

Small Plants and Little Caterpillars

Parental Authority and Child-Centred Parenting



Does the Sun Shine In Your Garden?

It has been fashionable for some decades now, particularly amongst those who like to think of themselves as experts in child-rearing and/or politically progressive, to argue for child-centred parenting. They mean by this that the child's "wishes and feelings" must be at the forefront of parenting and that the child must be "empowered" and "put at the centre of decision making about their future" [1]. Most social workers, family court personnel, state-school teachers, and others similarly Marxist-trained, are especially vocal in their support for this method of raising children.

Of course children are to be at the centre of decisions concerning them; how can they not be? But it is the parents who are to make those decisions, not the unformed children themselves:

"Children are like plants growing every day. They need regular attention and direction. I plant a garden every year. And about half the time I wait too long to stake my tomatoes. A small plant doesn't need staking, and I tell myself I will stake them before it becomes critical. ... But [I] waited too long. I finally staked them but too late to prevent ... disease. ... So it is with children, they need constant pruning and fertilizing and training to grow up instead of down – to reach for blue skies instead of crawling along the ground. ... Children need the constant sunshine of their parents' smile and approval. They need to be pointed in the right direction day after day. They need admonition like a plant needs fertilizer. ... If children all came into the world disciplined and wise and willing to deny their impulses for the greater good, we could just leave them to free expression, but every parent knows better" [2].

Absolutely, a child has essential needs and rights. Shelter, healthy food, good clothing, and the love of their parents are the basic rights of every child. Neither do parents need an 'expert' to inform them that they desire to protect their children from harm (as far as possible) and to train them up into maturity - into responsible, moral, kind, hard-working, and self-disciplined adulthood. All these things every parent knows and does to the best of their ability through their example, through education, encouragement, guidance, routines, discipline, and a very great deal of sacrificial love. This is not rocket-science. Most parents instinctively know this and carry it out with as much wisdom, patience, consistency, and assistance from other family members, as they can.

When I Was a Child...

But every sensible parent also recognises that a child doesn't yet understand the difference between needs and wants. When we are children we speak as children, we understand as children, and we think as children; and children naturally want a lot of things that are bad for them because, just like the little caterpillar crawling along the ground that is not aware of his future life as a butterfly, children have no concept of the future. They have yet to learn of the hard work of adulthood, of deferred gratification, of self-control and self-discipline, and of serving others. Children live in the here-and-now and their world is one of relative freedom and limited responsibility, of immediate satisfaction, and self-centredness.

No child has to be taught to pull out every toy in the toy box when it's playtime, but every child has to be taught to put each toy back again when playtime is ended. If given a choice between fruit or sweets for pudding, wearing sensible shoes or party shoes to school, going to bed early or staying up, doing their homework or watching TV, tidying their bedroom or playing with their doll/train, helping with the dishes or playing in the park, what are they going to choose?

And why wouldn't they? We all prefer the easy to the hard, or the pleasant to the onerous. We all prefer fun-times to hard work, or pleasing ourselves to pleasing others. But when we become adults we put away childish things. The child is *still learning* that life isn't always about doing or having what we want but is about the carrying-out of 'grown-up' duties and responsibilities (for their own, their family's, and ultimately society's, benefit), while an adult *has* learned that lesson:

"Adults are supposed to be mature enough to choose the virtuous path and do what they ought to do even if it is contrary to their desires. That is character, something you're not born with; it has to be developed. And children don't have character unless they are properly trained. Children do not see the need for self-denial or self-restraint. They feel desire and they do what feels good" [2].

And as adults, we have the blessed privilege of training up these precious little caterpillars into bright and beautiful butterflies. But if we do this *well*, then we will see what these self-proclaimed 'progressives' fail to: that children are *not* inherently capable of making wise or considered decisions for themselves, neither do they yet have the moral capacity to understand the difference between right and wrong, until they are taught these things by their parents:

"Therefore, parents must constrain their children to right behaviour. In time their moral understanding will develop and they will begin to choose good, even when it is contrary to their carnal desires. Character is formed, and as training continues [the child's] character grows stronger until [s/he] matures into an adult" [2].

A Solid Foundation

And so, all our decisions concerning the future welfare of our children will be made on the solid rock of adult rational, mature, and experienced thought, *not* on the sinking sand of childish and emotional "wishes and feelings":

"[T]he best-adjusted and most self-possessed children [have] parents who [are] loving, but also demanding, authoritative, and consistent in their discipline. By contrast, permissive parents, no matter how loving, produced children who lacked self-control, initiative, and resilience. ... good discipline improves the quality of the parent-child relationship. When authority is exercised with the proper combination of firmness and love, the effect is increased love and respect for the parent. Parents, in turn, find it easier to love well-behaved children. ... Respect for the parent who exercises proper authority leads to respect for legitimate social institutions, and to respect for the law" [3].

"Authoritarianism or permissiveness produces lopsided children:

- Authoritarianism → harsh, strict rules, insensitive, shouts at their child, rules-focused,
- Permissiveness → soft, lack of rules, supersensitive, bargains with their child, feelings-focused,
- Compassionate → disciplines in love, consistent, sensitive, instructs their child, training-focused.

A child will find what s/he needs most ... by ... a compassionate parent who exercises authority well. In this way the child gains both the wisdom and the love s/he needs" [4].

**"I have observed a beautiful principle:
The children most accountable to act responsibly are the happiest
and most secure in love and grounded in good will" [2].**

Source References:

[1] The Guardian, *The Guardian Charity Awards 2012*, (27 November 2012)

[2] No Greater Joy, *Six Ways Parents Destroy Their Children Without Trying*, (14 December 2012)

[3] William Kilpatrick, *Why Johnny Can't Tell Right From Wrong and What We Can Do About It*, (1992), pp.257-258

[4] Foundations for Freedom, *Parental Authority*, (17 December 2011)

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