

SERMON

"CHILDREN LEARN WHAT THEY LIVE"

Seven weeks ago, on 15 March, I finished my sermon on "A Question of Education" by reading the anonymous poem/meditation "Children learn what they live".

In the version I first knew, the language was exclusively male - itself a living and learning model. Since then I have seen and used versions in non-exclusive language, such as plural or non-specific. I want today to build my sermon around that meditation.

If children live with criticism
they learn to condemn.
If children live with security
they learn to have faith.
If children live with hostility
they learn to fight.
If children live with fairness
they learn justice.
If children live with ridicule
they learn to be shy.
If children live with praise
they learn to appreciate.
If children live with shame
they learn to feel guilty.
If children live with confidence
they learn to be patient.
If children live with approval
they learn to like themselves.
If children live with acceptance - and
friendship -
they learn to find love in the world.

If children live with criticism
they learn to condemn.
If children live with security
they learn to have faith.

In talking to children, and in correcting them, we . need to convey caring, not rejection. We need to avoid critical comments such as

When will you learn?

What's the matter with you?

How many times have I told you?

Didn't you hear me?

Why did you do that?

We need to deal with the situation, not with the person.

We need to avoid attacking the child.

Dr Haim Ginott, a child psychotherapist, told how he saw ten-year-old Larry drop and break a glass. Larry's mother's response was immediate: "What's the matter with you?"

Larry's father, in the boy's hearing, explained to Dr Ginott: "He can't help it. He was born clumsy."

Such criticism attacks the core of the child's personality. Why shouldn't Larry believe his parents and assume the role assigned to him? The child labelled "clumsy" will learn to behave clumsily.

How much better it might have been if Larry's parents had said, instead: "Oops! It's broken. We'd better sweep it up before anyone steps on it and gets hurt."

If children live with hostility they learn to fight.

If children live with fairness they learn justice.

Dr Ginott told of another ten-year-old boy, Ray, whose father shouted at him: "Leave the table! You eat like a pig. Do you know what a pig is?"

"Yes!" cried Ray. "It's the son of swine!"

My cousin Michael, as a child, was known for his volatile nature. His father, my uncle Rod, was sometimes liable to "lay down the law" and expect / demand adherence to his instructions. If adherence and obedience were not immediately forthcoming, Rod could become both belligerent and stubborn, getting more and more forceful and dogmatic and angry in . his attempt to impose his will.

Michael often rebelled. He was lively, with little innate ability to restrain his ebullience and his own strong will. There were sometimes major clashes of wills. Sparks could fly.

My father was much calmer, much more gentle in his approach. He was not given to attempting to bring up his children by force.

On one occasion, when he was about ten, Michael was staying with us. At the dinner table, he had got up from his seat for some reason. When he went to sit down, he slipped off the chair, fell to the floor, and suddenly disappeared from view. We all laughed - it was so unexpected and funny.

Michael jumped up, embarrassed and angry. Declaring that he wasn't going to put up with being laughed at, he said - or, rather, shouted - that he was going to go straight home.

He was all set for a shouting match, an argument, a fight. He expected to be told to sit down, and not be stupid;; or to leave the room until he could behave himself.

He could have resisted and fought against such orders, and challenged anyone to make him sit down or make him leave the room.

But my father, without raising his voice or getting angry or giving any orders, quietly said something to the effect of:

"Well, we've enjoyed having you here, and we would be happy for you to stay. But if you want to go home now, that's OK. I'll drive you home now, if you'd like to pack your clothes and things."

That took Michael completely by surprise. It took the wind out of his sails without in any way attacking, him or giving him something to resist. Instead, it offered him a free choice, without blame or recrimination.

"Oh!" he said, and stopped to think for a moment before sitting down and saying: "Well, no. I'd like to stay here if that's all right."

"Fine," said Dad. "We're happy to have you."

And that was it.

If children live with ridicule
they learn to be shy.
If children live with praise
they learn to appreciate.

The best antidote to fear is for children to learn that they are free to feel, to think and to dream without losing the love and respect of their parents. Children - like adults - need to know that all their feelings are legitimate: the positive, the negative, and the ambivalent.

We can spare children - and adults - much guilt and anxiety by treating all their feelings as normal and as real. Behaviour can be "good" or "bad"; but feelings, dreams and fears cannot be so described.

Don't tell a frightened child that there is nothing to be afraid of. This is likely simply to increase the fear: in addition to the original fear, there is now the fear of being afraid, and a feeling of shame or ridicule or inadequacy that will inhibit any future confession of fear - or any other "negative" feeling.

It is better to acknowledge the child's fear openly, and express understanding of it.

When ten-year-old Rose spoke of her overwhelming fear of tests, her father did not offer denials. Instead, he responded: "Tests can be scary; especially final exams." Rose was encouraged and reassured to feel that her fear was quite normal and indeed that it was shared by adults..

When I taught public speaking in TAFE classes in the 1980s, I tried to encourage my students to accept their nervousness, and learn to deal with it, and go on in spite of it; and not to aim at simply "not being nervous". Like other people, many of them had an idealised concept of speakers who "are not nervous".

I tried to teach them that such speakers - and actors, ministers, news-readers, radio and television announcers - usually are in fact nervous, and suffer from stage fright or "pre-performance nerves", but have learned how to avoid showing it or allowing it to affect their performance.

If children live with shame they learn to feel guilty.

In an article entitled "How to drive your child sane", Dr Ginott warned against pushing children into defensive lying.

Some parents, knowing that their child has failed a test, will deliberately ask: "Did you pass your exam?" to see if the child will tell the truth.

But that sort of question puts pressure on the child,' who may be tempted to say "yes".

It would be better for the parents to say: "Your teacher informed us that you did not pass your exam, and we wonder how we can be of any help."

If children live with encouragement they learn confidence.

There is a story - possibly apochryphal -- of the young teacher, new to the school, who was assigned to a particular class and not told very much about them.

She was not "warned" about them. She was not warned that this particular group was notorious as trouble-makers, as slow learners, as problem kids. She was simply given a list of their names, with some other basic details, and sent off: thrown in at the deep-end!

The. Principal expected to have to deal with a constant stream of "discipline problems", but there were none. Whenever he asked the new teacher how things were going, the answer was: "Fine. They're all doing well."

He didn't like to interfere, or be seen to be prying. And eventually he decided to let sleeping dogs lie. He figured that the end-of-term exams, and the students' usually low marks, would give him the excuse to sort things out.

End-of-term came, and the teacher handed in the list of her class's marks. The Principal was puzzled. All of that class's marks were wildly out of line with what he expected. All the students had apparently passed. Many had done well, and some students' high marks had equalled the results of the best students in the "top" class.

The Principal discussed it with the teacher. He believed she needed to be "put on the right track" about scholastic expectations and marking standards. There was no point in giving high marks for poor work, even if she thought it might "encourage" them.

Surprised, she showed him examples of their work, and he was amazed.

"But, it's impossible!" he said. "That's the bottom class. Some of those kids can hardly spell their own names. They're way below average, in terms of IQ, and those who aren't stupid are deliberately troublesome and lazy. They've always been a problem group."

The teacher disagreed. They were a bright, cheerful, co-operative group. She admitted that, of course, she had found the first few days a bit difficult, but she had expected that, until they and she had got used to each other. But after those first few days, they had settled in and got on with their work so well that she sometimes had difficulty in keeping ahead of them.

And, she said, they were certainly not below average IQ. The list she had been given showed that they were above average.

She showed him the list that she had transcribed into the roll book.

Sure enough:

Susan Adams	133
Peter Brown	120
Paul Cook	141
Debbie Donaldson	138

and so on.

The Principal was flabbergasted. He was sure that something was wrong. Eventually the light dawned. The original list of names and numbers, scribbled on a piece of paper without a heading or explanation, was a list of the students' locker numbers.

If children live with tolerance
they learn to be patient.
If children live with approval
they learn to like themselves.

Children -and adults - resist us less when our
. requests convey respect and safeguard their
autonomy. They respond better to brief statements
that are not phrased as orders.

It was a cold, windy day when nine-year-old Tim said: "Mummy, I want to wear a T-shirt today." His mother replied: "Check the thermometer. Over 20 degrees, T-shirt. Under 20 degrees, - pullover." When Tim checked the thermometer, and saw that it read 15 degrees, he put on his pullover without argument.

Another mother, tired of nagging about house hold chores, wrote a Situations Vacant advertisement and stuck it on the refrigerator door. It worked. It read:

WANTED: Young men between the ages of ten and twelve. Must be muscular, intelligent and daring. Also able to fight off wild animals and cut through dense underbrush between house and garbage bin. Applicants please line up by kitchen sink.

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they learn to condemn.

If children - people - live with security
they learn to have faith.

If children - people - live with tolerance
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If children - people - live with approval
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In our dealings with children, and with adults- in our dealings with each other - let us seek to treat others in ways that will enable them to grow and develop in ways that are good and positive rather than destructive and negative. Let us deal with other people - children and adults -as we would like other people to deal with us.

If children - people -live with acceptance and
friendship
they learn to find love in the world.

So may i t be.

Amen.

Geoffrey R Usher