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Children and Values

Are we rich? This question can be a show stopper for any parent. One mother confidently answered, “Yes we’re rich. We’re rich in love, laughs and good health. We have lots of friends, fun, and good looks. We’re loaded with talent, ideas, and good nature, so we’re quite rich.” She was trying to accent the positive health. We have lots of friends, fun, and good looks. she went on to explain, “We are far richer than most people in the world; still no matter how hard your father and I work, there will always be others who are richer. The important thing is to be content with our middle ground and not to worry about money. We will probably always be able to do and have the things we really want, if they’re important.”

If they’re important. Do you have a true appreciation of what is important, of what your values are? On every hand, experts tell us that parents must set the pattern for values they want their children to have. In a speech delivered on the occasion of his being named Father of the Year in 1956, the late Joseph N. Welch said if he had it in his power to bestow on the youth of the land one single quality it would be integrity. He pointed out that we can fail to pass this priceless quality on to the children by being a little lawless; by being a fixer; by being a cheat, and a chiseler. One of his sons said this to him, “When the two of us were young, there were times when you and Mom would obviously set out to tell us how to live the good life. We could always recognize those moments and would close our ears and minds. Your most influential moments were your most inadvertent ones. We were apt to imitate what you really were—not what you said you were or even what you may have believed you were.”

Example is truly worth considerably more than telling children how to act. In the family, school or community a heavy share of responsibility for upholding the right values rests upon the adult members. A small, integrated stable community has a clear set of standards, rules and values. But now, in so many communities, rules are often made as parents go along. Instead of being clear cut, values are often uncertain, if not contradictory. Early marriages add to the problem. Young people of 18 may have a strong set of values and attitudes to help them in decision making, but many are unsure of themselves, Jobs often take them far from parents and older friends who could help them. Studies indicate that the number of decisions to be made have multiplied, too. By the time a youth has reached 21 he has had to make as many decisions as his grandfather made in his whole lifetime.

LEARNING VALUES BEGINS EARLY

Learning his role in the family and society begins when the child is born. Through the voices of his parents and their expressions and reaction to his behavior the child is guided toward consistency or inconsistency in his habits and views of the world. The anthropologists, child psychologists, and family life specialists agree that if the pattern for a child is one of consistent loving care, he will be given a sense of trust in people and his world. A cornerstone of character is this sense of trust.

Some parents let a child do exactly as he pleases because they think “he’s too little to understand what is the right thing to do.” But, actually, he’s not too little. All the time he is reflecting his parent’s values and building his own values in accordance with the way his parents respond to him. Other parents think a child should be left perfectly free to develop his own values. Children brought up by such extremely permissive methods often grow up indecisive and insecure. They have a feeling that their parents don’t care very much. Children need positive parents—those who not only have sound values of their own and live by them, but help a child develop his values.

Demand is the word one father used in a recent message to parents. When he realized that he and his wife were not demanding enough of their children they gradually tightened up on discipline and insisted on better performance all along the line. Rules were stricter regarding bedtime, homework, television. They cut down on some services they had been performing for the convenience of the children—chauffering for instance. The children learned to walk or ride their bicycles. Apparently the change from a climate of relative permissiveness to one of demand was gradual enough that the children seemed not to resent it. Actually, children enjoy the chance to attempt things that are difficult. They have pride when they succeed and are pleased with responsibility given them.

Recently a commander of a naval air station complained of having to provide moral and ethical training, as well as technical instruction to young sailors. The difference between right and wrong should have been taught long before they arrived at the station. If they don’t understand the moral difference between us and our potential enemies they are no good as fighting men.
BUT CULTURES VARY

Cultures vary in what shall be taught and the sureness with which it shall be taught. In Europe parents know very well how to teach a child to maintain the same place and status as the past generation. In America all parents can do is to make children strong and well equipped to strike out on their own. Parents don't expect their children to live in the same place and follow the same occupation of their father. As a result, they lack the sure hand on the rudder which parents in other societies display.

ADULT ROLE IN TEACHING

Though we think of parents as teachers, the problem in learning is in part a problem of creating good conditions for learning in the home. Those things which help to create conditions are parents with clear-cut values, parents who are positive, and who make sure the pattern for the child is one of consistent loving care. When the child is very young, directions are clear and definite though kindly. When children are older, the counsel is usually to help them find their own answers. In punishing children, parents must make sure that a child realizes it is the act of which they disapprove and not the child himself. A happy home is not child centered but belongs to all members of the family.

VALUES RELATED TO MONEY

Someone has stated facetiously that Americans are people who buy things they don't need with money they haven't got to impress people they don't like. There is probably more truth to the statement than we like to admit; but, it doesn't indicate values we want to teach children. Very young children soon learn about money—that it will buy wonderful things, such as ice cream, toys and coloring books, and even that it carries a certain amount of power. This much children learn before they are old enough for allowances.

Allowances are taken pretty much for granted these days. Yet for many parents, it goes against the grain to hand over money to a child regularly, when he has done nothing to earn it. But he has done nothing to earn the clothes he wears or the food he eats either, and yet all parents consider food and clothing necessities which they must provide. Parents should use the same tone of voice in handing the child an allowance as they do when they give him a new coat or other necessities and treats. The allowance should be thought of as part of the money parents have budgeted for the child—money that is his to manage.

Sidonie Gruenberg, authority on children and money, says that much experience has taught her two things: First, it is astonishing but true that a small weekly allowance usually comes to less than dimes and quarters doled out for a candy bar here, a toy or movie there. Second, a youngster can learn more about money and what it can buy only by being free to make choices, decisions and mistakes of his own. If a flimsy toy breaks or ceases to give pleasure, he will hesitate to buy another one when it is his own money that's at stake. Seriously and thoughtfully he will consider the question, Is it worth it?

With an allowance, parents have to guide their children with gentleness, subtlety, and understanding. It is an excellent opportunity for the boys and girls to become acquainted with the values and standards of their parents. Each can learn that families are different and that his allowance need not be the same as some other child's. The main problem is to help him understand that spending is governed by income, not by what someone else spends.

What about financial rewards and penalties? A child should not be paid for being good, for then he has learned a good reason for being bad occasionally. If he is paid for studying hard, for getting good grades, or is docked on his allowance for being late, he may become confused about money because it puts a cash value on things that have none.

Is materialism running rampant? Most American youngsters have never known anything but a high level of prosperity. Moreover, many adults use the dollar sign in rating people, products, and performance. "They're a darling couple and very well-to-do," one might say. Or "He's really got it made." or "It should be nice; it cost enough." We all say these things to a greater or lesser degree. None of this is questioned by the children. To them materialism seems the way of life.

But do our values need to be so commercial? One mother thinks it quite possible to return to a true appreciation of what is important. She and her husband are making a determined effort to guide their children in the proper evaluation of a person's worth—in character, not in cash. They are going about in this way:

Phraseology. Parents are deliberately changing their own choice of words and are helping their children make changes in describing people, things, and events. Instead of "rich," "loaded" and "wealthy" they substitute such words as "stimulating," "attractive," and "worthwhile." If anyone in the family is caught using money as a definition of quality, the rest of the family say "and what else is there worth talking about?"—concerning the person, situation or article.

Reconsider the personal values on which our behavior is based. This step is one which we all should take. Do we equate extravagance with good taste? Is amassing possessions the only life goal we can set for ourselves? Are we guided by superficial and false values?
Talk aloud about taste and quality and things that matter most. To make sure the children are listening, two tools are used—

1. A game is made of looking through magazines. Each selects the most beautiful house or car or travel scene and then defends his choice. Giving reasons why a choice is made is a familiar part of the management process.

2. Does-it-make-sense yardstick. This tool is best explained by examples. The family plans to go to a game and the question is, “Does it make sense to buy box seats when we can watch the game from general admission seats?” Or “Does it make sense to buy a boat when we have no place to keep it?” This gives the family a chance to discuss and make choices since the answer could as well be yes as no.

More difficult than laying down a set of values for tangible things is evaluating the worth of people. Does the size of a man’s bank account determine the degree of respect and deference he is shown? Do we honor money-making more than service, big-spending more than decency? Does money triumph over all? These are questions adults must answer first. We have evidence all around us that money influences the judgment of many people. But, if we support what we honestly think to be right and not merely popular, our youngsters will have the courage to take independent stands.

DOES TELEVISION DEVELOP SUITABLE VALUES?

Television offers some programs that are desirable, but many are undesirable for children. Gladys Taber in her Butternut Wisdom column in Family Circle sums up some of the things she thinks undesirable: “The Old West was inhabited largely by homesteaders such as my relatives, who lived in sod huts, tried to conquer the wilderness, raised their families and went to church, even if it meant riding all day in a springless wagon. Today's children must think the West was full of men fast on the draw, predatory Indians, and good hearted but sinful women who danced and sang in saloons. The family comedies also present an unfortunate picture for our children. The men invariably make innocent, well-meaning but unfortunate mistakes on all levels, and the women pull the chestnuts out of the fire. Often, these episodes are funny—but I wonder if many of these tend to make children think that father is just somebody one has to have around. In the end, the kind of fare we get on television is our own choice. Many of the best programs are dropped because cheap offerings attract more viewers. It all comes right back to our living rooms.”

CRITERIA FOR JUDGING TV PROGRAMS

Program is desirable if it—

- Provides enjoyment and is related to the child’s interests, play and other activities.
- Meets the child’s need for adventure and excitement in a wholesome way.
- Helps the child to understand himself and others.
- Aids the child in developing suitable ideals, values, and beliefs; stresses the democratic way of life.
- Promotes the growth of interests, enriches play, and adds to the child’s information.
- Fosters appreciation of well-written and well-illustrated materials; stimulates wide reading.
- Presents experience suited to the child’s degree of maturity.
- Promotes language development; employs clear, correct, and interesting conversation or discussion.
- Fosters an understanding of the world and of the child’s responsibility for growing up to be an informed, cooperative citizen.

Program is undesirable if it—

- Is unrelated to the child’s experience and interests; encourages passivity rather than participation.
- Is overly exciting and emotionally disturbing; shows excessive torture, terror, and punishment.
- Is insincere, prejudiced, and unrealistic; presents people as stereotypes.
- Glamorizes crime, lust, greed, cruelty, indecency, and intemperance.
- Adds nothing to the child’s knowledge; repeats commonplace and trivial experiences.
- Is ill-timed, clumsily written, and badly illustrated; causes eyestrain or needless confusion in reading or viewing.
- Portrays situations that are too mature to be understood or so infantile as to be absurd.
- Uses an unsuitable vocabulary, one that is too difficult or too easy; employs faulty grammar, vulgarity, and language of the underworld.
- Distorts reality; encourages the child to become fearful, insecure, dependent, and uncooperative.

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—Paul Witty