



Building Blocks

for Parents

The ABC's of Guiding the Child

(from Workshop presented by Rudolph Dreikurs, M.D., November 1962)

A primary concern of most parents is teaching their children appropriate behavior. Dr. Dreikurs has summarized useful suggestions that can be used in guiding a child's behavior.

GOLDEN RULE: "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you." This is the basis of democracy, since it implies equality of individuals.

MUTUAL RESPECT based upon the assumption of equality, is the inalienable right of all human beings. No one should take advantage of another; neither adult nor child should be a slave or a tyrant. Distinguish between firmness and domination. Firmness refers to your behavior in a conflict situation; domination means forcing your decision on the child. For example: Assume your children are fighting in the kitchen while you are preparing a meal. Tell the children they may continue fighting in another room where it will not disturb you. By speaking firmly, but kindly, you maintain respect for yourself and show respect for the children by offering them a choice between behaving in the kitchen or fighting in another room. You have refused to act as a tyrant yourself, but have also **refused to be tyrannized by the children.**

ENCOURAGEMENT implies faith in and respect for the child as he is. Don't discourage the child by having too high standards and being overambitious for him. A child misbehaves only when he is discouraged and believes he cannot succeed by useful means. A child needs encouragement as a plant needs sunshine and water. When we tell a child he could be better we are really saying he is not good enough as he is.

REWARD and PUNISHMENT are outdated. A child soon considers a reward his right and demands a reward for everything. He considers that punishment gives him the right to punish in turn, and the retaliation of children is usually more effective than the punishment inflicted by the parents. Children often retaliate by not eating, fighting, neglecting schoolwork, or otherwise misbehaving in ways that are the most disturbing to the parents.

NATURAL CONSEQUENCES is a technique which can be used effectively only when a good relationship exists between parent and child. In using this technique the parent allows a child to experience the logical consequences of his own behavior. For example: If a child dawdles in the morning, the logical consequence of his behavior is that he will be late for school. Instead of using his personal authority to remind him and hurry the child, the parent allows him to experience the unpleasantness of being tardy. Therefore, when natural consequences are used, the child is motivated toward proper behavior through his own experience of the social order in which he lives. Only in moments of real danger is it necessary to protect the child from the natural consequences of his disturbing behavior.

ACTING INSTEAD OF TALKING is more effective in conflict situations. Talking provides an opportunity in which the child can defeat the parent in arguments. Children tend to become "mother-deaf" and will act only when punishment is threatened. Usually a child knows very well what is expected of him. Never explain to a child what he already knows and has heard repeatedly. Talking should be restricted to friendly conversations and it should not be used as a disciplinary means. For example: If you are driving your car, and your children start to quarrel and fight, instead of telling them to be quiet, the parent can pull the car to the curb and simply wait for them to be quiet. If the parent maintains a calm, patient attitude, he can, through quiet action, accomplish positive results.

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WITHDRAWAL as an EFFECTIVE COUNTERACTION: Withdrawal (leaving child and walk into another room) is most effective when the child demands undue attention or tries to involve you in a power contest. He gets no satisfaction in annoying if nobody pays attention, nor will his tantrums work without an audience. Withdrawal is not surrender nor indifference. Beware of overconcern: Feeling you must “do something” about every situation. Often, doing nothing effects wonderful results.

WITHDRAWING FROM THE PROVOCATION, BUT NOT FROM THE CHILD. Don't talk in moments of conflict. Give attention and recognition when children behave well, but not when they demand it with disturbing behavior. At these times attention becomes a premium for bad behavior. The less attention the child gets when he disturbs, the more he needs when he is cooperative. You may feel that anger helps get rid of your own tensions, but it does not teach the child what you think he should learn.

DON'T INTERFERE IN CHILDREN'S FIGHTS. By allowing children to resolve their own conflicts they learn to get along better together. Many fights are provoked to get the parent involved, and by separating the children or acting as judge we fall for their provocation, thereby stimulating them to fight more.

TAKE TIME FOR TRAINING . . . and teaching the child essential skills and habits. Don't attempt to train a child in a moment of conflict or in company. Allow for training at calm times, regularly, until the lesson is learned. If many areas need improvement, give attention to one at a time. Limit yourself to what you can do. The mother who “does not have time” for such training will have to spend more time correcting an untrained child.

AVOID LETTING YOUR OWN NEED FOR PRESTIGE influence you in training your child. For example: If your child knows how to dress, but is sloppy about his personal appearance, avoid the impulse to remind him or straighten his clothes yourself because you **are afraid of what others will think** of you as a mother. Your own prestige is less important than letting the child learn for himself.

NEVER DO FOR A CHILD WHAT HE CAN DO FOR HIMSELF. A “dependent” child is a demanding child. Maintain order and establish your own independence. Most adults underestimate the abilities of children. Give children opportunities and encouragement to become contributing members of the family and other groups. Children become irresponsible only when we fail to give them opportunities to take on responsibility. In assuming the child's responsibility we deprive him of the opportunity to learn. Don't indulge **yourself** by giving service.

PARENTS' DEPENDENCE ON THE CHILD is a different concept to recognize. In many instances a mother who constantly reminds and does things for a child unnecessarily not only takes the child's responsibility away from him but also becomes dependent on him for her feelings of importance as a mother. Often, mothers will feel useless in the home unless they keep themselves constantly busy with the child.

UNDERSTAND THE CHILD'S GOAL. Every action of a child has a purpose. His basic aim is to have his place in the group. A well adjusted child has found his way toward social acceptance by conforming with the requirements of the group and by **making his own useful contribution** to fit. The misbehaving child is still trying, in a mistaken way, to feel important in his own world. For example: A young child who has never been allowed to dress himself (because “mother is in a hurry”), will lack the feeling that he is a useful, contributing member of the family and will feel important only when getting mother angry and annoyed with his misbehavior.

THE FOUR GOALS OF A CHILD'S MISBEHAVIOR. The child is usually aware of his goals. His behavior, though illogical to others, is consistent with his own interpretation of his place in the family group.

Goal 1 Attention getting - he wants attention and service

Goal 2 Power - he wants to be the boss

Goal 3 Revenge - he wants to hurt us

Goal 4 Display of inadequacy - he wants to be left alone, with no demands made upon him

OUR REACTIONS TO A CHILD'S MISBEHAVIOR PATTERNS. Very often we can discover a child's goal by observing our own reactions to his behavior. For example: when his goal is attention getting, we respond by feeling annoyed and that we need to remind and coax him. When his goal is power, we respond by feeling provoked and get into a power contest with him - “You can't get away with this!” When his goal is revenge, we respond by feeling deeply hurt and “I'll get even!” When his goal is display of inadequacy, we respond by feeling despair and “I don't know what to do!” If your first impulse is to react in one of these four ways, you can be fairly sure you have discovered the goal of the child's misbehavior.

DON'T ACT ON YOUR FIRST IMPULSE: By acting on your first impulse you tend to intensify the child's misbehavior patterns rather than correct them. You act in accordance with his expectations and thereby fortify his mistaken goals. What you do if you don't know what to do? First, think of what you know would be wrong to do and refrain from doing it; the rest is usually all right. Second, imagine what the child expects you to do, and then do the opposite. That throws the child off guard, and then you can arrange with him what to do about the situation.

MINIMIZE MISTAKES. Making mistakes is human. Regard your mistakes as inevitable instead of feeling guilty, and you'll learn better. We must have the courage to be imperfect. The child is also imperfect. Don't make too much fuss and don't worry about his mistakes. Build on the positive, not on the negative. For example: Instead of pointing out how poorly he ties his shoes, point out instead how well he can button his shirt.

DON'T BE CONCERNED WITH WHAT OTHERS DO, but accept responsibility for what you can do. By utilizing the full potential of your own constructive influence, you do not have to think about what others should do to the child. Compensation for the mistakes of others is unwise, and over-protection may rob the child of his own courage and resourcefulness. For example: If father is too harsh with the child and mother runs to protect him, three negative results are accomplished. First, mother deprives father and child from learning to get along with each other. Second, mother teaches child to run to her for protection instead of using his own resources. Third, mother antagonizes father so that he is less willing to cooperate with her in dealing with the child.

A FAMILY COUNCIL gives every member of the family a chance to express himself freely in all matters of both difficulty and pleasure pertaining to the family as a whole, and to participate in the responsibility each member of the family has for the welfare of all. It is truly education for democracy and should not become a place for parents to "preach" or impose their will on children, nor should it deteriorate into a "gripe" session. The emphasis should be on "what we can do about the situation." Meet regularly at the same time each week. Rotate chairmen. Keep minutes. Have an equal vote for each member. Let any wrong decisions stand until next week.

HAVE FUN TOGETHER and thereby help to develop a relationship based on mutual respect, love and affection, mutual confidence and trust, and a feeling of belonging. Playing together, working together, sharing interesting and exciting experiences lead to the kind of closeness which is essential for cooperation. Instead of talking to, nag, scold, preach and correct, utilize talking to maintain a friendly relationship. Speak to your child as you would speak to your friend.