

Good Discipline: Is It Possible?

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"When I went to school the teacher didn't hesitate to let me have a good whack when I misbehaved and I never suffered for it," observed a parent displeased at the permissive attitude of a teacher toward an unruly group of students.

"I don't want anyone touching *my* child at school. I don't use physical force on him at home and I don't want anyone outside doing what I don't do myself," stated a distraught parent to a harassed principal over the telephone.

THESE comments are typical of many heard both in and out of the schools of America. Today, as for a number of past decades, there is an almost continual dialogue being carried on between the adherents of physical force to maintain discipline and those opposed to its use. The arguments offered by both sides sound terribly convincing, yet they do not in the end seem to settle the question.

Probably the single most significant factor in the initiation of the discussion and that which led to the decline of physical forms of discipline were the occasional cases of brutality and sadism by teachers upon

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children recorded over the years. Unfortunately, there are and will continue to be some in the profession who because of their background or current emotional and mental state lose conscious control and go too far in punishing the child who has misbehaved.

Also there has always been the danger of teachers arbitrarily being judge, jury, and executioner. There are times when the teacher "plays God" because of the relative innocence and inexperience of those placed under his control. Whether the teacher has exercised prudent judgment is sometimes questioned by both school administration and parents.

Nevertheless, there is a growing problem of maintaining good order in the schools. Perhaps it is nothing more than a mirroring of the open conflict and hostility evident in society, but the fact remains there is confusion and doubt in the schools about how to cope with the child who will not respond to the firm look of the disturbed teacher, or the threat of administrative action, or even to having the parents called in for consultation.

There are in the schools large numbers of children who do not respond to traditional disciplinary procedures. They are a decidedly disrupting influence on the individual classroom and on sound education in general.

These children are generally considered to be the children of the poor, or the deprived, or the neglected—and that a number of unruly children come from these homes is undoubtedly true. Yet there are also large, perhaps equal, numbers of unmanageable children coming from the middle- and upper-class homes.

Discipline has become a problem in places where it was never a problem before. Some claim it is the age of dissatisfaction and unrest we live in. Others say such behavior is attributable to a breakdown in parental authority. Many observers state that it is reluctance by teachers to use physical punishment either out of actual fear of student reprisal or of legal reprisal by the parents of the offended child.

There is still another segment of responsible educators who feel that this is a transitory problem that will disappear as the teaching staffs stabilize with less turnover and the student body becomes less transient and more permanent. Discipline is very rarely a significant problem with a teacher who has taught for five years. He has either developed his own unique method of coping with children or has left the profession.

Children tend to be just as conservative as their parents and teachers. When they have been in the school situation for a number of years and have grown and matured surrounded by the same staff of adults, children tend to develop behavioral responses that are generally conforming. But discipline tends to break down when both unfamiliar teachers and students struggle to find their own identity. The problem of discipline is almost always present in schools where the turnover in staff and student personnel is large.

Possible Solutions

Whatever the causes of discipline problems in the schools today there are a number of solutions which can be of value in establishing orderly procedures for combating such problems.

1. *There ought to be an orientation pro-*

gram for all new students entering a school. It is cruel enough for a youngster to be moved at any time. He has adjustment problems in giving up his old associations and being forced to make new ones in what often appears to be a hostile environment. The school should do everything possible to inform new students of the duties and rules they must abide by. Small children should be given detailed instructions concerning the physical layout of the school, toilets, exits, routes to the cafeteria, nurses office, etc. and an exact and clear explanation of the rules of conduct expected of them. It might even be advisable to appoint some of the more responsible students as guides for a few days to assist the child during his difficult period of adjustment to a new school.

2. *New teachers are especially in need of help in the early weeks and months of their new assignments.* Experienced teachers generally fail to remember their own early experiences in adjusting to the sometimes frustrating demands of teaching. The veteran teacher ought to try to assist the novice in the difficult job of getting to know the ropes.

The new teacher does not have years of experience with children or a vast catalog of past experiences to use in particular situations. He has not had the invaluable opportunity of time on the job to assist in handling troublesome students or situations. Students, on the other hand, are notorious for making it difficult during the "feeling out" period when the novice and the pupil are making mutual evaluations. Every good school needs a teacher orientation program to acquaint new people with the routine of the school and what is expected of them in order to soften, as much as possible, the often traumatic first days which can either be the making or breaking of many first-rate individuals.

3. *There must be a strong central authority who has the capacity to act as final arbiter in discipline cases.* He must be a gifted diplomat who knows how to salve rattled emotions and must have the ability to take the long-range view of individual situations. Yet he must be strong enough to realize the need for the orderly running of

the school. The value of the individual student who has problems cannot be underestimated but neither can the effect of the behavior of an ill-disciplined student upon the entire educational program be overlooked.

If, as is the case so often, the principal does not possess the necessary qualities for this aspect of administration, though he may be able in all others, he must have the courage and wisdom to appoint another individual or committee to handle this aspect of conducting a first-rate school.

4. *The lines of communication between the school and the home must be kept open at all times.* All too often a serious situation arises simply because there was not close rapport with the family of the obstructionist child. Discipline, it must be remembered, is primarily the responsibility of the home—and the school that respects and nourishes this division of responsibility is a wise one. The time for the school to make unilateral disciplinary decisions is after the parents have been consulted and have failed to act, not before.

5. *If there is a basic weakness in the American school, it is the almost total misunderstanding of the need for guidance facilities in the lower elementary grades.* Too many schools fail completely to understand the necessary relationship between learning problems and discipline problems. Many if not most discipline problems are in truth some form of rebellion by the child because he has been frustrated in his desire to learn.

The majority of children who do not learn and thus become discipline problems, do so not because they lack the ability to learn but rather because they have failed to learn some basic, necessary fundamental skills. Once they fail, and the developmental system of education practiced almost universally in the schools breaks down, children immediately experience severe frustration, often for the first time in their lives. Their reaction is all too often to become obstructive. The child expresses his dissatisfaction with both the school and himself in rebellious acts.

Unfortunately, but significantly, there

is a great lack of guidance people to recognize and identify the relationship between failure and discipline and even fewer remedial specialists to cope with the child's learning problems. What begins as a simple, often minor difficulty is allowed to develop into a problem that increases in intensity until it becomes unmanageable. What is needed are, first, adequate facilities and staff to observe problems early enough to nip them in the bud, and second, expertly trained curriculum specialists to help the child overcome his learning difficulty.

6. *A final ingredient needed in developing an orderly school environment is a better understanding of just what the school means by "good discipline."* Also needed is development of a capacity by teachers and parents to stop overreacting to every manifestation of rebellion, until the child reacts almost automatically, precisely in the least desirable manner for the development of self-control.

Discipline really means control. Not only of the overt actions necessary to carry one through the day, but mental and emotional control as well. The child needs to be trained early both in the home and the school to recognize the need and value of organized and responsible actions. Scolding for wrongdoing needs to be balanced with praise and reward for the good act.

Patterns of behavior need to be recognized for what they are, habits. *Discipline is in truth a habit of living.* The more one develops the habit of thinking and acting in a disciplined way, the more he intuitively begins to act like a responsible human being, one who understands the need to conform to the demands of society.

It must be remembered, however, that complete conformity and obedience to authority is not a desirable end in itself. Prudent resistance to authority is after all man's principal check on unjust demands being made upon him. The art of parenthood and teaching is learning how to temper discipline with freedom, good order with the demands of questioning minds, justice with mercy and understanding. And therein lies the rub. □

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