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SOME GUIDING THOUGHTS FOR PARENTS

By REV. EDGAR SCHMIEDELER, O. S. B., Ph. D.

IT IS a commonplace to say that parenthood is a difficult profession. It was always so in the past. It is even more so today. How frequently, for example, do matters of discipline perplex the modern father and mother; how often are they not at a loss to know which course is the best to follow in their dealings with their little ones! Shall they punish or shall they praise? Shall they allow or shall they refuse? The decision is often not an easy one to make. And yet upon it may depend in no small measure the future weal or woe of their offspring.

Keenly aware of the many difficulties that confront them in their tasks of child training, not a few parents today are eagerly reaching outside the home for help and guidance. Can the assistance they seek be given them? Can helpful direction be made available to them?

It must be admitted, first of all, that there are very real limitations to what can be done. Matters of child guidance cannot be reduced to rule-of-thumb methods. In other words, hard and fast rules that offer unfailing solutions for all possible cases of discipline that may arise are quite beyond the realm of possibility. The variations in the types of both children and parents are too great. The same is true with regard to the circumstances in which they find themselves.

Still, it is no less certain that some guiding principles can

be laid down and that some helpful suggestions can be offered to parents. A number of these are set forth in the following paragraphs with the hope that they may prove of some practical value. They represent in no small measure the work of a group of mature students who, on completing a course in Parent Education under the direction of the writer, pooled their common ideas and thereby provided much of the material that appears in the pages of the writer's *Parent and Child* (Paulist Press).

TYPES OF PARENTS.—Perhaps the logical starting point for parents who are interested in making the most of their opportunities for the training of their children within the home is to turn the searchlight of inquiry upon themselves, to investigate their own attitudes towards child training, and to study their own methods of fulfilling their obligations in this vital field of activity. And this should be done with the full realization that the present and future well-being of the child rather than their own convenience and the order of the household should be given first consideration.

Such an examination would undoubtedly show that many parents today fit into one of the following three groups: first, parents who are too strict; second, those who are too lenient; third, those who are inconsistent or alternating in disciplining their children.

PARENTS WHO ARE TOO STRICT.—There are, as a matter of fact, not a few parents who rule their homes like autocrats. They are overstrict and severe. Excessive punishment, ceaseless bickering, and endless restriction make the home anything but inviting to their children. The result is only too frequently the cultivation of a disputatious or rebellious character, or of a silent and sullen antagonism instead of the development of a spirit of loyalty to parent and home. Deceit and double dealing may even

be resorted to by children in such homes in their efforts to escape punishment.

No doubt autocratic parents get a certain thrill out of the realization that their children obey them with unquestioned obedience. But the proper training of children is of far greater importance than a little selfish bit of pride or pleasure on the part of parents. The important question is whether under such rigid rule children will develop a wholesome degree of moral independence and self-control. In other words, will they on leaving the parental nest be able to stand on their own feet in the world? The chances are many against one that they will not.

INDULGENT PARENTS.—More common today than a discipline that is too rigid is undoubtedly one that is too weak and easy-going. As there are parents who are autocrats, so also are there parents who are little more than servants to their children. Such parents may be simply of an easy-going temperament, or certain environmental circumstances may account for their leniency and failure. The spirit of "do as you please," for example, is very much in the air these days and is extremely contagious. Some parents, too, may actually persuade themselves that they can train their children by yielding to them. They give in to all their childish whims and tantrums as the easiest, if not the only, way of maintaining peace and quiet.

Yet these parents must certainly realize that by countenancing such a philosophy of the easiest way they are simply leaving their children unprepared for life. The world into which these youngsters must eventually be turned is emphatically a world of hard knocks. Young people whose rule of life is to avoid what is difficult and to go through with those projects only which appeal to their sense of ease and comfort are the raw material from which the failures of life are formed. There is much need today

for a diligent cultivation of the cardinal virtue of fortitude within the home in order that the creed of softness which has become so characteristic of the times may be effectively counteracted.

INCONSISTENT PARENTS.—Most frequent of all and most disastrous is the union of license and severity within the home. In this instance, the parents are inconsistent, spasmodic in their dealings with their children. First they pet and then they punish; one minute they coax into good behavior and the next they scold abusively; today they condemn a certain act and tomorrow they pass it by unnoticed.

It is not to be wondered at that under the circumstances children scarcely know what is expected of them. Nor will they ordinarily fail to take the chance offered by their parents' changing humor for the extortion of bribery and affection when they want it. Thinking their parents guided more by whim than by principle, the children may even lose all respect for them and all confidence in them.

In this connection it is also well to observe that differences in judgment on the part of parents should always be settled in private, and never be paraded in the presence of the children. If the parents make use of two opposite codes or standards, that is, if one constantly shields and spoils while the other remains ever stern and unyielding, the methods of each stultify those of the other. The fact is that the union of license and severity in the home, whether in the person of one and the same capricious parent or in two parents with opposite standards, is both very common in practice and decidedly harmful in effect.

THE MIDDLE WAY THE RIGHT WAY.—The type of discipline required of parents will, of course, have to depend to some extent upon the disposition of the particular child that is being dealt with, but it must always be a consistent discipline.

Moreover, it must in general lie between the two extremes of severity and laxity.

Obedience in the home is quite compatible with wholesome and whole-hearted democracy therein. In fact, a proper degree of independence, initiative, and freedom must be recognized and encouraged. Without these there can be no development, no virtue or self-control. A policy of repression stunts and kills, or it incites to rebellion with the subsequent necessity of a host of laws and regulations, all unwelcome because imposed from without.

On the other hand, to permit a child to range entirely at its own will is to prepare it not only for failure in every worthy conflict of life, but in all likelihood for shame and disgrace as well. A controlled freedom should be aimed at.

SOME RULES AND GUIDING PRINCIPLES.—With a proper attitude towards the general task of child training in mind, parents should derive some practical help and specific guidance from the following few rules and principles:

1. First of all, parents do well to realize that there can be no training at a distance; hence they must go out of their way if necessary to keep close to their children and to enter in so far as possible into their work and play. Under the older economic order of more rural times, parent and child were constantly brought together through shared work and play. Under the newer and present order, however, which prevails particularly in cities, this is no longer the case. Economic and social conditions have built an ever-widening chasm between the two. The companionship that formerly came about automatically must today be carefully planned and even sacrificed for. It must in great part be brought about by artificial effort.

2. Parents should realize that the training of the child is not

only the mother's, but also the father's task. It is particularly difficult for many fathers today to spend much time with their children; hence they must learn to make the most of the limited amount of time that they do have with them. In other words, they must learn to take an active interest in the hobbies and sports of their children. The child, whether boy or girl, who comes under the guidance of only one parent is in much the same position as a half orphan and will be very liable to suffer a one-sided development.

3. Another point that parents do well to bear in mind, particularly in this day of a rapidly disappearing patriarchal family system, is the importance of their winning the loyalty of their children and of playing the role of sympathetic confidants to them. If a father and mother are trusted friends and confidential advisors to their children in their early years, it is reasonable to hope that they will continue to serve in this highly important capacity during the difficult period of adolescence and afterwards. Certainly it is worthy of the highest commendation that children bring all their problems, troubles, and doubts to father and mother for solution. Such, however, will only be the case if parents are truly companions, friends, and confidants to their little ones.

4. A principle that is particularly deserving of emphasis is the following: A positive rather than a negative turn should be given by parents to their efforts at child training. In other words, they should be as ready to approve the good acts of a child as they are to condemn the bad ones. Thus if a child is reprovved for eating too many sweets, why not commend him when he faithfully eats his vegetables and fruits?

5. At times punishment may become necessary in training children within the home. Its aim should always be to bring about

regret in the child's mind. He will not readily repeat that for which he has felt sorrow. Many suggest also that wherever possible punishment should follow naturally from the offense committed. Such a practice, at any rate, would tend to focus the attention of the child on the consequence of his own act rather than on the possible anger or resentment of the parent. An extensive use of corporal punishment in the case of the average child is hardly commendable, since it is hard to administer it unemotionally and harder still to receive it in that manner. Undue corporal punishment is perhaps more liable to result in defiance or secretiveness than in penitence.

6. Again, parents should always bear in mind that the proper aim in a child's upbringing should be to develop self-control and self-training. Hence, at least from his earliest school years, a child should be gradually trained to moral independence. During the pre-school years, of course, his mental capacity is not sufficiently developed for reason to play any considerable part in the training process. The principal method of training during this period, therefore, must almost exclusively depend upon the simple fact that the child will naturally tend to repeat acts which have pleasant consequences and to avoid those which have unpleasant ones. The unpleasant consequences may result from the undesirable action itself or they may be artificially attached to the action by the parent, for example, in the form of a scolding or other act of disapproval.

It is undoubtedly appropriate to demand blind obedience on the part of a young child. But it is a mistake to carry it over into later years. Children of school age are old enough to appreciate the reasons of things and should be taught them. Ideals and principles should play an ever-increasing part in their training. Thus, the child should be taught to obey not to avoid punish-

ment, but because the law of God expects it of him. Or again, he should be taught to be truthful because lying is essentially wrong, and so on with other acts and omissions. If children have learned no reason for being good other than blind obedience to their parents, their good habits will have no permanent force. They will only be make-believe.

SOME SPECIFIC SUGGESTIONS.—1. As few commands as possible should be given to children. Over-correction and domination are naturally resented by a child as they are by an adult.

2. A child's attention should be secured before a command is given him. An order shouted haphazardly at a little one who is all preoccupied with some playful activity that is almost as serious as a matter of life and death to him, will likely be but dimly recognized and but little heeded. For real co-operation attention is altogether necessary.

3. Commands given a child should be followed up; that is, parents should let it be known firmly and pleasantly that they unfailingly expect obedience. Otherwise all discipline will be speedily undermined.

4. It is poor policy to bribe a child. He will likely capitalize his disobedience by holding out for a greater bribe the next time. If given a penny to behave today, he will likely expect another, or two of them, before heeding orders tomorrow.

5. Parents should not expect the impossible of a child. If their commands are reasonable, obedience will be fairly easy on the part of the little one.

6. Not a few parents incessantly make use of threats in order to gain obedience. Such a habit ordinarily results either in a hampering fear and timidity on the part of the child or in a real-

ization that the commands of the parent are futile and their observance or non-observance a matter of trivial importance.

7. It is particularly worthy of note that once a child has lost confidence in his parents because of deception or other cause, it will be restored only with the greatest difficulty. Hence the unreasonableness of deceiving children in order to gain obedience.

8. One should be just in dealing with children. In adults the imposition of an unjust command leaves an ugly scar if not even a festering wound; in children it at least lessens their respect for and their confidence in their parents.

Such are a few of the guides that can be offered parents to aid them in their difficult tasks of child training. While admittedly far from adequate to solve all the manifold and perplexing problems that confront them, these suggestions are recommended for what helpful service they may be able to render them.

Parents, of course, are human. Hence mistakes will at times be made by them in their dealings with their children. But they should not be too human to admit their mistakes when they see them and to correct them.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Can you suggest any positive principles besides those mentioned herein which should be helpful in training children?
2. Is it necessary for parents to understand their children in order to train them successfully?
3. Do parents ever expect too much of their children?
4. Do parents ever do too much for their children?
5. May parental example ever lead to disobedience on the part of children?
6. What are some specific ways in which fathers and mothers can keep in closer contact with their children today?
7. Which is easier, to prevent undesirable habits in children or to correct them?
8. Which is worse, a command that is not obeyed or no command at all?
9. Is it wise to argue with a child?
10. Do you think it important to find the cause of a child's disobedience?
11. Might the following factors lead to disobedience: fatigue, sickness, over-excitement, unjust punishment?
12. Should one give a child what he wants when he teases for it?
13. Should the following means of obtaining obedience be used: sarcasm, deception, fear?

