

Raising Children In A Democracy
Rudolf Dreikurs, M.D.

We are confronted with the fact that parents are ill prepared to raise socially and emotionally sound children. It seems that Homo Sapiens of the twentieth century, particularly in the United States, has lost a knowledge which all other creatures on the earth possess, namely, how to raise their young. The simplest routines of social living become perplexing problems. Many parents find it difficult to get the children up in the morning and to school on time, or to bed at night, without scolding and fighting. Many young children seem to have lost the natural tendency to eat; they have to be coddled and coaxed, reminded and threatened, bribed and waited on, making each mealtime a torture. How to get children to keep their rooms clean, to their toys and clothes away, is a major puzzle to which many parents still seek an answer. We take it for granted that brother and sisters will fight for every advantage, and forget that the term “brotherly love” once implied the height of considerateness and devotion. Little of that is found in our families. The slightest contribution to the welfare of the family, such as daily chores, is fraught with conflict and frustration. The child’s responsibility to study, to practice, or to apply himself in any way, is often the source of endless friction.

Despite these rather general conditions, many children do behave well and develop satisfactorily. Often they do so not because of their parents, but in spite of them. This is indicated by the fact that many excellent students and outstanding youngsters have brothers and sisters who are socially and academically deficient. If the parents knew how to stimulate progress in one child, why did they fail to do so with others? The number of children who do not function well is too great to be dismissed lightly: they can no longer be regarded as exceptions.

The strongest evidence of a universal parental failure is our concern with parent education. We would not need books about raising our children, or study groups, lectures, and

classes for parents, if parents knew what to do with their children. Unfortunately, what parents read and learn often adds to their confusion. In many cases, the “experts” hardly know more than the parents about how to bring up children. Some of them merely describe the maladjustments that characteristic of various age levels, without either explaining them or suggesting remedies. Others attribute the difficulties of children to a lack of love and affection, to the parents’ emotional instability or immaturity. They, too, are unable to tell parents what to do in any concrete situation. The prevalent pessimism in regard children is apparent when a suggestion to a parent is found to be effective. “It really worked!” indicates their utter surprise that something can have an effect on the child.

Cultural Growing Pains

What is the reason for this predicament? Are our adults really becoming more insecure, immature, morally and socially deficient? There is no reason to assume that. Naturally, parents become upset if they are frustrated in their efforts. Those with high moral standards are likely to feel even worse when their children do not respond as they should. What is wrong with them—or with their children?

Every culture and civilization, including our own has developed a definite pattern for training its children. For many generations they knew exactly what to do. But now we are rapidly moving from an autocratic past in to a new era of democracy with an increasing degree of social equality for all. Our children have gained status; they share in all this equality. The traditional pattern for child training is obsolete, and nothing has been developed to replace it. It is this breakdown of tradition which confuses parents.

In the course of this democratic evolution, adults have lost their power over children. They can no longer control them, or “make them” behave or perform. Pressure from without has

lost its impact. Reward and punishment have become ineffective. They were necessary and appropriate in an autocratic society which imposed its will upon its subjects. Parents used to have the right to enforce submission, even if it meant severe beatings and threats of expulsion. Today, society sides with the child, and declares a brutal mother or father to be unfit. Children support each other in their defiance. They no longer think of a reward as an expression of the benevolent authority; they consider it their “right.” Once a reward has been used to stimulate effort, the child refuses to do anything unless he gets another. Conversely, the failure of punishment is obvious...Far from being intimidated, the child takes it in stride and shrugs it off, responding—at best—only temporarily. Imbued with his “rights,” the child assumes that if he is punished by an adult, he has the same right to punish. Our homes and schools are filled with such acts of mutual retaliation.

The eternal smoldering conflict between the generations, which in the past was contained by the power of adult, has burst in to the open with the waning of adult authority. Adults and children are at war. At times the struggle may take on subtle forms, at others exhibit the full brutality of warfare. Communication between adults and children has vanished; they simply cannot see eye to eye. Misunderstanding is rampant, and distrust reigns. Juvenile delinquency and childhood schizophrenia mark the extreme in the rebellion youth. But the efforts of the struggle are felt in every home and in every classroom—particularly in the metropolitan areas. Children feel misunderstood and abused; adults, disregarded and defeated. In each conflict situation, parents attempt the traditional solution, in which the outcome is determined by the victor. In a democratic atmosphere, with its need for agreement based on mutual respect, nothing can be gained through either fighting or giving in; but the parents do not know what else they can do.

Understanding—A Basic Requirement

We need a new tradition in raising children, a tradition based on recognition of social equality between parents and children and embodying mutual respect. Trying to impose one's will on the child violates respect for him and makes him more rebellious, while permissiveness and indulgence violate respect for one's self and produce tyrannical children and anarchy in the home.

However, things will probably grow much worse before the need for a total overhauling of our premises will be acknowledged. More is needed than a recommendation for a general attitude of love and tolerance. Parents need to know what they can and what they should not do in dealing with children, particularly in moments of conflict and disrupted order. They gain little from generalities. They need practical information, both about effective methods and about the psychology of children. In bygone times, children posed few problems; in most cases, pressure from without insured compliance with demands and regulations. Today, parents need to know how to motivate the child to cooperate, to function, to respect order, and to take on his share of the responsibility for all.

This need to understand the child's motivation is one of the basic requirements for a new approach to children. When authority alone determined behavior and function, a concern with motivation was not needed. Today, prevention of undesirable developments—and, even more, all corrective efforts—require a knowledge of the psychological dynamics that underlay emotional blocks, antagonistic and hostile attitude, and detrimental goals and intentions. The question of psychological orientation for parents is one of the most complex aspects of contemporary psychology. Parents receive a great deal of information; but much of it is vague, inapplicable, and often even questionable. I suggest that training in recognizing the child's immediate goals is

most helpful in enabling parents and teachers to understand children and to counteract detrimental behavior or deficiency. If he does not understand the child's goal, the educator becomes a victim of the child's unconscious scheme, rather than his guide. ¹

The democratic atmosphere requires a specific relationship as a basis of cooperation. We must treat even an antagonist with respect, and at the same time inspire his respect. This is what parents need to learn. A formula for mutual respect is an attitude of kindness and firmness; the first expressing respect for the child; the second, respect for oneself. There are too many who are kind but not firm, and others who are firm but not kind. Some can be kind and firm, but rarely at the same time. Practical training in concrete situations is required to develop this skill in interpersonal relationships. Most parents can learn it if the problems are discussed clearly and in detail.

Certain technical procedures facilitate this learning process. Parents can discover the fallacy of talking. As a rule, children do not listen, since a great deal of domestic talk is used not for communication but as ammunition. Once the mother stops talking, she is ready to move into action. The child is impressed by action, not by words, which merely induce him to become mother deaf. Action does not mean hostility, only planned procedures.

It is possible to teach parents the kind of actions that impress children. The first lesson a mother has to learn is to withdraw from the undue demands of the child. The main goal of our child guidance work is to extricate parents from the tyranny of their children. Parents today are usually no match for their children. The child knows how to influence his mother, while she is at a loss. It is usually not the child who is dependent on the mother, but the mother who depends on every breath and move of the child. So-called dependent children are those who use a real—or more frequently an assumed—"weakness" to dominate their mothers and keep them in their

service. Many behavior problems and deficiencies disappear when children are left to their own resources, deprived of undue service, attention and an audience.

In such a situation, the child is exposed to the pressure of reality—and he responds well to it. This is the basis of our second principle: the application of natural or logical consequences. Many parents find it difficult to distinguish between punishment and logical consequences. It requires training to become aware of the subtle but all-important distinction. For the adult, one pressure is not much different from the other; for the child the difference is fundamental. The application of natural consequences replaces the authority of a person with the authority of the group—of reality. The child rebels against order only because he identifies it with the demands of a personal authority which he tries to defy. By removing herself as a source of pressure, the mother teaches the child the benefit of order; the child learns to respect it, while is unwilling to accept the pressure of a person in power.

A great many practical suggestions emerge from this general frame of reference. It has

¹The application of this teleo-analytic approach to home and school is described in the author's books, *The Challenge of Parenthood* and *Psychology in the Classroom*.

been found helpful, for example, if each member of the family refrains from becoming a part of a conflict between two others. They have to learn to settle their own problems, be "they" the children, or a child and an adult. Actually, they learn rapidly if there is no one to interfere, to control, judge, and pacify. Remaining aloof, a mother may discover that her apparently innocent younger child is the trouble-maker, egging on his big brother; and that he can take care of himself if left alone.

Another lesson in democratic family relationships is that each member of the family is responsible for his own actions, although each may be inclined to blame someone else for existing conflicts and frictions. No one has the right to sit in judgment over what the others are doing. If each member of the family could see what he could do, and were willing to do it, he would feel no need to pass judgment. It is less important what others are doing to the child than what we can do; others—whether within or outside the family—are part of reality with which we have to deal. Anyone who is able to establish a cooperative attitude with a child can help him to ward off detrimental influences and to deal with hostile forces.

The Need for Encouragement

One of the most important techniques which parents and teachers need to learn is the art of encouragement. The term is widely—and lightly—used, without much awareness of its complex nature. No corrective effort is possible without encouragement, which implies restoration of the child's faith in himself. Deficiency or misbehavior indicates discouragement; it is so much easier and more gratifying to do right, that every child would do it had he not lost confidence in his ability and the possibility of success. Our methods of training children constitute a sequence of discouraging experiences, whether through impositions, humiliations, indulgences, over-permissiveness, or neglect. Consequently, every child needs encouragement as a plant needs water. But few adults know how to give it.

Encourage is more than praise. Actually, praise can often cause additional discouragement, because the child may consider it either as undeserved or as an obligation to succeed beyond his capacity. The art of encouragement presupposes sincere faith in the child as he *is*, not in his potential or what he *could* be. At present, few adults have faith in children, and least of all in those who need the most encouragement. Only those who do not need it get a great

deal; those whose whole future may depend on encouragement encounter only confirmation of their failures.

To a large extent our educational practices are *mistake-centered*. A great deal of our educational effort is devoted to preventing or correcting mistakes. Many of these well-meant procedures lead to further discouragement. One cannot build on weakness—only on strength. Our children are usually impressed with the fact that they are not good enough *as they are*. Consequently their belief in their own strength is sapped; even their self-confidence is only temporary and conditional. The most successful child must remain fearful, because no success protects against future failure. And failure and mistakes threaten social status and recognition, without which nobody can feel secure.

* * *

General principles like these still require further exploration and testing. They have merged as a new approach to raising children, developed in the laboratory of child guidance and classroom experimentation. They are far from being universally accepted, and therefore do not constitute a “tradition.” But some effect and generally acceptable methods of dealing with children will have to be established to provide a reliable frame of reference for all parents. No set of rules guarantees success or excludes new conflicts; but it can provide a yardstick by which procedures can be evaluated, and an orientation which reduces confusion and inconsistencies.

The coming revolution in our educational practices presupposes a new outlook on life. Traditional concepts of man will have to be discarded. The slave mentality that prompts everyone to be afraid of punishment and to be good only if he has to be, needs to be replaced

with the realization of one's own freedom, self determination, responsibility, and almost inconceivable power. We have to be free of fear before we can stop using fear to intimidate our children into conformity. All cultural influences that imply intimidation are inimical to the development of freeman. We can no longer operate on a double standard, one for adults and one for children. We can no longer present to them a picture of life that we do not accept for ourselves. There is no need for pretenses in regard to religion or sex; our children deserve to be treated as our equals, sharing our beliefs and convictions—which, indeed, we cannot hide from them. We do not need symbols of power for them when we have discarded them for ourselves. Sincerity, courage, and a sense of responsibility can evolve without fear, without threat of punishment, and without the traditional symbols of an autocratic past.