

Moral Training
By Dr Margaret Lowenfeld
(Co-Director of the Institute of Child Psychology)



(Report of the third of four lectures in a course of eight on the “Common Difficulties in Normal Children” arranged by the Institute of Child Psychology and delivered at Friends’ House, Euston Road, N.W.1 on Wednesday, November 21st, 1934.)

As you can imagine, the question of moral behaviour, taking those words in their widest possible sense, is one of the most frequent that comes up in the work I have to do. A very large proportion of children brought to me, either in private or otherwise, are children who from the point of view of those who bring them are not showing that conformity to moral standards that they should. These vary from quite serious delinquencies that come from the courts down to the milder troubles of non-conformity with the particular standards of the particular home in which the child lives. It is necessary very carefully to study in the way I tried to put before you last week with regard to obedience, what exactly are the requirements being made upon the child and what are the reasons for its failure and, indeed, of what nature is that failure, because one of the remarkable things about every kind of difficulty in connection with children, as I expect you are beginning to realize, is that they very rarely are what they seem to be.

The first point that strikes any one who has to deal with parents or teachers complaining of moral failure in children is the curious rigidity of the adult point of view. It is almost as if behaviour were a set of shaded cards or things that you take out of a box; that the child either had or had not jumped over this particular stile or gone through that hoop in the correct way. There seems to be little or no general understanding among the general public that a child’s capacity develops from stage to stage and is entirely different from one stage to another.

We are very much indebted to Dr. Charlotte Bühler of Vienna for pointing out certain facts about the emotional and intellectual development of children which have a strong bearing upon the problem we are considering. I would like with your permission to divide the question into three parts: to consider the moral training of children from 0 to some age round about 4 and 5, then from the ages 4 and 5 to round about 10, 11, 12 and, finally, from the latter age to 17 and 18, and to point out to you that the problems we have to encounter and the virtues we should be trying to inculcate are radically and entirely different at those three stages.

The Moral Training of Children from 0 to 4 or 5

The first problem that every infant finds set to it by life is the problem of behaviour which is aroused by frustration; that is to say, is aroused by a failure of the outside world to fulfil the child’s desires and demands at exactly the moment and in exactly the way that the child wishes. A very small baby, that is to say up to its first week of life, is probably attended to, as much as is possible in human affairs, as rapidly and completely as may be. Even so, this very far diverges from the experience it had a week before birth when it was not conscious at all of any need but when every need, as soon as it arose, if one can imagine it arising at that time,

was immediately and adequately satisfied. So the child is faced immediately with a conflict, which conflict expresses itself in more and more definite ways as the baby grows older; but it is always the same conflict. When mummie and nannie are pleased with the child they bend over it with smiles, they emanate from themselves a feeling of satisfaction and joy in the baby that every baby, like every dog and every horse, is acutely sensitive to. When mummie is displeased there comes a frown or cold air and the feeling of displeasure. Few things are harder for children to bear than the feeling of displeasure, of being separate, being shut off from the warmth and the delight of the approval of those upon whom they are dependent. If, as very often happens, the child is expressing dissatisfaction with the delay in the arrival of its bottle, or delay in the arrival of its food in a way that is natural and proper to it, that is to say it is making a horrible row, the mother will very probably apply this sense of discomfort, of separation, to the child. The child stops howling experimentally – you can watch babies do this – and finds that this sense of separation is replaced by a sense of approval. The child becomes aware of a situation in which one desire is pressing one way, the other desire is pressing another, each desire, in its fulfilling, annihilating the other. It has to do something about it. What most good-natured children with a perfectly healthy background and a good start in life do is gradually increase their capacity to endure this tension of desire without giving way to some clamant distress. Gradually, if they are being well handled, the outside world also increases its rapidity of attention and so between the two parties a compromise is reached. The child increasingly learns to wait for those satisfactions; the outside world increasingly learns to understand the child's needs and meet them appropriately. There is, therefore, a gradual increase in the child of the capacity to wait for satisfaction and, if you like to look at it that way, one of the most important duties of training that any of us have to do for children between 0 and 4 and 5, is to bring about in them this capacity to accept delay in satisfaction. In fact, the whole training of the nursery that is so instinctively and intuitively done by good nannies leads towards getting the child not to snatch for its cake the moment it appears and not to jog for the other child's toy the minute it appears more attractive than the toy the child has, not to knock the intervening playthings over on its way to the thing it wants, but gradually to learn a mastery of the most primitive forms of its own desire. Actually, this process goes right through life and you can regard the whole of moral education and training as a gradual incitement, gradual encouragement and training to yourself and to other people to accept delay in satisfaction until you come, in mature life, to people who are able to desire very greatly certain things, for example an artistic creation, the building up of a business, the bringing about of a social reform, and can keep their desire at a white heat of tension without being driven by it at any point into precipitate of hasty action. We all know when we meet an individual of that type that we are in the face of a mature character. the foundations for this character are laid in the first years of life before the social claims can properly be said to come upon the child and before it comes into the world of intellectual discipline.

The second point that a child has to cope with during these years is that it has to endure generously the frustration which is put upon it by the presence of other children. It has to learn in regard to the absolutes of its life this balance between losing favour and suffering frustrated desire when among little children of its own age, its friends and companions. It is not exactly in the same position as they; it is possible for it forcibly to enforce the fulfilment of its wishes; if you leave 2-year-olds or 4-year-olds together if one is a little stronger than the other it is possible for him to knock over or dominate the other child, to be absolutely master

of the situation at all points regardless of the feelings and wishes, the rights and desires of its playmate. Another most important thing which we have to teach children in the nursery school age is gradually to be able to give and take in this matter of frustration.

Please note that I am not talking about sharing. Sharing is a very different quality which comes rather later if the general development of children is naturally followed. It is not so much that you want Tommy to share his toys with his companion as that you want him to take the lead for five minutes and allow Tommy to take the lead for five minutes; to play his game and to allow Tommy to play his, not to be perpetually snatching toys from the other child because the other child when he is playing with the toy looks more attractive than the first child feels when playing with it, to begin to enter upon the foundations of a social life by allowing that the other child has the same right to the same kind of life as Tommy; that the child has the right to be dominant at its moment as Tommy has the right to be dominant at his.

The last point that properly comes into the question of training, from this angle, children from 0 to 5 is the gradual encouragement of the child to enjoy his own toys sincerely – and the question of sincerity runs as an undercurrent to this subject. One of the miseries well-to-do children suffer, one of the things that always makes one extremely unhappy when one goes into a well furnished nursery is to find a small person with every conceivable kind of ready-made toy, taken out of the shops without any relationship to the child's needs, desires or understanding, to find the child artificially attempting to play with those toys one after the other, and completely failing. It is perhaps strange to use the word "sincerity" in this relation but it really is, for both grown-ups and for children, a most important point that mothers should notice what sort of things their children really want and really enjoy and that the children should be encouraged to stick to the things that they do and not behave like a miserable small person of 4½ years of age whom I saw recently and who was referred to me because of a complete lack of concentration and ability to do anything. I asked her mummie to bring with her the toys she thought the child ought to be playing with and when they arrived nannie came staggering in with a rather large armful for an hour's play. When she set them down I asked her, "What do you think she should do with them?" and nannie replied "I went round the nursery cupboard and selected carefully the sort she would like to have when away from home". I set the child down in the middle of these unsuitable toys and said to the mother: "What do you think I should say now?" The mother looked at me in a hopeless sort of way and replied: "I thought that was your work." I said: "That is so; but I should never attempt to make this child play with any of those toys." The mother asked: "What do you mean? I asked the girl in Hamley's to give me the very best things a child could have. I thought she was not giving me enough so I brought several extra." I smiled at the mother very nicely and asked her to go back to the waiting room and make me a pattern. We always make our visitors make us a mosaic and they are rather intrigued with them.

I sat down for a little while at the other side of the room and watched this small person. Finally, she looked up at me and said: "I try so hard to play when mummie is there but I never can." I said, "Well, Mary, what do you do when mummie is not there?" With a big sweep she pushed all the toys into a corner, made a dash for the water-taps at the end of the room and began playing with them. I said: "Do you like doing that?" and she said: "Yes, but mummie and nannie never will let me." You are making a child false to its own nature from the beginning when you make it into what you want it to be instead of allowing it to develop along the lines that itself wants. It may seem odd that I have said nothing about the usual things in which

people are interested when dealing with children between 0 and 5, but we have already covered tenderness and obedience, and I do not think that the question of truth or falsehood, the question of right to property comes into this age at all. We are going to take it up when discussing the next age.

The Moral Training of children from 4-5 to 11-12 and 13-18

Looking through the list of complaints made by parents and guardians of children between 4 and 5 years of age I was interested to find that they nearly all resolved themselves into complaints with regard to truth and complaints with regard to property. The chief difficulty, I think, applies to truth. People who are accustomed to dealing with children and who understand them would not, but a large number of the general public would, bring a child of 10 or 11 for what is called habitual lying, or say "We are all terribly distressed about this child because we have always been such an honourable and upright family. We find that he (or she) perpetually tells untruths." These people are extraordinarily solemn and if I know them well enough or if, in the first moment, I can recognize the type of person they belong to, I always say rather carefully: "Yes I quite understand. I suppose in telling the mileage of your car, or the exact number of shots you do by yourself when playing golf you find no difficulty whatever in sticking to the exact truth?" The parent looks at me in a perplexed and bewildered way and asks: "Has that anything to do with it?" I say, "I suppose not, from your point of view, but it does at least raise the question as to whether this mental accuracy, or shall we say inaccuracy, belongs entirely to the child."

From that standpoint we can begin to develop because the most extraordinary thing about our relationship to children – this is true of all kinds of morality and of all stages of child development – is when looking at the child we completely forget, we wipe ourselves and our own lives out, and we take down, as it were, this box from the mantelpiece, this little measure called the "actual truth" and we say: "You know, dear, there really were no cats in the yard when Tommy came in and he said there were four" or "It is awful to deal with children who cannot tell us a simple fact such as whether they met Mrs. Jones out or whether they did not, and when you ask them if their account of the last party they went to, or the account of the play they have just come from, is accurate in all its details they look at you with a completely blank expression and say: 'I don't see what that has to do with it.'"

As an experiment I suggest that it is worthwhile taking a party of grown-up people to see a simple film or play with a nice straight story. Choose the climax of it somewhere, let us say, in the second act, and on reaching home ask your friends to tell you exactly what happened, and then go again to the theatre and look at the play. I did that recently with six people and only one got really anywhere near an accurate account of what had happened. The reason is that we choose out of the world around us those sections we are going to attend to. In those sections we are accurate. For instance, if you ask a woman to describe the dress of another woman, particularly at a party when the other woman was looking pretty, she can probably tell you with complete accuracy. Ask her to do the same thing in regard to a man and she will probably not be able to. It is an embarrassment I perpetually suffer under. I can never remember; but if one does not want to appear too foolish one makes it up. We are all

conversant with that sort of thing. You know the conversation you so often have in society when books come up, and somebody says what a wonderful book Mrs. So-and-so's latest one is. You happen to have noticed its title in The Observer last Sunday and you do not want to admit that you are behind Mrs. X in your general reading, so you gather the general tone of her remarks and say: "It was marvellous, but have you read So-and-so" and feel you are one up on that. That is natural and universal reaction to circumstances. There is no individual alive who is able to respond with equal accuracy to all the parts of his or her environment. It is not possible either to perceive accurately or produce accurately unless you have been very interested in the thing you have perceived or experienced.

The great difficulty about children is that what the grown up is interested in, the child never is. What the grown-up expects the child to be truthful about, the child can see no reason for taking any interest in. Supposing somebody were to ask you after my lecture how many adjectives I used, you would look at the questioner and say, "It never occurred to me to count, and I never should be able to." Then the questioner might say: "Are you quite certain Dr. Lowenfeld did not mention 'demonstration' as a word, and you would say: "Well, really, I cannot say for certain – I did not notice." But supposing it were a matter of very great reality, that you had been criticising the exact style of language I am using, then it would have been a great fault not to have been able to give some kind of answer to questions of that kind. To children the sort of things that mummy and daddy ask them are exactly like that. A child goes to a party and finds there all sorts of lovely things to eat; it has nice sorts of sensations of being rolled over and over in one kind of game and beats somebody at another game; the child has intense joy because, if she is a girl, her frock looked prettier than anybody else's, or she is humiliated because it did not. The child comes home bubbling with all these things and is met by a charming mummy who says: "Well, darling, were you good?" Imagine the sort of dismay that immediately comes over the child's face. What does it matter, how does it know, whether it has been good or not? How could it be interested in such a dull topic at a very jolly party, even if it were able to answer the question?

I find in the large number of cases that on this question of lying by children the question of accuracy or inaccuracy hardly enters into the child's mind: the child is in an entirely different range of experience; it is not interested in what you are asking it and it has hardly any idea of the phenomenon that you wish it to report.

Then comes the different kind of lying: the lying that distresses so many good parents. The child will do something but will not own up, or will say something quite different, or invent a story, or deny something which the grown-up has seen it do. To the parent that seems a strange and incredible thing for the child to do because, as many parents and teachers say to me, "The child knew she would not be punished. I told her that nothing would happen. If only she could have trusted me and said she had broken that vase."

In this connection I would like to comment an unpretentious little book by Mrs. Thorburn entitled Edward Marigold which contains a perfect study of how a small girl came to break a vase and was entirely unaware of the fact that she had broken it. It was very difficult for grown-ups to really appreciate a calamity. Again and again you find a grown-up having lost his money or on the way to losing it, having lost that or other things out of life, totally unable to own to you that that has happened. He or she will say: "Oh, something is going to turn up. It's not so bad. Something will happen to-morrow". The capacity to look disaster in the face

and say, "This and this have I done" or "This and this has happened to me" is one of the rarest of the moral qualities, and here are we, who hardly ever manage to achieve it in our own lives, expecting it of our small children as a natural product of being alive at all. Nobody should dare to expect a child to own to something he or she has done, if that individual is not absolutely certain he or she, in parallel circumstances, would be able to do what the child is expected to. That is a matter about which I feel very deeply and a matter about which children themselves, perhaps, feel more sore than about almost any other moral mishandling. All the more so if the child has recently seen her mother or father avoid a social issue in exactly the same way. And, after all, the evasion of social issues is much more frequent than the acknowledgement of them, and children are extraordinarily quick-witted and observant in watching the general handling of affairs by their parents.

In order to illustrate the next difficulty I will tell you a little story of an early patient of mine, a child who was brought to me by her father for being "too theological". Her father was Scotch and rather theological himself. He thought his little daughter of nine or ten was becoming too great a prig and casuist to be coped with at all. He explained: "My wife is subject to headaches. The children all know that I mind greatly about these headaches and try very hard to keep the house quiet when my wife has them, and treat her in such a way that the headache may not last for several days. I usually go up to the nursery to tea with the children. I went up to tea the other day with the two children, Ann and Peter. Ann is about 10. Just as we were nicely settling down the door opened and mummy came in from shopping looking very tired. Ann, in jumping round to greet mummy, upset the milk-jug. Mummy was busy looking at something else and did not notice the havoc it had made of the tea-table until she was sitting down and saw the table swimming in milk, when she said 'Oh, Ann, how did that happen?' And Ann, without turning a hair, said 'Daddy did it.'" Daddy, being sporting and immensely amused, played up, and the tea-table was put tidy. When Mummy had gone away, the father turned to Ann and said: "Ann, why did you say I upset the milk jug?" And she replied: "Well, you see, daddy, you remember the other day at breakfast you upset the milk-jug. Mummy came in looking so tired, and, you know, I was afraid Mummy had a headache. You remember when you upset the milk at breakfast Mummy did not make any fuss at all. She said 'I'm so sorry' and rang for Mary and put it right again. If I had said I upset the milk Mummy would have been ever so bothered this afternoon."

That little girl had grown up very well. She represents a somewhat brighter and more original form of what many children's minds are. The child realizes the moment you suspect it that there is going to be a terrible to-do. It thinks it perfectly ridiculous. After all, what is spilt milk? When daddy spills it is nothing. "It is only the fact that I have done it" reasons the child. "Why should it be so awful when I have done it and so perfectly natural when anybody else has done it? I'm hanged if I will own up." Many children feel that this question of blame is so very much over-weighted in the parents' world that to own up puts the whole thing in wrong proportion: that the amount of trouble that is caused, even when mummy is, so to speak, being nice about it, is out of all proportion in the child's mind to whatever it has done.

There are various forms of truth: there is literal truth and emotional truth. Literal truth is a kind of truth that the Anglo-Saxon race is particularly good at. We have been noted since the dawn of the last two centuries for our commercial probity. It has been for centuries the proud boast of this country that an Englishman's word is his bond; that an Englishman, if he has once said he will do something, can be trusted to carry it out; that if he gives an account in a Court

of Law it is correct; that is to say, he is tremendously interested in literal or factual accuracy and truth. But there is, I would like to submit, hardly any society in the world that is so riddled with emotional deception and hypocrisy as our own society. If you ponder on that I think you will see what I mean. We have grown up with the feeling that one must not talk ill of one's neighbours; one must not talk ill of one's family; that it is not nice; it is not done; it is not right to say anything really about anyone except in political controversy, and then it is hard to say anything which is bad enough!

In ordinary dealings with normal people how often does one come across the following situation: A man recently wrote to the press complaining that a certain other man in his neighbourhood had been applying for a post of public service and had written to the various people in that large neighbourhood with whom he had connection. He had been at school with one, in a regiment with another; he played golf with a third. He had asked each for a recommendation and the following had happened. The man had written a tepid but perfectly good sort of recommendation. He had then waylaid or telephoned to or in some other way got into contact with one or other of the members of the committee and said: "Do you know So-and-so who applied? I was at school with him, and I could not say anything in writing about him, but of course he is the most impossible person" and proceeded to expound one or other quality that would make it unsuitable for the candidate to hold the office in question. Not one of the men applied to felt it his duty to say quite frankly to the person concerned what they thought about him. It would have been easy to say: "I am awfully sorry, but I do not want to say anything to your discredit in black and white, but I do not feel myself in a position to give you a recommendation." But no; we feel that the preservation of the social amenities in so many cases is so much more important than any kind of real emotional truth.

Again and again one comes across situations in which, if you know the family at all, you know it is riddled with hate, malice and uncharitableness, but the individuals themselves will say: I do not like to say anything about So-and-so because she is my mother, my sister, my aunt, or my cousin. It is not that I am pleading for any kind of lack of courtesy or any kind of brusqueness among intimate relations, but that we should at some time find out what we really think and feel about people and be genuinely honest with regard to them.

The children we bring up are perpetually faced with situations of this kind: Mummy and daddy talking at breakfast. Mummy reads a letter and says: "Oh dear, there's that awful Mrs. Jones, and you know she says she is coming down to see So-and-so, and she so hopes that she will be able to see me this afternoon. Do you think I can get out of it?" Daddy shrugs his shoulders and says, "Well, you know, my dear..." and Mummy says, "If you think I had better, I suppose I must" and forgets all about the conversation the child has listened to. But in the afternoon that child sees Mrs. Jones arrive and Mummy run down and says: "Oh Mrs. Jones, how nice of you to call. I got your letter this morning. It's awfully nice of you to come". The child looking on thinks: "Well, well; where are we? This is the same Mummy who jumped upon me last week for telling this (to the child) small elaboration of a factual truth, and here is mummy definitely saying one thing and at another quite clearly saying the exact opposite.

Again, it is not that one would ask that in social relationships we should always be correct and truthful, because we all know that is entirely impossible, but it is that in dealing with children we should make some allowance for the fact this code of emotional dishonesty, which we all know to be essential for social living and which we have all grown to accept and to elaborate

in its many difficulties, is very difficult of acquisition. The child in its early stages cannot possibly have any conception of what it is we are trying to do. Therefore, when dealing with a child and its so-called lies it is well to try and see things from the child's point of view, and to try to see that in some cases the child may be really showing a greater spiritual truthfulness than the adult who is blaming him.

This story about a little patient of mine will illustrate the point. There was a little boy of about 8 whose parents were in India. The boy had been left with the relatives, by marriage, of the mother; she did not know them very well. She knew that her sister-in-law had two children and was a trustworthy person. The little boy was sensitive and musical; very keen on all sorts of gentle and out-of-door things, birds and flowers, and shrunk from noisy and rough companions. The aunt was a rough-and-ready person without any particular sensitiveness, and her two children who were a little older than her nephew were quite cheerful ordinary hooligans, rough and somewhat coarse. The little boy got tremendously to dislike these two and felt very unhappy. The mother of the other children resented this very badly and began to write derogatory letters out to the mother in India. Finally, the little boy was brought to me, hauled by the ear, so to speak, in horror, as having grown into a confirmed and incredible liar. "What makes you think that?" I asked, and the following story emerged.

The boy had been lost about two days previously and had been picked up by the Police. He had refused to say where he lived. After considerable trouble the Police had recognized him and found out where he, so to speak, did live. The aunt had come down very angry to fetch the child from the Police Station and he had flown to the opposite corner of the room, and vowed he did not know her and did not live at that address; and would not have anything to do with her. She hauled the child back saying he was a complete and absolutely incredible criminal. That was what the mother was told when she arrived a week later, and so she brought the boy to me. I sent her away and got to know the child and the story from his point was this:

Up the hill from the house in which he lived with his aunt there was a doctor's house with a large garden. The doctor was very busy, a widower with one little daughter who was just the sort of person the boy wanted to meet, just as interested and sensitive as he, as observant and as full of liking of all the country sights and sounds. When the little boy had been supposed to be going to school he had been truanting and crept through a corner in the hedge to play with the little girl. Nobody in the doctor's house knew; the maids were too busy in the house. One day he was late and it was foggy. In coming out of the garden he lost himself and was eventually found by the Police, found in a state of terror, with the whole of the surface training stripped off and only the essential child remaining. The one thing the child knew and the one thing terribly true about the situation was that he did not belong in any real sense whatever to his aunt-in-law. When the Police asked where he really did belong, where he came from, he gave the name of the doctor up on the hill. They telephoned the doctor's house and found that the boy had never been heard of there. So they then came back and said he was inventing lies to make it more annoying.

I was able eventually to demonstrate to his mother that the story was absolutely true and correct. His body certainly did get up and sleep in the other house, but there was nothing of him that lived there in any sense whatever. The one place in which he was at home and had

community, comradeship and all that meant so much to him, was with his little friend up the hill.

A matter on which people are very troubled with children of this age is that of stealing. We get a steady number of children, both in private and in the Institute of Child Psychology, for stealing. Only yesterday a boy of 13 was before a Police Court for having broken open his sister's money-box and stolen 12/- from it, money that the child had saved for her summer holiday. The boy was dazed, and when asked about it, could give no account why he had stolen the money or what he had done with it; he did not seem at all able to square the picture. That sort of thing is very frequent.

Again, the adult always assumes that a child understands all about the value of property: that it should not take property and that it has deliberately done a bad action. Firstly of all, I do not believe that anyone who has not earned their living, who has not had something to do with the handling of money, can possibly be expected to have any real conception of the meaning of property. In the nursery meum and tuum is a very real thing about many children. That, however, is not a sense of property but of "me-ness" and "you-ness". If he takes his sister's toys he will be hit over the head. But the idea that there is something evil and awful about removing an object found in somebody else's possession is not a thing that it is possible for a child of itself to know.

It is possible to put any notion into a child's head, to make the penalty so dreadful that any child will behave and do as you want, believing that since you have said so it must be so. But that is not a thing that happens naturally to a child. That was illustrated by a little girl who lived in a house in which her mother had a certain number of people to stay, sometimes commercially and sometimes friends. The little girl stole various things: lipstick, and powder, and so on and amused herself by making-up like the ladies she saw. Sometimes she took things of more value. On one occasion she stole a gold watch, and at that point something had to be done.

After some time I got the child to talk about the whole subject and she suddenly burst out: "Oh dear, how could daddy know how much I wanted a watch if I didn't take one?" There had been no idea of stealing. It was a symbolic action. With children the matter of taking things so often is a picture language. The child takes what is a symbol of the thing he wants because he wants to demonstrate to you that he has tremendous need and hunger for something he has not got. In almost every case of investigation in regard to children of that type one finds it is true that they have a tremendous need for affection, a desire for some kind of birthright of childhood which is at the moment being denied them.

Therefore, in dealing with children who in any sense have offended against our adult laws there is only one way of getting any conception of the situation one has to deal with, that is by trying to look at the whole matter from the child's point of view. To try to visualise, from the child's point of view, the kind of thing we are trying to teach the child, and then consider the action in question in relation to all the circumstances.

When we ask a child to be truthful, let us consider whether we ourselves are truthful. When we ask a child to be absolutely honest let us consider whether we ourselves are also always honest; and when we ask the child to respect other people's property, let us consider whether

we, too, are always respectful of other people's property; when we ask a child to do any of those things, let us ask ourselves what kind of experience the child has in the family that it lives among.

Finally, if we are to help a child to have that control of its immediate desires, that capacity to accept delayed satisfaction, which is the maturity that we want for children, let us try to get to the root of what it is we are asking the children to do. I would suggest that, particularly from those of the ages from 12 to 16, what we should be trying to do is two things: first, to give them the courage to be themselves. That is a very difficult thing for anybody to acquire, and probably it is the last thing that comes into our minds when we think of moral training.

We are so accustomed to exacting from children an outward standard; we are so accustomed to feeling practically content if a child appears to behave the way we wish it to. So frequently one finds people completely baffled and bewildered by finding children, whom they have, so to speak, brought up so well, going to new circumstances and then apparently going to pieces altogether. So rarely they ask themselves: Did that child want to be what I have made it into? Did this code of manners, this code of rectitude express in the very smallest degree this child's real nature? Unless it does there is no hope whatever that when the child goes to new surroundings, with new demands, that it will have the least ability to conform to them. You have taught the child a code it has learnt by rote, but when that code is no longer applicable, we know what happens.

It was my privilege to be in an isolated part of Eastern Europe in about 1919-20, in touch with a large number of men and women who came from a codified and stratified society to circumstances where there was, for the time being, no public opinion; where it was our job to create our own public opinion. It was a matter of extreme interest and sadness, in some cases, to see how quickly those codes crumbled, how quickly, once the standard things one was expected to do were not there, the person emerged in all his or her primitive childishness, just as if still 5 years of age and 6 years of age. That kind of moral training is the greatest possible failure: to have succeeded in producing somebody who can react to codes as long as the codes are there with no understanding whatever why they are there or the least ability to transform those primitive desires into the likeness of anything that that adult would approve.

In considering every problem in connection with the moral training of children the first essential is to see its relationship to the particular child in hand. If you cannot make a virtue a desirable thing to that child, then give up any attempt to inculcate it in the child: either make the child want to be what you want it to be, or do not try to force on it a code it despises.

The second essential is what must surely be the basis of all moral training for every child at any age: the attempt to put the child into such a relationship to the whole of life that it is going to see that the bigger things are more worthwhile than the smaller. You want to avoid the position: "Why should I do that mummy?" "Because mummy wants you to do it, dear" which, after all, is most foolish. Why should the child do what mummy wants it to do? It will soon ask: "How do I know what mummy wants me to do is either right or proper?" Instead of trying to put the child into a position in which it is perpetually thrown back upon criticism of you, try to put it into a position in which it will see that things have to be done because there is a law in the universe and it cannot be anyhow else.

As you probably all know, that is the basis of the work of the George Junior Republic in America and of Homer Lane's work in England as well as a great deal of the newer education: the attempt to help a child to see that corporate living is a public spirit or school spirit, a thing that grows out of any society of human beings who are attempting to create some sort of living which will set each one of them free. If you can see your school society, if you can see your home society, if you can see yourselves as a community endeavouring to give each individual in the community a chance to grow up, a chance to achieve this kind of maturity that we have been talking about in this lecture, then you will put every point of this discipline to your child in such a way that the child will see it as something that it struggles towards and not as a rule imposed upon it by authority.

Lastly, the question of sincerity, the question of the attempt to make the child realize that it is better to be primitive and sincere as far as its ultimate growth is concerned than to be a perfect little gentleman or lady at 5, outside, or to exhibit the perfect public school spirit at 19 or 20 on the surface, but to have all along felt that that was a thing one did not wish to be. In the last resort, citizenship can only be built upon honesty, and the one thing we find in dealing with children who have infringed the moral code, in dealing with every kind of child – I am thinking of the widest possible range – is that when you can get back to the real person inside, if you can get the child to see the total meaning of the rule that has been broken, then you will see an effort on the part of the child of itself to grow into conformity with the standard you want the child to adopt.