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TRAINING CHILDREN FOR SELF-RELIANCE

Experiment Station Circular 66

THE UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA AGRICULTURAL
COLLEGE EXPERIMENT STATION

W. W. Burr, Director, Lincoln, Nebraska

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EXPERIMENT STATION CIRCULAR 66

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Throughout this circular there are references to investigative work conducted by the Experiment Station of the College of Agriculture of the University of Nebraska. Results of this work are available in Research Bulletins 106 and 114, which are technical in their manner of presentation. Additional work on family relationships is being carried on.

Training Children for Self-Reliance

LELAND H. STOTT

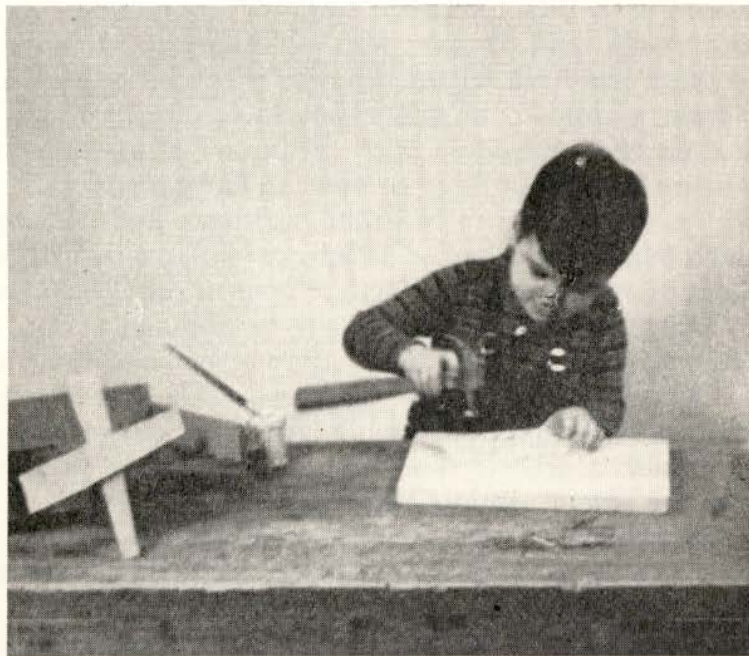
Department of Home Economics

WHY IS IT that the three-year-old can never amuse herself for any length of time, but must be continually entertained or played with?

Is it Billie Green's own fault that he has made himself an object of disdain to his associates by running "to tell Mother" every time he gets into difficulty with a playmate?

Why do so many young people in high school and college always find themselves "left out" when group activities are planned?

Whom should the devoted young husband thank for his bewilderment and grief when his wife periodically packs up and goes home to Mother because he is so "inconsiderate of her feelings"? On the other hand, whom does the young bride have to thank when she suddenly finds herself entirely responsible for getting her husband up for breakfast or for seeing to it that he is properly dressed?



In answer to such questions, some would say that all children and adults *naturally* differ, that some are *naturally* self-reliant while others are born to be dependent and irresponsible. Every one recognizes, of course, that individuals do differ rather widely in native capacities and talents; but it is also true that many traits of personality are built up through the process of habit formation as the individual becomes adjusted to his environment. Probably most of us would agree that the dependent, unresourceful, and irresponsible individual is as he is largely because of his home environment and training—*because of the way he has been reared*.

Parents, to be sure, don't often knowingly and deliberately make incompetents and irresponsibles of their children. The natural inclination is to shield and protect them from discomfort and it is through efforts to do so that difficulty often arises. We realize, however, that the more self-reliant any child becomes as he grows toward adulthood, the better fitted he becomes to take his place as a responsible adult.

The Nature of Self-Reliance

IS SELF-RELIANCE A GENERAL TRAIT of personality which we all possess in varying amounts, and which functions in all areas of human activity?

Or, are there as many possible kinds of self-reliance as there are different situations in which self-reliant behavior might be shown?

Or, again, is there in human nature a relatively small number of distinct and perhaps independent traits, all of which may appropriately be called self-reliance, each functioning in particular areas of human activity, and possessed in varying degrees by individuals?

The answer to this problem (as we have already said) is of considerable practical importance to parents and teachers. If self-reliance is a single, general trait, then to train a child to be self-reliant in certain typical situations would tend to make him self-reliant in all kinds of situations. If on the other hand self-reliant behavior is specific to each single situation, then to train a child to be self-reliant in feeding himself, for example, would have no effect whatever upon his behavior in a different situation, such as dressing in the morning. In order to make a really self-reliant individual of him he would have to be given experience and training in all situations in which self-reliant behavior is demanded. Upon which basis shall we proceed in our efforts to promote the development of self-reliance in our children?

Scientific research is gradually furnishing answers to many perplexing questions such as these. In a study at the University of Nebraska College of Agriculture an analysis has been made of the self-reliant behavior of children and young folks in a large variety of everyday life situations in the home and at school. The results of the study show quite definitely that there are several distinct varieties of self-reliance.

Self-reliance in other words is not a single, general trait of personality, but a number of *independent* traits. Each of these traits might, with equal right, be called "self-reliance" but, at the same time, each depends upon experience and training of a particular sort for its development in the individual child. A person who has developed a great deal of self-reliance of one sort may or may not have developed the other varieties. That would depend upon his past experience and training. We shall now consider some of the more important sorts of self-reliance and try to suggest how we, as parents and teachers, might help children to achieve a satisfactory measure of each.

Independence in Personal Matters

EACH OF THESE VARIETIES of self-reliance applies in, or is related to, a particular area of human activity. For example, one sort of self-reliance, or its lack, shows itself in relation to the *personal* problems and difficulties which children as well as adults face. If a young person as a rule manages to get himself out of difficult situations; if he habitually faces alone his personal problems such as choosing an article of clothing, raising the

money to pay for it, or deciding whether to go to college; if he usually seems to know what to do in emergencies; if he can usually make up his mind without difficulty; if he prefers to make his own plans and arrangements for trips and other activities; and if he is willing to take the consequences of his own decisions, he would be regarded as a self-reliant individual.

Clearly all of these matters are more or less personal in nature. A person thus characterized is one who has learned to "stand on his own feet" and act upon his own responsibility. The child who runs immediately to his mother every time he gets into the least difficulty with his playmate is not learning to meet his own problems independently. The boy who dilly-dallies, sulks, and cries until Mother helps him put on his stocking, is practicing *dependence* rather than independence in overcoming difficulties, as is also the student who immediately goes for help with his "tough" assignments instead of working them out for himself.

A child's achievement of any sort of self-reliance depends to a very great extent upon actual *experience* or *practice* in acting "on his own" in a particular area of human activity or in a particular type of life situation. If he is to be self-reliant or independent in regard to his personal difficulties and problems he must be given opportunities for practice and responsibility, appropriate to his age and ability and always with guidance.

Young children meet with "personal problems" most frequently in their play situations. Five-year-old Jerry, for example, while constructing a system of highways in his backyard playground on which to "speed" his tiny toy automobiles, found himself in great need of a bridge across a "river." He went to his daddy for help. The father's first impulse, of course, was to make the bridge for Jerry, and had he carried out this first impulse a better looking and probably more usable bridge would have resulted.

But a valuable opportunity for experience and practice under sympathetic guidance in solving a personal problem would have been wasted for the boy. Instead of doing the job for Jerry the father suggested several pieces of material that might be used and some alternative ways that they might be worked together to form a bridge. Jerry, none too pleased at first, set to work and after several unsatisfactory attempts and some irritation finally came through with a "bridge"—truly not a very handsome or substantial one, but one which gave him a feeling of accomplishment and satisfaction that a much better bridge made by someone else could not have afforded him. With a little guidance from his father he had, through his own efforts, surmounted a difficulty and had gained in personal independence.

In ordinary home life many situations present themselves in which the child might be placed upon his own responsibility and be obliged to make a choice between alternatives. When Mary realizes that by choosing to spend her dime for candy or for a new box of water colors, she is delayed one whole week in the purchase of a fuzzy Persian kitten for which she has been saving for so long, she experiences a forceful lesson in the importance of carefully weighing alternatives and of choosing wisely. She thus learns by experience to exercise independent judgment in personal problems.

We cannot easily overemphasize the fact that the only way a child can learn to be self-reliant and independent in solving his personal problems and difficulties is through actual practice. He must be allowed as a child to choose between alternatives, to make simple choices for himself and learn, through the actual experience of making mistakes and of suffering their consequences, the importance of choosing wisely. The importance of such experiences, of course, is one of the most difficult things for some parents to appreciate. To stand by and watch a child make an obviously wrong choice—one which will surely cause him dissatisfaction or discomfort—is too much for many parents. The tendency is to try to shield the child from failure, or themselves from humiliation caused by the child's failure.

Considerable guidance is of course always necessary and many short-cuts in the learning process must be made use of. Our culture is far too complex for a single individual to learn everything about behavior through personal trial and error. At the same time, one of the most important lessons a child has to learn is to profit from mistakes and failure, and surely the *only way* one can learn to be intelligently independent is through practice in meeting situations independently. The dominant, overprotective parent is the greatest handicap a child has to overcome in acquiring "independence."

Possession of this independence by a young person does not mean that he is noncommunicative or inclined not to confide in his parents or consult with them regarding his problems. On the contrary, our studies of family life and personality development in children have shown that the child who habitually talks over with his parents his problems, his ambitions, and his plans and decisions is most likely to have developed independence in regard to them. It is extremely important for a youngster to realize that he can always depend upon sympathetic understanding, free from personal blame, from his parents in regard to his decisions and the solutions of his difficulties, even in cases where they are perhaps not the most wise or desirable ones possible. Under these circumstances, he would not only be more inclined to confide in them in all matters but would also continually receive encouragement to meet life's problems more realistically.

Self-Reliance in Work and the Use of Leisure

ANOTHER SORT OF SITUATION in which self-reliant behavior might be seen in young people is in ordinary, everyday work and in the use of time. If a youngster has so many things that he likes to do that he never has time to feel bored when thrown upon his own resources for the evening, if he enjoys working out new ways of doing his daily tasks, if he is always conscientious in the performance of his share of the work and even is likely to go ahead with additional work on his own responsibility, and if he is never at a loss for something to do for his own entertainment, he may rightly be said to be a self-reliant individual. His self-reliance is of a different sort, however, from that previously described. It involves industriousness and a sort of resourcefulness in work. It might be called "self-sufficiency in work and in the use of leisure."

The importance of this particular personal characteristic in the individual's adjustment to life is easily seen. The person characterized by it is never found unoccupied. He is one in whom responsibility is vested and who, therefore, is likely to make rapid advancement in his job or profession. Life is always full and interesting to him because of his many interests and hobbies. Although he is in a sense self-sufficient and independent of others for his amusement and pastime activities, it does not necessarily follow that he is unsociable or reclusive in his habits. Indeed he might be quite the opposite. The same tendencies which help him in his job might also serve as a basis for friendships with his associates and thus develop him socially.

At first thought one might question whether consideration should be given the problem of the development of self-reliance in work and the use of time in relation to young children. Work is the concern of the adult, not of the child. Nevertheless, early childhood training is important in the development of this aspect of adult efficiency. Even the small child might well be given a measure of responsibility in deciding how best to divide his time among the various activities of the day and how to use that time most satisfactorily for himself and others concerned.

In a modern nursery school, for example, the child is not entertained in order to keep him in good humor. Instead, he is given things to do—things that are interesting and constructive. Within limits, he is allowed to choose the particular play object or activity in which to engage. He learns many creative activities in which to entertain himself both alone and jointly, or cooperatively with other children. He learns to choose wisely in this area also. Experience teaches him that if he spends all morning building with the blocks he will not have a chance to paint or model with the clay, and thus a sense of the value of time is gradually gained. He also learns through experience that certain little tasks which are of the nature of work must also be done promptly, for the most satisfying outcome. He must gather up the blocks or the cars which he has scattered about and put them in their proper place. He learns that to do these little tasks conscientiously and with dispatch means more time for the things he enjoys more.

The nursery school children are also encouraged to wait on themselves and to be responsible for the care of their own wraps and other possessions. Hooks on which to hang their wraps are placed at a convenient height for little folks. They are given simple tasks to perform, such as serving each other at the table, which are carried out with surprisingly few mishaps. The children like to do these things, for they give the child a sense of accomplishment and a feeling of importance. Children thus gradually acquire self-reliance in work as well as in play.

These same techniques can, of course, be used in the home. A variety of simple, inexpensive playthings and a safe place in which to use them can in most cases be provided. Then, through suggestion and with a limited degree of control and wise guidance, the child can learn to entertain himself, to appreciate the value of time, and even to perform conscientiously the little tasks necessarily connected with his play. By a few thoughtful rearrangements of closet hooks and by other means he can be encouraged to

care for his own wraps and other possessions, and he can be given his share of the household tasks to perform. These experiences should make for the development of self-sufficiency in work and the use of leisure.

Personal Responsibility

A THIRD KIND OF SELF-RELIANCE which recent study has revealed might be called "personal responsibility." If a child has learned to assume the responsibility for getting himself ready and off to school on time, if he dislikes being late for an appointment, if he has formed the habit of seeing to it that he keeps his appointments and promises to his associates and teachers, and if he is able to feel confident at examination time because he has, on his own responsibility, kept up in his studies, he will rank high in this particular trait. It includes dependability and conscientiousness in meeting one's obligations and in doing one's share generally in maintaining satisfactory relationships with others.

The man who has developed this trait is *not* the one who shifts to his wife the responsibility of getting him up and to work in the morning. Neither is he the one who spends most of the day in the pool hall and forgets to get home in time to do the "chores," or who habitually fails to stop at the store for the article he promised to bring his wife.

This sort of self-reliance is in one respect similar to the one previously described which we called "independence." Such matters as keeping up in one's studies or seeing to it that one is on time for school and for one's appointments are indeed personal matters and they involve independence of decision. At the same time, however, they belong to a somewhat different area of human activity—the area of person-to-person relationships. Self-reliance of this sort is of immediate value in the development of one's ability to get along well with others.

Here again we can be of assistance only by providing favorable conditions and encouragement for practice. If the child is to learn to depend upon himself to fulfill his obligations, do his part, and in general to maintain satisfactory personal relations with others, again to an appropriate degree, he as a child must be put upon his own responsibility in keeping up his end of the bargain with his brothers and sisters, parents, and others about him. On such occasions as when he fails to let Sister have her promised "turn" at the swing, when he forgets his promise to Mother to come home from the neighbor's at the appointed time, or when he fails to return Dad's hammer to its proper place after using it, he should as far as possible experience invariable consequences. He should soon learn by experience that such failure to keep his word or to fulfill his obligations is invariably followed by loss of privilege.

The connection between his own irresponsible behavior and the unpleasant consequence should be direct and clear. He should likewise learn by experience that as a result of keeping his word and remembering his obligations, his personal dealings with others consistently bring pleasure and satisfaction to himself. *Self-discipline*, resulting in the growth of personal responsibility, is thus encouraged and authoritarian control with ex-

ternally imposed penalties has no place. The child learns to be responsible for his own behavior rather than blindly obedient to authority.

The basis for habits of punctuality also may be established early in the child's life. It is often easy to put the child upon his own responsibility in the matter of getting to school on time, or of going to bed at the proper time, by making it strictly a matter between himself and the clock. He soon gets a practical concept of time and learns to associate the passing of time with the movements of the hands on the clock. With the realization that this objective, time, never waits for him and that he is responsible for his own race with the hands, there is gradually formed the basis for habits of punctuality and of personal responsibility.



Resourcefulness in Group Situations

INDIVIDUALS DIFFER from one another in self-reliance of still another important variety. This variety involves social relationships to a greater extent than the one just considered. It has been called "resourcefulness in group situations."

A young person who has developed this trait to a high degree is the one who is usually asked to help plan special parties and programs at school. He usually is ready with ideas and suggestions concerning such matters and those suggestions are usually practical and usable for the occasion. In class meetings and committee meetings his ideas are usually listened to and made

use of. Not only is he likely to be one who helps with plans, but he is often given the job of leading out in the execution of group plans.

This particular variety of self-reliance, then, especially involves resourcefulness and a sort of aggressiveness together with dependability and willingness to work in social situations. It is self-reliance, but of quite a different sort from those previously described.

In order to live a full and completely satisfactory life one must not only be able adequately to deal with the problems which arise from one's personal adjustments and social relationships, but one must also be *socially useful*. Perhaps nothing contributes more to the unhappiness of a youngster of high school or college age than the feeling that he is "out of things"—that he is not able to participate equally with the others in group discussions and in planning and directing group activities. Of course we all vary in innate aptitude—in the ease with which we can achieve self-reliance and facility of this sort. Nevertheless most of the difficulty which the young man or woman faces is chargeable to the lack of early environmental opportunity to develop through practice and experience.

What Can Parents Do?

THERE ARE TWO FACTORS in general, that parents might check on and perhaps adjust to this end. First, the general atmosphere of the home should be such as to encourage social development—an atmosphere of congeniality, confidence, and affection. This of course is an important factor in the development of all aspects of personality but particularly is it important in the development of resourcefulness and self-confidence in social situations. A child who is subjected to an uncongenial atmosphere at home tends to develop a feeling of social inferiority, which immediately puts him at a disadvantage. Even with otherwise equal opportunity for social experience he probably cannot long compete with the child who has an attitude of confidence born of a congenial and happy family life.

The second factor is, again, the matter of seeing to it that the child, early in his life, gets actual experience and practice in the very function itself—in *actually participating* in group discussions and activities. He should be given ample opportunity and encouragement to express his ideas and at the same time be made to feel that those ideas are given weight and consideration. The family meal provides a very favorable, natural setting for training and development of this sort.

Perhaps because it is so commonplace, the opportunities afforded by this home situation for social training are often sadly neglected. Too often the adult members are so engrossed in discussing matters of interest only to themselves, or are so busy seeing that Junior or Sister behave properly at the table, that little or no effort is made to gauge the conversation so as to include the little folks. Their efforts to join the conversation are often either ignored entirely or even suppressed. Many instances of childish misbehavior, which in reality may be merely bids for attention, could be prevented or eliminated simply by encouraging the child to take part in the conversation and by recognizing and respecting his contributions.

To sum up, then, these are the traits of self-reliance which we have considered here: (1) *independence in regard to personal problems and difficulties*, (2) *self-sufficiency in work and the use of leisure*, (3) *personal responsibility*, and (4) *resourcefulness in group situations*. Each is relatively independent of the others. "Self-reliance" is not a single, general trait. Neither does the quality which we have called "self-reliance" consist merely of a collection of unrelated and specific habits. On the contrary there appear to be a number of different varieties of self-reliance. There are undoubtedly important varieties other than these described. The important point is that it is not sufficient to give a child experience and practice in "doing" for himself in only one type of life situation, such as caring for and choosing his own clothes, if he is to develop the other important varieties of self-reliance as well. Opportunity for practice in "standing on his own feet" in a number of different types of life situations must be provided.

This wealth of opportunity for the practice of self-reliance in its various phases, of course, is best provided in a thoroughly democratic social order. When many limitations, restrictions, rules of conduct, and patterns of thinking are imposed by an autocratic head there would seem to be little opportunity or even need for the exercise of self-reliance in any form.

In a like manner a child would be handicapped in his achievement of self-reliance if the home atmosphere were one of strict obedience to autocratic authority. Our studies have shown that adolescent children of parents who believe in strict and autocratic parental control are, on the average, less self-reliant than children of parents who do not hold such beliefs. Our research results also indicate that self-reliance in all its aspects is best developed in a family atmosphere of mutual confidence, affection, and companionability, where children habitually confide in and freely express affection for their parents, and where many group activities both in the home and outside the home are planned jointly and enjoyed together. Such an atmosphere is characteristic of the truly democratic family.

Any given child, then, may be expected to acquire the different traits of self-reliance in proportion as he grows up in a democratic atmosphere at home, in school, and elsewhere—an environment made up of a great variety of situations in which he is permitted and encouraged to make his own choices and decisions and to assume responsibility for them not only in relation to his own welfare but also in relation to the common good of those about him. To be as truly democratic as possible in all our behavior as parents, teachers, and citizens is to foster the development of self-reliance in all its aspects and varieties in the children with whom we deal.