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For Parents of young children

Parental Influence and the Child

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There are many influences on a child—but his parents are his most important influence.

Many parents consider themselves child raising experts. They develop theories or ideas that may or may not work. Recently, a sociologist at the University of Wisconsin tried to determine whether one particular way of caring for an infant could affect his personality. Using the members of a first grade class, he identified specific infant care practices—such as in feeding and weaning—that parents had followed with their children. He then tested the personalities of these first graders. He found that different infant care practices produced no significant differences in the personal adjustment of children at the first grade level. He concluded that the total home and family situation determines personality development more than one specific rearing practice.

As a parent, you can affect your child in two different ways:

- ◇ **Through what you do**—a particular child care practice you follow such as how you help your child learn to walk.
- ◇ **Through what you are**—the fundamental quality or characteristics of your own personality.

Some child development experts believe that parental characteristics have a more vital influence on a child than any particular child care practice. For example, two mothers may use the same toilet training method, but each may have different feelings and attitudes during the period. So, each child may react differently to the training due to his mother's reaction.

Of course, a knowledge of child care is important, but this newsletter is more

concerned with examining the influence parents have on their children, both as individuals and as marriage partners.

Complexity of Parenthood

Parenthood is not simple! It is a complete commitment—one cannot divorce a child. As a parent, there are several areas you should understand. You should:

1. Understand children in general—so that you have standards or criteria with which to understand your own children. For example, you cannot determine whether your child is developing at a normal rate unless you know what can be expected of a child his age.

2. Understand your own children—their desires, interests, and abilities as well as their problems and difficulties. Each child has a unique personality, so try to understand each of your children as an individual. What one child means by his actions may be entirely different than what his brother or sister means by the same actions.

3. Understand the influences on children—

Parental influence. Have you ever noticed your child's reaction to your happiness? Your sadness? Your anger? Children tend to display the same mood or disposition you feel. In fact, they may learn your behavior by imitating what you do or how you react to things.

Sibling influence. Brothers and sisters often play a big part in influencing a child. They may be companions while playing, but rivals for your attention and love. Little brothers and sisters often become pests to an older child.

The interaction and sharing between brothers and sisters is an important as-

pect of the learning process. Such relationships help your children develop basic attitudes about themselves and toward other people.

Outside influence. People outside the home also have an important influence on children. Teachers, relatives, and children in your neighborhood can help your child learn how to get along with others. Of course, TV, radio, and other means of communication present opportunities for your child to see and hear many types of behavior.

Environmental influence. The physical, mental, and social development of a child are all affected by the environment in which he lives. A home that provides a child with such things as educational toys and interesting music helps to stimulate his development. A simple toy made from objects in your kitchen, for example, may help your child learn about sounds, learn how to hold an object, or learn how metal feels. Perhaps you have noticed how much your child enjoys hearing different sounds and playing with objects new to his touch.

4. Understand and accept yourself—

Because you are such an important influence on your child, it is vital that you know yourself, a quality you can develop through self-understanding and self-acceptance.

You can develop self-understanding by asking yourself questions like these: "Who am I?" "What makes me react or feel the way I do?" "What things make me happy?" "How do I react to other people?"

Self-acceptance requires a realistic view of what you can and cannot do. Perhaps you've had an important goal that you now know you can never reach.

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If you can accept the fact that you will never attain this goal, you can face other people (including your children) with respect for yourself and without the feeling that your child must do what you never could.

Let's look at an example. Jack had looked forward to becoming a professional baseball player for many years. As a young boy he spent many hours practicing and playing. Through high school and college, he was recognized as an outstanding player. However, when it came to playing professional ball, Jack found he simply wasn't good enough.

Our fictional Jack could react in several ways. If he refused to believe he wasn't good enough to play professional baseball, he might continue looking for success in the sport. He would probably be bitter and "hard-to-live-with." However, if Jack accepted his limitation, he might look for work opportunities related to baseball. Or, he might seek another profession where he had interest and ability and use his baseball ability by coaching the local sandlot team. If Jack showed this self-acceptance, he would probably be a pleasant person to live with.

If you and your spouse have self-understanding and self-acceptance, your child will probably have these characteristics too. Your understanding and acceptance of *yourself* can influence your child to try to understand and accept *himself*.

The Home Atmosphere

Home atmosphere or "emotional tone" is established by the relationship between parents and the relationship between children and parents. A child's behavior in a specific situation, as well as the general characteristics that mark his personality, are dependent on his relationship with his parents.

A child cannot choose his family—he is born into a home atmosphere already established by his parents and the other children in his family.

A basic element—Experts in child development point to the relationship between husband and wife as a basic element in the home atmosphere. In a recent study, it was found that mothers who had unsatisfactory marital relations more frequently had colicky infants than mothers who were well adjusted in their marriages.

What is an adequate marital adjustment? A simple answer is: an adequate marital adjustment is one in which the basic physical and emotional needs of both husband and wife are met.

Our physical needs are easily recognized. We need food, water, sexual satis-

faction, rest, and exercise and the exterior comforts of shelter and clothing. Most husbands and wives can help each other meet these basic physical needs.

However, learning to recognize and satisfactorily meet the emotional needs of ones husband or wife is a challenge for married couples. Although every person is different, two emotional needs apply to all of us: the need for love and the need for a sense of personal worth.

We need love—A child responds to his mother's approval and tries hard to be worthy of her love. A child needs love so much that halfway assurances will rarely satisfy him. You may have heard a mother tell her child "Mother loves you when you are good." The mother may not realize that such a statement really threatens the child with the withdrawal of her love. Every child needs his parents' affection whether or not he has earned it. Being loved for what he is rather than for what he **does** reassures him that he is wanted no matter what.

The same principle holds true for the love between marriage partners. A husband or wife should not be loved for what he or she **does** but for what he or she is.

A two-way love is essential for complete fulfillment. It isn't enough to be loved; one must feel free to love without fear of being rejected. Married partners who have mastered the ability to give and receive love find a satisfaction in their marriage that other less skilled couples lack, regardless of how well matched they may be.

We need a sense of personal worth—An adult, as well as a child, needs to feel that his personal worth and achievements grow with him. To look over the past 5 or 10 years and see how one has progressed in the ability to get along with people or in skill at business or homemaking activities gives a satisfaction that is its own reward. The person who brings to his marriage a sense of achievement and personal worth brings with him the faith that he can work out any marriage problems he may have.

An agreeable home atmosphere, then, is one in which there is freedom to love and be loved and one in which each individual is treated with respect and feels a sense of personal worth. In such a home, each family member has a sense of security and stability.

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Philosophy of Child Rearing

Parents often look for rules to successful child rearing. In this newsletter, we have tried to point not to rules but to a general philosophy of the influences parents have on their children. This philosophy can be summarized like this:

- ◇ No single child rearing method is the "right" method.
- ◇ The quality of your marriage is one of the most important factors in child rearing. If you and your spouse get along well and can meet each other's needs, you will probably have little trouble raising your children.
- ◇ Your and your spouse's personal adjustment are important factors in raising your children.
- ◇ No child is reared without some problems or difficulties, but chances are any problems you have with your children will be similar to those most parents have.
- ◇ You are not responsible for everything that happens to your children—parents alone cannot provide everything children need for development.
- ◇ You shouldn't interfere with all phases of your children's natural development—their personalities have an inward as well as an outward growth.

Don't focus a great deal of attention on child rearing itself. Do come to know and improve yourself and your marital relations. Build a warm relaxed relationship with your spouse and your children.

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"Let Your Child Know What You Believe In." March 1961.
"What Matters Most to You?" June 1957.
- ◇ Aaron Rutledge. "Be Yourself First." *Farm Journal*. October 1963.
- ◇ Especially for fathers:
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