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How NOT to Raise a Juvenile Delinquent

By Ray Johnson

The human family is a picture of God's Family, and parents need to rear their children in a manner pleasing to God.

Stan and Harry had much in common. The two teenagers grew up in the same neighborhood, in a nice but relatively poor section of town. Both lived with their mothers — their fathers left for parts unknown soon after their births. Both their mothers worked long hours; nei-

ther was able to spend much time with her son. As youngsters Stan and Harry attended the same school and were members of the same Boy Scout troop.

But Stan and Harry were as different as night and day.

Blond, smiling, happy-go-lucky

Harry couldn't walk out of a store without stealing something. He couldn't talk to anyone, even briefly, without telling several lies. He grew up to be an embezzler, an incurable gambler and an alcoholic, finally ending his life in suicide.

Meanwhile, dark, quiet Stan main-

tained good grades, upheld his scout's oath, was painfully honest and was respected by everyone. He grew up to be a geologist, has a happy marriage and generally is a successful person.

What made the difference? Was Harry born to be a delinquent? If not, what went wrong? Psychologists and sociologists have pondered these questions for years. They have studied illegal behavior among youths since early in this century, and generally agree that delinquents are *made*, not born. They feel that environment, parental guidance and peer-group relationships all play a part in predisposing young people toward delinquent behavior.

Evidence indicates that these scientists are correct. Thus parents have a deep obligation to their children. And this is nowhere more true than in God's Church!

Our Father in heaven desires godly offspring (Mal. 2:15, Revised Standard Version)! We parents have a great deal of control over the environment in which our children grow up. We must provide an atmosphere that will give them the best opportunities to develop in the ways of God.

"To turn the heart"

God tells us that in the latter times He will send Elijah, in spirit, to bring our families closer together. God intends to "turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers" (Mal. 4:6). Is this happening in *your* family?

This prophecy must come to pass. Through Herbert W. Armstrong, God has been thundering this message at us for some time now. God has sent us a leader in the spirit of Elijah to teach us what He expects of us. But what are we as individuals doing about it? God is not going to force us — the adults in His Church — to make the first move toward the children of His Church, but He is going to hold us accountable in the judgment day if we have not done so!

Let us look, then, at some aspects of the environment many delinquents have in common and see how we can give our children a better chance in life.

Family relations

The *family* is probably the single most important environmental factor

in childrearing. If every family was based on a good marriage, there would be far fewer delinquency problems. But even in the Church, unfortunately, we have disintegrating families, and these are breeding grounds for juvenile delinquents.

When a family is split by divorce, for instance, a child can be deprived of affection, security, social opportunities and physical needs. Overprotecting children, of course, can cause them problems later. But the *lack* of the inherent securities a solid family unit provides is a major cause of delinquency. A disintegrating family is cursed with alienation, tension and rejection, which destroy the environment children need.

Of course, we have no control in the case of a parent dying. But who has more control over separation or divorce than the parents? If family disintegration ceases to be a problem for Church members, it will cease to be a problem for our youths.

Even within marriages that remain intact, proper family relations can be absent. This only hurts the marriage and the children. But who is responsible for the tension present in many homes? The parents!

God spells out for us more than once the formula for happy marriages (Eph. 5:21-6:4, Col. 3:18-21). Are you tired of hearing these verses referred to and expounded? Believe God! If you will follow these instructions, your marriage will have a vibrant, joyous, lasting quality not found in marriages in the world, and your children will be far better able to cope with the evil world in which they must live.

Are you aware of the ways you could be contributing to the future delinquency of your children? Do you reject their advances and put them down? Do you fail to uphold them and listen to them — do you refuse to give them the loyalty you expect them to show you? If so, you need to *change*!

Do you tell your children they are dumb or stupid? Do you tell them they can't do anything right? When they want to tell you something — something meaningful to them but trivial or silly to you — do you ignore them, tell them to go play or otherwise put them off rather than give of yourself? Do you teach your

children God's standards and then not enforce them, or do your children see you deviate from God's way yourself?

We can't discuss every possible aspect of family relations here, but these ideas are representative of areas where some of us miss the mark. Our job as parents is to develop, with God's help, meaningful, pleasing marriages in His sight. We must demonstrate real love and affection for our children.

In regard to discipline, some interesting generalizations emerged from one 10-year study of 500 persistent delinquents and 500 nondelinquents.

It was found that children whose fathers were overstrict and/or erratic in disciplining them had a 72 percent delinquency rate. On the other hand, youngsters whose fathers were lax or too lenient had a 60 percent delinquency rate. Some 83 percent of those children whose mothers' supervision was classified as unsuitable became delinquent. Those whose mothers' supervision was classified as close or suitable had a 10 percent delinquency rate.

Parental affection is also important; 76 percent of boys whose fathers were indifferent or hostile became delinquent, and 86 percent of boys whose mothers were indifferent or hostile went the same route.

In other words, overstrict, erratic or lax discipline by the father, unsuitable supervision by the mother, lack of affection from both parents and lack of family cohesion in general promote juvenile delinquency. Parents reap what they sow (Gal. 6:7)!

Personal approach

The *approach* to life a young person adopts and the kind of goals he pursues are important in determining whether he will become a delinquent.

For example, a young person, from whatever background, who wants to get a good education and do the best he can in the occupation he chooses is less likely to show illegal behavior than a youngster who does not care about school or work but wants to do "whatever comes along." The first young person has a sense of purpose and is becoming more responsible. The second is drifting through life with-

out any worthwhile goals and is prone to get into trouble.

Solomon noted this centuries ago: "The integrity of the upright shall guide them: but the perverseness of transgressors shall destroy them" (Prov. 11:3). "It is as sport to a fool to do mischief: but a man of understanding hath wisdom" (Prov. 10:23). "My son, forget not my law; but let thine heart keep my commandments . . . Let not mercy and truth forsake thee . . . So shalt thou find favour and good understanding in the sight of God and man. Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths" (Prov. 3:1, 3-6). A young person with the right goals in life — one who has been taught the way of God and travels in it — will be far better off than one without this outlook.

Are you as a parent extending your young people's horizons in the work area? Are they being given opportunity to learn what education, experience, income and ethics are involved in different occupations they have shown interest in? Have you been helping them set right goals?

Living in a certain area, holding a certain job or having a certain education level is not what is important. The important factor in developing godly character is what we do with what we have. The laws of God give us the instruction we need to travel in the right direction — toward His Kingdom. A youth who is trained to let God's laws govern all His actions will be in good stead.

Peer-group pressures

Youthful crime is seldom committed by lone individuals. Of 5,460 delinquents studied in Chicago, Ill., 82 percent were caught with one or more companions. One study reported that "delinquents almost without exception chummed largely with other delinquents while the nondelinquents, despite the fact that they too lived in the slum, had few intimates among delinquents."

Another large study revealed that 98.4 percent of the delinquents were accompanied by peers. Conversely, nondelinquents associated with delinquents only 7.4 percent of the time. Birds of a feather flock together.

Peer-group pressures heavily influence the development of your child, for good or for evil.

A child's character can be known by how he behaves — whether what he does is pure and right (Prov. 20:11). Can associating with law-breaking youths be considered "pure and right"? God says, "He that followeth vain persons is void of understanding" (Prov. 12:11). Paul warned, "Be not deceived: evil communications [associations] corrupt good manners" (I Cor. 15:33).

How does an adolescent develop his attitudes and master the skills of his social group? Largely through his peers. They are his friends and have the traits he likes or desires. In addition, he is looking for their acceptance and approval.

How much of their peer group's culture your children will take on depends on the attitudes and values they develop in your home! We must help our young people develop a stable, godly system of values by the time they are running around with other kids, or they are likely to take on the values of their peers. This means working closely with our children from the time they are in diapers. We must consistently set good examples for them to emulate.

Also, we must exert some control over who our children's peers are. This doesn't mean meddling unnecessarily in their affairs ("provoking them to wrath" — Eph. 6:4), but Satan is the god of this world and rules over the hearts of men except they be called and chosen of God (II Cor. 4:4). The devil deceives the whole world (Rev. 12:9) and will exert a strong negative influence on your children through their peers unless you help them avoid it.

Instill right values

A child's value system is part of his entire personality, those distinct characteristics that make him different from everyone else. Your child is the person he is because of the values he has.

George Mouly says: "The child's personality is molded by a vast array of interacting forces. The school, for example, plays an important role in providing a relatively objective basis from which he can get his bearings and assess his potentialities for

growth. The foundation for personality, however, is unquestionably *set in the home.*"

Housemovers can move a house to a new foundation, but it is difficult, costly, time-consuming and therefore not commonly done. Similarly, once a child's value system is founded and his way of life is built upon it, change is very difficult to bring about. It is much better to lay the right foundation from the beginning.

One of our jobs as parents is to help our children adopt as their own the values that are right in God's sight. If they believe, for example, that being honest is right — if they really hate lying and cheating — they will manifest trustworthiness in their lives. It will be part of their nature — part of their *character*. The foundation for these right values must be laid as early as possible in the child's life, and we as parents are responsible for doing so.

We must rear our children in a way pleasing to God, within the limits of the physical blessings God has given us. We must provide a neighborhood as secure as our means will allow. We must provide a healthy, loving family atmosphere filled with the right examples, so our children can imitate us as we imitate Christ. We must provide a positive environment with many growth-stimulating challenges and reasonably few failures.

We must provide definite guidelines, but be balanced in our discipline, and train our children to make decisions and accept responsibility. As a family, we must do enough together that members learn to pull together for common purposes. We must show acceptance and approval; the closer we rear our children to God's way, the easier this will be.

Perhaps the most important responsibility God gives us is our family. A kingdom is essentially a family that grew to be a tribe that grew to be a nation. God's Kingdom is His Family, His immortal, spirit-born sons and daughters, ruling the universe. The birth of some of the first members of God's Family is just ahead of us now. We, and eventually our children, can be part of that Family. Let's love our children and turn our hearts to them so they *can* turn their hearts to us. □