

Freedom and Discipline in Education- Part II

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Margaret Lowenfeld

A very grave obstacle meets us at the outset in any attempt to define discipline in education. This is the intimate connection, particularly evident in England, between education and moral training.

The earliest experiments in freedom for youth known to me were those made in the George Junior Republics in America and in the Little Commonwealth of Homer Lane in England. These were institutions designed to give children who had already failed in social adjustment a new start in life, and were based in the most daring and successful way upon the principle of freedom; but they were not in essence schools at all, and their problems were problems of character and not of learning.

Character Training and Mental Discipline

Where problems of ethics have become indistinguishable from problems of education—and this has happened in the free schools just as it did long ago in the public schools—the child is faced largely with problems of conduct and character; smoking or not smoking; swearing or not swearing; being aggressive to authority or not aggressive. These are not problems of the training of the mind. We have allowed problems of social adjustment to be entangled with problems of personal development, until it is hard to see the subject as an *educational* one at all.

So long as, and in so far as, our system of education is carried out in schools where the children live as well as learn, this difficulty is ineradicable, and the public schools, with their insistence primarily upon the formation of character, have not allowed us to forget it. The formation of character and the training, development and education of the mind have necessary interconnections at many points, *but they are fundamentally different tasks*. In discussions upon school management, 'discipline' is usually construed as an ability to keep a number of school girls and boys quietly seated in a classroom for definite periods of time, or conforming to a given pattern of behaviour outside the class. It has nothing whatever to do with education, if education be taken to mean the training and discipline of the intellectual faculties of the human being.

The Disciplining of Desire

But what is the meaning of discipline itself, apart from any specialized activity of the mind or body? All human beings experience almost hourly the fact that 'desire outruns performance,' and in the lack of harmony between desire and ability lie many of the most lasting pains of the soul and mind. This lack of harmony may be due in part to prohibitions coming from the

environment, but there remains an equal or even stronger element of strain in the conflict arising within the personality itself.

Desire in childhood is terrifically strong, far stronger than at any time in later life; moreover, the ability to wait for fulfilment is a virtue impossible to childhood, and only very hardly learned in later years. In childhood, to wish is to feel, and to feel is to demand instantly with the whole of the self that the feeling obtain satisfaction.

We have said that freedom is the possibility of carrying out anything that the self wishes, with approval from the environment and the self; but before the statement has any meaning, the nature of the self must be understood. Children are faced with the continual experience of passions arising, as it were, from nowhere and sweeping over them to ends they cannot see. The force of passion in early childhood makes the child feel almost as though it itself is in danger of destruction. Furthermore, two desires often arise simultaneously, which are mutually destructive to one another. Which arises from the child's real self? Which is he to be rendered free to obey? The drama and pitifulness of childhood is that the child is totally unable to answer a query of this kind; he does not know. Nor, at the moment of his rage, or of his acute fatigue, does the normal man know either. To ask either man or child to decide truly and act wisely at a moment of this kind is to ask the impossible.

A small child in the grip of a violent emotion is usually a child in immediate danger of terror; the emotion is to him an outside thing coming from the unknown upon him, and fraught with grave dangers to himself. By himself he is unable to cope with this thing—his emotion being too strong to express—and often he exhausts himself in temper or tears till a state of equilibrium is restored.

Every human being wishes to be master of himself and to accomplish his desires, but in so doing he is faced with unavoidable obstacles. It is in the nature of the child's desire that so many of the things which he wishes to do cannot be accomplished: he cannot be a prince, overcome his enemy, know the contents of a book without reading it, make a clock in half an hour, or become an engine driver. Left alone to himself, it is essential that he create, either from inside himself or from the outside world, something to which he can hold and which will give him the counter-balance to his own strivings.

Mechanisms of Control

The name 'discipline' is usually given to those devices which one uses for controlling the urgency of desire and acquiring mastery over it. By himself no child can directly achieve empire over his desires. In every human being, three mechanisms come into play during this struggle for control:

1. Strong disapprobation from external and loved authority induces in the child such pain of displeasure and of being outcast from love that fear of a recurrence of this pain holds in check the primary desire.

2. The spontaneous awakening within the child of an emotion which conflicts with the first desire produces an unbearable tension. Then the whole conflict is pushed out of direct consciousness into the deeper regions of the mind.

(In the first case a permanent crippling of the energy of the mind may result; in the second the tension of the conflict, if not too severe, will give rise to energy in other forms, capable of finding different expression).

3. The third and most effective type of check is that given by the nature of impersonal material, which enforces its own laws upon the mind or body that wishes to master it. Thus, hammering a typewriter which one cannot control leads, not to power over it but to frustration of the desire to bend it to one's will, where hammering a playfellow, or sister, may actually and in reality bend them to one's will, with disastrous consequences later.

Control gained according to the first mechanism is nearly always disastrous to the mind, if only because it withdraws from the working of the intellect force that might have been behind it. Take, for instance, the impulse of curiosity, an impulse of tremendous power in childhood, and the mainspring of all learning. Met by adult disapproval vigorously applied, a child is only too often given such a horror and fear of his own curiosity that it is inhibited altogether.

As far as we know, little can be done to promote or modify the occurrence of the second type of control. The laws governing this mechanism are as yet too imperfectly known. Control of the third type of discipline is largely in our hands; hence the value of all practical education. Frustration of immediate impulse, or failure to achieve our goal at the first attempt, is the only road to eventual mastery of the desire and ability to use it spontaneously. Only continually repeated attempts to accomplish an end bring either satisfaction or joy or real control of the desire itself. Every individual who wishes to achieve conscious control of himself sets up his own barriers, the overcoming of which gives him exercise in struggling and in self-mastery.

Intellectual Ripening *versus* Character Growth

But the child is composed of many desires: the achievement of harmony is a lifelong struggle. Here we find, in its acutest form, the conflicting interests of intellectual ripening versus character growth. In a sense, character is independent of time, and a victory won in a gain so precious that against it no passage of time can weigh heavily in the balance. In the region of intellectual work, time counts supremely, and time once lost can never be replaced. It is in accordance with our evaluation of the work of intellectual achievement that our decision between these two will ultimately be reached.

Apart from the mere memorizing of facts, there is *no hastening of intellectual ripening*. There has to be adequate time for brooding and for the

gradual assimilation of fact and integration of thought. The child whose energy is absorbed during the years of school life, or even part of these years, in coping with the urgencies of desires in other quarters, will not have either the energy or attention to spare which are essential to the mastering of intellectual tasks. He will emerge into life, richer perhaps in character, but poorer in knowledge and intellectual ripeness than he might have been. School years are so few; the question is whether a child can find his way unaided in these short years to both goals simultaneously—the goal of freedom of character and that of intellectual maturity. Too often the latter is sacrificed to the former, and the real purpose of school is lost.

As I see it, the fundamental problem is the provision for the child of such real impersonal holds and checks as will set him free for the labour of intellectual effort, effort chosen by himself and directed by himself along such lines as his own desires lead.

Considered from the point of view of intellectual growth, the function of discipline is to reinforce character by selective action in such a way as to set it free for intellectual achievement.