

RAMBLIN' ABOUT CHILD REARING

A young father dropped by to confer with one of my sons on some item of business. His little boy, not yet two years old, wandered over to the toy box and began to drag out all manner of interesting animals and colorful, noise-making contraptions. The men held our attention as they discussed several interesting items—everyone ignoring the kid. With business concluded, the father said to his son, “Come on, let’s go.” I am always observing the interaction of parents and their children, so I watched to see how quickly the little fellow would give up his intoxication with his captivating pile of distraction. It was obvious he had heard. But rather than drop the toys and come running, which is what you would expect from an obedient, well-trained child, he started grabbing toys as if he intended to prevent anyone from separating him from them. This young father and his wife have done a good job with their first child, and I was hoping for a good showing with this one as well.

I got much more than I hoped for. The wobbly toddler, with his arms full of toys, crossed the room to unburden himself at the toy box. He hastily made several trips until he had completely restored the room to its original order, and then came to his daddy’s side. I couldn’t believe it. I quickly ushered them out of the house before my wife took notice. What if she considered the fact that this tiny tot was better trained than her husband? I know it is never too late to train, but it does get too late to want to be trained.

The most successful teaching is done before one year old. If you stake the plant when it is young, you won’t end up trying to tie up a crooked plant—something I do most every year. As I have said before, “If a child is capable of taking toys out of a box, he is capable of putting them back in.” Children are able to do much more much earlier than parents suppose.

Most training is actually untraining. That is, parents wait until a child is conditioned to inappropriate behavior before they commence training, and then they are trying to break bad habits, not form or mold developing habits.

In our selfish, carnal state, we parents tend to be motivated by internal pressure more than wisdom—the pressure of feelings, frustrations, guilt, anger at being ignored, embarrassment, etc. We follow the path of least resistance. We tolerate more than we should until emotional pressure motivates us to action. The problem is that at that point our response is a negative one. It is criticism and

irritation. The child understands it is the parents’ ego in competition with his for supremacy. I know the child can’t put a name to it,

but his little soul will respond to emotional control and manipulation just as would your spouse. An irritated parent comes across as a bully, like an incompatible roommate, rather than a dignified authority that is training for the child’s good.

All early training is done by participation and repetition, not by precept. You cannot lecture a one- or two-year-old on his duty.

Threats and spankings will not mold habits. But if, right from the start, you never allow a child to leave his toys or clothes scattered, you will never have a hassle. Do not force the one-year-old child to work for you. Don’t put pressure on children that young. You

need to apply pressure if he is angry and throwing a fit, or stubbornly rebelling, but you don’t pressure a child for being untrained. It’s

your fault.

So you shouldn’t spank him for failure to put his toys up. Sit with him on the floor and make a game out of cleaning up. The first few times it is not necessary that he do any significant portion of the work. You just want to communicate the idea that toys are never left scattered. Show him how to return toys to the box, laugh, sing, and play. You may put away ten toys while he cleans up only one. You may have to hold his hand and guide it. He will think it is the grandest thing in the world to be playing with mother. If you make cleanup delightful, he will dump the toys out and then pick them up several times during the course of play.

Heed this warning: If you try to train in a confrontational attitude, the child will emotionally draw back from you and from the experience of cleanup. He will come to associate cleanup with tension and anxiety. You will not only fail to teach him to clean up after himself, you will teach him to avoid clean up, and you will teach him to be tense and demanding of you. You would expect that a child living under a significant amount of parental tension and pressure would draw away from the parent, but the response is one of whining, demanding, clinging, and a generally dissatisfied state of mind. He will demandingly snuggle up with a frown on his face. He will forcibly push away things that you offer him, because his soul is dissatisfied and angry. He wants and needs unconditional affection given in the security of authority. What he has gotten is arbitrary rule with conditional affection given in an atmosphere of criticism and rejection—a sure formula for shipwreck.

As I was writing this I was interrupted by a child screaming. Deb is baby-sitting an eleven-month-old little boy. I let him scream for about five minutes, as I wrote the last lines of the above paragraph, and then I left my office and went to investigate. Deb was doing business on the phone—talking to a missionary, long distance. The child was clawing at the back door, trying to get it open so he could go outside. I picked up a switch and walked over to where he was conducting his scream-in. In a calm but firm voice I said, “No, stop crying.” I didn’t expect him to respond, but I wanted to establish the rules. When he failed to respond, I switched him twice on the only exposed skin—about three inches between his sock and pants leg. Again he did what I expected, what he does when his mother swats him—scream in defiance. But I have seen her swat him, and it never even gets his attention, other than a signal to scream louder. But when I switched his bare skin, he looked shocked and started to rub it. He continued to cry in protest, so I gave him two more licks on the bare leg. This time, he was convinced that I meant business. I know that he understood the issue, because he crawled past me, away from the door. Again I commanded him to stop crying, brandishing the switch. He stopped crying immediately, continuing to rub his leg while staring at me.

At this point, you could say that I had won. I had trained him to respond to my command and to cease his crying protest. But that is only the negative side of training. I like to stop with the positive, so I picked up one of the toys and started talking about it and trying to get his attention to something creative. The rule is **“When you take something away from a child, always replace it with something positive.”** I don’t mean that you should purchase compliance with a bartered settlement. You do not want to give the child an indulgence to satisfy him. Just don’t leave him sitting in a boring vacuum. Turn him to something stimulating and creative. I didn’t want to leave him sitting on the floor, rubbing his sore leg and brooding over his defeat. If I did that, he would soon return to his demand, for he had his heart set on going outside. After failing to gain his interest in the toys, I rolled a ball over to him. He shoved it away violently. It was a symbolic rejection of me and my attempt to distract him. At this point I might have spanked him for his little show of defiance and self-will, but I did not want to get caught in a downward attitude spiral. He needed to be drawn into something positive, so I overlooked that little display in hopes of turning his attitude around. I could have overridden his temper and crushed his rebellion, but I wanted a friend, not just an obedient servant.

Sitting near by was a five-gallon plastic water container, one third full of coins—our life savings—our insurance policy—our hospitalization—our retirement—former math curriculum—and now kiddy entertainment. Earlier he had reached down inside, as only his little hand could do, and drawn out some coins which were now scattered on the floor. I pretended to ignore him and commenced to pick up coins, making as much jingling sound as possible, and dropping them one by one back into the container. It was more than he could stand. I had noticed that he was a manipulator. He rushed over to where I was and reached deep into the jar, coming out with a hand full of coins. He handed them to me smiling. I took them and again dropped them back into the jar one by one. He drew out more and dropped a few on the floor, threw some across the room laughing, and handed me some. His attitude had recovered. He was happy. He was playing. He was no longer trying to get out the back door. I had not only won the contest of wills, I was winning his soul to myself. I was tying the strings of fellowship. This camaraderie would make it harder for him to disobey. He was coming to value my friendship. He would now want to please me.

But there was more. Now that I had him on most pleasant terms, I would teach him responsibility. I would teach him to clean up after himself, to put the coins back into the container. So I picked up the coins from the floor and held them over the hole, dropping them slowly so he could see what I was doing. I made it look and sound fun. After a moment, he touched the coin in my hand just as it slipped away into the jar. I then bragged on how smart he was to put the coins back in the container. Again I manipulated him into assisting me in returning the coins. He got the idea and retrieved a coin from the floor to return it to the jar. As he dropped the coin in the jar, he looked up for my approval, giving me a big smile. I bragged on his maturity and hard work and dropped more coins in the jar. He was convinced; putting them back in the jar was as fun as taking them out. All this occurred to the background sound of my commands accompanying his actions. When he dropped a coin in the jar, I would say, “Put the coins in the jar.” He came to identify my pleasant command with the pleasure of putting the coins back in the jar. He will now repeat the cleanup experience just to relive the pleasure of camaraderie. And he also learned the meaning of the command, “Put the coins back in the jar.”

This took about ten minutes of my time. You say, “I don’t have that much time.” Then give your children to someone who does. Obviously you have chosen to dedicate you time to some pursuit you deem more valuable than well-trained children. You shouldn’t be a parent if you are not going to give it all that these little developing souls deserve. The world has enough misfits without Christians adding to the mob. There is no greater joy than training up godly, emotionally stable, hard working, and ministering children.

You are too busy? Amish mothers make their own soap, carry water in buckets, build a fire outdoors under a big cast iron pot, boil the clothes for thirteen kids and a grimy husband, hoe the garden, preserve the vegetables, kill and clean the chicken, milk the cows and churn the butter, split the fire wood, and then do all the house cleaning chores that you do, and they have time. But then they don’t have telephones or TVs, and when visitors come over they don’t stop work to visit. The visitor helps with the work.

Did I forget to mention: The Amish mother trains her children to work! She is not their servant. She is the TRAINING BOSS. You can be too. It will take a load off your mind and body while building character and self-confidence in your children.