

Behaviour Problems in the Nursery



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Every mother and every children's nurse who wishes to handle her children wisely is faced with the same problem: how to combine sympathy and freedom with discipline.

All successful human beings have at their command certain habits of behaviour, of self-knowledge and skill, and these every parent wishes to enforce upon his children. At the same time he is faced by the insistent demand in modern thought for freedom for individual growth, for the development of individual traits. How are these two to be harmonized?

The desire to form in children habits of obedience, of courtesy, and of unselfish consideration of others, arises in any parent from his own experience. Every parent wishes to see his child happy, successful, and popular with his fellows. Half instinctively he knows that these results follow only upon long practice of actions of courtesy and unselfishness, and from his own experience he knows, only too sadly, how difficult a habit of this kind is to gain and keep under stress of circumstance. Cleanliness, punctuality, courtesy, to be reliable must rise out of sources laid so deep as almost to become instinctive—to become, as we say, second nature to the child; otherwise they will serve only in happy circumstances and wear away under stress.

From a retrospective view therefore, parents and teachers strongly feel the value of these accomplishments, and it is difficult indeed not to feel that no price can be too high to be paid for success.

But none of these qualities is natural to the child. A child comes into the world with one desire only—to live—and to live with the greatest number of pleasant, and the fewest number of unpleasant sensations that he can compass. Curiosity, eagerness, enjoyment go to the making of his day. The simple desire for pleasure divides itself into desire for power over one's environment, and desire for gratification of one's senses. A baby, as far as his own nature is concerned, is prepared to sacrifice the whole world to gratify himself; it is only himself he knows, and only his own desires that are real to him. A parent is too often told that psychologists say that if these desires are repressed evil will result. How then is training to be brought about? Is all desire for courtesy and unselfishness to be given up in the allowing of full play to each instinctive drive? Or, are we to insist upon the acquisition of these so lovely social qualities by all the means in our power, and for ever after feel the

prick of uncertainty lest we have thereby crippled and spoiled the instinctive happiness of the child we train?

Thus the dilemma must put itself to every sympathetic parent who is sensitive to modern thought and modern literature. And the dilemma is in a way real, but it lies more in our conception of the facts of discipline than in the nature of the things themselves.

It is of the nature of progress that every living force tends to shape for itself certain moulds into which it can pour itself, the mould and the life that fills it for the moment appearing as one. After a while the mould becomes inadequate, it needs to be destroyed that new moulds may be made. The life of art and of architecture shows this very vividly. The same is true with forms of character. Before we can tackle our dilemma we need to consider whether we are satisfied with the character we have ourselves achieved: with our national character. In the past the English educational system from nursery to university produced a certain type of person. We were satisfied with that character: we knew the price we paid, we accepted quite contentedly the charges of insularity, of lack of imagination, of conventionality, because we knew the force of what we gained. But now we are in a transition stage, when everything is uncertain. The old goals satisfy us no longer, and, though we only partly realise it, we are being driven to search for new forms. To fence, to be hardy, to be able to ride a horse, were at one time indispensable necessities of life, to which everything had to be sacrificed: now they have hardly more than a historical interest. To have an impassive exterior and a certain character of voice are no longer the hall-mark of a cultivated man. And yet it is of as fundamental importance to every parent that he should know the goal to which he moves, and that a price must be paid for each achievement. No very courteous, very gentle, very unselfish child excels in initiative and in daring and self-reliance. The daring child will at the same time be boisterous, rude and in- dependent.

What is important is that each parent should decide which is for him the crucial and essential quality. Both forms he cannot have— which does he choose? Are we more interested in the cultural development of our children, in the kind of men and women they will appear to be as they move among their fellows, or does their individuality appeal to us more? If so, are we prepared for them possibly to be unpopular, and even for a time unmannerly, so long as they develop individual characters of their own? To achieve outward dignity early, a certain sacrifice must be made of originality and spirit; and to preserve the peculiar flavour and individuality, which lie potentially in every child, equal sacrifice of the smoother qualities must very often be accepted.

As our conception of the beings we would have our children become matures, it will be seen that a bridge can be built between these two classes of qualities. The difficulty about this bridge, as with all real things, is that it is hard to build and, moreover, involves the hardest of all efforts for the parent: the willingness to alter one's own scale of values, and to allow oneself to be changed. All the same, it is possible, and in this lies the thrill and the hope of future education, whether home or school. The foundations of character are

laid in the early years, and the best part of this bridge is built in the nursery. The key-arch of the bridge lies in the value given to the early egocentric desires of the child.

To the older educationalist the crude desires of childhood were wrong and to be combated at every point. 'No', replies the new knowledge that is 'slowly coming to us, ' not bad: primitive; undisciplined; raw'. This energy, this tremendous will towards possession, towards exploration, domination, self-gratification, is good in the sense that a natural force is good, a force which may destroy a town or create its light or heat. What is necessary is to grasp the nature of this force, and its possible transformations, and to help it to find paths of development in harmony with the whole of its nature and desires. No child wishes to be 'naughty', to be 'dirty' in our sense, to be rebellious. He wishes to be loved, to be cherished, to be held warmly and comfortably, and to be admired. But these primitive forces within him that he does not understand force him into directions which meet with our disapproval, and the results which he deprecates as much as we deplore them, automatically recur. .

A child of three bangs a drum all day—a sound, which is past bearing to any adult after a certain length of time—and a typical situation arises. The child's energy is driving him to a course unendurable to adult surroundings. It would appear that one or the other must be sacrificed; but, and here is the joy of the new way of regarding things, neither need be sacrificed; there is a third way by which both can be reconciled. The child's desire is for the experience of sound and the joy or satisfaction of sound produced by his own action. This is the germ of the pianist or violoncellist, and also of the drunkard who sings upon the streets. It is our joy to cultivate it also into the one rather than into the other. Ask for the loan of the drumstick for a moment; hit the drum, then hit a hollow box; the sound is different. Hit the table, the chair, the cupboard door: each gives out a different note. This is fascinating to the infant. Quickly the child will seize the idea. In place of the indiscriminate banging of a drum without attention or development, will come an eager and amused investigation of all the noises producible from the common things of life. Don't put upon children yokes too hard for them to bear; don't say 'Don't make a noise', to a child throbbing with the joy of vigorous life; give him the kind of noise to make which will harness his mind and his eagerness, and train his sense perceptions to delicacy.

'Dirt', that is, soft material, which is mould-able, or stuff with which marks can be made, is attractive and enthralling to every infant. Sense perception in small children is much keener than in adult life. It is a new experience, nothing is known about it by the child, and there is to his mind a world to explore. The coal box therefore, to the crawler, his own faeces possibly, or any source of colour and soft-ness, to the toddler, are objects of fascination and delight. To explore their possibilities and try out the sensations they can give him is a keen delight. 'Cleanliness' as the adult knows it, comes from association and training, and has no meaning at all for the child. Punishment for 'dirtiness' has as a result no meaning for him, and horror of the adult at the state of ecstatic messiness a child in this stage is able to get into, spells to him only the marauding adult, demanding from him under pain

of acute displeasure, the very things that give him keenest joy and that for no reason.

The typical position of conflict arises. What should be done? Keep the desire and the zest, but change the material. Discipline is necessary, and the recognition by the child of suitable and unsuitable sources of pleasure. But the pleasure itself is good and the source of much that is valuable in after life. The same process of thought is needed here, in the adult, as in all problems of this kind. Two questions need to be put: 'What is the centre of this pleasure? What is it, that is, exactly, that this child is enjoying in this action?' and second, 'How can I give him the same satisfaction in another and more socially valuable way?' For moulding sense and the love of dirt: modelling clay, sand and water in a tin sand-tray, garden mould and a potting shed, form an excellent bridge, and lead by natural analogy from the original interest, to plasticine and intelligent use of modelling materials. Charcoal and paper, soft chalks, water-colour paint with large flat brushes and big stretches of paper on a wall, serve to lead the toddler's interest from the coalbox to careful drawing, confining the desire within the legitimate channels, but keeping the strength of emotion intact.

On the other side of the picture, it is also of great importance in the search for freedom of expression, to allow to the child a frame-work of cool, unalterable, emotionless order. Every child needs to have a scaffolding of security about him within which to build his own character. Everything within a child is in a state of flux and change: quiet unalterable law about exterior matters, the time-table of the day, the places where things belong, the order of due precedence, appeal to him. They are essential to him for his proper interior growth, and for the harmony between his wishes and the outside world.

Contraction, relaxation, education, should be as the beat of the heart: freedom to express the reality, definite guidance as to the ways in which better expression is made; fixed, quiet, unalterable facts to return to, fixed by bigger, quieter adults, from whom come rest and firmness and recuperation, before the rhythm swings back to energy again.