



PARENTING: THE TOUGHEST JOB ON EARTH *

by Mortimer J. Adler

Bringing up children, which is the task we have come to call parenting, puts burdens upon us and raises problems for us that have been around for a long time—perhaps not forever and perhaps not everywhere, but certainly for many centuries in the history of the West.

Our Greek and Roman ancestors were conscious of these burdens and problems. They were discussed in some of Plato's dialogues (the *Meno* and the *Protagoras*) and commented on in Aristotle's *Ethics*. St. Augustine in his *Confessions* revealed that the youth of his day were of ten troublesome to their elders.

In modern times, Montaigne in one of his essays considered what should be done to succeed in this common human undertaking. And, of course, in our own century, books of advice to parents about the rearing of children have been legion.

Anthropological studies of primitive peoples *appear* to indicate that failures in training the young to conform with the mores or customs of the tribe are the exceptions rather than the rule. Why this is so has not been adequately explained. In certain Far Eastern civilizations, especially in China and Japan before the twentieth century, it also *appears* to be true that success rather than failure prevailed in the business of bringing up the young.

In our own day and society, as well as in many other contemporary societies, both Eastern and Western, we have become more and more acutely conscious of the difficulties that beset us in this undertaking. We are also more willing to admit what our ancestors may have tried to conceal or, perhaps, simply did not record—that the percentage of failures closely approximates the percentage of successes. If that is the case, if the chance of succeeding is fifty-fifty, then we must conclude that there are no clear-cut rules for bringing up children which, if followed, would assure success.

Why should that be the case? Is there any way of solving the problem in a more satisfactory manner? I am going to try to answer these questions, but first let us ask about the differences between good and bad parents, and

about the objectives that good parents should aim at in their efforts at parenting.

The Difference Between Good and Bad Parents

The government that parents exercise over their children is despotic rather than constitutional, which is to say that the rulers and the ruled do not have equal status. The young members of the family do not have a voice in their own government, as do citizens in a republic, nor are they, as the governed, ruled with their own consent.

This is as it should be, certainly during the years of infancy and even after that, until the children grow to an age and achieve a measure of maturity that justifies their demand for the freedom that accompanies being self-governing individuals. That age may vary from one century to another. Prolonged immaturity, the unfortunate state known as adolescence, is a peculiarly contemporary malady.

Putting aside those who are bad parents because they give little time, attention, or effort to the rearing of their children (parents who let their children fend for themselves from a very early age), what about the rest?

On the political stage of civil society, despotism may be either benevolent or tyrannical. So, too, on the domestic front of family life. Despotic government is benevolent if it is directed entirely toward the good of the ruled, the well-being and welfare of the governed. It is tyrannical if it aims in the opposite direction, toward the self-interest of the rulers.

For all those children whose parents are bad, either because they have forsaken the task of parenting or because they are tyrannical in the treatment of their offspring, the results must be regarded as a matter of chance. If, under these conditions, the young grow up to be good men and women rather than delinquents or

criminals, scoundrels or knaves, or simply dishonorable human beings, the factors operative in the process are not under anyone's control. We cannot learn from successful outcomes under these conditions what to do when those of us who are good parents attempt to regulate the process of growing up so that the outcome is desirable rather than undesirable.

What Are the Objectives Good Parents Should Aim At?

Being "good parents" means, in addition to being benevolent, that parents are themselves persons of good moral character, possessing a sufficient measure of moral virtue. Not only do they know the difference between right and wrong, but they also practice what they preach. They more frequently than not seek what they ought to seek in life, and do what they ought to do. They naturally aim at training their offspring to be like themselves in these respects.

In saying this, I appear to have ignored the intellectual, as opposed to the moral, development of the young—the cultivation of their minds, as opposed to the formation of their characters. Of course, good parents should be concerned with the knowledge their children should acquire, the intellectual skills they should develop by habit formation, and the growth of their understanding. But these matters cannot be exclusively the business of the home. Parents should take some responsibility for the education of their offspring, but their main task here is to seek good schooling for them, and when they find it—if they can—to cooperate with such schooling to assure its success.

Let us concentrate, then, on the formation of good moral character in the young—the development of moral virtue that, like every skill of the mind, is a matter of habit formation. It is not difficult to say what is meant by moral virtue. Let me try.

One aspect of it consists in being habitually temperate; that is, having the habitual disposition to resist the temptations of immediate pleasure and to postpone the gratification of immediate desires for the sake of achieving a good life as a whole.

Another aspect of it consists in being habitually courageous; that is, in having fortitude as a habitual tendency to suffer the immediate pains and to overcome the immediate difficulties involved in working for the good of one's whole life.

A third aspect of it consists in being habitually just; that is, having the habitual disposition to avoid injuring others and to act for the common good of the community in which one lives.

All three aspects of moral virtue lead the person who has such virtue to aim habitually at a good result in the long run rather than at instant gratifications in the short run. Deferred gratification—a willingness to give up the pleasures of the moment and a willingness to suffer momentary pains—lies at the heart of moral virtue, without which no one can succeed in making a morally good life for himself or herself.

Understanding this helps us to answer the next question we must face.

Why Is the Formation of Moral Virtue So Difficult?

In the first place, we must remember that the habitual disposition that constitutes moral virtue must be acquired in childhood and youth, the earlier the better. The longer we wait, the more difficult it is to alter the character of a person who has formed bad habits when very young.

In the second place, we must remember that we are asking not about the difficulties to be overcome by an individual in the formation of his own moral character,

but rather about the difficulties to be overcome by parents in their efforts to develop moral virtue in their offspring while still quite young.

When the question is understood in this light, the answer turns on three points. First, and perhaps most important of all, is the fact that the repeated acts by which any habit, good or bad, is acquired are all matters of free choice on the part of the individual forming that habit. Acts of free choice can be guided in one direction or another, but they can never be compelled to take the direction of those who are trying to guide them. If they could be compelled, they would not be free. Hence, no matter what parents do to guide their children in one direction rather than another, they can always fail.

The second point is that the essence of immaturity consists in having short-run rather than long-run aims, with an insistence upon immediate as opposed to deferred gratification. It is difficult, if not impossible, for the young to think about the good of their lives as a whole. As we get older, and have less time left, it becomes much easier; but when we are young we cannot think much beyond tomorrow, next week, or a few weeks ahead.

Third is a fact with which we are all acquainted. The young seem unable to learn from the experience of their elders. All of us who have children have tried to tell them that we have been through the problems that they confront and that we have suffered the consequences of making the wrong rather than the right choices in trying to solve them. But what we tell them about our own experience as guidance for what they should do falls on deaf ears. If the younger generation ever profited from the experience of their elders, the progress made by the human race would surpass our wildest dreams and fondest hopes.

Finally, it is necessary to take the genes into account.

Parents who have two or more children do not have identical materials to work with. What appears to work well in the rearing of one child does not work at all in the rearing of another, probably because the genetically determined temperaments and tendencies of individual children are so different..

The age-old issue about the conflicting influences of heredity and environment comes on the scene here. How much of what eventuates in the rearing of a child is determined by heredity (that is, by the unique genes of that individual) and how much is due in some measure to the home environment and to the treatment given the individual child by parents? No one knows and no one ever will know.

The Toughest Job on Earth

In *Viewpoint No. 5*, I dealt with the serious and extraordinarily difficult problems that confront us for the first time in the twentieth century. Unlike them, the problem of rearing children has always been with us. Like them, it is certainly as serious, but it is even more difficult, so difficult that it may even be insoluble.

However, to look on the brighter side, one point can be made that may give us some hope of coping with the problem. Parenting, which is somewhat akin to teaching, should be regarded as one of the three cooperative arts discussed in *Viewpoint No. 3*. Thus conceived, it calls upon parents to assist their offspring in the process of growing up, doing so by observing carefully the steps the children themselves take in the process and doing what is necessary to facilitate their progress. Parenting departs from being a cooperative art, as teaching does also, when it tries to be the active and dominant factor in the process—when parents or teachers think that what they do should be like the molding of passive, plastic matter. Parents should not try to make children replicas of themselves, but rather help their offspring become the

adults their own native endowments destine them to be.

When parents thus cooperate with the individual nature of each child, there is a better than fifty-fifty chance that the outcome will be favorable. As in other cooperative arts, resort to prayer may be advisable.

* From VIEWPOINT Vol. 6, published by Britannica Home Library Service (1985)

RECOMMENDED READINGS

Encyclopaedia Britannica: "Family and Kinship," Vol. 19

Aristotle; *Nicomachean Ethics*, in *Great Books of the Western World*, Vol. 9

Montaigne: "Of the Education of Children," in *Great Books of the Western World*, Vol. 25

Plato: *Meno* and *Protagoras*, in *Great Books of the Western World*, Vol. 7

Plutarch: *Discourse Touching the Training of Children*

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Founded by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann (1990)

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