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Discipline for Young Children

Michigan State University Extension Service

Lennah K. Backus, Ben Ard, Parent Education and Child Development

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DISCIPLINE
for
YOUNG
CHILDREN

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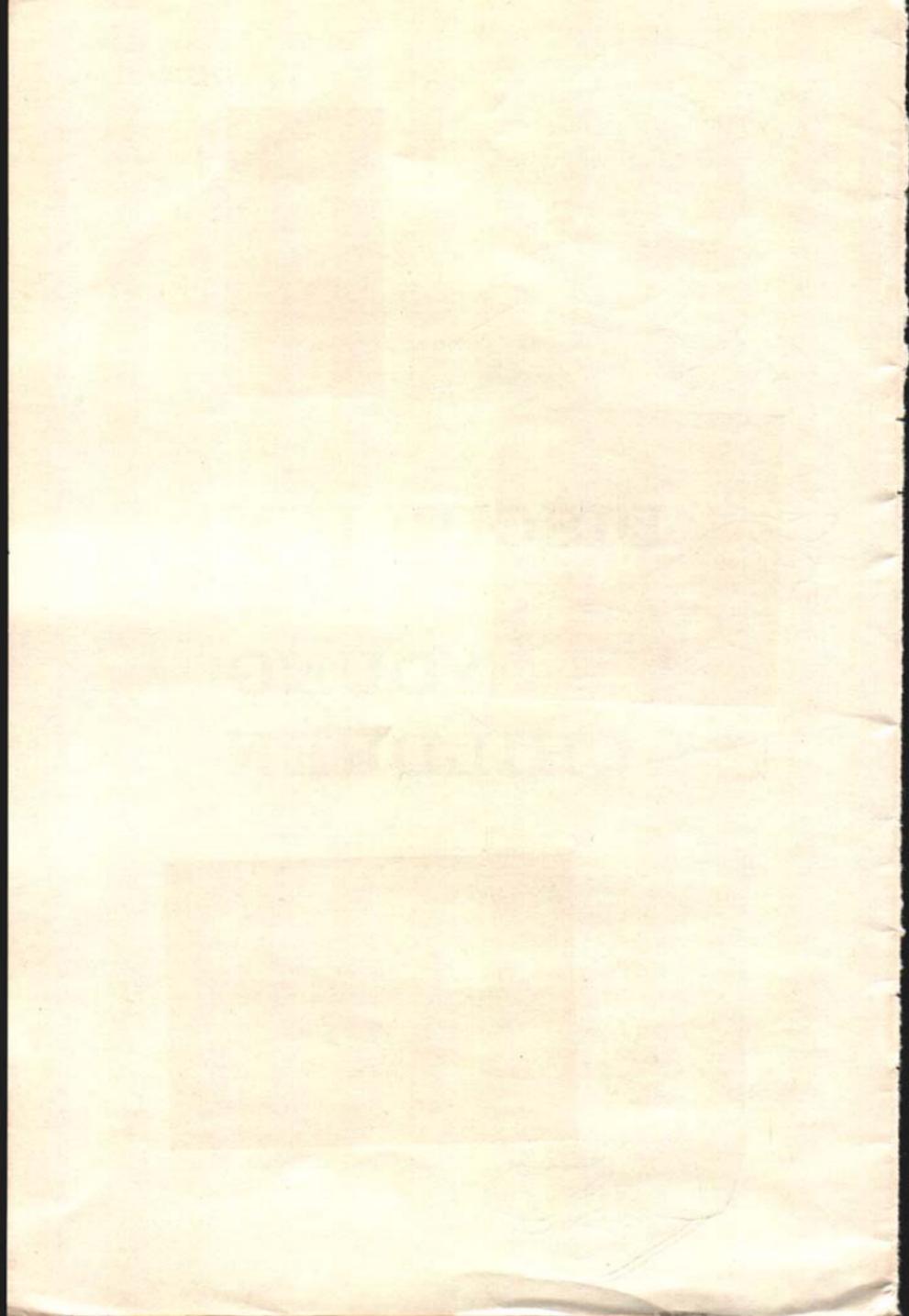


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Preface

Why read a bulletin on the discipline of young children? Some people feel that everyone just naturally knows how to handle children. But the task of being a good parent today is very complex. It cannot be left to chance or to the supposed "natural equipment" of the father and mother.

People used to think that the only way to raise farm crops was the way their parents did; but now they have found new and better ways based on scientific research. In the same way, some people feel that the only way to rear children is the way they were reared by their parents. But recent research on children and parents shows us that some older methods of discipline had harmful results.

Better ways of handling children have been and are being studied. This bulletin should be a help to parents who want to consider better ways of handling and understanding children.

M.S.U. 1958

Mrs. Lennah K. Backus
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Discipline for Young Children

By LENNAH K. BACKUS and BEN ARD

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To say that all children need discipline is to say that they need to learn some rules for growing up and getting along in the world. This does not mean that all children need punishment in order to grow and develop. In the beginning, these rules are set up by the parents or other adults. As the child grows older, however, he must find a set of rules for himself, and become responsible for his own behavior.

To discipline children wisely, you first must try to understand them. To understand them, it is necessary to know something about the way children grow—their stages of growth—and about their inner and outer world.

Behavior Related to Stages of Growth

Children may act in certain ways because their bones, muscles, or nervous systems are “grown up” only to the point that permits that kind of behavior. Most children behave in similar ways at certain stages of growth.

SOME BEHAVIOR COMMON TO MOST CHILDREN

- The infant in his bed knows only the rules of regular care and comfort. Soon his learning begins—he uses his playthings to handle, to chew, to learn to hold, and to learn to let go.
- A child 1 to 1½ years old begins to exert his independence by wanting to undress himself; it may be another year before he can put his clothes on without some help.
- A child of 2 is likely to hang on to his possessions and refuse to share with others.
- Around the age of 2, a child may say “no” to almost everything.
- The nerves and muscles necessary for bowel and bladder control are not fully developed until some time in the second year.
- Children of 2 and 3 years find it difficult to sit for long periods of time, such as for a long drawn-out meal, in church, or riding in a

car. Their short span of attention affects the length of time they can play at any one activity.

- Around 3, children may shock you with the use of “naughty” words.
- Age 3 is often called the age of “doing,” especially copying and imitating everything that grown-ups do.
- Age 4 is the age of “finding out”—those countless questions of “why” and “how” are evidence of the child’s growing curiosity that needs satisfying.
- Children also vary greatly as to how active they are, how much food they eat, and the amount of sleep they need.

The fact that **children are like this** means, then, that some behavior is due to the age or stage of the child. If a 2-year-old hits his playmate for no outward reason, it doesn’t mean that he is going to become a quarrelsome adult. He may only regard the child as a threat to a much-loved toy. Being able to share this toy in the future is a sign that he may be growing out of this stage of holding tight to his things.

The little child who is unwilling to sit at the table while the adults visit may show upsetting behavior, but not necessarily “naughty” behavior needing punishment.

This might help . . .

Just remember that some of the behavior of children is the result of mere growth. **You can relax knowing that “this too will pass.”** You cannot excuse all misbehavior on these grounds, but you can excuse some of it.

As parents of young children, maybe you can become more tolerant of noise, dirt, and upsets in plans. Being able to endure, tolerate, or overlook some behavior will be less of a drain on your energy.

Part of the secret of handling young children is to **redirect undesirable behavior** when you can. Three-year-old Johnny who persists in stirring up the living room may do better if he is allowed to play outdoors every day.

LETTING CHILDREN DEVELOP AT THEIR OWN LEVEL AND RATE OF SPEED

This means more attention to **readiness** for each new learning. Wait for the child to show some readiness, even though you may feel

he is lagging behind in his learning. Remember that a child tends to repeat those acts which give him pleasure and satisfaction. If he is forced to learn too soon, he may not want to try again. While forced learning is not helpful, give him a chance to learn when he is ready.

Provide play materials that challenge the child but which are still within his abilities. Blocks which are not too big for little fingers to grasp are easier to pile one on top of the other. Using them will be more apt to give the child a feeling of accomplishment. Plan for some variety in his play day and you will do a better job of meeting his growing and changing needs. A child who is busy and happy is less likely to be disturbing.

Behavior Related to Inner World

Another way to look at children's behavior (other than as stages of growth) is to realize that some behavior is related to the inner world of the child—his physical needs and his inner feelings and stresses.

INNER WORLD—HIS PHYSICAL NEEDS

Discipline problems sometimes arise when you try to meet certain physical needs of the child. The routines centering around mealtime, bedtime, and physical care need to be thought out carefully. Wise handling of such routines can be thought of as **preventive discipline**. Aim to use discipline to **prevent** undersirable behavior **before** it happens, instead of to **punish** for misbehavior **after** it happens.

Mealtime

Almost every mother goes through a feeding problem at one time or another. Such problems can be just temporary, or they can be longer lasting. When a child begins to feed himself, it often means a lot of messiness and added work for the parent. There is the temptation to keep feeding the child, often long after he has shown interest in feeding himself. Remember that this is an important experience for the child. It is not only a matter of getting the food down him—he is also learning to do something for himself.

This might help . . .

Watch for the time when he is ready to do new things. In this case, when he begins to hold things, let him hold a cup or spoon.

Begin by putting a few drops of milk in the cup. Leaving a full glass of milk on his tray tempts fate (even though he may be able to handle it some of the time). You can prevent many accidents of this kind.

Since this is a new learning, avoid shaming or scolding when accidents happen. Continued spilling can mean that the child gets special satisfaction from the commotion he causes. You may need to go back to feeding him yourself for a time to try to find out the reasons for his behavior.

Even a child who has learned to feed himself fairly well may want help at times, when he is tired or upset.

When a Child Refuses Food

At the age of about 1 year, children usually begin to eat less. The rapid growing during the first year is past. Now, with a slower rate of growth, he needs less food. He also may not feel like eating—that is, he simply may not be hungry. Adults do not always feel like eating everything that someone else puts on their plates. You can expect variations in one child's appetite as well as differences between children of the same age, size, and weight as to how much food they need.

Children, like adults, like some foods better than others. Their likes and dislikes may not be too pronounced unless an issue is made of them. Adults sometimes express strong food preferences in front of children. This may give them similar ideas.

Children sometimes get notions about eating. One notion can be to refuse to eat without a certain spoon or even a dish placed just so. If you give him some good-natured humoring in this instance, don't feel that you are indulging him.

This might help . . .

- Serve attractive, appetizing food.
- Offer it in a matter-of-fact way. Be casual, friendly, patient.
- Do not force a child to eat.
- Let a child eat the amount he wants and have some choice in what he eats.
- Avoid scolding or nagging. (There is a limit to what one can expect in table manners.)
- Remember to make mealtime pleasant.
- Try improving some of the physical arrangements. See that the

child is seated comfortably at the table with support for his feet. Give him utensils that he can handle. Use bright-colored dishes or napkins sometimes to improve a lagging appetite.

- Let the child help with some small part in preparing the meal. This will often give him more interest in the meal.
- Serve meals on time and you may have less need to discipline the child who is misbehaving simply because he is hungry.

Bedtime

Many families use the period just before bedtime as a time for the family to spend together. Keep this period as a pleasant interlude in the day, free of too many "don'ts."

Why do little children often resist going to bed? Sometimes they just do not want to bring an end to their play. This is usually the case with the 3- to 4-year-old. If so, just give a little advance notice such as "Finish what you are doing," then, "To bed go your toys and off go your shoes."

This might help . . .

With the younger child, it is better to take him by the hand and lead him away from his play, or carry him to bed, having fun on the way. A short story to look forward to, a little visit—some time spent with him—is more likely to start him off to bed in a happy frame of mind. Too much exciting or vigorous play just before bedtime can make it hard for him to slow down.

Happily to bed does not always mean quickly to sleep. Cries of "I want a drink" and many other devices can bring on a scene. Why does he resist going to sleep? To answer this, begin with the question, "How much of the day was the child awake?" To exaggerate, we cannot expect a child to sleep late in the morning, take a long afternoon nap, and be ready for an early bedtime. The child may just not be sleepy.

Moreover, we would not expect to punish a child who is having trouble going to sleep. Children vary as to the amount of sleep they need. They even vary somewhat from day to day. One authority, Benjamin Spock, says that the average 2-year-old needs about 12 hours of sleep at night and 1 to 2 hours of nap.

There are some physical arrangements in the room which makes sleep come more easily. These include: clothing which is not too heavy, a well ventilated room, and one that is quiet.

It might surprise us to know how many times "naughty" children are simply tired children. We can safely say that being tired is one of the main causes of misbehavior in young children. Tired children at the end of day are sometimes in conflict with tired parents, who may be short on energy and patience.

What about punishing children by putting them to bed? We have been talking about a pleasant bedtime routine for the child—punishing a child by putting him to bed works against setting up a pleasant bedtime routine. When a child is used to playing in his bedroom, he may have better feelings about bedtime than when the room is used only for sleep or as a place of punishment.

When he is tired, we would expect rest to help him avoid more misbehavior. We should make the rest seem more important to him than the punishment.

Now comes the question of **isolation** (removing the child until his behavior improves) as a way to discipline the child. Many parents find it effective. Consider the child himself, how long he will be kept apart, and where he will be kept before you take such action. Thinking of these things will help the child behave better without making more problems for himself or for you.

Discipline problems may arise around the routine of going to bed, but you can reduce these by looking more closely at the cause of such behavior. The solution may be very simple, not the least of which is making the hour before bedtime one that the family enjoys together.

Other Routines

In everyday routines of washing, dressing, getting ready to come to the table or to go to the store, children may seem both obstinate and slow.

This might help . . .

- Try pointing out the next step in dressing—this may keep him moving toward the goal you set for him.
- Allow plenty of time for him to finish his tasks. Reminders may help, but too many turn into nagging or scolding.
- Praise the child when he shows some effort in washing himself, even if the results are far from perfect.
- Help washing and dressing become a regular part of his day. This will help the child accept the routine.

- Be gentle in washing him or picking him up so you will avoid hurting him.

Illness

Children getting over an illness often need special consideration. You can give him special toys, special food, or more of your attention to keep him happy during his illness. Keeping this up too long may result in pampering the child. If it provokes a series of small incidents, it is hard on a child who may not be quite up to par.

There are several things you can do to help prepare a child for a visit to the dentist or a stay in the hospital. Your own attitude toward the event can ease the worries and help the child to accept the idea. Don't paint the experiences in too glowing terms, but don't make him overanxious by preparing him too far ahead or with too many details.

INNER WORLD—HIS FEELINGS AND STRESSES

A child's feelings, even when distorted, affect his behavior. Even when a child may wrongly feel that nobody loves him, this feeling may affect and help explain a lot of his behavior. Parents may love a child very much, but if he feels that they do not, he will often act as if they do not. Thus the way a child sees his parents, his brothers and sisters, and the emotional climate of the home can affect—in fact, largely determine—much of his behavior.

When a child feels unloved or appears to be jealous, it is well to understand such behavior as reactions to his inner feelings. Many a child has either thought or said that his parents love a brother or sister more than they love him. Or he has felt that he has lost their love by doing things the parents call "bad." Yet much of this very same so-called "bad" behavior may itself be the result of his feeling of not being loved (or at least not loved enough).

When parents punish for misbehavior, they actually can be adding to the child's feelings about the home situation—that his parents don't love him. Parents need to be careful, in disciplining children, not to imply, either in words or actions, that they do not love the child himself.

They may rightfully disapprove of certain behavior. However, they should be sure to show that it is the behavior (or misbehavior) they disapprove of, not the child himself. It is better to say, for

example, "That it is not worthy of you" than to say "Bad boy!" It might be more realistic to say "I don't like for you to do that."

Many people know that children may sometimes "act up" or misbehave in order to get attention. Even punishment, in the child's eyes, is some attention, and perhaps better than no attention at all.

Stresses may arise in the child's inner world (influenced by his outer world), and they can also affect his behavior. Discipline and training can affect the inner world of the child. For example, the way parents handle toilet training, thumbsucking, or childhood fears may cause stresses to build up in the child. They may later affect his behavior. In other words, the child's emotional reactions to the stresses involved in toilet training, and the parents' handling of thumbsucking or his childhood fears, may appear later in certain behavior patterns.

If a child is spanked for his accidents during toilet training, he may come to feel that there is something "dirty" or "bad" about his genitals. This may affect his later marital adjustment.

When someone slaps a child's hand (or slaps the child) for sucking his thumb, it may only add to the stresses that could have led to the thumbsucking in the first place.

Childhood fears of the dark and imaginary things may also come from stress which the child is feeling at a certain time in his life. Therefore, punishing a child by putting him to bed might not be the best discipline at such a time.

Parents' expectations of their children sometimes cause stresses in the children which affect their behavior. Parents' expectations of what the child should be able to do (e.g. stay dry, quiet, and so on) may make it more difficult for him in such areas.

Behavior Related To Outer World

We have mentioned earlier that some behavior patterns can be related to the way in which children grow—their stages of growth. We also noted how some behavior is related to the inner world of the child—his feelings and stresses. Another factor to consider in understanding children better is their environment, or outer world. This means such things as the physical surroundings, play space, brothers and sisters, neighborhood kids, and so on. This outer world of the child also affects his behavior.

SUPERVISING CHILDREN'S PLAY

Rainy Days

In some households, rainy days mean more discipline problems than usual. In many cases, it is merely because the mother is busy and the environment is such that the children have to play underfoot.

A child whose only place to play on a rainy day (or most of the time) is within the same four walls where his parents live, is probably going to be more of a discipline problem than a child who has all outdoors in which to play.

Most children sometimes (some parents might say most of the time) like to whoop and holler and make noise in their play. An imaginative child can usually make up his own vivid sound effects to go with his play. If there are brothers and sisters and neighbors' kids around, what one child can't think of, another will. And a parade of the fife and drum corps may not appeal as much to the adults as to the children. In other words, expect more noise on a rainy day.

Good house planning can take into account the different needs of the adults and children for space, privacy, and quiet. If you have to live in limited housing space, a different kind of planning is called for.

You may need to rule some parts of the house as "off limits" for some activities. But you need to provide some space for children to play. Water play and finger painting call for practical floors and washable tabletops. Such things help prevent discipline problems.

Here are some helpful hints you might consider for rainy days:

- Talk over and plan for definite play areas in the house. Perhaps the back porch for noisy play, the bathroom for water play, and other such plans would be helpful.
- Put aside some play materials for rainy days (including at least some "quiet" table games).
- Try to be flexible as well as consistent about playing in the house, especially on rainy days.
- Try, if you can, to find some time, no matter how brief, during that rainy day to play with the child.
- Don't be surprised if things turn out to be a little more difficult for both parents and children on rainy days.

Sunny Days

During rainy days there may be too much supervision since the children are underfoot more than they normally might be. However, on most regular days many problems may arise because the children have less supervision than they need. In other words, in some homes supervision is a little too plentiful on rainy days and perhaps too scarce on other days when children range far and wide.

Homes can be planned so that the kitchen window overlooks the children's play area. This makes an easy way for mothers to supervise their children's play without actually being with them. A good fence can help the supervision process for pre-school children, but be sure there are enough things to play with **inside** the fence.

Many discipline problems that arise with young children could probably be avoided by more and better adult supervision of young children's play. Little children should not be expected to play for long periods without adult supervision. Too often, after a fight has started, or some child has been hurt by another, or some rules have been broken, then the adult steps in and "lays down the law."

Too often we think that this is the only method of discipline. This is so often the case that some of us only think of punishment when we hear the term "discipline". Good discipline should include **positive** suggestions (supervision that offers a choice of other things to do) rather than merely what not to do.

The best of play equipment and a well-fenced play space are not enough. Young children need the chance to play with others, especially if there are no youngsters near their own age in the family.

Some parents send their young children to nursery schools to meet this important need for group play experience. But not all communities have nursery schools. Some groups of parents join together on a neighborhood basis to take turns in supervising the play of young children. More often, neighbors' kids enter in the informal play of most young children.

Neighbors' Kids

The neighbors' kids, as part of your children's environment, are easy to blame for your child's behavior. They can lead your children into problems, and some do, on occasion. But even on those occasions, the neighbors' kids are not always to blame. If you look, you may find that your own children are the "ringleaders."

In any group, children are sometimes leaders and sometimes followers. In the process of changing, they can get in each other's way. This is true when children are playing well (doing acceptable things) and also when they are "up to some mischief," so we can't always blame the neighbors' kids.

You might discuss general limits or rules with the other parents of children who play together. Even if this does not work out too well, you can have "house rules" or "yard rules" at your house. All children playing in your house or yard should follow your rules. Good supervision should make this clear to all new neighbors' kids until it is accepted by all. Don't expect young children to solve all the problems that may come up with neighbors' kids or among themselves.

Brothers and Sisters

Many children (some would say all children) wrangle with their brothers and sisters at times. A certain amount of jealousy and rivalry seems to crop up in many families where there are brothers and sisters. If you understand that this can occur, handling fighting, arguing, or other hostile behavior should be easier. Just because your children are related by blood does not mean that they won't have differences of opinion, feelings, and attitudes.

If you lay down such rules as "Little boys don't hit little girls," sisters might take advantage of such a situation. (The alternative here does **not** have to be "let 'em run wild," however.) Every family, of course, has to set up its own rules (at least, where one adult does not "lay down the law" for all). In working out the ground rules in your house, try to allow **some** outlet for some negative feelings toward brothers and sisters. This can reduce, but not entirely do away with, the number of situations calling for discipline. Perhaps you can see a problem coming between brothers and sisters, and even allow it to be "talked out," within certain limits. Letting off steam **verbally** may prevent letting off steam **physically** (such as hitting brothers or sisters with whatever is handy).

Setting Limits—Past and Present

Every parent must set some limits for his children. However, setting limits is sometimes hard for today's parent because of new ideas that are being talked about and written about by psychologists and

other specialists dealing with children. Being a good parent today is so complex that it cannot be left to chance or to supposed "inborn equipment" of the mother or father.

In yesteryear there was no question about discipline or setting limits for children. There was only one acceptable way: the way one's parents disciplined. In those days children were "to be seen and not heard," they were to "speak only when spoken to" at the dinner table, and, in general, to "toe the line." Fear was the basic principle upon which discipline operated.

"Spare the rod and spoil the child" was another accepted practice. Even today some people believe in "back to the woodshed." Recent research makes us question this strict authoritarian approach.

"Several years ago a study was made of the home training of a large group of adults. The results showed that adults whose childhood home training had been most strict tended to dislike their parents strongly, to quarrel with other people, to have trouble controlling their tempers, and to be worried and fearful. They also tended to have fewer friends, to be less well adjusted, and to be more unhappy than those whose training had been less strict. We might well question whether having children "toe the line" is worth the price they later pay as adults."¹

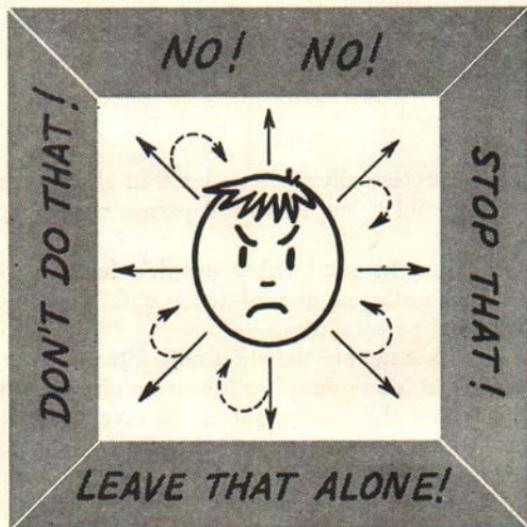
Such research as this, and other knowledge of children and their needs, have brought out thoughts of a more permissive form of discipline. However, many parents, after reading articles suggesting permissiveness as a better form of discipline, have acted as if the writers had said "let 'em run wild." It is very doubtful if any responsible person has ever actually suggested letting children run wild. But to parents from strict homes, any easing up of the rigid rules may seem like too much. Yet, what does the strict authoritarian approach do for the child?

"Under the strict authoritarian situation you "whale the daylights" out of the child if he ventures into the street. Soon he "learns" not to go into the street. Why? Because of the fear of a spanking, not because of the inherent dangers of playing in the street. This learning works whenever the authority is present, but when the

¹ Remmers, H. H. and C. G. Hackett, *Let's Listen to Youth*, Better Living Booklet, (Science Research Associates, Chicago, 1950).

authority leaves (and the fear of punishment is removed) the child may dart into the street."²

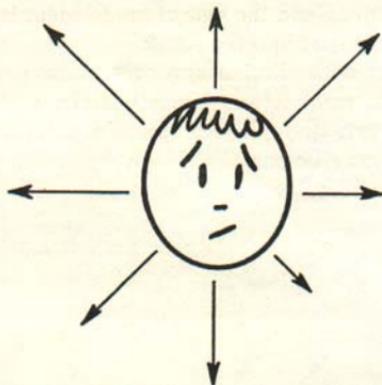
Thus, the strict authoritarian approach doesn't really accomplish what most parents want it to. Unfortunately, simple control is so easy, through threats and physical punishment, that unless one is careful, the child may be surrounded (overpowered may be a better word) by a "Wall of No."



The child may come to think, "I can't say what I feel, I'm always wrong anyway." He may feel that most of what he wants or tries to do is "wrong." Thus, the strict authoritarian approach sets up limits that are too rigid and too confining. The child may, in a sense, turn back on himself, inwardly. Sometimes children come to think of themselves as really "bad" as a result of this.

When parents began to read about criticisms of the strict authoritarian (or complete control) approach, some felt that the only other way was "sheer indulgence." Under a sheer indulgence (no control) or "do nothing" approach, however, the child may keep "testing" the situation to see if any rules exist. But no limits or "walls" are there.

² With the permission of the Association for Childhood Education International. From CHILDHOOD EDUCATION, Jan. 1957. Vol. 33, No. 5, 1200 Fifteenth Street, Northwest, Washington 5, D.C. Pages 214-217. "Permissiveness Re-examined" by D. Keith Osborn.



Some parents may actually place no limits at all on their children, but it is very doubtful if any thoughtful person would suggest such sheer indulgence.

Some limits must be set. Other people's feelings, rights, and property must be considered, as well as the child's own health, welfare, and individual potentialities.

We have seen that neither the strict authoritarian (complete control) method nor the "do nothing" or "sheer indulgence" (no control) approach really meets the needs of the child. Neither is a very reasonable approach to the problem of discipline. What about this permissiveness?

Ideally, under a permissive approach, our "wall of no" stays firm around areas where it must remain firm; but the "wall" disappears in areas where freedom can be allowed (acceptable areas).

Thus, an important part of permissiveness is **flexibility**. Permissiveness might be defined as "freedom with rational or reasonable controls." It occupies a middle-ground position somewhere between complete control and no control. It could be called "democratic living"—freedom of the individual, but within this freedom, consideration for other's feelings, rights, and property.

You might think of permissiveness as a bank account where we make many deposits of the "yes" nature and few withdrawals of the "no" nature. Permissiveness implies an understanding of the child's needs and abilities. This means we do not make demands on the child that he cannot understand.

Often parents make rules "as they go." Before long, the situation becomes impossible for both parent and child. If the home is to

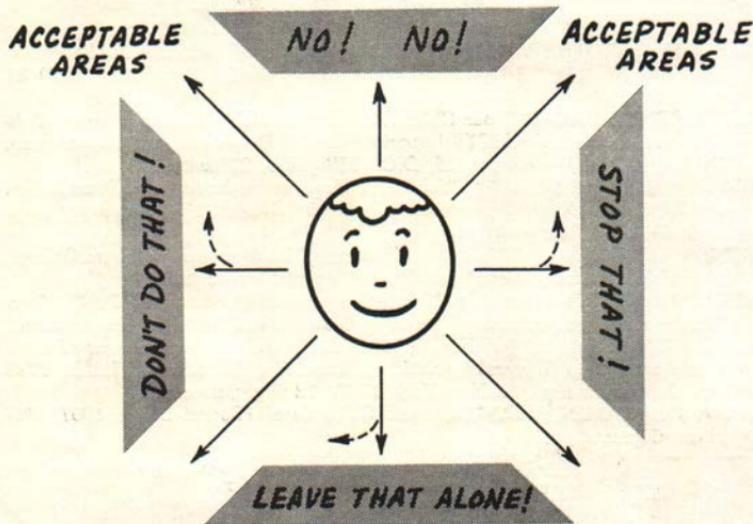
operate in a permissive manner, both parents must agree on the basic areas where controls will be enforced. When parents agree on the "rules of the house," control will be easier and more consistent; it also will avoid confusion for the child. Parents need to review their "rules" often to keep them consistent with the over-all goals for the child.

Permissiveness implies learning through understanding rather than learning through fear. For parents, it means making decisions on the important limits and holding to these, giving freedom in areas where it can be freely given.

The child who is used to reasonable limits **with** explanations will be more likely to accept a limit **without** explanation in an emergency. For example, a child about to step into the path of a moving car is much more likely to stop when mother calls sharply "Jimmy, stop!" if **mother doesn't always yell orders at him.**

Not too long ago, parents and educators too often used authority that was rigid and unquestioned. This kind, called **irrational authority**, was based for the most part on the power of the adult. Children responded to this authority with awe, fear, and obedience.

Today's parents, interested in rearing children who will grow up to be spontaneous, outgoing individuals, able to stand on their own two feet, are looking more to **rational authority** to do the job. Ra-



tional authority is more reasoned and objective. It depends on the knowledge and ability of the parent to apply his knowledge to a particular child in a particular situation.

To help young children learn some rules for growing up and getting along in the world, we might say that:

- Permissiveness should be used generously in your relationships with children.
- Young children need some limits.
- Let the number and kind of limits allow room for growth.
- Keep limits as consistent as possible.
- Keep limits flexible, rather than rigid.
- Give an explanation of "why" when you set a limit. If there is not time right then, explain soon after.
- Re-examine limits often.
- Use discipline which will lead toward self-discipline.
- Build discipline which relies more on affection and trust than on punishment. (Love may not conquer all, but it goes a long way toward making parent-child relations happier.)

P.S. — Keep your sense of humor handy!

For Further Reading

- BARUCH, DOROTHY W. "How To Discipline Your Children" (Public Affairs Pamphlet No. 154, 22 East 38th Street, New York 16, New York, 1949) 31 pages, 25 cents.
- CHILDREN'S BUREAU "Your Child From One to Six" (Children's Bureau Publication No. 30—Revised 1956, Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington 25, D.C.) 110 pages, 20 cents.
- GROSSMAN, JEAN SCHICK "You Don't Have To Be Perfect . . . Even If You Are A Parent" (National Association for Mental Health, 1790 Broadway, New York 19, New York, 1948) 26 pages.
- HYMES, JAMES L., Jr. "Discipline" (Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, 1949) 44 pages, 60 cents.
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