

Teaching Your Toddler

By Katharine G. Howard



A small battle of wills took place between my first-born son and me. Breakfast was over for his daddy and me. But sitting in his highchair, Phil dawdled with the remains of his milk. He announced firmly, ‘Wanna git down.’

‘Just finish your milk, then you can get down,’ I told him, not dreaming that this was a crisis.

He sat quietly for a time, then declared, ‘Wanna git down.’

‘Yes, as soon as you finish your milk.’ We repeated this scene every few minutes for more than an hour. I began to realize that my authority was being tested. Inwardly I determined that he would sit there until he did what I told him. Just how long that would have taken had it not been for the milkman, I do not know. Phil loved to watch the milkman come down the cobblestone street in our suburb of Schaerbeek in Brussels, Belgium, with his little cart pulled by his dog. When Phil heard him coming, down went the milk and he wormed his way out of the highchair in no time.

Years later, during his military service, Phil wrote his father and me thanking us for teaching him obedience. It never occurred to him to disobey an order, he said, but many men tried to get around doing what they were told and consequently they spent a lot of time in the brig.

‘Train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old he will not depart from it’ is as true today as when Solomon wrote it several thousand years ago. Running one’s eye down the columns of any concordance on the words *obey*, *obedience* and *obedient* gives some idea of the importance of these words in God’s sight. ‘Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams,’ Samuel told Saul. In order to properly *hearken*, which is the beginning of learning, one must be obedient.

Training must come before teaching. Before parents can train their children properly, they must first discipline themselves. An orderly home and orderly habits can be accomplished only by agreeing together on these things. Our home ran on a tight schedule. My husband had to catch his commuter train on time, and each child had to finish his duties and leave for school on time. My husband insisted on a leisurely breakfast and family prayers. This is impossible unless the children cooperate. And they don’t cooperate unless they are disciplined from their earliest days. This discipline lays the groundwork for teaching.

Praying together for wisdom and standing together on all matters of discipline should be a rule for parents. Older children quickly notice when they can play one parent against the other: ‘If Mommy won’t let me go. I’ll ask Daddy. He won’t know that Mommy has said no.’ Parents of young children (and older ones, too of course) should read the book of Proverbs frequently and soak up the wisdom given by the Spirit of God.

Aren’t toddlers too young for serious training? Years ago when our three older children were quite small, my husband and I invited to our home a father of ten children, all of whom had become

fine Christian men and women. When we had our three tucked safely into bed, we young parents began to ply our guest with questions on child-training. I have never forgotten one thing he said: 'If you don't get obedience by the time they are eighteen months old, it is too late!'

I would hardly say eighteen months is too late to teach a child obedience, but certainly it becomes harder the longer a child is left in doubt as to who is in authority. We hear much these days about not frustrating the child by saying 'don't.' Actually the real frustration comes when he has been naughty and then is not punished. I noticed so often that a speedy application of a switch to little legs cleared the atmosphere. For weeks to come there was no need for further chastisement. We are told that 'whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth.' Unless we follow His example firmly and consistently, are we truly loving our children?

As each of our six became eighteen months old, I found that our wise friend had been correct. When the child begins to crawl and then to toddle, he puts his parents to the test. "Does Mommy *really* mean don't touch?" he seems to wonder. 'I'll try her out and see!' And he does just that.

I recall watching my son Dave as his little son Michael edged toward my gas stove in our kitchen in Florida. He had been pulled away from it and told not to turn on the gas jets. Yet he edged slowly toward the stove, stopping now and then to look at his father who continued to say quietly, 'Michael, don't touch that.' When Michael touched, he found out that Daddy meant what he said. There were hot tears as a result.

Even tiny babies can be taught when put to bed that crying does no good. The mother must discipline herself. If she is sure that the baby is dry and warm and has a full tummy, then she must let him cry. It only takes a few nights for him to

learn that it is a waste of time. The tantrum-throwing toddler can be dealt with easily by relegating him to a room by himself. Crying and screaming aren't much fun without an audience.

There is a great deal of talk these days about having things *unstructured*. Just how can a Christian make this jibe with such Scriptures as 'Let everything be done decently and in order' (I Cor. 14:40), or with a careful study of God's creation? What would happen to the galaxies if they were unstructured? Certainly there should be order in the home.

Structure in a home includes more than scheduling. It means teaching a child to discipline his mind. Even a small child can learn to pay attention and to look at his parent when the parent is speaking to him. During our family prayers, we allowed no playing or mind wandering. We expected our children to listen.



Training of a child begins early, but when can we begin to *teach* him? What greater joy for mother than a low rocking chair and a wee baby in her arms to sing to? Let his little ears hear her sing 'Jesus Loves Me' or 'Away in a Manger' or 'Saviour, Like a Shepherd Lead Us.' The rocking rhythm automatically gets songs and verses into a child's mind. Soothed by the motion and his mother's love, he is more open and can learn without effort.

An appreciation of good literature can be instilled early. *Peter Rabbit* and *Benjamin Bunny*, *Squirrel Nutkin* and *Jeremy Fisher* soon become friends of our children. They also loved the catchy swing of the poems by A. A. Milne. And we wore out two Bible story books.

My husband instituted family prayers as soon as we were married.



Immediately after breakfast we had a hymn, a brief Bible reading, a prayer committing each member of the family to God's care and then we united in saying the Lord's prayer. When the

children were little, I held them on my lap while my husband played the piano for the hymn. I would hold my baby Jim's arms and help him beat time to the music. Soon he did it on his own.

I found that simply repeating Psalm 23 each night to Jim after he was tucked in bed was a painless way of implanting this beautiful song of David in his heart and mind. Within a week he was beginning to say it with me, and it was part of the going-to-bed ritual. As he mastered Psalm 23, we added other Scripture.

In teaching young children, it is well to remember the words in Isaiah 28:10, 'For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little and there a little.' It is thus our patient God has dealt with us; and so we must deal with our little ones, repeating often the Word of God so that it will be hidden in their hearts so they will 'not sin against God.'

We noticed that the repetition of the Lord's prayer at the end of family worship was an easy way to learn it. My small grandson, Charles, wanted to join in on it but had not mastered it all. However, he came out good and strong on what he did know. In clear tones he would say, 'heaven...name...come...done...' 'Trespases' was somewhat of a stumper, but in time he had that down pat too and soon join in the whole prayer.

The old rendering of Psalm 127:3 as given in the Book of Common Prayer challenges every parent; 'Lo, children and the fruit of the womb are an heritage and gift that cometh of the Lord.' How are we cherishing this gift? No time spent in this responsibility is lost.

'We give Thee but Thine own,
Whate'er the gift may be:
All that we have is Thine alone,
A trust, O Lord, from Thee.'

(W. W. How)

Let's live before our children that they may be able to truly honour us as it says in Ephesians 6:2, 'Honour thy father and mother; which is the first commandment with promise.'

Very young children are capable of giving their hearts to Christ. One of my sons has no recollection of when this took place in his life, but he knows it did. My younger daughter recalls when at age four she and I knelt by my bed and she asked the Lord Jesus to come into her heart. She says she has never doubted her salvation since then. Remember the loving invitation of the Lord, 'Suffer the little children to come unto Me and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of heaven' (Matt 19:14).

God grant that none of our little ones will have to say in later life the sad words from Proverbs 5:12-14 (Jerusalem Bible), 'Alas, I hated discipline, my heart spurned correction; I would not hear the voice of my masters, I would not listen to those who tried to teach me. Now I am all but reduced to the depths of misery, in the presence of the whole community.'