

To Prohibit or to Permit?

Towards A Healthy Balance in Parenting

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One of the challenges parents face is the decision whether to prohibit our children from participating in an activity or to permit them to do so. On the one hand we are afraid of provoking trauma or unnecessary anger in them if we deny their requests. On the other hand we worry that our permission might expose them to risky situations and misbehaviour. In this dilemma, as in many others, understanding the outcomes of our educative action toward our children is important.

It's a given that younger generations will introduce changes in the customs and practices of adult society. Young people often violate the traditional behavioural patterns of their parents. They talk, dress, and behave in ways that disregard the rules and standards adults consider reasonable and acceptable. They frequently worry us and provoke us—likely in ways similar to what we probably did with our parents when we were our children's ages. It has always been this way as far back as the 5th century B.C. when Socrates wrote: "Our youth love luxury, they have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for elders and . . . tyrannize their teachers." On the other hand, our children inherit our shared worldview as well as our prejudices, our fears, and our miseries. A reflection on our ideas about parenting will shed light on the mistakes that we sometimes commit in our exercise of authority and how these translate into errors that, in reality, we do not want to commit with our children.

Fundamental Models of Education

The term education comes from the Latin word *educare* which means "to direct," "guide" or "lead." Closely connected is the Latin word *educere*, whose meaning is "to bring up," "cultivate" or "extract." The fusion of these two etymologies explains the coexistence of two basic conceptual models of education: the *authoritative* model and the *developmental* model. Our concept of education depends on the basic idea we have about the development of human beings that springs from one or the other of these fundamental models. This basic idea will shape our approach to our duties as parents and our parenting style.

In all ages and cultures it has been understood that the main educational task of parents is to help their children to become nice people, well integrated in the community and good citizens. According to this view, the task of education is defined by many as teaching, training, conforming, correcting, preparing, leading and disciplining. If we think that our children are in danger of making a mistake when they dare to disagree with us, question our ideas, or disregard our rules, we are tending toward the authoritative model. Consequently we warn, discipline, repress, rebuke, and so on.

Some parents, however, sensing how important the transmission of values, models and habits of discipline are, not only try to mark the limits of an acceptable behavior, but also try to open the minds of their children and orient them towards the analysis of ideas and situations. These parents are not satisfied with their children ignoring the other sides of reality; on the contrary, they try to develop in them the abilities necessary to live in a society where different opinions coexist, sometimes contradictory to one another. They try to enhance their learning through contact with different ways of life. This is more the developmental model and we adopt it to the extent that we are not afraid of diversity and the challenges posed by alternative thinking. It is interesting to observe that the main advice of Paul to parents is not advice to protect them by all means, but he advises, “do not exasperate your children; instead bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4).

Choosing a Christian Model of Education

As Christians parents, how should we raise our children? How should we try to teach them? Do we opt for a strict style with precise limits, to keep them in what we consider the right path? Or do we give them healthy guidelines and tools to prepare for their independence, so that they can learn how to critically evaluate everything the world offers throughout their life? If we want to help our children to solve problems that will confront them in the future, a wrong choice in our choice of educational model may cause numerous problems.

Most families with conservative religious beliefs tend to follow authoritarian and strict educational patterns. Trying to be protective, these parents set up excessive boundaries around their children. Their discipline criteria are narrow and their actions focus primarily on prohibiting, forcing, and directing. They want to avoid the influences that could be damaging to their children and protect them from what they consider to be negative. For them, the world has become an inhospitable, perverse place, packed with forces eager to manipulate the innocent minds of their children. These parents may look suspiciously at anyone who does not think like them, whose behavior they fear to be contagious and dangerous. Other parents are more concerned about stimulating critical thinking, autonomy and independence in their children and allowing them to be confronted by diverse world views and opinions.

To think of ourselves as protectors of our children in our role as parent educators is natural. Obviously, bad influences and evil social pressures do exist. These must be confronted. Our societies are secularized, but we are people of faith and want to rear our children with spiritual values. Our beliefs differ from the world around us, at times so much that parents and teachers feel they are teaching against the current, with their educational efforts often annulled by the cultural influences of the environment. Social standards that undermine our cherished values we find intolerable. The great diversity of view points that coexist in society creates a tension between the correct or right and the inconvenient or unacceptable. To live in a world like ours means that our children will constantly be confronted with contradictory standards and behaviors that threaten their dignity and values. As a result, it is necessary to be vigilant regarding the influences that press in upon children.

Responsible guidance. To let our children be confronted with alternative points of view that are contrary to our own is necessary in helping build in them a balanced and mature

character. Behavioral science helps us understand that constructing sound moral thinking is possible only when we face problems, obstacles or difficult circumstances which push us to think for ourselves and make choices. Thinking about issues and making choices are also the ways by which we firmly adopt for ourselves the values that are meaningful to us.

The solution, then, is not to prohibit, direct, or unreasonably restrict the ideas of our children and youth. Too many strict limits on their desire to learn reduce the possibility of their progress and personal growth. The education we provide will inevitably determine the amount of freedom the youth will be able to live with. Human beings should be able to form their own opinions, to look critically at reality and to have a solid capacity to understand what is good or bad for their personal development.

A parenting style that is characterized by the suspicion that anything unfamiliar is likely harmful can produce children who are narrow-minded, trapped in their own small world, and fearful of the outside environment with a fear that we helped create. While it is important to monitor children's reading and program viewing and prevent them from harm, it is also important to teach them how to critically evaluate the material they read and watch. To not help them develop their mental faculties in this regard is to miss the implication of this significant presupposition about humankind and especially about children which Ellen White has shared with us:

“Every human being, created in the image of God, is endowed with a power akin to that of the Creator—individuality, power to think and to do. The men in whom this power is developed are the men who bear responsibilities, who are leaders in enterprise, and who influence character. It is the work of true education to develop this power, to train the youth to be thinkers, and not mere reflectors of other men's thought. Instead of confining their study to that which men have said or written, let students be directed to the sources of truth, to the vast fields opened for research in nature and revelation. Let them contemplate the great facts of duty and destiny, and the mind will expand and strengthen. Instead of educated weaklings, institutions of learning may send forth men strong to think and to act, men who are masters and not slaves of circumstances, men who possess breadth of mind, clearness of thought, and the courage of their convictions” (*Education*, pp. 17, 18).

Building the Strength to Think and to Act

Many of us no doubt have been relentless protectors and strict censors of cartoons, fashion magazines and other popular media. Of course it is commendable that parents avoid granting access to certain images or allowing small children to witness acts that could be harmful. Even when their children are older though, some parents continue to insist on their avoiding contact with the supposed pernicious effects of toys, movies, and reading materials. Let's be clear. We can't always keep them from contact with the media around them. We cannot protect our children forever. Sooner or later they will come face-to-face with the same delicate, controversial and challenging topics that we confronted as we grew up. Whether we like it or not, eventually our children will have to fight their own battles and confront doubts. Only when they do this thoughtfully, prayerfully and carefully will they be enabled to grow.

Facilitating critical analysis. Facilitating the development of the ability to do critical personal analysis is an important part of our educational work as parents. It's unfortunate to see kids involved with video games that provoke aggressiveness, watching movies, or engaged with other media that proclaim messages so radically opposed to Christian values without anybody to help them evaluate these situations. As a result, they will inevitably misunderstand the messages.

Children pass through developmental stages. Every stage of a child's psychological development has determined characteristics; their cognitive, emotional and spiritual capacities develop in a progressive manner. In our parental education of our children we must keep pace with their mental and moral development. It is important to be sensitive to your child's developmental process and not expect a child to be able to process situations or resolve moral issues before they are mentally prepared.

When children are able to reason we can analyse together televised advertisements and help them understand the commercial interests hidden in them. In middle childhood and pre-adolescence we can help them process dilemmas and give their own responses to the challenges that they will face in the world.

Be positive, not negative. If we blame them for having doubts or give simplistic explanations to their questions, we will be transmitting our unfounded fear of new ideas, our preference for easier solutions, and our comfort with superficial and empty answers. Their desire to learn will be shattered and their minds left as an almost empty place with outdated ways of thinking to confront whatever appears to threaten their ideas. In this way, they will always carry the same fears and suspicions about what they do not understand.

Contrary to this restricted approach, children are better served by a parenting style that is neither fundamentalist nor sceptical, in which they are taught to evaluate critically, to be open to challenging ideas, to invent new solutions, to dialogue. Education for critical thinking implies avoiding biases or simplifications (judgments are not all black or white, nor all or nothing). The analysis of problems and situations require consideration of their different contexts, since few things can be solved in an absolute manner isolated from their context. It is also necessary to evaluate sources of information and to be sure of their implications. It is healthy to teach our children to look, listen, read, not only to decipher images, sounds, or spellings, but also to dig deeper into the different levels of understanding. They will learn to relate more effectively with others if they also listen, dialogue, and learn from the arguments of others.

It's not easy to carry out this kind of education. But the results make up for the efforts. By being careful with what we prohibit and not being too restrictive in what we permit our children to do, we will provide them with lessons in moral strength and decision-making that will last a lifetime.

References

White, E. G., (1903). *Education*. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association.