

The 4 Common Mistakes Parents Make

YOU PROBABLY have made some mistakes in rearing your children. There is no such thing as a perfect parent. But according to the famous Gesell Institute of Child Development, the four most common mistakes of parents are ones easily corrected.

Dr. Arnold Gesell, who for nearly 50 years has pioneered in making a science of child development, indicates that the biggest mistake of parents is to feel guilty about making the errors rather than taking steps to correct them.

The Gesell Institute has recorded its observations of more than 20,000 children—and, of course, parents. In this exclusive article, Dr. Gesell and his co-workers, Dr. Frances Ilg and Dr. Louise Bates Ames, discuss for the first time what they've discovered about the adult side of the child-parent relationship.

Here are the four mistakes they come across most frequently—and practical suggestions to make them rarer:

Blaming yourself for your child's failures

Do you believe that if your child fails in school or is a juvenile delinquent, it is your fault—that what's wrong with your "unhappy" son or "mal-adjusted" daughter results from "bad home atmosphere"? This popular belief, which has frightened a generation of parents, is held by many psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers and child-guidance clinics. America's parents make a big mistake in swallowing this over-simplified explanation of child failure, warn Gesell authorities. "Father could stop drinking and Johnny still might not be able to read," Dr. Ames points out.

Gesell investigators—who use experiment and observation instead of psychoanalytic theory in studying normal child development—claim that the emotional factors in child-rearing have been over-ballyhooded since World War II. Dr. Gesell says, "In America there has been an excessive emphasis on psychiatry, learning and conditioning and too little emphasis on constitution and heredity."

Important hereditary factors are largely ignored by some of today's parent-scarers, Dr. Gesell contends. A child isn't just a malleable piece of clay. Much that he is—for better or worse—comes from

within. He inherits not only his "spitting image" of Uncle John's looks but clear-cut abilities and disabilities, and strong tendencies toward and away from certain types of behavior. In most cases, he doesn't behave the way he does just because of how you treat him. More often, it is due to his innate individuality.

Take bed-wetting. "We know of no evidence to prove that all bed-wetters are emotionally disturbed or that emotional disturbance necessarily has anything to do with bed-wetting," report Gesell researchers. "We find that some children are just naturally slow in this department just as others talk or walk late."

So instead of making the mistake of looking for complicated emotional "cures," see if your child's simple, physical needs aren't being met. "Too many mothers have been made self-conscious by the talk about possible harm they might do their children," says Dr. Ames. Some specialists even go so far as to insist that mothers can literally drive their children insane. "It seems cruel that parents of disturbed children also have this unfounded guilt added to their misfortunes," says Dr. Gesell.

The noted Gesell Institute of Child Development describes these adult shortcomings and gives some advice: don't worry about them, correct them!

by JACK HARRISON POLLACK



Gesell-trained observers get data by watching children.



Many parents try to overstuff children forgetting capacity for food differs



Dr. Arnold Gesell

Not knowing how to use discipline

Parents make another mistake in thinking there are only two ways to discipline their children: (1) the strict "old-fashioned" way which says "no" to almost everything, or (2) easygoing "modern" permissiveness which says "yes" to almost everything. Both methods inevitably fail, Dr. Gesell claims.

Many authoritarian mothers and fathers mistakenly believe that discipline must start at once in earliest infancy. But Gesell investigators have found that the wiser discipline is more one of handling, schedule and surroundings than just "making baby learn."

Slapping, shouting, punishing parents assume that good habits are instilled in children by force or fear. But early authoritarian discipline often backfires on parents later.

Parents who threaten their children—but never intend to carry out the threats—also make a mistake. A youngster soon learns that his parents don't mean everything that they say. It is equally wrong when a mother threatens a disobedient child, "When Daddy comes home, he's going to spank you!" If it is necessary to punish a child, the mother should do it herself, promptly. When punishment is delayed, the child may brood about it and just resent his father.

Instead of using authoritarian or permissive methods, Gesell authorities strongly recommend a third type—a middle ground, "developmental discipline"—which says yes or no depending upon the child's stage of development. Here, growth, not whim, is your guide. It means adapting your



If punishment is necessary, it should be given at once, not delayed for Father.

Worrying about the wrong things

Too many parents overlook age and individual differences in their youngsters. They mistakenly believe that all children require specific amounts of food, sleep, rest, attention, discipline. But growth traits aren't slavishly followed by every youngster on a year-to-year basis. "Children have different capacities and develop at different rates of speed, depending on their body type, environment and temperament—which is what makes your child unique," explains Dr. Ilg.

Too often, parents try to rush nature. "It takes a child a long time to grow—but he must do his own growing," Dr. Gesell says. "It is a mistake to try to hurry or retard that growth process."

Nevertheless, many a mother tries to toilet-train a child too early. And many a father blusters about his 18-month-old baby: "It's time that she learned how to behave!" But nature decides the timing—

you don't!

Many impatient parents also rush their children off to school too soon. Neither age nor IQ means that a child is necessarily ready for school, Dr. Gesell's studies show.

Overfeeding children is another common error—especially of young parents—who make no allowance for age and individual differences. These parents frequently create unnecessary feeding problems by bullying their children into eating larger portions than they want. "Instead of three large meals a day, many thin, scrawny children do better with four or five small ones," says the Gesell Institute.

Parents who think that their children are "bad" also usually fail to understand age and individual differences. Many of these children are merely "bad" at making transitions—and need their par-

discipline to your child's age and abilities and showing that "there are things you can do and things you can't do." Demands are few but firm. The trick here is largely preventive: to work around bad behavior tendencies, to stop trouble before it begins.

Here are some examples of developmental discipline: in handling a dictatorial 2½-year-old, avoid situations to which your child can answer "no." Instead of asking, "Can you hang up your coat?" say, "Where does your coat go?" In dealing with a 4-year-old's defiant, out-of-bounds behavior, use his interest in numbers to motivate him by saying, for example, "Let's see if you can get your coat off before I count 10! One..."

Developmental discipline is also effective in coping with thorny adolescent problems. Some parents get an 11-year-old's cooperation by making deals. "You help me wash the dishes and I'll help you with your homework." When a sullen 15-year-old comes home from school and goes directly to his room without greeting anybody, he often needs to be greeted with as much coolness and indifference as he lavishes on others, Dr. Gesell advises. This can shock him into self-awareness, and his politeness will then reappear.

Another mother of a teen-ager told Dr. Ames, "Today when my daughter does something I don't understand or approve of, I no longer haul out six dozen psychology books. I simply ignore it and sure enough the problem passes away. I found that by the time I had finished researching the problem, she had a new one, anyhow!"

ents' help. "Much so-called 'badness,'" Gesell researchers point out, "is immaturity. Actually, there is a 'good' side even to the 'bad' ages. So try to discover the 'good' while you smooth over and keep your child growing through the 'bad.'"

Parents of teen-agers who think in stereotypes are inclined to lump all adolescents together with—"Teen-agers are all alike!" But adolescence isn't just a period of inevitable conflict. Some stages can have much quiet charm and beauty. If anything, adolescence is an era of contradictory moods, Dr. Gesell has found.

Remember, the comforting fact of age and individual difference is that time is on your side. Mark Twain once observed that 15 was the age when you learned how ignorant your father was, but at 21 you were amazed at how smart he had become!

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