

OF PUNISHMENTS.

BY EDITH ESCOMBE.

“Too early and too thoroughly we cannot be trained to know that Would, in this world of ours, is as mere zero to Should, and for most part as the smallest fraction to Shall.”—
T. Carlyle.

No child can be properly trained without a certain amount of correction. Like all young things—human and otherwise—a child has to learn what is expected of him, he has to be taught to conform to rules and regulations. This discipline should rightly begin during the first month of his existence. The prescribed two hours between a baby’s meals is discipline, the laying of him down to sleep—in spite of protest—is discipline; and, as the child grows the necessity for discipline increases and extends.

Some children are naturally amenable, others like to see exactly how far they can go, and some delight in doing a thing just because it is naughty. With many children a reproving look is enough, whilst an angry word brings tears to their eyes. High-spirited children are more daring; if corrected for some misbehaviour they will repeat the action out of sheer bravado; then comes the warning, which may be sufficient, if not, this formal preliminary must be followed by punishment. With quite young children anything will serve, a pat on the hand, to sit still for five minutes, or to go to bed five minutes earlier than usual. These are enormous punishments and, once or twice enforced, it will be found that in future the warning will be taken.

I have a very kindred feeling with those children who like being naughty because it is naughty. There is something in me that responds to that gleam of devilry, that undaunted ingenuity of mischief; all the time it is half joking, it is the flapping of young wings to try their strength, it is the new spirit in antagonism to control. The one thing with these children is, not to get angry, nor to strive to draw too strict a cordon of rules; as we should with a lusty trout, we must let out the line, being very sure we have control of the other end. We must be patiently persistent till we have proved we are master.

The most difficult natures with which to deal are the sulky. The only plan with such temperaments is to allow

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time; to try to coerce an obstinate child is as useless as to thrash a jibbing horse. The one thing is not to be beaten by them; it is better to miss an appointment rather than give in, outflank your opponent you may, but a frontal attack is fatal. Once a child understands us there is no further difficulty—a look, and the thing is done.

Occasionally a type of child presents itself that can be described by no other word than “impish”; the child that demands the constant attention of whoever is in charge to see that things are not thrown in the fire, water upset, bells rung, flowers destroyed, knick-knacks fingered; it is this description of child who bolts through any open door or gate, presumably with the intent of being chased and brought back. The only explanation is that such children are possessed with a demon of nervous energy, for which there is no adequate outlet. The mother

of such a child had patted the hand of her two-year-old little girl in correction for the child's having twice deliberately rung the bell when she had been told not to touch it. The child ruefully considered and rubbed her reddened hand for the space of a second or two and then charged once more at the bell. The mother turned to me and asked: "What can one do with such a child, I can't beat her all day long?" Whatever I may have said in response, my inward comment was, "You have begun too late."

It is so difficult for us to be just to children. We can no more judge of life from their stand-point than they can see life from ours; therefore, rather than punish a child unjustly I should prefer not to punish him at all. I have known a really conscientious, over-zealous mother administer a solemn whipping for offences that would be cast off with growth, as the bud sheds the sheath that has sheltered it; but she was doing what she thought right, we can none of us do more.

That it is never advisable to strike a child in anger is a universally recognised rule. I entirely hold with the precept, at the same time there is only one woman in a hundred who can in cold blood strike a child sufficiently hard for the punishment to be of any use whatsoever. Many modern mothers object to the mildest corporal punishment, and assert that they would never have a woman in their nursery who attempted such a thing; a child may be put to bed, deprived of coming downstairs, kept in the corner, be put outside the door, and

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any device resorted to rather than the primitive and natural chastisement employed by all animals to their young. This, I think, is a pity. With young children the punishment should follow sharply on the misdemeanour, or they are bewildered to know what we mean. Half the pathos of childhood comes from that struggle of children to understand what grown-up people mean; that look of questioning perplexity that so readily resolves into one of fear; that vanishing of joy from a child's face at an unexpected rebuke; the nervous embarrassment at the publicly administered correction; the quick-mounting painful blush of childhood, to which the average adult thinks it no shame to draw attention; the quickly gathering tears; the retreating little figure from the room!

I have a theory that children should not be checked in their—sometimes pert—answers, unless we are persuaded they were *meant* for rudeness. I firmly believe the majority of children who are scolded and punished for being impertinent, have not a notion what is meant. Those quick retorts, sometimes smart, sometimes very foolish, are the early flights of repartee that would later develop into wit; go one better if you can, but don't snub a child. I believe the conspicuous absence of wit in general conversation might be traced to the crushing of its efforts at an early stage.

Not for one moment would I advocate rudeness in children, than which there is nothing more offensive and objectionable, only let us be careful to distinguish the *motive* from the words. Not long ago I explained to a little girl of twelve that—though I knew she had not meant it—something she had said sounded rude. She was filled with contrition and apologies, and begged me to be sure and tell her if I ever noticed her doing it again. Some people will correct a child for the mere fact of answering, though the answer may be the most legitimate explanation. I have known children give quite quick and clever rejoinders, and for my own part I like to hear them.

It is a mistake to correct a child before a roomful of people. At first the culprit is merely shy and embarrassed, in time he becomes accustomed to it, and under all circumstances it is a pity if it can possibly be avoided. A word spoken quietly in private has double the effect. The children for whom repeated punishment is necessary are those who were not trained from the beginning to discipline. The baby of eighteen

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months who has been allowed to have his own way is quite a handful, he is still sufficiently young to avail himself of that powerful advocate—a noisy roar. I thoroughly appreciate the method of the untrained mother; first, she administers corporal punishment to her child, allows him to relieve his feelings for a minute or so in lusty yells, then she further chastises him to make him quiet. In a rough-and-ready way that poor mother is teaching her child the lesson of self-control. Judiciously applied, I consider this is the best treatment for screaming children. After the ages of three or four years I should not advocate corporal punishment for a child. I think later it does far more harm than good. When children are perpetually being punished I am persuaded that whoever is in charge has not the art of managing children. For the most part the generality of children do not require definite punishment. Say they get their feet and clothes wet playing in the garden, the bare fact of bringing them in and changing their wet garments is in itself a punishment; and this is only one of many examples which might be made wherein the crime brings about its own punishment.

I think, were I laying down definite laws on this question, I should say that disobedience and cruelty were the only faults that distinctly merit punishment. Most people would, I know, say untruthfulness, but there I do not agree. With our wider moral outlook we are unable to appreciate the—to us—fantastic notions of a child. I recall the tale of a missing shoe; nowhere could it be found. A three-year-old boy stated that he had thrown it into the bushes; which bushes? He described a thick laurel hedge. Search was made but no shoe was forthcoming; a day or two later it was discovered that all the time the shoe had been mislaid in the house. Many people would have accused that child of having “told a story”; for my own part I don’t believe it was a story. In that visionary life children lead there is no hard and fast line between fact and fancy, with them there is a mellow blurring and they cannot readily distinguish what is from what is merely visionary; all too soon this misty outline clears into the hard bare facts of reality, and we see things as they are.

The instance of a deliberate untruth was given to me by a mother of her five-year-old boy. The children were forbidden

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to touch either the strawberries or roses when left to play in the garden. On one occasion the mother happened to look through the laths of a venetian blind into the garden at the moment when the child was breaking off a rose. She made no comment at the time, but later asked the boy if he had picked a rose. He declared he had not touched one. She then told him she had seen him from the window. He was whipped and put to bed, and told he was to remain there till he said he was sorry. Three days the child stayed in bed before he would comply with the imposed condition. When the episode was told to me, I felt the mother was more worthy of blame than the child.

I do not believe children are by nature untruthful; they are either frightened by previous punishments or threats, or they are themselves hazy about facts and fancies. Any way, I would

never punish a child even if I thought he had deliberately lied for his own advantage. I should talk to him and try to show him something of honour as we recognise it. Personally, I have never known a child sufficiently naughty to deserve a severe punishment. I have known them tiresome, worrying, aggravating, mischievous, but as often as not there was some good reason, they had been kept indoors by the weather, they were over-tired, they had hurt themselves. True, I have often felt I should like to give an aggravating child a good beating, but that would be to relieve my own feelings and not for the benefit of the child.

The best plan with regard to punishment is to bring children up so well that any extreme form of correction is never needed. When I see ill-behaved children it is their training I criticise. We are inclined to expect a perfection of childhood that is sadly lacking in later life. Each stage of progress is beset with its peculiar faults and deficiencies which have to be faced and overcome. As we ourselves fall short in our conduct of our ideals, so we must expect that these smaller men and women will fail to attain that standard of perfection which we would fain see them reach. Let our aim be to see good rather than evil; according to the military code for officers let us fail to notice those little errors which once seen involve punishment, remembering that "it is better to suffer a great wrong than to do a small one."