

How to Develop Right Character in Your Children

As a parent, you can develop the right kind of physical character in your children if you rear them properly. Read this article to learn how.

By L. Leroy Neff

Several years ago I received a letter from a father whose children were grown. He mentioned some of the problems he had with his children over the years.

Then, possibly somewhat proudly, he concluded, "Well, at least they grewed [*sic*] up."

The term he used to describe his children's develop-

ment reminds me of the common question: What is the proper English word to describe the training, guidance and instruction of children? It used to be improper to use the word *raise*. The idea was that one *reared* children and *raised* vegetables. In recent years, though, English usage has changed, and now, apparently, both words are acceptable.

We would all probably agree that a

change in the terminology is proper to describe many circumstances today. Too few parents really *rear* children today. Instead, they *raise* them, just like some people raise vegetables. Some gardeners put a seed in the ground and let it grow with precious little watering, fertilizing, weeding or hoeing.

Many people today *raise* children about that same way. In so many cases, as the man wrote me, parents find that their children have "growed" up. The children receive little or no training from the parents and simply survive in spite of what



the parents do or don't do. At least the children don't die from parental abuse or neglect!

When your children are grown, is that all you will be able to say about them — "At least they 'grewed' up"? Is that all that God expects of you concerning your children?

Students of the Bible know that God gives parents a great responsibility toward their children. The children are made in the image of God, and have the potential of being born of God in the resurrection as actual sons of God, inheriting with Jesus Christ and many others the whole universe!

Developing character

How we rear our children will have a profound effect on whether they ultimately will be born of God, and how difficult that process may be for them.

God is a master potter who is shaping and molding spiritual character into His begotten children. This character will become more and more like His perfect character until, at the resurrection, we, too, will be perfect in character and no longer able

to sin (Matt. 5:48, I John 3:9).

In a similar way, parents have the opportunity to develop, form, shape and mold physical character in their children. That character will be good or bad, depending a great deal on what the parents do in rearing children.

While we are in the process of rearing our children — or neglecting to rear them! — Satan the devil, the god of this world who has deceived the whole world (II Cor. 4:4, Rev. 12:9), is at work trying to influence them. He, too, is trying to form and shape their character.

But instead of trying to develop godly character within the children, Satan is trying to develop his own character of ungodliness, rebellion, sin, selfishness, competition and greed. Sad to say, in many cases Satan is more successful than the parents in fashioning children's character.

Satan uses many strong and effective influences on children, and starts while they are still infants. When born, children are sweet, lovable and innocent, not having sin or an evil attitude. In a short time, though, under Sa-

tan's influence many become selfish and display bad attitudes. In a few years, many children become unmanageable, rebellious and even criminal.

Satan, the "prince of the power of the air" (Eph. 2:2), accomplishes this by broadcasting wrong moods and thoughts into unsuspecting minds. He uses every available influence, even including public education, which is often atheistic and whose teachings are based on the false theory of evolution. Other strong influences upon children are peer pressure, the mass media and music.

This present evil world is ruled by Satan!

Parents need to offset Satan's bad influence by providing the right home environment, along with proper instruction and guidance for their chil-

Illustrations by Michael Jon Woodruff



dren. This is a big job, but it can be done. And it can't be done too soon!

Character can be established early

Many parents wait until children are old enough to reason with, or old enough to go to school. And then, too often, parents leave all the teaching up to the schoolteacher!

Do you realize that a child learns more in the first year of life than in any succeeding year? By about age 5 a child has learned 75 to 80 percent of what he will learn during his whole life.

It is amazing what little children, even infants, can be taught. Some have been taught to read before they are even able to talk. Small children can also be taught to recognize and identify items before they are able to talk or read.

Knowing this, should we work with infant children to teach them the "three Rs" so that they will know them by the time they start school? Not necessarily.

There is something much more important that should be taught: the right kind of character and attitudes.

Tests have shown that a child's personality is usually set by the time he is 3 years old. Researchers have taken an extensive number of personality profiles of children 3 years old. Then, 15 years later, when the children were age 18, they were again evaluated. In most cases, the personality was the same.

If personality is mostly developed by age 3, it is logical to deduct that character can also be strongly developed at an early age. Of course, character may be profoundly affected at a later time by personal or family traumas or unusual circumstances. One such experience that changes character for the better is real spiritual conversion.

As parents, we can develop within our children the belief and practice of proper values. For example, we can teach and instill honesty in our children. If a child practices honesty early, that particular aspect of character will become a part of the child's mentality. On the other hand, the child can just as easily be taught to be dishonest; dishonesty would then become an integral part of his character.

Probably the most important aspect of character is that of attitude.

Parents should instruct the child to have a teachable attitude, as well as one of love, obedience, giving and sharing. The child should learn to reject the attitudes of hatred, anger, selfishness and rebellion.

God tells us to "train up a child in the way he should go" (Prov. 22:6). How can we properly educate our children in the way they should go? And what is that way? Following are several main points to consider.

Are you the right kind of example?

A main point is to be the right example in your own life. Children will follow parents' examples more than parents' words.

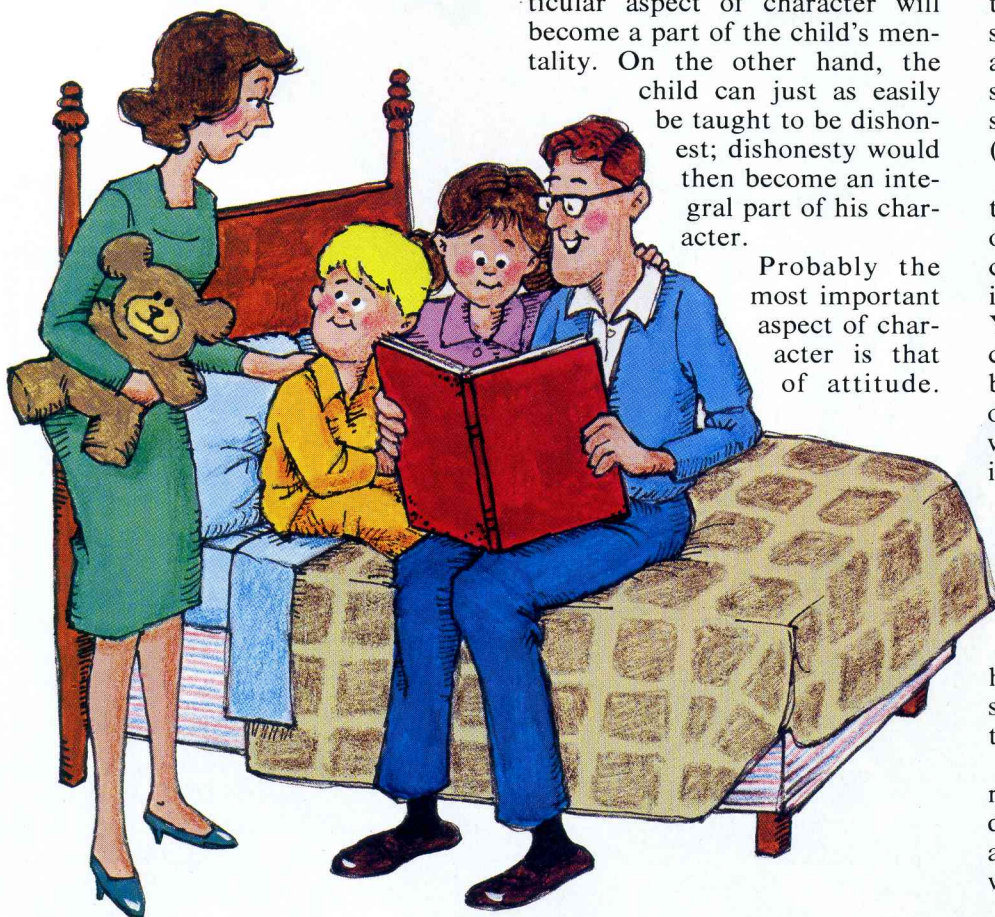
Do you keep your word? Are you obedient to God? Do you say nice things to other people's faces and then speak critically of them in private? Do you claim to be a Christian in public and then do unchristian things in private — even in your own home?

Paul gave, in the book of Romans, an important principle that can apply to parents. He said: "You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal?" (Rom. 2:21).

Parents should teach children the right way of life, including obedience to God and God's commands, one of which, stealing, is mentioned here by Paul. You should not only teach your children the right way of life, but you should live it yourself; otherwise, as Paul says a few verses later, "The name of God is blasphemed" (verse 24).

Parents should set the right example in love, affection and outgoing concern for their children. Children need a lot of "TLC" (tender loving care). They need to be hugged, held, touched and shown affection, especially when they are young.

Parents also need to set the right example in providing children's needs. The children, after all, did not ask to come into this world; the parents, whether on



purpose or accidentally, produced them. When a man and woman embark on such a course, they are obligating themselves to provide for the child until the child is grown.

If anyone does not provide for his own, including children, "he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (I Tim. 5:8).

Basic provisions that children need include wholesome, balanced food; appropriate, quality clothing; and cheerful, well-kept living quarters.

What is the way to go?

We read earlier that we should "train up a child in the way he should go" (Prov. 22:6). What is that way?

Notice what God said of Abraham: "For I have known him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice, that the Lord may bring to Abraham what He has spoken to him" (Gen. 18:19).

Abraham was to instruct his family in the way of God's *righteousness* and *justice*.

The book of Deuteronomy repeatedly mentions how we should instruct our children in God's way: "Only take heed to yourself, and diligently keep yourself, lest you forget the things your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. And teach them to your children and your grandchildren" (Deut. 4:9).

After Moses rehearsed the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy 5, he mentioned our need to instruct our children: "You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up" (Deut. 6:7).

How to instruct

How can we train our children in God's way? First a caution,

and then more on how to accomplish this goal.

"And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord" (Eph. 6:4).

"Do not provoke" is translated differently in various Bible versions. The Phillips translation says "don't overcorrect." The New International Version says "do not exasperate." Other translations read "do not irritate" and do not "goad your children to resentment." A common failing of many parents is to overcorrect or undercorrect. Parents should strive for balance in this area.

The phrase "training and admonition" is translated in the Revised Standard Version as "discipline and instruction." Let's first examine the aspect of instruction, and then discipline.

How should we instruct?

We have already seen that, first, we should set the right example in our own lives, and then we can instruct by teaching. We can show principles and examples from God's Word and from our own and others' experiences to relate what the proper way is.

We can point out the positive and the negative results of right or wrong actions, in language that the child, depending on his age and maturity, will understand.

For example, children should be warned about the evils of illicit sex. Show what is happening in the world around us as a result of violating God's law against adultery and fornication. Point out the toll that is being reaped in unwanted pregnancies, and the epidemics of "social diseases" such as genital herpes. Genital herpes, a disease presently without cure, has lifelong consequences. If the people now suffering from these penalties would have obeyed God, they would not have the problem.

We can show our children the bad results of smoking, drug abuse, lying and stealing, watching the wrong kind of movies, reading the wrong kind of litera-

ture, listening to the wrong kind of music and participating in the wrong kind of activities.

Children are not yet equipped to make right decisions. They need to be told these things. It is to be hoped that you know God's way well enough to be able to effectively impart it to your children.

All of this training takes time — lots of time. Try to spend time each day with your children. Talk to them, teach them, get to know them and let them get to know you. Go places and do things with your children. You can take in cultural events or places of natural or man-made beauty. Teach them to appreciate and enjoy the finer things life has to offer. Go on family outings or camp-outs. Such activities will be most memorable for your children — and for you. They will help to bind your family together as a unit.

How should you discipline?

Ephesians 6:4 (RSV) also tells us that we are to discipline our children. Discipline is much misunderstood and usually improperly applied in today's world. Actually, it is an extension of the responsibility of instructing in God's ways.

The word *discipline* comes from a Latin word that literally means "instruction." The dictionary gives several meanings of the word, including "instruction and exercise designed to train to proper conduct or action" and "punishment inflicted by way of correction and training."

A small sapling can easily be trained to grow in the right direction, but once that sapling becomes a mature tree, it is not possible to train it. In a similar way, children can be trained when young, but there comes a time when parents may no longer be able to teach a child.

While a child is young, teachable and pliable, he can be trained by proper instruction and correction. This includes approbation or reward for doing well, which is

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often totally overlooked. Positive reinforcement is just as essential as using the proper kind and amount of punishment for not doing well.

What does God say about punishment as a tool of instruction? God is our Father. How does He deal with us?

"My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; for whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives" (Heb. 12:5-6).

If God loves us He will correct us. And if we love our children, we will correct them, not for the purpose of harming, injuring or satisfying anger, but to teach needed lessons. God the Father corrects and punishes so that we will learn the lesson and not repeat the mistake. That is the purpose in correcting a child: so that he will not repeat the mistake or continue in a wrong way.

"Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of correction will drive it far from him" (Prov. 22:15). The way a child will get over foolishness is to have proper punishment. Realize, of course, there is a difference between childishness and foolishness. Children are not adults and should not be expected to act completely like adults when they are young.

What is a "rod"?

Just what is the "rod" mentioned in Proverbs 22:15? A cat-o'-nine-tails? A bullwhip? Some other instrument of torture? Some may have thought so! Another scripture should help us to understand that it is nothing like that.

"Do not withhold correction from a child, for if you beat him with a rod, he will not die" (Prov. 23:13). The "rod" referred to *will not cause death*. We can therefore conclude that it is not injurious if applied properly.

If a child is not chastened when he is young, the time may come when it is too late. Notice: "Chasten your son while there is hope, and do not set your heart on his destruction" (Prov. 19:18). This verse shows that the purpose of chastening is not to destroy or hurt the child.

If we do not administer chastening, God says we hate our children: "He who spares his rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him promptly" (Prov. 13:24). Administering discipline *promptly* is important to showing a child proper love.

Here are seven important points to practice concerning punishment:

- 1) Punishment should never cause injury to the child.
- 2) The punishment should be painful, or it will not be effective.
- 3) Punishment should only be applied to the *gluteus maximus*. That is where one sits down. You should never strike a child in the face, head or other parts of the body.
- 4) It should be done only in private.
- 5) Punishment should be applied promptly.
- 6) It should only be administered after the parent explains to the child why the child is being punished.
- 7) It should be administered in love, not anger. If you are angry, wait until you cool down.

In all of this, have an attitude of pity toward your children. "As a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear Him" (Ps. 103:13). If we have love, patience, pity and concern for our children, God will treat us that way. But if we are harsh, cruel and unmerciful, how can we expect God to show mercy and compassion on us?

While this information has mainly concerned the proper, balanced use of corporal punishment (i.e., spankings), you should remember that other forms of discipline are necessary and useful at the right time and place. As children grow older, for instance, punishment may take the form of

denial of privileges rather than physical discomfort.

Remember, too, that the punishment should fit the infraction, and that children vary in temperament and aptitude: Different young people will need to be dealt with differently. Use wisdom and discretion, and make sure all disciplining is done out of real, proper concern for the child.

Must have divine guidance

The most important point in child rearing is probably the most overlooked by people in today's world.

After all is said and done, after the children are grown and no longer at home, we all look back. As we look back, can any of us say, "I did a perfect job in rearing my children"? Surely no one in his right mind can make such a claim. At best, we all fall short of perfection in anything we do. Jesus said, "Without Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). Whatever we do, including child rearing, we must have God's help.

This last and most important point, then, is to seek God's help. We must have divine guidance in all that we do, including child rearing. We receive that help through proper understanding of God's Word and by the leading of God's Holy Spirit (John 16:13).

Ask God to help you understand what to do, and then to help you do it the right way, with love and consistency.

Children are precious to God (Mark 10:14). They are a heritage from God (Ps. 127:3). God lets us care for them for a few years, and then they are gone. We must take advantage of the few short years they are with us in order to train and instruct them in the right way.

Learn to rear your children God's way. If you do, your children will enrich your life greatly and give you a joyful home environment as you mold physical character in their lives. This character will be of great help to them for the rest of this physical life and, it is to be hoped, after that for all eternity. □