

PARENTS AND THE CHALLENGE OF CHILDREN

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TOO many children present problems fraught with danger these days. One has only to pick up the newspapers or listen to the news to appreciate the seriousness and scope of the child-adult conflict as well as its far-reaching consequences. Indeed, it is not uncommon to read of parents and teachers being beaten, injured or killed. Conflicts and tensions between adults and children are becoming too much the rule rather than the exception.

All kinds of explanations have been offered for the misbehaviour and misdeeds. Some say the attitude on the part of children is caused by the influence of comic books. Others claim it is lack of adult discipline at home and school. Some lay the blame to a decline of ethical and moral values as religion loses its grasp on people and has lost its significance to the modern mind. Still others say the reason is due to lack of respect for authority which stems from home and school situations.

There is much that can be said for these explanations, and there is little doubt that each one partly explains the problem. However, in the final analysis, are reasons for the existence of the child-adult conflict the important consideration? Perhaps, instead, it is time to start understanding the children of today and thereby begin to discover solutions.

In former times the pendulum was at the extreme of authority, so that autocracy prevailed. Children did what they were told to do without question. Blind obedience was expected of them because 'I said so'. This was true at home and at school. It usually meant the child *felt* the order as well as heard it. Thus corporal punishment was the accepted means of persuading children to conform to the authority figure. But since differences of opinion often existed between parents in the same house, the child was easily confused and grew up to populate our modern neurotic society.

As a result of the many abuses of this authoritarian approach the pendulum has now swung to the other extreme, and the swing has been given impetus by the prevalent misunderstanding of the true meaning of democracy. This implies a radical change

from authority to 'equality' as our national¹ educational philosophy. But the methods of character education for children have not kept abreast of these trends, either at home or at school. *Instead, the parents blame the teachers or school authorities for not doing the job they themselves should be doing at home, and vice versa.* The result is that both parents and teachers are so busy putting the blame on the other to cover up their own inadequacies and shortcomings that the child is running rampant. Thus the pendulum has swung to the other extreme and we have a child-centred home instead of a parent-centred one.

This is further complicated by the underlying conflict in which parents and teachers are caught. They were children in an autocratic age and are now raising children in a democratic age so that today they do not know how to cope with the discipline problem. Instead of accepting the challenge which children present to them, they go to an extreme either by indulging the child and becoming his slave or they return to the old way of being too strict with him and admitting defeat. Children have become a threat instead of a challenge.

The problem of raising children is all the more confused by the conflicting literature on child guidance. As a result bringing up children becomes an almost impossible task, because a 'common sense' psychology of character training is almost completely overlooked in the confusion.

Alfred Adler, founder of the school of individual psychology, gave the world a 'common sense' psychology which today's parents and teachers would find most useful as a guide to rearing children. He was a practical psychologist, an educator and a parent. He spoke in simple words and wrote in simple language so that his system of psychology can be understood, shared, and benefited from by people the world over.

When Catholicism is superimposed upon Adlerianism, the result is a Catholic psychology of education for both parents and teachers which is workable because it involves the total personality of children. Adler stresses the importance of the family and family life from a psychological point of view just as the Catholic Church stresses it from a religious viewpoint.

He termed this emphasis the 'family constellation', or the position of the family members in relation to each other. Family

¹ The author of this article is writing of the United States.

constellation is an essential feature of Adlerian psychology in order to understand the child, because it is from the family that the child develops his own particular *life-style* which will characterize him throughout his life. Since each person perceives things in a singular way, Adler termed his system *individual psychology*.

The first person with whom the infant comes in contact is the mother. In fact it is from the mother that the child first acquires his attitudes towards other people, towards himself, towards the school, towards the world, and even towards life itself. Hence the infant's education to become a useful person begins *in the home at birth through his relationship with the mother*.

It is for this reason that Adler felt the mother had a special mission *as an educator* in the development of the child. She, by nature, is the closest one to the child, and vice versa. Thus, upon the attitude (co-operation or non-co-operation) of the mother depends the attitude of the child. To raise an emotionally healthy child, it is her special task and function to teach the child *mutual co-operation* so he will know how to co-operate with others in the tasks of life—subsistence, society, sex and the Supreme Being (or work, the community, other people and religion).

The Catholic Church, in her wisdom, long ago assigned women a special place. It is at the mother's knee that the child should learn right from wrong. And it is the mother who teaches her child religion for the first time—who gives the child his first glimpses into the meaning of life and his place in it. The mother lays the foundation for the child's *life-style*; and, if she is building a strong foundation, she teaches her child *co-operation* in all areas. As the child grows towards independence, he is thus able to take his place as a good citizen who co-operates for the welfare of the community, and a good Catholic who co-operates as a member of the mystical body of Christ.

The second person the mother teaches the child to co-operate with or to share himself with is the father, who has a special function of equal importance to play in the character formation of the child. Religiously and psychologically the role of the father is a serious duty and obligation. From the relationship of father and mother to each other the child can learn a further lesson in *co-operation* or else one of his first lessons in *non-co-operation*.

This is the basis of the need for accord between the marriage partners on raising the child together—as a team. And both

parents should share in disciplining their children. The task cannot be delegated to only one partner because children receive guidance and example, whether it be good or bad, from both parents. Parents who shirk the duty of discipline leave the door open for psychological and religious conflicts in their children, which may later lead to a situation requiring professional help for both child and parents.

The most effective method for parents to use in dealing with children, even in matters of discipline, is to treat them kindly but firmly, *and to give them respect as individuals*. If a child is treated as an inferior or as a misfit or as a threat, he will grow up to be an inferior, a misfit and a threat. Raised in such a way, he cannot be expected to become independent and respectful of himself and others. Nor can he gain confidence in his abilities unless he has been taught self-confidence by encouragement to creative productivity.

A child who is treated as an inferior and with disrespect for his individuality will grow up dependent, exploiting others including his parents, and emotionally crippled. He has learned a life-style, first from his parents and later on his own.

Take, for example, a boy whose mother fusses over him when he has the sniffles. The boy, even as a baby, learns the lesson well: he gets attention by having sniffles. As he grows older, he adds stomach upsets and then headaches to his *repertoire* of attention-getting mechanisms. His 'ill-health' excuses him from doing chores, gets him extra money when his allowance is gone, etc. He develops a life-style of bad health to achieve his goal of getting attention without doing anything that really deserves attention. He knows how to do nothing and get applause for it, too.

Inferiority feelings are also important in the development of a child's life-style. Sometimes a child possesses an actual physical inferiority (spastic muscles, deafness, poor eyesight), but usually these feelings stem from an imagined (real, nevertheless, to the child) inferiority, such as short stature or straight hair.

In the cases of actual inferiority, parents should never reproach, belittle or overprotect the child because this will teach him defeat, discouragement, and how to use his handicap as a weapon to get his own way. It is important that the parents teach handicapped children early in life how to compensate constructively for the

inferiority—to turn it to an advantage as a co-operating member of society.

When a physically normal child feels inferior, it may stem from his attitude regarding such things as his looks or size. His parents, other members of the family, or playmates often reinforce these feelings by calling attention to his size or looks. Thus the physically normal child develops emotional inferiority and a mistaken life-style. He uses this faulty life-style as an excuse to do nothing and yet to gain attention from others. The child feels nothing can be expected of him because he is helpless: he is suffering from an 'inferiority complex'. Adler would describe such a child as being 'on the useless rather than the useful side of life'.

In Adlerian psychology the position of the child (oldest, middle, youngest) in the family constellation is important towards understanding the life-style. The oldest one is usually an authoritarian. This child is most often reliable, dependable, and causes little trouble *unless* he feels dethroned by the presence of a second-born or a youngest. Then his behaviour may change drastically because he will no longer feel he is the centre of attention. He or she usually likes to be first in doing things.

Often parents are heard to say: 'Our first one was an angel but the second one is a devil'. If the first one does well at school, it is possible that the second one will do poorly as this is a different way of winning attention. If the first one is helpful at home, the second won't do anything. If there is a third child, then the second one feels he must either outdo the oldest and the youngest or give up in complete discouragement, especially if the other two children are doing very well.

If the oldest finds acceptable ways of getting attention, the second must find different ways of doing so. When the oldest fails in some area, then there is opportunity for the second to secure attention. But when the oldest is considered perfect, then the second child feels he can only get attention by a devious or annoying way.

The third child or the baby as a special position. Sometimes he outdoes the other two, but more frequently than not he uses his position to have others wait on him. In this way he doesn't have to do anything because nothing is expected of him. The youngest child is often spoiled and pampered—just like an only child. And

also like an only child he gives up tasks because he becomes easily discouraged.

Feelings of inferiority and a particular position in the family constellation do not necessarily mean that a child must develop a faulty life-style. The difference between a constructive or destructive way of life depends upon the child's *goal* and it is the parents' duty to show the child healthy goals, while discouraging false ones.

For instance, if a baby is crying and there seems to be nothing wrong, it is wiser to let the child cry instead of paying attention to the fussing. Thus the baby learns to experience frustration and through this to resolve his own problem. In other words, the parents set a goal of independence for the baby by encouraging him to mature behaviour right from infancy. As a result the child experiences a feeling of strength, of accomplishment, and of reliance on his own abilities.

On the other hand, the parent who gives in to the crying is teaching the child immature behaviour, that is: 'fussing gets attention'. Therefore, it is always better to ignore irritating actions, even temper tantrums, in order to guide the child along constructive channels of self-development.

Although parents need to encourage their children, it is a good idea to do this in moderation. Too much approval fosters an erroneous life-style, as the child may look for constant parental approbation instead of developing self-confidence and independence.

The important role parents play in the child's character formation cannot be overstressed. When parents fail to teach their children co-operation and independence, problem children result. Adler says that three types of children will eventually need psychotherapy: the pampered, the neglected, and the child with an inferiority.

In therapy these individuals will have to be helped to understand their faulty goals and life-styles. Then they will have to be assisted to find useful, beneficial goals and to see how their non-co-operative behaviour is in reality short-changing themselves in the tasks of life.

Lecturing and punishment only make the problem child feel more inferior and more determined to use more forceful means

next time to gain attention. Some children even prefer punishment to being ignored.

Sheer force also encourages misbehaviour; it does not correct it, and preaching is of no avail as the child usually already knows everything you are saying. However, progress can be made by helping the child understand the goal of his misbehaviour or what he expects to gain by it. Then he is ready to listen to reason, to co-operate in a mature way.

A parent-child relationship of mutual respect and co-operation fostered by kindness and firmness, and rooted in religion, creates a healthy family atmosphere. A simple basic psychology, such as Adler's individual psychology, gives parents the knowledge to understand their children, while Catholicism offers both children and parents a way of life—a set of sound principles—to govern their actions. In Adlerianism and Catholicism, parents and children will find the answer to total personality integration, and through the practice of religion be able to advance from co-operation on the natural level to co-operation with the divine.



SERMON 282 OF SAINT AUGUSTINE ON THE FEAST OF SS. PERPETUA AND FELICITY

(Translated by H.O'D.)

TODAY we're keeping the feast of two holy martyrs—the two who stood out most for bravery on this occasion, the two whose names stand for the reward they and all their companions received for their great and holy sufferings. Perpetua and Felicity—the names of two, the reward of all. And why? Because in that struggle all these martyrs were toiling hard, by suffering and by bearing witness for a certain space of time, only so that in the end they could enjoy—perpetual felicity! How very appropriate it was that divine providence arranged that these two shouldn't just be martyred, but should be martyred practically hand-in-hand. Which happened so that one single day could be marked with their double glory—a joint feast-day left behind for those who follow to celebrate. Their example in this wonderful struggle encourages us to imitate it, and their very