has the responsibility to live up to them without complaint. No one enjoys government without representation for long.

In one family where the children objected at council meeting to picking up their things, mother said, "I know how you feel. I get tired picking up things, too. Shall we all take a vacation and leave our things anywhere they happen to be over Saturday and Sunday?" There was a unanimous affirmative vote and the family settled back to enjoy itself. The confusion wasn't too great on Saturday but by Sunday noon things were thick. The living room was a mass of Sunday papers, night clothes, outdoor garments, toys, utensils, and tools, while the kitchen, bedrooms and bathroom were almost equally disordered. Mother couldn't find the paring knife; John had lost the purse that contained his week's allowance; Judy was unhappily

searching for her doll clothes, while father complained that his tobacco had taken wings and flown away. At the delayed dinner Judy said, "I've had enough. This is no longer fun. I've ruined the doll clothes Aunt Alice sent me; they were out in the hall with the galoshes. I didn't suppose you and dad would leave things around too. It's too big a mess to live in." Since everyone agreed, they all turned to, had a grand clean-up and felt a satisfaction in the doing. This demonstration was never forgotten in that family and the children had a changed attitude toward their responsibilities for their things after the experience.

Children who have participated in council meetings grow into gradual understanding of family problems: what the family income has to cover, and how at times it must be stretched; what is the basis for determining each one's personal allowance; how much labor and expense go into keeping the physical equipment of the home in working order and how the work of the home can be divided so that even the smallest child makes some contribution to the needs of the whole group; how a group of people of varying ages, tastes, and dispositions can work out their needs for privacy, for joint and separate hobbies, for recreation individually and as a family; how health problems can be solved, and to quite an extent kept from arising; and the thousand and one other needs that crop up in every home. It is a type of life-training which automatically develops thoughtfulness of others and the willing acceptance of responsibility. It turns the home into a laboratory where the child can see the wheels go round and have his share in making them turn. They see father and mother as co-workers, not on a pedestal, but as humans who try and fail even as they do. Carried through with faith and patience, it is a maturing influence on every member of the family.

In marked contrast is the pampered, sheltered-life policy in effect in so many homes, where the child is not taken into membership, has no definite responsibilities, is often a complete parasite, a "gimme" boy or girl in a home where all the basic operations of the institution, the "how," "where," and "why" are kept a secret from him.

To be sure, the family council plan is only a tool to provide a rich growth environment. It needs to be supplemented by good organization and proper planning to prevent problems from ever arising. As preventative measures three things will help:

1. ARRANGEMENT—having as little bric-a-brac around as possible; keeping very precious things under lock and key until the age of appreciation arrives; arranging the child's cupboards, closet, and play space so they are convenient for the child; choosing color schemes and furniture for the home that stand the wear and tear of children. (Anything to avoid nervous tension in the parents and constant "No, No" to the children.)

2. **SUBSTITUTION**—by observation noting when the children are becoming too excited or fatigued and suggesting quieter games or initiating a story hour.

3. **ENRICHMENT**—many unhappy, whining children do not have enough variety of material to manipulate or enough chance to climb, run, jump, and develop muscular skills. Sometimes a basement or attic, a backyard or vacant lot can meet the need, but more and more (in the belief of the writer) city mothers will have to work together by the block or the street to provide the basic necessities for their children's development. Summers on a productive farm enrich any child's life, and summer camp is equally good in some cases.

To implement the democratic, cooperative ideals in the home, certain techniques are helpful. These are chosen with the goal of allaying hostility, or taking away the urge to fight or resist, for, as long as there is a conflict situation, constructive development is impossible. In some cases the aim is to build self-confidence.

IN GENERAL:

Hold attention by lowering the voice and speaking slowly and distinctly. Children are very responsive to the quality in voices. They can always detect tension and they respond to it more readily than to the words the voice says.

Break down any job into parts: the get-ready part, the do-it part, and the clean-up part.

Never praise poor work, but praise the small part of the job that is well done.

SPECIFICALLY:

To child who pounds finger, don't oversympathize, just say "Oh, and your best finger, too. Well, all carpenters do that once in a while."

To the child who is hurt, recognize the reality of the hurt:
Child—"These stones hurt my feet."

Parent—"Yes, they do hurt, don't they?"

To the child who says, "I can't" when the task is within his powers, just answer: "Isn't that too bad," very matter-of-factly and do not give help.

To the child who won't try: "You trust yourself too little. I have a better opinion of you than you have of yourself. I still believe in you and your ability."

To the child who gives up: "Did you ever hear the story about the two frogs? Once two frogs fell into a bucket of milk. Both tried to touch the bottom but couldn't. One gave up and drowned from discouragement. The other kept kicking until the milk turned to butter, then he could easily walk out."

To the child who always wants to be the star performer: "Do you see this watch? What makes it go?" Then point out that the front part is necessary, too, but that often the unseen parts are what really keep things going."

To the child who argues: "Maybe you are right. I will think it over."

To children quarreling: "You will have to finish your quarrel in your room but you may come back to the living room just as soon as you have settled your difficulties."

To child developing temper tantrums because of too many prohibitions (due frequently these days to unavoidably crowded housing quarters), suggest the game of changing places, let him play "Mamma" and let mother pretend to be the child. It is a release of tension for the child and if mother observes his tone of voice and his actions, she will gain an interesting picture of herself.

To child a little jealous of baby sister or brother, who says he wants to play baby again. Humor him and treat him as a baby with all the restrictions usually imposed on babies. He will soon tire of it and be much better satisfied to resume his own role. When he goes back to being himself, arrange to give him your whole-hearted time and interest for a certain part of each day.

These suggest helpful attitudes in handling common situations. The writer has stressed self-discipline as preferable to any other kind of attitude because she believes that only by this type can children develop to their optimum and attain the self-confidence which brings self-security.

It [self-security] is directly proportional to the amount of self-confidence which the child has and is inversely proportional to his inferiority feelings. As the inferiority feeling opposes the development of social interest, so social interest—the feeling of belonging—depends on the realization of one's value and strength and one's equality with others. This alone gives a feeling of security. It is the realization that one can cope with life, trust one's own ability and therefore have confidence in others. This seems to be the only basis for inner security.¹¹

As a test of our success in training our children in self-discipline, let us ask ourselves these questions:

Is my child growing more confident that he can participate successfully in many kinds of group activities?

Is he able to initiate and to carry through a project of his own on his own?

Does he increasingly take responsibility for himself and his acts?

Is he developing a nice consideration for the rights, needs and feelings of others?

Does he have enough self-confidence so that he is spontaneously generous and kind?

While every parent's job is a hard one, often puzzling and wearing, nevertheless no other job yields such deep satisfactions. As the parent witnesses the gradual development of character in his child and knows that it is rooted in the principles of democracy (the belief in the unique value or worth in each human being) and cooperation (the working together with others to benefit the group) he can only be thankful for the opportunity he has had to teach and lead his child toward this fine fulfillment.

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