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1930

WHY CHILDREN BEHAVE AS THEY DO
Ruth Staples

We are sometimes inclined to think that the way children act is inevitable, that their particular kind of behavior has been inherited from one or the other side of the family. If a child argues persistently, some people may say he "takes after his mother," or his quick temper may be referred to as an inheritance from his father.

Forming Early Habits

Scientists today, however, believe that as far as character and personality traits are concerned, inheritance is a minor factor, that, for the most part, children behave the way they do because they have learned to behave that way. It is true that children are born with a number of instincts, common to all human beings, and that they naturally show emotion, under certain situations. All babies are startled by loud, sudden noises and are angry when not allowed to move their arms and legs. Also some children have a greater natural ability for music, art, or school work than others. But these inherited forms of behavior are very simple and serve merely as a foundation for later behavior.

The child who inherits a talent for music does not suddenly become capable of playing the violin, he merely has the kind of a nervous system which enables him to become an accomplished musician after years of ardent practice. In the same way, a child naturally enjoys the presence of other people, but he has to learn how to get along with them, if he is to turn out into a socially well adjusted adult. Such traits as persistence, independence, and love of achievement help constitute the character of what we call successful men and women, but these qualities have been learned, and are not magic traits passed on by their forebears. Life is largely the result of habits and attitudes built up in childhood, the parents are the first and the most important teachers.

Since learning begins at birth, it is a poor plan to wait two or three years before starting to teach the children good habits. Babies are going to learn, whether we direct their learning or not, and if they are not taught good habits, they will probably pick up undesirable ones. Poor habits of sleep and eating, habits of disobedience and untidiness in a child, show the lack of training by his parents. They are not unfortunate characteristics the child is born with.

There are ways of teaching which have proven to be the most successful; certain laws which serve as a guide for building all kinds of habits in children and which apply equally well to health habits, to social habits and to emotional habits.

Trial and Error Learning

Children need to have an opportunity to try things out for themselves and by trying this way and that, they finally succeed in discovering the best method. When they say, "let me do it," let them try. You will be surprised how well they succeed if you give them plenty of time, sufficient opportunity and a few good suggestions. Do not expect them to get things perfectly at first. They will make many mistakes, but this is part of the learning process. Gradually the wrong moves are eliminated and the task is learned. This need for experimenting applies both to

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learning such motor tasks as dressing one's self and to learning how to get along with other children. Experience is an excellent teacher.

Learning by Practicing

By repeating an act again and again, it becomes firmly established as a habit in the individual. If the child always brushes his teeth before going to bed, it eventually becomes automatic, and he doesn't need to be told to do it. If every night he puts away his toys, he will finally do it as a matter of course. If he always has to eat his vegetables before getting his dessert, he will soon learn that it is useless to refuse them. A hungry child will eat what is set before him if he knows that there is no way to get anything else. On the other hand, if we frequently allow exceptions to occur, if the child doesn't always have to mind, if he doesn't have to take his nap every day, it will be very difficult to teach him obedience, or to get him to nap when we wish him to do so.

Learning by Pleasant and Unpleasant Results

While practice in doing a task is an exceedingly important rule for learning, the effect that the act has on the child is equally significant. If he experiences pleasure from what he is doing, he tends to repeat this act again, while if it brings about unpleasant results, he tends to avoid it. The baby who touches the hot stove will let it alone in the future. If, by crying and fussing, a child gets his own way, he will try it again and again, and the result is a whiney, fussy youngster. On the other hand, if the crying brings no satisfaction, he will soon stop trying it and give it up as useless. He may find that it pays to be cheerful and learn to greet the world with a smile.

When children play together for the first time, they always want the same toys and are apt to grab and snatch from each other and zealously guard what they have secured. Soon, with frequent companionship of others of their own age, they learn that it is a lot more fun to have someone to play with, even if you have to give up your own way part of the time, and here we have the beginning of such character traits as willingness to cooperate and unselfishness. The child repeats again and again the behavior which he finds brings him satisfaction. If we wonder why our children fly into temper tantrums when they can't have what they want, we can be sure they are getting some pleasure out of it, even if it is only the pleasure which comes with getting attention. It is natural for a child to become angry when thwarted, but a child can learn self control if the angry outburst brings no satisfaction, and if, when he does control himself, he wins the approval of those he loves and admires.

Learning to Perform Tasks

Little children tire easily, and find it difficult to keep their attention on any one thing for long. As they grow older, they concentrate better and fatigue less easily. When the child is first learning to lace his shoes or button his clothing, he should not be kept at it too long. If he buttons one or two buttons at first, he will learn to dress himself more quickly than if he is given a great many buttons to do. Fatigue causes unpleasant association and even an aversion to just what you are trying to teach him. Children need to experience success in their work and in their play.

If they are given tasks that are too difficult, not only do they learn less quickly, but they soon get discouraged and lose confidence in their own ability. On the other hand, if things are made too easy for them, they never learn what real effort is. The child learns more readily if he is interested in what he is doing. The reason children learn so much in their play is due to this factor of interest.

They will work so hard to make the toy airplane and learn so much about putting things together, because it is something they are thoroly interested in. Let us take our cue from this, and make what we wish to teach the child so attractive that he is anxious to learn. It takes considerable ingenuity to find ways of making things appeal to the child, but it is worth the effort.

Suggestion and imitation, too, play a part, and the attitude of the adult often furnishes a model for the child. Only too often the child refuses spinach because his elders do, or reproduces a display of temper he has witnessed. If we are distressed over our children's behavior, it is advisable to study the whole situation and find out what is back of it. It is much more likely to be something in his environment, in the way he is handled, than a matter of inheritance. We should, therefore, think carefully about the way we handle the children, it is wiser to think out, ahead of time, what effect a certain procedure will have on the child, than to correct the results of poor management.

The National Kindergarten Association contributed the following articles:

DANGER IN MAKING THREATS.

Edith Lochridge Reid

Gertrude was noted for her carelessness in losing her handkerchiefs, mittens, pencils and other belongings that are easily misplaced by an active child. The truth was that her mother fussed about these losses without doing anything to help Gertrude correct the habit. The child had no pockets in her dresses, and her coat pocket was too shallow for mittens, so these should have been fastened together in some way by snappers or tape in order that she could care for them at school. Her pencil could have been tied to her notebook.

However, no such helpful devices were prepared for her, and Gertrude continued to be most unfortunate in losing things, so her mother finally said that the next time she lost anything she couldn't play with her dolly for a whole month.

Now it can readily be seen that this punishment, aside from being out of proportion and unsuited to the offense, was a threat that showed the mother's lack of understanding. In her impatience to cure her of carelessness she unwisely threatened her little daughter with what she felt was a real penalty that ought to bring quick results.

Within a few days Gertrude lost her new pencil. In her anxiety not to let Mother know and not to have teacher's disapproval when class time came, Gertrude took a pencil from another girl's desk. To add to the difficulty she denied that the pencil was stolen.

It was a pitiable situation. Controlled by fear, the child had been driven from mere carelessness to stealing and lying. Her mother might easily have said, "Now, let's see if you can't go a whole day without losing your things." Then this time could have been extended to three days or a week, always with the sympathy of Mother displayed at each report. Gertrude would then have felt safe in confessing when she did make a mistake or experience a loss. But as it was, Mother's effort - a threat - was the rock upon which she was wrecked.

EXCHANGING A RAINY DAY INHERITANCE

May Whitcomb

Marion stood, a disconsolate little figure, her nose pressed to a white button against the window pane, watching the steady splash of the rain in pools outside. "Oh, Mama," she said, "I don't like the rain. I can't play. I can't do anything. Why does it have to rain?" Mother, busy with Baby, glanced up sympathetically and said, "I don't like the rain either, dear, but perhaps it will stop before long."

Somewhat comforted by her mother's sympathy and understanding, Marion watched and waited for the rain to stop, but it kept on and on. No occupation was suggested other than the usual, "Run and play with your toys," which did not appeal, and by nap time Marion and Mother were both irritable and out-of-sorts. "And I can't blame her," said Mother to Aunt Nell that afternoon when she dropped in. "Rainy days always make me miserable and blue and Marion must have inherited it."

"Well" said Aunt Nell, wise in experience gained from rearing a large family, "possibly it's inherited, tho I doubt it, but you might be able to help her overcome such a handicap - and it will be a handicap if she grows up feeling that a rainy day must be a gloomy, disagreeable day. I used to try and plan something a little unusual for rainy days when the children were small. Sometimes we kept a few special toys for such days, or I had little surprises for them. I'll tell you, I'll start Marion off with a rainy day box!"

Mother was dubious, but agreed it was worth a trial, and a few days later Marion received a large parcel. Removal of the outer wrappings disclosed a box, securely tied, and pasted across the top with a rainbow label marked, "Do not open until it rains."

During the two sunny days which followed the mysterious package remained unopened, and for the first time Marion could remember she was happy to find it raining on the morning of the third day. At last she could open the package! After breakfast the box was opened disclosing more packages - four of them, all bearing rainbow labels. Marion pulled out the top one and Mother read the note which said: "After breakfast open me -
I'll keep you busy, just you see!"

Inside Marion found a shiny, new pair of scissors, many pages of bright magazine pictures and a large square of muslin to spread on the floor or table to catch the scraps. Marion wanted to open the other packages at once, but Mother explained that the note on each one told just when it was to be opened - one at eleven o'clock, another after lunch, and the fourth after nap time. Their contents - a picture book, bright colored beads, and strings and a soap bubble outfit - kept the child busy and she was glad to help Mother by amusing the baby with her strings of beads. Thoroughly convinced of the value of the plan, Mother told Marion at tea time that they would put the new toys back in the box and keep them for rainy days. The next rainy day Marion found a red balloon in the rainy day box. Another day Mother made tiny sandwiches for her doll's tea party. Magazines with pretty pictures were saved for it and a scrap book started - and gradually rainy days were looked forward to as a cozy play time rather than "days when you can't do anything."