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BIDDING AND FORBIDDING

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Discipline is a worry to all parents and teachers; questions and conversations circle round and round the problem, which is becoming more and more urgent in today's education. Here in abridged form is Alfred Schreiber's attempt to solve it, from his 'Briefe über die religiosc Erziehung lvi Elternhaus" (Letters concerning religious instruction in the home).

A mother asked Rudolf Steiner, "At what age should one expect a child to obey?" This was his response: "Obey what is said to him in words - 'Do this, do that'? Not before the seventh year. If a child does not learn to obey by imitating, which is the right way up to his seventh year, if he simply obeys orders that are thrown at him, he will become a sneak and a hypocrite for the rest of his life."

Whenever I quoted this advice to parents, it almost always met with violent opposition. Before they gave any thought to the underlying reasons for it, they would cite practical experiences to prove how impossible it was and therefore how futile.

Education today is still influenced by our "Thou shalt not" frame of mind, by the image of a severe God. This was indeed right for a past epoch of humanity. And a child does go through all the levels of human evolution on a small scale. But he does not reach the Old Testament level, with its characteristic phrase: "The imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth", until his seventh year. Only then does he begin to unfold his own individuality; only then can he begin to feel separate from the world around him, and even in opposition to it. It is then that the struggle begins between duty and inclination. Before that time he lives in the world as a part of it; he and the world are still one. Between the ages of three and seven his feeling for good and evil slowly awakens. He eats of the tree of knowledge, and the gates of Paradise gradually close behind him. He will gradually acquire a proper feeling for human weaknesses and imperfections, but it is not good to force this process too soon. To waken his consciousness of sin is to help "the evil Accuser" -who gives trouble early enough to the adult, stealing away his strength and his courage to believe in the Good, which is within himself. Rudolf Steiner presented quite a different view of man's nature when he gave the evening prayer for children: "From my head to my feet I'm a picture of God." However upset and discordant a child's day may have been, however painfully he may be feeling his own shortcomings, that will all be balanced out by the greater, consoling truth that Man is created in the image of God.

It does not agree with what is in a child's consciousness, to have to pray as in this old German prayer:

"Whatever wrong I did today,
Dear God, please do not see it;
Thy mercy and the blood of Christ
Will take it and redeem it."

A child is not yet ready for the mystery of the redemption of sin through Christ. Words like this can become mere phrases. Later, about the time of the preparation for confirmation, this mystery may be approached very gently, because only then does a young person begin to discover human weakness and sinfulness in his own experience, and thereby is able to unfold an organ of understanding for the fact of salvation. Religious instruction can never consist of moral sermons. They usually spring from a mind that says, "I, the teacher, am more perfect than you, and my task is to improve you." This will never promote reverence for the child-nature, which is essential in education.

It is very interesting that peoples who have come straight down from older cultural epochs have kept many customs that are spiritually right. In the bringing up of their children they instinctively take into account what lives in a child before it has reached the stage for moral commands. We quote the following from "Lectures on Folk-Morality" by Dr. Richard Karutz: 1

"Primitive man allows his child to develop in complete freedom during its first seven years."

"The Batak never punishes his child, for fear its offended soul will run away."

"The Eskimo never strikes his child until its eleventh or twelfth year, for the child knows more than the grown-up: it possesses the wisdom of its earlier earth-lives as well as the wisdom from its life between death and a new birth."

"The American Indian says one must not scold or punish children or they will grow up to be cowards and bad hunters - in other words, one must not break a child's will, or spoil his self-confidence, his initiative, his courage - or even his obstinacy or willfulness: these must be regarded as something good and promising for the future of his personality."

Dr. Karutz adds this comment to the many examples he cites: "The pedagogical result of this gentle method is surely good. By general agreement the children are civil, peaceful, compatible, gentle, confident, industrious, brave, gay, not half so naughty as one would expect them to be, charming rather than wild, good and loving to their parents."

Thus we see that Rudolf Steiner's advice agrees with the ideas that prevail among primitive, uncivilized peoples. They still have a conception of the soul's existence before birth, and they revere the supersensible element that lives in a child.

"Yes, but children have to learn to obey!" is the objection. Certainly they must. But we should know how important the different age-levels are in this connection - something not usually observed carefully enough. This is even true of Jean Paul, who speaks out nonetheless in his *Levana* against commanding and forbidding, recommending only the scarcest use of them. 2

If one thinks one has to enforce obedience at an early age and that one has to break down defiance and willfulness, one will certainly get as a result what Rudolf Steiner called "a life-long sneak and a hypocrite."

A child should learn to obey by imitating, Rudolf Steiner says. Again the teaching methods of so-called primitive peoples, who still do things from instinct, show that this is the right way for the child. From Dr. Karutz' book:

"Primitive man cannot do otherwise than educate through the child's faculty of imitation, and he sets us an example for the first stage of development. 'When you sing, sing at the door so that the child passing by may learn wisdom.' This Schambala proverb shows the negro's insight into the matter, and the conviction upon which he bases his practice. A child in his first seven years does manage in passing to acquire many practical skills - in field and wood, by river and beach, in kitchen and house.

"A child learns life's realities while playing. If mother carries water, little daughter does also, in a crock just like mother's but tiny, and mother fills them both. As the little girl grows, the crock grows too. The boy grows and so does his fishing-net; at first he catches dead leaves and bits of broken dishes; in time he catches fish. So reports Nordenskiold of the American Indians."

I wish to make it perfectly clear that in citing these examples from the life of primitive peoples I am not recommending that we return to that level of culture. What they did out of a dreamy instinct, out of an ancient, now fading connection with the spirit world, we in this present age of awakened consciousness can try to understand with clear judgment, and can do out of our own free will, in accordance with the character of the different age-levels of the child.

Although the imitation-age ends with the seventh year, one can still use imitation for a while afterward as a pedagogical help. As Dr. Karutz points out in the same volume: "The grown-up as he works is still the natural example for the children to follow in their play, and he provides it in constant variety according to their ages, purposely giving them plenty of opportunities to observe and listen."

One will notice that the less obedience one has demanded from a child before his seventh year, the easier it is to do so afterward. Commanding and forbidding create a division; they destroy between parents and child the bond in which the forces of imitation are active. To educate a child through the use of these forces entails at first perhaps greater fantasy and ingenuity as compared to the simple task of ordering him about, threatening him, scolding him, telling him to stop. It requires a stronger self-discipline. But in the end it saves much useless energy and worry.

If mother is peeling potatoes in the kitchen, her little two-year-old daughter cannot help wanting to imitate her: an irresistible force drives her to do so. She splashes in the pan with her little hands, fingers get wet and dirty, perhaps a finger gets cut by the knife. Then the harried mother bursts out: "Stop it! let it alone!" But that's just like chopping off the spirit-hands that direct the child's physical hands. Naturally it is more work and less convenient for mother to get up every moment, wash hands, wipe them, try to find the child a different toy. But as long as she peels potatoes her child can only want to do the same. In most cases she would be perfectly content to use a little wooden knife that her father could whittle for her; and if she had her own

little bowl with two or three potatoes in it, she would be supremely happy to do her work whenever mother calls, "Come, you may help me peel potatoes!"

Of course there are many kinds of work a child cannot and should not imitate. One should try to engage in these at a time when the child is not watching. With a little ingenuity one can work out many things. The idea is not only not to bid and forbid, but also in their place to do something that is suitable for the child, to set it an example with the help of imitation so that it likes to do things that are worthwhile and avoids doing things that are not worthwhile.

Jean Paul speaks from his heart when he says in *Levana*: "Do not find pleasure in bidding and forbidding, but rather in a free imaginative handling of your child. Frequent commands benefit the parent, but not the child."

If a child does things that could hurt him, things from which we should protect him, for instance like touching a hot stove, it is better to let him find out on his own body how it feels to be burnt. Then one never has to tell him again. From greater dangers one has to protect him in some way or other by careful thought. For instance, one will not run the hot water first, but the cold, into the bathtub while the child is playing nearby, in case he should fall in! Even so there will be occasions when a child has to learn from his own deeds about Nature's "iron necessity"; it will be an important experience for him when he learns that Earth has laws that cannot be broken, laws that set a limit to man's seemingly unlimited freedom. The inevitable consequence of natural laws — and they are really divine laws! —must foreshadow the moral laws which we adults present to a child, at first by just the actions of our lives, later in words. That is why we should be careful if we want to be law-givers in the child's world. For reprimands and explanations of a necessary command, however well-meant, are already an admission of feeble authority. A child should obey out of his love for the adult, and because for him whatever the adult says is right! At this age a child does not yet have the capacity for logical thinking which he would need in order to comprehend the rightness of a command or the reason for it. One would do well, if ever one thinks one has to give a command, to make sure first that the child has the strength to carry it out, and also the will to do it out of love for parent or teacher. If there has to be a trial of strengths, it will never go well. For even if one seems to emerge the victor, then the child's will has been seriously crippled and he becomes 'the sneak.' And if one fails, one has lost more than a battle; one has lost one's divine authority over the child.

There are many instances of naughtiness during the first seven years that we should not judge from a high-and-mighty standpoint of morality, as if we were God Himself, angry and avenging. We simply should not take them too seriously. Reprimands, punishment, drawing so much attention to them, can just bury them deeper in the child's soul. It is much better to overlook them in a big-hearted way, to see and yet not to see. Goethe once said to Eckermann that many bits of childhood naughtiness fall away of themselves, like twigs on a little tree while it is growing.

Rudolf Steiner expressed the same thing when a mother complained about her children's spitting, stamping their feet, grimacing and other nasty, small tricks: "Those things are not defects of character. By the time they are thirty years of age, they won't do them any more."

The more laws a government passes, the less they are obeyed. Let us not make laws for children at the age when they are unable to obey them or to understand the reasons for them. The authority of the lawgiver must remain supreme. He must be concealed, as it were, in the clouds of Sinai until the children have reached the stage where they are able to feel his presence, and to sense through him the divine Lawgiver Who rules the natural world and the moral world too.

1. R. Karutz, *Vorlesungen fiber Moraliscite Völkerkunde*, Suhrkainp Verlag, Stuttgart, 1933
2. Jean Paul Friedrich Richter, *Levana*, or *The Doctrine of Education*, George Bell and Sons, London, 1901