

DON'T LET YOUR CHILD BE A LEFTY!

By ABRAM BLAU, M.D. as told to Jerry Klein

"IT LOOKS TO ME like Johnny is going to be left-handed, and I certainly wish it weren't so. But I'm not going to try and change him because I know that correcting him will only make him nervous and maybe even cause him to stutter."

How many times have you heard parents speak that way of a child who showed signs of becoming a confirmed "lefty"? No doubt they thought they were being "modern" and "progressive" parents by not trying to get their child to do something which seemed to be against his nature. But how wrong such an attitude can be!

Being left-handed in a right-handed world is no small handicap. And in the great majority of cases, I believe a child's left-handedness results not from any inborn cause, but because unknowing, negligent parents fail to train him as they should.

Right at the outset, let me say that children usually have equal capacity to become either right- or left-handed. It is the adults' obligation to see that they become righties. And normally any tendency toward left-handedness can be overcome without causing any undue stress or damage because, despite popular belief, handedness is not something you are born with but is a trait formed in youth just as the child develops his language and other cultural inheritances.

The heritage of preferring the right to the left is something that dates back thousands of years to the Bronze Age of mankind, and before that time it may not have mattered whether a person was righty or lefty—you could lift a rock or punch an adversary equally well with either hand.

But at that point in human development more complicated tools began to appear—one-sided implements which could be used more efficiently with one hand than with the other. For some unknown reason, it happened that the right hand became the favored one. Gradually, social attitudes developed around that fact until today being lefty is an abnormality which puts a person at a genuine disadvantage—besides exposing him to false suspicions that he is somehow "out of step."

Our language calls for right-handed writing, right-eyed sighting, and rightward reading. Schoolrooms, lighting, and many other things are arranged for the convenience of righties. Many tools are designed for the right-handed exclusively. Being a lefty may be fine if you're a major-league baseball player, but in many other occupations it is an awkward handicap that makes things more



Training a youngster to right-handedness won't warp his personality—just straighten him out for our right-handed world

difficult not only for the lefty but for his right-handed associates.

One of my favorite examples is the girl who would have made an excellent switchboard operator at the telephone company. She had to find another position, however, because, being left-handed, she was constantly snarling wires with the right-handed operator sitting at the board to her left.

Babies are born ambidextrous; that is, they can manage just about as well with one limb as with the other. Normally, parents make them right-handed without ever consciously thinking about the matter—as, for instance, when they playfully shake hands with an infant. My point is that leaving the matter of handedness to the infant to decide willy-nilly really amounts to neglect on the part of the family, who should be instilling the right-handed habit in their offspring.

The first signs of hand preference become apparent when the baby is about nine months old. A decided preference is established around the age of two years.

THE LEFT-HANDED HABIT can usually be broken, but of course the older a child becomes, the more deeply rooted the habit grows and the more difficult it becomes to alter. The methods required to reform the older child will vary from case to case, and it may be necessary for parents to seek professional guidance. If the youngster resists too hard and long, or if there are emotional factors involved, it may be unwise to persist.

Only in a relatively small number of cases is left-handedness due to some inherent mental, physical, or emotional state which first needs to be changed itself. In the main, simply because an individual is a lefty does not suggest he is necessarily lacking in any way; indeed, many superior citizens in every field have been left-handed—such artists as Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Picasso, and such recent world leaders as King George VI and President Truman.

Nevertheless, the world is easier for righties, and it is experience and learning that determine which side a person will come to prefer. And so I say: don't be misguided into thinking you'll do a child damage by training him to be a righty; the dangers of such training are virtually nonexistent. As a parent, you owe it to a lefty to help him get on the right side of things.

COVER:

Photographer Arthur Leipzig focuses on Wilmoth "Mac" McAdams, fishing off Florida's Gulf Coast. Only 50 and 51, McAdams and his wife Eleanor have already made their retirement dream come true. See p. 6.

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