

Rebellious Son

(Continued)



black, bitter, irrational rebellion in my son. One day he brought home a report card from school on which his teacher had commented that he was sullen.

"I'm warning you, son, you're headed straight for trouble," I said.

He breathed the word "Bunk."

I whacked him. He cried. And so it went.

I was so upset I could hardly concentrate on a story I was outlining for an interested editor. It concerned juvenile delinquency. I thought I knew about that. Who doesn't? I'd been as shocked as the next man about the extraordinary rise in the number of acts of violence in the United States. I knew how difficult the problems could be. I had one of my own. I wanted to write my story.

My wise editor insisted that I do a job of research first.

It happened that the first part of the research period corresponded with a period of increasing rebelliousness in my son. He was constantly on my mind as I visited institutions of correction and asked questions.

"There is a relative lack of hostility in a child whose needs have been met," one authority told me.

But how could that be? My son lacked nothing, yet he was hostile. I wondered.

"Records indicate that the new youth treatment centers are 'curing' offenders better than old-fashioned punishment prisons," another authority said.

Nonsense. Coddling delinquents merely encouraged them.

"When a boy comes here, his past is never mentioned," a camp superintendent told me.

In disciplining my son, I emphasized his past errors.

"We cure delinquents by trusting them."

I nagged my son.

"Behavior disorders are studied objectively to discover the causes which produce them. Then an effort is made to modify such behavior by removing the causes rather than by teaching or authoritative means."

I had to admit it. I was authoritative.

I read about the horror of silent periods in prison life and about how they were being discontinued by enlightened administrators.

Being sent away from the table was a kind of silent period for my son.

One well-known doctor wrote about delinquents: "They don't need punishing; that hasn't worked in a thousand years. What they do need is help and understanding."

There it was again. No punishment. But reasonable punishment, punishment to fit the crime, was the best kind of help and understanding. Or was it?

A booklet put out by Science Research Associates of Chicago said, "Johnny is more likely to acquire pleasant manners if he is praised for genuine thoughtfulness than if he is scolded for omission of a 'please'."

That hurt.

So did this from a 1956 Family Weekly article: "The responsibilities of parenthood overwhelm many people. Facing facts is a painful experience for, in a real sense, the child is an extension of the parent."

I pursued my research through "Wayward Youth" by August Aichhorn, a student of Sigmund Freud. He put it this way: "We fail in with these (delinquent) children's demand when we punish them. Their need for punishment is satisfied for the moment and no change in their behavior is achieved. The punishment produces pleasure instead of pain, gives temporary relief, and allows the child to remain hostile to discipline."

Aichhorn then made this important point about the social worker with delinquents: "The social worker is the important object with whom the dissocial child can experience all the things in which his father failed him... in which his father failed him."

"It is, above all, the tender feeling for the teacher that gives the pupil the incentive to do what is prescribed and not to do what is forbidden."

I TOLD MY SON that I would never spank him again. No matter how he acted, I would never lose my temper with him or lecture him at the dinner table.

He screwed up his pug nose and said defiantly, "I don't believe you."

My impulse was to lash out at him.



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