



# TO TRAIN UP A CHILD

Turning the hearts of the fathers to the children

645,000 IN PRINT

MICHAEL & DEBI PEARL

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# To Train Up A Child

by Michael and Debi Pearl

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# Introduction

This book is not about discipline, nor problem children. The emphasis is on the training of a child before the need to discipline arises. It is apparent that, though they expect obedience, most parents never attempt to train their child to obey. They wait until his behavior becomes unbearable and then explode. With proper training, discipline can be reduced to 5% of what many now practice. As you come to understand the difference between training and discipline, you will have a renewed vision for your family—no more raised voices, no contention, no bad attitudes, fewer spankings, a cheerful atmosphere in the home, and total obedience from your children.

Any parent with an emotional maturity level higher than the average thirteen-year-old can, with a proper vision and knowledge of the technique, have happy obedient children. This is not a theory; it is a practical reality that has been successfully applied many times over.

One couple we know was stressed out with conflict of their three young children. After spending the weekend with us and hearing some of these principles, they changed their tactics. One week later, they exclaimed, “I can’t believe it; we went to a friend’s house, and when I told my children to do something, they immediately, without question, obeyed.”

These truths are not new, deep insights from the professional world of research, but rather, the same principles the Amish use to train their stubborn mules, the same technique God uses to train His children. These principles are profoundly simple and extremely obvious. After examining them with us, you will say, “I knew that all along. Where have I been? It’s so obvious.”



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ISBN 978-1-934794-85-2  
EBook: September 2009

ISBN 978-1-934794-86-9  
EPub: September 2009

ISBN 978-1-892112-00-2  
First book printing: August 1994  
Nineteenth book printing: New Cover, second printing: July 2009  
OVER 645,000 IN PRINT

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## Foreword

This book could not have been possible without the many friends who recklessly and, at the time, unknowingly contributed to the many examples found in these pages. Little did they know that their parenting was being scrutinized and documented.

To all the children named Johnny, I apologize. Some name had to be used to keep all others anonymous.

Although the majority of the text bears the name of Michael, and the smaller portion that of Debi, she played a constant role as critic and editor. Many of the creative ideas are hers. Without her, I could neither have been successful as a parent, nor have written this little book on the subject.

*Michael Pearl*

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## CHAPTER 1

# To Train Up a Child

### SWITCH YOUR KIDS

When you tell some parents they need to switch their children, they respond, “I would if I could find someone willing to trade.” I have had children in my house who were enough to give an electric wheat grinder a nervous breakdown. Their parents looked like escapees from a WWII Polish boxcar. Another hour with those kids and I would have been searching the yellow pages for discount vasectomies. While we tried to sit and talk, the children were constantly running in and out of doors, complaining of ill treatment from the others, begging to go or stay or eat, or demanding a toy that another child would not relinquish. The mother had to continually jump up and rescue some breakable object. She said, “No,” six hundred sixty-six times in the space of two hours. She spanked each child two or three times—usually with her hand on top of a diaper. Other than misaligning the child’s spine, it seemed to have had no effect.

When we speak of consistently rewarding every transgression with a switching (not a karate chop to the lower backbone), some mothers can only visualize themselves further brutalizing their children, knowing it will do no good, anyway! Their discipline is just “laying down a field of fire” to give themselves sufficient cover to get through to the next task. They have no hope of conquering the child’s will. They just desire to create enough diversion to accomplish their own mission.

Another mother walked into my house with her little ones and sat down to talk. She said to them, “Go out in the sunroom and play, and don’t bother Mama unless you need something.” For the next two hours we were not even aware the children were present, except when a little one came in holding herself saying, “Pee-pee, Mama.” They played together

well, resolved their own conflicts, and didn't expect attention when one of the girls turned the rocking horse over, which gave her a knot on her head. They didn't run in and out—*they were told not to*.

This mother did not spank her children while at my house, and she did not need to rebuke them. She looked rested. When she called the children to go home, one asked, "Mama, can I stay and play with Shoshanna?" Mother answered, "No, not today. We have work to do at home." As he lifted his arms, his mother picked him up. Hugging his mother's neck, he said, "I love you, Mama."

This young mother said to me, "My children want to please me. They try so hard to do everything I say. We have such fun together." She is looking forward to having more children. They are the joy of her life.

By the grace of God and through the simple, Biblical principles found in these pages, and with determination and an open heart, this mother has trained-up children who bring her joy and honor.

## **OBEDIENCE TRAINING**

Most parents don't think they can train their little children. Training doesn't necessarily require that the trainee be capable of reason; even mice and rats can be trained to respond to stimuli. Careful training can make a dog perfectly obedient. If a seeing-eye dog can be trained to reliably lead a blind man through the dangers of city streets, shouldn't a parent expect more out of an intelligent child? A dog can be trained not to touch a tasty morsel laid in front of him. Can't a child be trained not to touch? A dog can be trained to come, stay, sit, be quiet, or fetch upon command. You may not have trained your dog that well, yet every day someone accomplishes it on the dumbest of mutts. Even a clumsy teenager can be trained to be an effective trainer in an obedience school for dogs.

If you wait until your dog is displaying unacceptable behavior before you rebuke (or kick) him, you will have a foot-shy mutt that is always skulking around to see what he can get away with before being screamed at. Where there is an absence of training, you can no more rebuke and whip a child into acceptable behavior than you can the family dog. No amount of discipline can make up for a lack of training.

Proper training always works with every child. To neglect training is to create miserable circumstances for you and your children. Out of ignorance, many have bypassed training and expected discipline alone to effect proper behavior. It hasn't worked, and never will.

**“TENNN—HUTT!!”**

When headstrong young men join the military, the first thing they are taught is to stand still. The many hours of close-order drill are designed to teach and reinforce submission of the will. “Attention!” pronounced, “TENNN—HUTT!!” is the beginning of all military maneuvers. Just think of the relief that it would bring if by one command you could gain the absolute, concentrated attention of all your children. A sergeant can call his men to attention and then ignore them, and without further explanation or command, they will continue to stand frozen in that position until they fall out unconscious. The maneuvers “Right flank, Left flank, Companeeey—Halt” have no value in war except that they condition the men to instant, unquestioning obedience.

As in the military, all maneuvers in the home begin with a call to attention. Three-fourths of all home discipline problems would be solved if you could instantly gain your child’s silence and unmoving attention. “TO THE REAR—MARCH” translated into family language would be: “Leave the room,” or, “Go to bed.” Without question they would turn and go. This is normal in the well-trained family.

**“WHOA, HORSE”**

Though we drive vehicles, we live in a horse and buggy community where someone is always training a new horse. When you get into a buggy to go down a narrow, winding state highway filled with eighteen-wheelers and logging trucks, you must have a totally submissive horse. You cannot depend on whipping him into submission. One mistake and the young men will again be making several new pine boxes and digging six-foot deep holes in the orchard.

The first thing you train a horse to do is to stand still and submit to being caught and handled. He must not fear the bridle or harness. He must stand still while thirteen children step in front of the iron wheels to climb into the buggy. When stopped at the end of a driveway, waiting for the traffic to clear, he must not exercise his will to step out in front of eighty thousand pounds of speeding truck.

Horse training involves preparing the horse to respond correctly in all future situations to which he will be exposed. This training takes place in a controlled environment where circumstances are purposefully created to test and condition the horse’s responses. This is done by taking him through various paces. To train him to stop, you hold the bridle as you lead

the horse, and say, “Whoa,” and then stop. Since you have a tight hold on the bridle, he must stop. After just a few times, the horse will stop at your command only.

The trainer establishes the tone of voice at which the horse is to respond. If you speak in a normal tone, the horse will learn to obey at that level. If you scream “Whoa!!” when training him, then in the future he will not stop unless you scream the same way. One such farmer trained his horses with a wild, frantic bellow. Most of his neighbors, who speak quietly to their horses, find it difficult to control his horses because of their inability to raise their voices in such vehemence.

### **SPEAK TO ME ONLY**

I was logging once with a fifteen-hundred-pound mule that sometimes wanted to run away with the log. In moments of stress (I was actually panic-stricken), I found myself frantically YELLING commands. The owner would patiently caution me, “Speak quietly and calmly or he will pay no attention.” I never did learn the art of calmly saying, “Whoa” to a runaway mule pulling a twenty-five foot, white oak log with my foot hung in the trace chain. The point to remember is that animals learn to identify not only the sound, but also the tone.

If you raise your voice when giving a command to your child, he will learn to associate your tone and sound level with your intention. If you have trained him to respond to a bellow, don’t blame him if he ignores your first thirteen calm “suggestions” while waiting for your fevered pitch to reach the point where he interprets it to be a real command.

### **TRAINING, NOT DISCIPLINE**

*“Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it”* (Prov. 22:6). Train up—not beat up. Train up—not discipline up. Train up—not educate up. Train up—not “positive affirmation” up. Training is the most often missed element in child rearing. A child needs more than “obedience training,” but without first training him, discipline is insufficient.

Parents should not wait until their child’s behavior becomes unacceptable before they commence training—which would then actually be discipline. *Training is not discipline.* Discipline is the “damage control” part of training, but is insufficient in itself to effect proper behavior. Training is the conditioning of the child’s mind *before* the crisis arises. It is preparation for future, instant, unquestioning obedience. An athlete

trains before he competes. Animals, including wild ones, are conditioned to respond to the trainer's voice command.

The frustration parents experience results from their failure to train. Their problem is not "bad" children, just bad training. The "strong-willed," the hyperactive, the highly intelligent, and the easily bored all need training, and training is effective on all of them.

Understand, at this point we are not talking about producing godly children, just happy and obedient children. The principles for training young children to instantly obey can be applied by non-Christians as well as Christians. Although, as children get older, the character and teaching of the trainer plays a more significant role.

### **TRAINING NOT TO TOUCH**

There is a lot of satisfaction to be gained in training up a child. It is easy, yet challenging. When my children were able to crawl (in the case of one, roll) around the room, I set up training sessions.

Try it yourself. Place an appealing object where they can reach it, maybe in a "No-No" corner or on the apple juice table (another name for the coffee table). When they spy it and make a dive for it, in a calm voice say, "No, don't touch that." Since they are already familiar with the word "No," they will likely pause, look at you in wonder, and then turn around and grab it. Switch their hand once and simultaneously say, "No." Remember, now, you are not disciplining, you are training. One spat with a little switch is enough. They will again pull back their hand and consider the relationship between the object, their desire, the command, and the little reinforcing pain. It may take several times, but if you are consistent, they will learn to consistently obey, even in your absence.

### **PLANT YOUR TREE IN THE MIDST OF THE GARDEN**

When God wanted to "train" his first two children not to touch, He did not place the forbidden object out of their reach. Instead, He placed the "*tree of the knowledge of good and evil*" in the "*midst of the garden*" (Gen. 3:3). Since it was readily accessible in the middle of the garden, they would be exposed to its temptation more often. God's purpose was not to save the tree, but rather, to train the couple.

Note that the name of the tree was not just "knowledge of evil," but, "*knowledge of good and evil*." By exercising their wills not to eat, they would have learned the meaning of "*good*" as well as "*evil*." Eating the

tree's fruit was not the only way in which they could come to knowledge of good and evil, but it was a forbidden shortcut.

By placing a forbidden object within reach of the children, and then enforcing your command to not touch it, every time the children pass the 'No-No' object (their "tree of the knowledge of good and evil"), they are gaining knowledge of **good and evil** from the standpoint of an overcomer. As with Adam and Eve in the garden, the object and the touching of it is, in itself, of no consequence; but the attachment of a command to it makes it a moral "factory" where character is produced. By your enforcement, your children are learning about moral government, duty, responsibility, and, in the event of failure, accountability, rewards, and punishment. In the here and now, they are also learning not to touch, which makes a child a much more pleasant member of the social group.

It just takes a few minutes to train a child not to touch a given object. Most children can be brought into complete and joyous subjection in just three days. Thereafter, if you are consistent, the children will remain happy and obedient. By obedient, I mean, you will never need to tell them twice. If you expect to receive instant obedience, and you train them to that end, you will be successful. It will take extra time to train, but once the children are in general subjection, the time saved will be extraordinary. Some people say, "Child-proof your home." I say, "Home-proof your child."

### **TOUCHY SITUATIONS**

Have you ever been the victim of tiny, inquisitive hands? A very young child, not yet walking, is keen on wanting to grab any object of interest. There is no fault in this, but sometimes it can be annoying. When you are holding a baby and he keeps pulling off your glasses, you cannot explain to him the impropriety of such socially impolite behavior. The little tot is not yet moved by social concerns. So, do you try to restrain him from getting to your face? No, you train him not to touch. Once you train an infant to respond to the command "No," then you will have control in every area of behavior where you can give a command.

Set up training situations. For example, using your glasses as bait, place the child where he can easily reach them. Look him squarely in the eye. When he reaches out to grab them, don't pull back; don't defend yourself. Calmly say, "No." If anything, lower your voice; don't raise it. Don't sound more serious than usual. Remember, you are establishing a vocal pattern to be used the rest of his youth. If he reaches out to touch your

glasses, again say, “No,” and thump or swat his hand with a light object so as to cause him a little pain, but not necessarily enough to cry. He will pull his hand back and try to comprehend the association of grabbing the glasses with the pain. Inevitably, he will return to the bait to test his new theory. Sure enough, reaching for the glasses again causes pain, and the pain is accompanied with a quiet, little “No.” It may take one or two more tries for him to give up his career as a glasses snatcher, but he will. Through this process, the child will associate the pain with the word “No.” There quickly comes a time when your word alone is sufficient to gain obedience.

There are many things you can teach the small child at this young age. You can stop him from assaulting his mother with a bottle held by the nipple. The same holds true for hair and beard pulling. You name it; the infant can be trained to obey. Do you want to wrestle with him through his entire youth, nagging him into compliance, threatening, placing things out of reach, fearing what he might get into next? Wouldn't it be better to take a little time to train him in his young and tender years? If nothing else, training will result in saving you time.

I know a mother who must call a baby-sitter every time she takes a shower. You should even be able to take a nap and expect to find the house in order when you awake.

### **OBEDIENCE TRAINING—BITING BABIES**

One particularly painful experience of nursing mothers is the biting baby. My wife did not waste time finding a cure. When the baby bit, she pulled its hair (an alternative has to be sought for bald-headed babies). Understand, the baby is not being punished, just conditioned. A baby learns not to stick his finger in his eyes or bite his tongue through the negative associations that accompany it. It requires no understanding or reasoning. Somewhere in the brain that information is unconsciously stored. After biting two or three times, and experiencing pain in association with each bite, the child programs that information away for his own comfort. The biting “habit” is cured before it starts. This is not discipline. It is obedience training.

### **OBEDIENCE TRAINING—BOWLS AND BABIES**

A mother clumsily holds her cereal bowl at arm's length as she wrestles her infant for supremacy. When she places the bowl out of the baby's reach, he is led to believe that the only objects that are off limits are those that are out of reach. To train him, place the bowl within easy reach. When he reaches for it, say, “No,” and thump his hand. He will pull

his hand back, momentarily look alarmed, and then reach again. Repeat the action of saying, “No” in a calm voice, and thumping his hand. After several times, you will be able to eat in peace.

After several occasions of responding to a thump and the word “No,” the voice command alone becomes sufficient to direct the child’s behavior. Always keep in mind, the baby is not being punished, just conditioned. The thump is not a substitute rod. It is reinforcing obedience training.

### **COME WHEN I CALL YOU**

One father tells of his training sessions with each new toddler. He sets aside an evening for “booty” camp, which is a boot camp for toddlers. He allows a ten-month-old child to become deeply interested in a toy or some delightful object. From across the room or just inside another room, the father calls the child. If the child ignores the call, the father goes to him and explains the necessity of immediately coming when called, and then leads him through the steps of obedience by walking him over to the place from which he was called.

Father then returns him to the toy and leaves him alone long enough to again become engrossed. Father calls again. If the child ignores the call, the father gives additional explanation and a repeat of the practiced walk. The parent, having assured himself that the child understands what is expected of him, goes back to call again. This time if the child does not respond immediately, the father administers one or two swats with a switch and then continues the exercise until the child readily responds to his summons. Thereafter, until the day the grown child leaves home, the parent can expect the child to drop everything and come when called. *As long as parents remain consistent, the child will consistently obey.* This “obedience training” is conducted with quiet patience. The spanking is not punishment and is not very painful. It merely gives weight to your words.

### **NEVER TOO YOUNG TO TRAIN**

A newborn soon needs training. Parents who put off training until their child is old enough to discuss issues or receive explanations will find he has become a terror long before he can tie his shoes.

As a mother begins to lower her child into the crib, he stiffens, takes a deep breath, and bellows. The battle for control has begun early, and in earnest. Someone is going to be conditioned. Either the tenderhearted mother will cave in to the child’s self-centered demands (actually training

the child to get his way by crying), or she will wisely allow him to cry (communicating that crying is counterproductive). Crying because of genuine physical need is the infant's only voice to the outside world, but crying in order to manipulate others into constant servitude should never be rewarded. Otherwise, you will reinforce the child's growing self-centeredness, which will eventually become socially intolerable.

### **STEPS TO OBEDIENCE**

One of our girls, Shalom, who developed mobility early, had a fascination with crawling up stairs. At five months, she was too unknowing to be punished for disobedience. But for her own good (and our peace of mind), we attempted to train her not to climb the stairs by coordinating the voice command of "No" with little spats on her bare legs. The switch was a twelve-inch long, one-eighth-inch diameter sprig from a willow tree.

Such was her fascination with climbing, that she continued to climb, ignoring the spankings. Spanking is supposed to work, but it seemed that, at her young age, her little brain couldn't maintain the association. So, out of desperation, I laid the switch on the bottom step. We later observed her crawl to the stairs and start the ascent, only to halt at the first step and stare at the switch. She backed off and never again attempted to climb the stairs, even after the switch was removed. She had assumed the association of the painful switch to the stairs and my command. I had communicated to her my will and my resolve.

### **EXCESSIVE DISCIPLINE**

Disciplinary actions can easily become excessive and oppressive if you set aside the tool of training and depend on discipline alone to do the training. I observed a proud, stern father ruling his children with a firm hand, and making sure everyone knew it. His rod was swift to fall, especially in the presence of company. His children trembled in his presence, fearing to incur his displeasure. I wondered why, if he was so firm and faithful to gain obedience, he had not achieved it before entering the public arena. I was impressed, but not in the way he hoped.

Except where the very smallest children are concerned, training at home almost entirely eliminates the need for public discipline. Yet, should the need arise in public, be discreet with your discipline, and then go home and re-train in that area of behavior so that you and the child will not be placed in that difficult situation again.

**TRAINING THE ORNERY AMISH BOY**

As I sat talking with a local Amish fellow, a typical child training session developed. The twelve-month-old boy, sitting on his father's lap, suddenly developed a compulsion to slide to the floor. Wanting to keep the child off of the cold floor, the father directed him to stay in his lap. The child stiffened and threw his arms up to lessen the father's grip and facilitate his slide to the floor. The father spoke to him in the German language (which I did not understand) and firmly placed him back in the sitting position. The child made dissenting noises and continued his attempt to dismount his father's lap. The father then spanked the child's leg and spoke what I assumed to be reproofing words. Seeing his mother across the room, the child began to cry and reach for her. This was understandable in any language. It was obvious that the child felt there would be more liberty with his mother.

At this point, I became highly interested in the proceedings. This one-year-old child was attempting to go around the chain of command! Most fathers would have been glad to pass the troublesome child to his mother. If the child had been permitted to initiate the transfer, he would have been the one doing the training, not the parents. Mothers often run to their children in this situation, because they crave the gratification of being needed. But this mother was more concerned that her child be properly trained than she was for satisfying her own sentiment. She appeared not to hear the child's plea.

The father then turned the child to face away from his mother. The determined fellow immediately understood that the battle lines had been drawn. He expressed his will to dominate by throwing his leg back over to the other side to face his mother. The father spanked the leg the child turned toward his mother and again spoke to him.

Now the battle was in full array. Someone was going to submit his will to the other. Either the father would confirm that this strapping one-year-old could rule his parents, or the parents would confirm their authority. Everyone's happiness was at stake—as well as the soul of the child. The father was wise enough to know this was a unique test of authority. This episode had crossed over from “obedience training” to “discipline for attitude.”

During the following forty-five minutes, the child shifted his legs fifteen times, and received a spanking each time. The father was as calm as a lazy porch swing on a Sunday afternoon. There was no hastiness

or anger in his response. He did not take the disobedience personally. He had trained many horses and mules and knew the value of patient perseverance. In the end, the twelve-month-old submitted his will to his father, sat as he was placed, and became content—even cheerful. He was now ready to quietly sit through three hours of the most boring church service a sleeping patriarch ever attended.

Some will say, “But, I couldn’t take it emotionally.” Sometimes it *is* difficult to set aside your feelings for the sake of training your child. It does involve emotional sacrifice. Yet, what is love, but giving? When we know it will work to the temporal and eternal good of the child, it is a joy instead of a sacrifice. It is a thrill to see it work to the child’s benefit.

If you know you are prone to anger or impatience, it will deter you from being aggressive in disciplining your child. You may fear that your discipline is an act of your ego to dominate. You must first deal with your own impurities for the sake of the child, for if he doesn’t receive consistent and forceful training, he will greatly suffer.

### **BE ASSURED OF TWO THINGS**

First, almost every small child will have at least one time in his young life when he will rebel against authority and attempt to take hold of the reins—as did the Amish kid. This act of stubbornness is profound—amazing—a wonder that one so young could be so dedicated and persevering in rebellion. It is the kind of determination you would expect to find in a hardened revolutionary facing enemy indoctrination classes. Parents who are trained to expect it, and are prepared to persevere, will still be awed at the strength of the small child’s will.

Second, if you are consistent in training, this attempt at total dominance will come only once in a child’s life, usually around two years old. If you win the confrontation, the child wins at the game of character development. If you weaken and allow the child to dominate, the child loses everything but his will to dominate. You must persevere for the sake of the child. His will to dominate must be dominated by the rule of law (that’s you).

Let me warn you of the need to be consistent. The cat that is prevented from coming into the house most of the time, but occasionally breaks through the barrier, will take the occasional success as impetus to always try to get in. However, if he is consistently kept out (100% of the time), he will lose the will to come in, even when the door is left open. You may scream at him, slam the door on his tail, and kick him sixty feet,

but if you occasionally allow him to stay in long enough to eat scraps off the floor or sleep on the couch, he will forever risk running the gauntlet to get in. Your abuse (they mistakenly call it *discipline* where children are involved) may make him sufficiently wary to obey while you remain on guard, but the hairy fur-ball will still bolt through the door when he sees the opportunity.

On the other hand, dogs, many times smarter than cats, can be trained either to come in or stay out on command. The key is always consistency. If Rover learns through conditioning (consistent behavior on the part of the trainer) that he will never be allowed to violate his master's command, he will always obey. If parents carefully and consistently train up their children, their performance will be superior to that of a well-trained, seeing-eye dog.

### **NEGATIVE TRAINING**

How many times have you observed untrained children in the grocery store arena? A devious little kid sits up in the command seat of the shopping cart, exercising his "childhood rights" to unlimited self-indulgence. The parent, fearfully but hopelessly, steers around the tempting "trees of knowledge of good and evil." Too late! The child spies the object of his unbridled lust. The battle is on. The child will either get what he wants or make his parent miserable. Either way, he conquers.

### **PURCHASED COMPLIANCE**

One father proudly told of how he fearlessly overcame by promising the child ice cream if he would only wait until they left the store. Such compromises will only affirm the child in his commitment to terrorist tactics. You are not gaining control of the child; he is gaining control of you. All children are trained, some carelessly or negligently, and some with varied degrees of forethought. All parental responses are conditioning the child's behavior, and are therefore training.

Parents who purchase compliance through promise of reward are turning their child into a racketeer, paying for protection. The child becomes the Mafia or union boss, and you take the role of intimidated businessman. If you are bargaining with a terrorist for one more day's reprieve from anguish, you may then strike a favorable deal. But, if you are training up a child, you need to reconsider your methods. Allowing yourself to be intimidated into compromise will turn your child into a psychological bully.

**DID YOU HEAR WHAT I SAID?**

I observed a father tell his small boy not to touch a particular object. Having been trained to ignore mild commands, the child picked it up anyway. With irritation in his voice, the father demanded, "Give it to me." The child pretended not to hear. With anger, "Did you hear me? [Of course he did.] Hand it to Daddy." With mounting anger, "Johnnieeee, give it to Daddy, NOW!!" Finally, another decibel higher—hasty—angry—threatening, "JOHNNY!! Am I going to have to SPANK YOU?" By this time the father was aware of his embarrassing tone. He calmed his voice, and in an attempt to bring it to a conclusion, he leaned way out and extended his hand, making it easier for Johnny to comply. Because of his father's angry voice and burning eyes, Johnny assumed the temporary posture of, "Oh well, there will be another day." But, instead of handing the object to the humbled, groping father, he held it in his general direction but down close to his body, forcing the father to advance even farther to retrieve it. The father, looking like a poor peasant receiving alms from some condescending member of royalty, submitted to the child's humiliation and reached to retrieve the object. And then, in a display of weakness, the father placed it out of the child's reach.

What did Johnny learn from this episode? He had his conviction reinforced that it is never necessary to obey a command the first, second, third, or even fourth time. No one expects him to. He has learned that it is permissible to grab anything within reach and to continue possessing it until the heat gets too great. He has learned not to respect authority, just strength (the day will come when he will be the stronger one). By the father's example, he has learned how to use anger. By the father's advance to take the object from his hand, he has learned how to "get in the last shot" and maintain his defiance. That father was effectively training his small child to be a rebel.

What has the father learned? He has learned that little Johnny is just a "strong-willed" child; that children go through unpleasant *stages*; that it is sometimes a very miserable and embarrassing thing to be a parent; that one has to watch a kid every minute and keep things out of his reach; that the only things kids understand are force and anger. All of which are false. The father is reaping nothing less than the harvest of his failure to train.

## CHAPTER 2

# Childish Nature

(Understanding a child's natural development)

### **“BEHOLD, THE SECOND WOE”!**

Just last night while sitting in a meeting, I looked over to see a young mother struggling with her small child. He seemed determined to make her life as miserable as possible—and to destroy her reputation in the process. She had the “Why me?” look on her tired face. He kept defiantly throwing his bottle on the floor (encouraged by her picking it up and handing it back to him) and making angry noises that forced the preacher to speak louder and louder. By increasing his embarrassing displays, the child forced her to put him down on the floor. He then proceeded to act as a circus clown, drawing attention away from the preacher. Finally he insisted on procuring a neighbor's property. When the frazzled mother tried to prevent his thievery and rescue the stolen goods, he kicked his legs like an eggbeater while screaming in protest.

It was enough to make you believe the Devil started out as an infant. I am just thankful that one-year-olds don't weigh two hundred pounds, or a lot more mothers would be victims of infant “momicide.” It causes one to understand where the concept of a “sinful nature” originated.

The mother knew that the child shouldn't be acting like this, but due to his limited intellectual development, she felt helpless. Older children and adults are constrained from such embarrassing public displays by public opinion, but children are not affected by peer-pressure, threat of embarrassment, or rejection. This little fellow's life was one of unlimited, unrestrained self-indulgence. No doubt, as is usually the case, his parents were waiting for his understanding to develop so they could begin to correct

“bad” behavior. They helplessly watched while selfishness and meanness of spirit took root in a void of understanding.

What is the driving force in this child, and how can it be conquered? We need to understand some things about the nature of a child in order to institute appropriate training.

### **GOD-GIVEN SELF-CENTEREDNESS**

God created us to exist in a constant state of desire and appetite. The tension in this continuous struggle provides the background for moral development. This is most apparent in the small child. He desires food, water, warmth, companionship, entertainment, and a dry diaper. God endowed him with strong compulsions to taste, smell, hear, see, and a desire to touch and feel “almost everything”.

The desires and passions in the infant are not yet complete. As he matures, he will find himself possessed of ever-increasing, natural desires for things “*pleasant to the eyes,*” things “*good for food*” and for those things that will “*make one wise.*” His growing humanity will give way to a desire to build, to know, to be appreciated, to be recognized, to succeed, to be a lover, and to survive in a secure state of being.

As infants grow, they learn to manipulate their surroundings to their own gratification. A smile, grunt, kicking of the feet, rolling and shaking the head, crying, and screaming all say, “Pick me up, feed me, look at me. Doesn’t anyone realize I have urgent needs? What could be more important than *me?*”

An infant’s world is no bigger than his needs and desires. It is the only reality he knows. He soon learns that not only his needs but his “wants” can be readily satisfied as well. The infant cannot think in terms of duty, responsibility, or moral choice. He has no pride or humility—only desire. Like Julius Caesar, he comes, he sees, he conquers. He is created that way. By nature, he is incapable of considering the needs of others. The child doesn’t know or care that you are tired and also in need of comfort.

Because of its resemblance to adult behavior, the self-centeredness of infants has all the appearances of a vice. But they are acting on natural, God-given impulses to survive and seek their own pleasure. They come into the world totally dependent—with many needs. But they soon learn that they can have their wants met as well as their needs. So they “*go astray as soon as they be born, speaking lies* (Psalm 58:3).” Before they can talk, they learn to lie to their parents by pretending that their wants are needs. Parents rush to serve them, and the child’s selfishness grows. They do not have the intellectual

and moral capacity to say “No” to appetites and impulses. They cannot yet be held responsible. They begin life in innocent self-centeredness. God does not impute it to them as sin, but it is the foundation of sin.

### **TO BLAME OR NOT TO BLAME**

As the child gets older, say from eight to twelve months, the adults in his life begin to pay less attention to his demands, and a weaning process begins. The child is made to wait, told “No,” and given boundaries. He must learn that he cannot always be first. If early training has not subdued the manifestations of his “selfishness,” people begin to refer to him as “spoiled.”

Guilty, frustrated parents are manipulated by the child’s whining and crying. The spatting begins. The kid gets jerked around. Resentment builds. Adults begin to blame him, even compete with him.

The child feels this tension but doesn’t understand what has caused it, but neither does he lessen his demands. He connives, calculates, and resorts to angry tantrums. I have seen a two-year-old take a weapon and angrily strike his mother. The young child has not matured to a point where he can understand responsibility, weigh values, and make conscious decisions based on moral or social worth, but he certainly can mimic the criminal mind.

### **TOWARD UNDERSTANDING**

What is happening? A short time ago the adults around this child would have given him anything he wanted, including their own life-sustaining food. Now they are beginning to expect a little giving on his part. But he doesn’t want to give. Taking has been his way of life from conception. And this arrangement suits him just fine.

We adults, sensing the capabilities of children, expect them to give and take at a level appropriate to their maturity. When they fall behind our expectations, we become irritated. Children NEVER make a smooth transition from the utterly dependent and self-centered state to the socially-conscious give-and-take state.

We are delighted when the three-month-old grabs food from our hand and stuffs it into his mouth, but let a three-year-old try it, and it is not so cute. We are delighted when a three-year-old interrupts our conversation with a tale of his own, but a nine-year-old is expected to say “Excuse me,” and wait for an appropriate time to participate in the conversation.

When we believe that a child has matured to the point of being capable of responsible action, we automatically expect it of him. However, if he is slow to assume his duty, we become irritated with him for not “acting his age.”

The beasts of the earth, in contrast to man, never need to deny their natural drives. They are within their intended boundaries living for self-gratification. But the growing child or adult who doesn't rise above self-indulging desires has fallen from God's intention and design. The root of all sin is found in the runaway indulgence of God-given desires. Although the child may not have matured to the point of accountability, still, his unrestrained indulgence is the very essence of future sinfulness.

### **A SPIRITUAL FETUS**

Life is designed by God to be like a spiritual womb, a place where moral development begins after birth and continues throughout life. The early years after birth could be viewed as the prenatal development of a moral being.

At their creation, Adam and Eve were complete physically, but morally undeveloped. A four-month fetus, still in the mother's womb, is a living soul. Though all of its tiny members match those of a mature adult, it is yet an incomplete creation needing further growth before becoming distinct from its mother. In like manner, a three-year-old child, in its soul, has all the tiny features of a morally responsible adult—a knowledge of right and wrong, a sense of justice, accountability, conscience, duty, guilt, shame, etc. Yet, none of the moral faculties are developed to the point of being fully operative and independent. The child is not a morally viable soul. He is an incomplete moral being. He is not accountable. Morally, the three-year-old is still in the womb. Moral life begins its development sometime after birth, probably in the second or third year, and continues until it matures at about ten to fifteen years of age.

Like physical development in the womb, moral development is a slow transition from no moral understanding at birth to complete accountability at some point in the child's youth. There are vast differences of opinion as to when God holds a child accountable for his own actions and thoughts. From time immemorial, age twelve has been the traditional “age of accountability.” But accountability is not an age; it is a state of consciousness (James 4:17; Lev. 5:3). Biblically, it will be sometime before twenty years of age (Deut. 1:39 with Num. 14:29-31). Observation seems to suggest that some children may be accountable as early as five, while others may not be fully accountable until nineteen. The mentally impaired

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