

WHEN BOYS AND GIRLS ACT LIKE REBELS



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LIFE WAS so simple when the children were little. They seemed to want to obey. Now all they seem to want is a chance to rebel!"

We hear such complaints often from parents who sincerely believe them, having forgotten how often their toddlers cried defiantly, "I won't!" or "No!"

It's true that very small children stage all-out rebellion far more than do those of school age. We don't let this distress us unduly in the little ones. "It's natural. They're just babies trying to learn," we philosophize.

Bigger children act like rebels far oftener than they actually rebel. This is natural, too, but much harder to accept as an inevitable part of growing up unless we understand what they are trying to tell us.

Youngsters in the middle years are pulled between two keen emotions. They want recognition of their fast-developing capacity for independence so intensely that they are impelled to demand more freedoms than they can handle—or actually desire. They feel an equally urgent need for their parents' approval—even when they are testing their new strengths by challenging parental opinions, wishes, rules and orders.

Seeing them safely through this difficult tug-of-war with themselves becomes much easier if we interpret each new act of seeming rebellion for what it generally is—an announcement that the youngster is growing in confidence in himself as a separate, distinct person, eager for his parents' recognition that he feels ready to make some decisions for himself.

If we can recognize these often-dismaying "rebellions" as healthy signs of growth, not the scornful criticism of Father and Mother that they seem to be, we can turn them to good account for everyone. This doesn't mean we should permit or condone all contradictions, impertinences, and defiance. It does mean that before forbidding or refusing or dealing out swift "justice," we do well to consider how much we may have invited that "revolt," perhaps by being too slow to relax controls which the child feels he has outgrown.

"Only stupid dopes like that old camp. It's for sissies. I'm not going back this summer and nobody can make me," said Johnny, by his manner including his parents in his scathing description of those who approved the camp he himself had adored the season before.

"A sissy camp is no place for you. You're growing up fast. Tell me more about it," said his mother, choosing to find out what was worrying him instead of closing the discussion by reprimanding him for his ugly manner.

His defiance shaken by this mild answer, Johnny took a calmer course. His camp really was keen; but girls went there, too, and the bigger boys had teased him about that. Did Johnny really want to be separated from his sister all summer? Well—no.

"Then why not do what you want?" said his mother, putting the decision she wanted up to him.

"Just tell your friends that boys and girls go to college together, too, and no one thinks that's sissy."

"Oh, Mom, you're smart!" said Johnny.

There are times, of course, when tact won't serve the purpose and a child must be drawn up short, allowing no argument.

Sunny little Arthur, 10, went far out of hand one afternoon, teasing his sister to tears, coming to the table with dirty hands and contradicting his mother with some rough words that shocked her.

"It was almost as if he were asking to be slapped down," his mother said, coming close to an important part of the truth about such rebellious streaks.

His misdemeanors were so many that she wondered where to start. Wisely she concentrated on the most serious, knowing that if she went through the list she would only stiffen his rebel's spirit.

"I know why you're using those words. You're growing up and you want to show it. But that's not the way to do it. We don't like those words in this house, and we won't accept them. And now it would be nice if you'd wash your hands properly. Then we'll be glad to see you looking and behaving like your own big self."

Arthur went off sulkily but came back magnificently scrubbed and in amiable spirits, seemingly relieved that he had been rescued from his show-off streak and pulled into line.

Children of all ages feel secure only if they are certain they will be guarded against carrying their freedoms to dangerous ends. They feel safe if they know they must, and will, be restricted by the framework of family and community needs, though they can be expected to test out these boundaries and battle hotly to cross them on occasion. Such conflicts can be ended quickly and happily if parents take a firm stand based on an understanding of the child's complicated feelings.

GROWING CHILDREN have an enormous respect for rules if they understand that they are not arbitrary parental whims. This is proved by the games they turn to with greatest enthusiasm in their school years. By far the most popular are those calling for rigid laws and the strictest teamwork. Youngsters playing baseball, hockey, croquet, tennis will discipline each other fiercely for the smallest infringement of rules. They obviously place a high value on observance of restraints they assume voluntarily. This means that we have to help our children by making the rules and restrictions of an adult world as reasonable and acceptable as possible.

Adults soon discover that youngsters conform far more readily to the rules of their own gang than they do to the wishes of their parents. If we remember how important it is to their pride to maintain the respect and approval of their friends, we can avoid many clashes of wills that seem like rebellion.

Peter astonished his father one Saturday when they went to swim at the club by shouting rudely

when his father tried to stop him from swimming the length of the pool, "I do not have to stay in the shallow end! I never do!"

"His mother let him go into the deep end yesterday and he's still excited about it," the lifeguard explained to cover the father's embarrassment. By the time Peter splashed back, his father had recovered from his first impulse to scold the boy on the spot.

"Hey, you're good! Why didn't you tell me you could take care of yourself in the deep water instead of yelling at me?" he said.

Peter had melted at the first word of praise. "It just came out yelling because I was humiliated being told to stay back in front of all my friends," he explained.

"Well, sure you were," his father agreed. "I can understand that. I was sort of humiliated myself being contradicted before mine. Let's go! If you catch me, you can duck me."

A YOUNGSTER's standing with his friends is of greatest importance to his pride and self-respect. If we try to protect it whenever possible, we avoid those rebellious accusations, "You don't understand! You never see my side! You won't listen to anything I say," that are so hard to bear.

Joyce breezily announced at the last moment that she was not going with the family to Grandmother's for Sunday dinner.

"We're going to cook hot dogs on Patty's new barbecue, and her dad is going to take the whole gang to the zoo this afternoon, so don't worry about me until supper time," she added lightly.

"But Grandmother is expecting all of us there," her mother reminded. "You know that."

Joyce started to boil over. "She won't miss me. We go there every week! Do I have to miss everything I want to do because you make all my plans for me? The gang's expecting me! They'll think I'm an idiotic little baby if I have to tell them I don't have any right at all to..."

"I can see that," her mother interrupted. "Now, let's figure a way out of this awkward spot you've gotten yourself into. I think Grandmother will understand if you call her yourself right now and explain that you realize it isn't very grown-up to break a date at the last minute but that this is a special occasion. Okay?"

"Oh, Mummy, I meant to tell you but I forgot," cried Joyce, all rebellion fading in relief that her mother had been able to see her side. Joyce had gone too far, of course, but by helping her learn her lesson as painlessly as possible her mother made things far easier if it became necessary to oppose some such plan in the future.

Children's loyalty to their friends is a big area which parents cannot invade hastily or arbitrarily without inviting rebellion. Joan, 12, had as her best friend a much more mature and boy-crazy girl of 14 who had recently moved into the neighborhood. Joan's mother did not like anything