



ARE PARENTS IMPROVING?

New Ideas About Bringing Up Children

A DEGREE in philosophy, a diploma in education, considerable experience of kindergarten teaching, and Training College lecturing, and three children of her own should qualify a woman to speak with some authority on the care and education of children. Yet when I approached a similarly-endowed friend of mine to ask if she could enumerate for *Listener* readers a few of the commoner mistakes made by parents in bringing up their

children, she was diffident. "I feel it would be rather impertinent of me to tell other people that they were making mistakes in bringing up the family," she said. "I'm sure I'm making mistakes in bringing up mine."

"Then you don't think a knowledge of child psychology helps much?" we could not resist asking.

"Oh, but it does!" she said, and went on to explain just how.

"You see, in order to understand your child, you've got to be able to put yourself in the child's place, and some know-

ledge of his general mental processes is a big help here. The child isn't just a small adult human being. He's a person in his own right. His modes of thought and action are different from ours, but too often we make the mistake of judging him by our own standards. If he does anything that interferes with our comfort and convenience, we label him 'naughty,' irrespective of the fact that what is 'wrong' from our point of view may be 'right' considered in terms of the child's own growth and development."

"Could you give me an example?"

"Well, consider the three-year-old who's always asking questions. Perhaps Mother is trying to make a cake, and it distracts her to find that having answered one question, another question springs from the answer, and so on. She says 'Don't be naughty. Run outside and play.' Now the mother with some knowledge of child psychology would recognise in this continual asking of questions an encouraging evidence of the child's development, and would probably realise that answering the child's questions was more important than making the cake."

Naughty Or Unhappy?

"Do you agree with A. S. Neill that there are no naughty children, only unhappy ones?"

"I think there's a great deal more in it than most parents realise. The constantly naughty child—the one who is consistently destructive, has frequent temper tantrums or is cruel to other children—is not entirely responsible for his naughtiness. Some emotional crisis in his life, such as the birth of a younger brother or sister, or some arrest or abnormality in his development may be responsible. In any case, it's worse than useless to resort to the usual practice of a generation ago—a good whipping."

"Do you think that there is fundamentally much change from the attitude of parents 20 years ago to the attitude of parents to-day?"

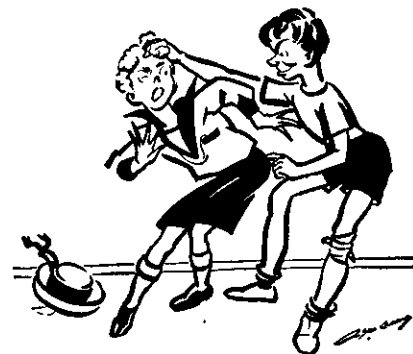
"Yes, I do think there has been some improvement. There's a far more positive approach to the bringing up of children. I think we're getting rid of the idea that children are born into the world full of original sin, and that in order to grow up into reasonable adults, their natural instincts must be curbed. We used to believe that children were born naughty and must be taught to grow good. Now we believe that the child is naturally good, that its natural instincts are good and must be allowed to develop naturally."

Parents Also Have Rights

"Even though it means a certain amount of inconvenience to the parent?"

"Yes. When people have children, they must expect a certain amount of inconvenience. But that doesn't mean that the parents must sit quietly and watch the children cutting holes in the curtains and tearing the wallpaper off in strips. Parents have their rights as well as the children."

"But if the child is too young to understand that parents have rights?



"Not entirely responsible for his naughtiness"

How would you explain to a two-year-old that he mustn't cut holes in the curtain?"

"I wouldn't explain. I'd give him something else to cut holes in—give him some pictures to cut out."

"And if he still preferred the curtain?"

"I'd put the curtain out of his reach."

"You wouldn't say 'don't!' or smack him?"

"I wouldn't say 'don't' because at two a child isn't old enough to know the meaning of don't. And I certainly wouldn't smack him."

"Why not?"

"In my opinion there is never any justification for smacking a child. Puppies, yes, but children, no. To me, it's always a confession of defeat."

"And do you think smacking does any permanent harm?"

"Yes, I'm certain of it. It must cause resentment between parent and child. This resentment sometimes manifests itself in the strange biting fits some children indulge in about the age of six, but even if the resentment doesn't show itself as obviously as all that, it may appear in disguised form when the child reaches adulthood."

"But apart from that, 'don't' and 'mustn't' and smacking, even if successful in their immediate object, are all negative ways of ensuring good behaviour."

The Positive Approach

"But if you rely exclusively on the positive approach, what happens to the child when he gets out into a world sprinkled with 'don't' notices?—'Keep off the grass,' 'Trespassers will be prosecuted,' 'Don't feed this animal.'"

"That's the argument usually put forward by people who have grave doubts about psychologically-sound methods of child-training. But it comes from a lack of knowledge. Trying the positive approach to problems of child discipline doesn't mean that the child is not subject to discipline. His meal times, sleep times, bath and toilet habits are imposed upon him from outside, and for his own good, he must conform to these. The trouble with 'don't' is that many mothers use it when it isn't necessary, merely because it's so much less trouble to say 'don't' than to direct the child into some alternative and more desirable form of activity."

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