

EXCESSIVE DISCIPLINE

Disciplinary actions can become excessive and oppressive when the tool of training is set aside and one depends on discipline alone to do the training. I have observed proud, stern fathers, ruling their house with a firm hand and making sure everyone knows it. The rod is swift to fall, and especially in the presence of company. The children tremble in his presence, fearing to incur his displeasure. I have often wondered why, if he is so firm and faithful to gain obedience, he has not achieved it before entering the public arena. I am impressed, but not in the way he hopes.

Except where the very smallest children are concerned, training at home almost entirely eliminates the need for discipline— especially public discipline. Yet, should the need arise in public, do a flanking maneuver and administer it; then go home and train so that it never again happens in public.

TRAINING THE ORNERY AMISH BOY

As I sat talking with a local Amish fellow, a typical child training session developed. The father was holding a twelve-month old boy who suddenly developed a compulsion to slip down onto the floor. Due to the cold floor, the father directed the child to stay in his lap. The child began to stiffen so as to make of himself a missile that would slip through to the floor. The father spoke to him in the German language (which I did not understand) and firmly placed him back in the sitting position. The child began to make dissenting noises and continued the resistant slide. The father then spanked the child and spoke what I assumed to be reproving words. Seeing his mother across the room, the child began to cry and reach for her. This was understandable in any language.

At this point, I became highly interested in the proceedings. Most fathers would have been glad to give up the child to continue their own conversation. It was obvious the child felt there would be more liberty with his mother. If he had been given over to her, the experience would have been counterproductive training. He would have been taught that when he cannot get his way with one, just go around the chain of command. The faithful mother, more concerned for her child's training than the gratification of being clung to, ignored the child.

The father then turned the child away from his mother. The determined fellow immediately understood that the battle lines had shifted and expressed his independence by throwing his leg back over to the other side to face his mother. The father spanked the leg that the child turned to the mother and again spoke to him.

Clearly, the lines were drawn. The battle was in array. Someone was going to submit his will and learn his lesson. Either the father would confirm that this one-year-old could rule his parents or the parents would confirm their authority. Everyone's happiness was at stake, as well as the soul of the child. The father was wise enough to know this was a test of authority. This episode had crossed over from "obedience training" to discipline for attitude.

For the next weary forty-five minutes, fifteen times the child would make his legs move, and the daddy would turn him around and spank his legs. The father was as calm as a lazy porch swing on a Sunday afternoon. There was no hastiness or anger. He did not take the disobedience personally. He had trained many a horse or mule and knew the value of patient perseverance. In the end, the twelve-month-old submitted his will to his father, sat as he was placed, and became content—even cheerful.

Some will say, "But I couldn't take it emotionally." Sometimes it is difficult and trying to set aside your plans for the sake of child training. It does involve emotional sacrifice. Yet, what is love, but giving? When we know it will work to the temporal and eternal good of the child, it is ajoy instead of a sacrifice.

Where our motives are not pure, where we suspect anger may be part of our motivation, our pricked conscience causes a reluctance to act. We fear that our discipline is an act of the ego to dominate. We must deal with our own impurities for the sake of the child; for if the child doesn't receive this kind of training, he will greatly suffer.

BE ASSURED OF TWO THINGS:

1. Every small child will have one or two times in his young life when he will decide to take hold of the reins. The stubbornness is profound—amazing—a wonder that one so young could be so dedicated and persevering in rebellion. It is the kind of determination you would expect to find in a hardened revolutionary facing enemy indoctrination classes. Parents who are trained to expect it and are prepared to persevere still stand in awe at the strength of the small child's will.
2. If you are consistent, this test of authority will come only one, two, or, at the most, three times in each child's life. If you endure, conquering the child's will, then in the long run the child wins. If you weaken and let it pass to the victory of the child's will, then by winning it is a character loss for the child. You must persevere for the both of you.

The household cat who, regardless of protest, door barring and foot swinging, is occasionally allowed to stay in the house will take the occasional success as impetus to always try to get in. If he is consistently kept out (100% of the time), he will not come in, even when the door is left open. The cat, allowed to occasionally get its way, is trained, despite your protests, to come into the house. If you kick it hard enough and often enough, it will become sufficiently wary to obey while you remain on guard but will still bolt through the door when it sees the opportunity.

On the other hand, dogs, thirty-five times smarter than cats, can be trained either to come in or stay out upon command. The key again is consistency. If the dog learns through conditioning (consistent behavior on the part of the trainer) that he will never be allowed to violate his master's command, he will always obey. If parents carefully and consistently train up a child, his or her performance will be as consistently satisfying as that rendered by a well trained seeing-eye dog.

NEGATIVE TRAINING

How many times have we observed the grocery store arena? A devious little kid sits up in the command seat of the shopping cart exercising his "childhood rights" to unlimited self-indulgence. The parent fearfully but hopelessly steers around the tempting "trees of knowledge of good and evil." Too late! The child spies the object of his unbridled lust. The battle is on. The child will either get what he wants or make the parent miserable. Either way, he conquers.

One father proudly told of how he fearlessly overcame by promising the child ice-cream if he would only wait until they left the store. Such compromises will simply confirm the child's terrorist tactics. You are not gaining control of the child, he is gaining control of you. All children are trained, some carelessly or negligently, and some, with varied degrees of forethought. All parental responses are conditioning the child's behavior, and are therefore training.

PURCHASED COMPLIANCE

Parents who purchase compliance through promise of reward are making their child a racketeer who is paid for protection. The child becomes the Mafia or union boss, and you, the "over the barrel" businessman. If you are just bargaining with a terrorist for one more day's reprieve from anguish, may you then strike a favorable deal, but if you are training up a child, you need to reconsider your methods. This compromise method is the making of a bitter, undisciplined, fleshly child—and eventually, adult.

DID YOU HEAR WHAT I SAID?

I observed a father tell his small boy not to touch a particular object. Having been trained to ignore mild commands, the child picked it up. The father demanded, "Give it to me." The child pretended not to hear. "Did you hear me? [Of course he did] Hand it to Daddy. [With more firmness] Johnnieeee, give it to Daddy, NOW!! [Another decibel higher—hasty—angry] JOHNNY!! Am I going to have to SPANK YOU?" By this time the father became aware of his embarrassing tone. He calmed his voice, and in an attempt to bring it to a conclusion he leaned way out and extended his hand, making it easier for Johnny to comply. Because of the angry voice and burning eyes, Johnny assumed the temporary posture of, "Oh well, there will be another day." But, instead of meeting the humbled, groping father, he held the object in his general direction but down close to his body, forcing the father to advance even farther to retrieve it. The father, looking like a poor peasant receiving his necessary food from some condescending royalty, submitted to the child's humiliation and reached to retrieve the object. And then, in a display of weakness, the father placed it out of the child's reach.

What has Johnny learned from this episode? He has had his conviction reinforced that it is never necessary to obey a command the first, second, third, or fourth time. No one expects him to. He has learned it is permissible to grab anything within reach and to continue possessing it until the heat gets too great. He has learned not to respect authority, just strength (the day will come when he is the stronger one). By the father's example, he has learned how to use anger. By the father's advance to take the object from his hand, he has learned how to "get in the last shot" and maintain his defiance. That father was effectively training his small child to be a rebel.

What has the father learned? That little Johnny is just a "strong willed" child; that children go through unpleasant stages; that it is sometimes a very miserable, embarrassing thing to be a parent; that one has to watch a kid every minute and put things out of his reach; that the only things kids understand are force and anger? All of which are false. The father is reaping the harvest of his "mistraining."

After we take a look at the nature of a child, much of the rest of this book will describe many positive training techniques.