

Discipline in the Home Schoolroom

BY M. W. NEY

Discipline in the home schoolroom, especially for boys, is a problem which raises an immediate question. Have boys changed so much since Miss Mason's day, or is it society which is different? The answer to this question is most important in dealing with the particular boy or boys because the home teacher must decide at the very beginning whether to cope with the boy in the boy or with society in the boy.

In my own teaching experience—before starting my own home schoolroom, I taught in a number of American private and public schools—I was led rather reluctantly to the conclusion that it was almost always society I was opposing in trying to deal with boys in terms of authority and discipline.

One of my first teaching assignments at a fashionable New York school, which believed very much in manual dexterity (this was several years ago), was to teach an attractive but unruly six-year-old boy to knit! The boy would not knit, however, and I found I had no background for dealing with the situation, which had baffled the older teachers, until I turned my very amateurism into an

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asset. After discussing baseball, the theater (his mother was a famous ecdysiast of striking style and unusual intellectual aspiration), and sailing, I found myself explaining that there were more of 'them' than of us, and that one 'can't fight city hall'. 'Knitting may be a bore,' I told him, 'but it is the only way to create some freedom for yourself.' Being an intelligent boy, he took the hint and started to knit. In my entirely uninformed way, I had chanced to speak to society in the boy and succeeded in getting him to conform where more experienced heads than mine had failed.

Since then I have taught in public schools in the Appalachians and in private schools in several states, including Florida. And I have found that the only solution to the problem of the reluctant boy scholar is to speak honestly to him about the social system which dominates him, and of which he is not a little afraid. Each case is, of course, different, but in general I try to point out that the world is a difficult place, and that bureaucracy, overwhelming as it is, *must* be served quickly and efficiently if there is to be any real time for anything else. I feel that we teachers put a unique ray of sanity in a boy's life when we teach him how to serve society with a smile. (This is contrary to accepted psychiatric treatment—and a shocking number of American children are placed with psychiatrists today for the vaguest of reasons—which teaches the child that he is wrong and society right and that he must 'adjust', but many parents are becoming disillusioned with the results of such treatment.) The basic source of frustration in all these angry young boys seems to me to come from their good sense. We cannot successfully hide from them the weaknesses of our present world; yet we are begging them to learn grammar quietly in the classroom while chaos reigns in the streets. I have invariably found that being frank with them has a calming effect, and grammar can proceed despite (or because of) our mutual agreement that it seems a trifle frivolous under the circumstances.

Using this particular application of 'honesty toward small persons', I have been able to rescue boys of such disparate background as a young mountaineer in Appalachia and the grandson of one of our best-known millionaire inventors: the first from chronic truancy, and the

second from chronic failure in school grades. And many others in between, but not as many as I would have liked, because there simply wasn't time to help more than a small fraction of the boys who needed it. It was all very amateurish on my part—this was before I had studied Miss Mason—and I had no coherent understanding of the principles of authority lacking in my own background as well as in the child's. The children in question more or less saved themselves because they learned to use their own wills—not too difficult a thing to suggest to someone else's child.

But now that I have my own home schoolroom, it is a very different matter to look into the hot blue eyes of my own son and face that same defiance! His sisters love their lessons and regard PNEU as a privilege and a release from the prison of ordinary school. They have risen above the envy and scorn of neighbours in this close community and wear their uniforms with quiet pride; and face less scorn and more envy as time goes on.

But this small boy who won't learn! There is the problem, and all the methods I used with success as a professional teacher with other

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children seem to be of no avail. His problem isn't as great, to begin with; and in the second place, he knows more of what I know; and, most important, he is my son and so I do not have real distance. What was startling and effective with other children does not work here.

I am sure that many other mothers with home schoolrooms share this difficulty, and I am also sure that most of them are aware of Miss Mason's writings on authority and discipline, so I am not going to recapitulate that common fund of knowledge and inspiration for all of us. I think it is important, though, for those who have home schoolrooms to apply Miss Mason's teachings within a possible framework of response rather than to try to make them fit clearly impossible situations. When Miss Mason was alive, for example, children were instinctively more obedient and respectful than they are today. She wrote with the children of that day in mind—one wonders what she would say if she saw today's delinquents in whom disrespect and contempt have become a religion! (As W. H. Auden wondered, in the preface to the modern edition of Henry James' *The American Scene*, how the latter would have reacted to a drum majorette!) This is not to say that Miss Mason's work needs updating. On the contrary, it is always contemporary, accurate, pertinent and helpful. But no more than anyone else in her time could she have seen the near-complete breakdown of common amenities and the average child actually encouraged to become rude and silly. (The recent best seller here, *Up the Down Staircase*, while superficially amused at the confusion in education, ends on a note of high admiration for the completely undisciplined child.)

In many cases, the child is punished by society if he is not rude and dedicated to ignorance! (The very act of setting up a home schoolroom is anti-social, in the sense that its constructive aims are at odds with the modern commandment to overindulge the material wants of the young, but leave their spiritual wants unheeded. Parents dissent from this at their own risk.) Although the United States enjoys the dubious distinction of being the world leader in terms of youthful disrespect among its young for discipline and authority, it is almost as bad everywhere else. Teachers of home schoolrooms in the deepest bush will find that their children's playmates are full of this disrespect and will, in turn, communicate it to their children, particularly the boys, if they play together.

It is a far deeper defiance than the old-fashioned reluctance of the 'real boy' to study,

and because the PNEU home schoolroom is a serious business, the boy is far more conscious of the difference between what he is asked to do inside the schoolroom and what is *au courant* in the boy's world outside. I try to keep this sense of difference in mind at all times with my own son, and to maintain an inflexible opposition, not to him, of course, but to the society which demands of him that he be lazy and self-indulgent, and which often speaks and acts through him.

Going from that basic generality to specific problems, I find that his craving is not to *find* thought, but to avoid it. He loves Tales, History and Arithmetic, and he reads easily, but he *would not* write his lessons out willingly, or even narrate as I knew he was able to. If I had never taught professionally, and had not been familiar with the fact that boys have more difficulties than girls with their work, I would have been much more concerned with his academic future. And I am sure that boys are more irritated by comparing them-

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elves with enthusiastic and able sisters than with relatively unknown girls in a large classroom.

In order to shift this atmosphere, I devoted more time to Tales and Stories during lesson time and took one academic subject at a time for evening reading: Geography, or even History or Animal Stories. It seemed to alleviate the embarrassment of classroom narration and placed the matter in a new light. Then we were reading for pleasure only, and, in addition, his sisters were elsewhere. After a week or so, each subject was moved back to lesson time and remained there comfortably. Narration has not been a problem since.

Turning to Miss Mason for further help, most of us will find that since we were not given her books as wedding presents, we did not realize the almost sacred duty of forming habits to ease our children's way. And in most cases, it is habit which we must look to as the plug for the hole in the dyke. To form habits, one must begin as low as possible, for we are, most of us, beginning late. Household chores are a safer level to fight on than lessons, a less distasteful field in which to inflict corporal punishment. I have found that with real belief in the principles of Authority, our children are generally happier and more obedient, for we all understand what we are free to do and what we are not free to do. Spankings are few.

Our son is not spanked for not doing lessons, but he considers it quite fair that he be spanked for failure in household duties or for disturbing the girls' lessons. I know that his lack of proper habits since babyhood are my fault, but I see no reason not to undo the error, insofar as possible. But I do not forget, either, that he is caught between my attempt at order and the world's bland disorder as enunciated by his playmates, a difficult position for a small boy and one which requires great tact and understanding if he is to choose order and suffer his companions' teasing. In the very simplest terms, I feel sure that the day he empties all eight waste baskets without being told, he will be responsible to himself.

As Miss Mason wrote (and it is not possible to improve on the perfection of her style in the original presentation): 'And that Heaven of the mind, is it not continual expansion in ordered freedom? And that restless, burning, inflammatory hell, does it not come of continual chafing against natural and righteous order?' Such words give this mother and home teacher—and many others, I hope—courage to spank, or to change a lesson time, or whatever must be done to achieve that order and calm those blue eyes, up to and including a steadfast opposition to the always avaricious exterior disorder which would claim him.