

How Strict Should Parents Be?

A child-guidance expert comes to the rescue of mothers and fathers caught in the cross fire between exponents of "get tough" and "go easy"

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WHETHER IT'S BETTER to be a disciplinarian or a permissive parent is a difficult question which, I suspect, will be troubling us always.

Excessive discipline may inhibit children, and excessive permissiveness may result in resentment of any supervision, thus causing children to become destructive to themselves and to others. To strike a happy balance is the ideal that parents should strive to achieve.

The dangers of excessive permissiveness are graphically illustrated by a family that has become the scourge of the suburb in which it lives. The father, a man well on in years and with a frightening temper, was determined that his children win respect in the community in which he had established them in a fine hilltop home. The mother, considerably younger, wanted above all to keep things pleasant. She found it easier to ignore misconduct than to impose punishment or stir her husband's wrath.

Now the father is dead, and the mother is surrounded by an unruly brood. Her boys race cars along narrow residential roads and damage property, including the cars which they occasionally "borrow." Her two teen-age girls have a reputation for taking anything they admire from their girl friends' closets, and their two younger sisters promise to follow in their footsteps.

Because of her excessive permissiveness, this mother appears to have deprived her children of an instinctive respect for that which is good and honest. There is, after all, a right way to behave, and the earlier a child learns this the happier and more well-liked he will be.

CHILDREN brought up with a healthy amount of discipline seem to develop into the best-adjusted adults, for excessive permissiveness offers no preparation for the adult world in which improper behavior almost always evokes unpleasant consequences. It is a vital parental responsibility to teach a child what he may and may not do and, as soon as he is old enough to understand, to punish him when he does what he has been told not to do.

But, whatever the offense, there is only one justification for punishment—the need to gain a child's attention so he clearly understands that his punishment is the specific penalty he must pay for a specific act. A whipping applied to the buttocks with little delay tends to be more effective than a withdrawal of affection or banishment to a dark closet. It is also likely to do less harm. For when punishment is prolonged, the reason for it may become secondary to the fear and unhappiness it induces, and a child may feel resentment for what he has suffered rather than contrition for what he has done.

It is not uncommon to hear a well-intentioned mother say: "I really punished him; I'd had just about all I could take this past week..." Punishment for general disappointment and frustration is useless. The very need for it indicates that previous punishment has not served its purpose.

An incident that happened to actor Joel McCrea and his sons a number



Ideally, punishment should be a specific penalty for a specific bad deed.

of years ago illustrates the way in which children can be guided to unquestioning obedience yet not cowed. One afternoon Joel called his young sons to him. "I understand you have a fort on that hill," he said, pointing to a far corner of his ranch. They said they had and, with enthusiasm, began telling him about it.

"I'd like to see your fort," he said after listening attentively. "But that's a pleasure we'll have to postpone, for I'm about to ask you not to go near that hill until further notice. Agreed?"

They nodded, and the fort was temporarily abandoned.

Several weeks later, McCrea led his sons up the hill. "You show me your fort," he told them, "then I'll show you why I had to ask you to stay clear of this territory." After the fort had been admired, they walked to a rocky ledge about 20 feet away. There lay a nest of rattlesnakes which a ranch hand had just killed.

"We knew you had a good reason, Dad," the youngsters exclaimed.

"Gee," said the oldest boy, "with all those young ones to protect, that mother rattler would have gone for us for sure!"

Joel McCrea smiled and nodded.

The McCrea boys previously must have demonstrated their obedience, so their father knew he could depend on them to do as he asked. And the friendship he displayed in showing them why he had had to deprive them of their fort could have been the basis of their trust in him.

Children are happiest and best-adjusted when they are secure—and they are secure when they know their parents will do *exactly* what they say, including meting out punishment when deserved.

COVER:

Guaranteed to put a hungry-looking gleam into any boy's eyes—watching Grandfather carve the first slice of turkey. Dennis Hallinan snapped this Thanksgiving scene.

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