

# Parents are Accountable Too

by Joanne De Jong

Quite recently a Chicago principal was run out of her job by a mob of angry parents who blamed her for their children's low test scores. The principal, Mrs. Dorothy A. Stevens, stated in her defense that the students' lack of achievement was the result of their poor conduct and their families' disinterest in education matters. "Accountability," a concept bandied about in education journals of the '70s, holds teachers responsible for the students' mastery of subject matter. The teacher has been hired to teach, they said. If the children do not learn, the fault lies with the teacher who is obviously not getting the job done.

But what about parents? Educators like Mrs. Stevens are saying that they too are accountable. There is no question that every parent hopes his child will be happy and successful at school. But, tempting as it might be to lay the responsibility for such harmony completely on the teacher, the truth is that by the time a child *enters* school he is either *handicapped* or *fortified* by the attitudes, values, and skills he has caught or been taught at home.

As teachers watch students passing through their school systems, they come to know which ones are benefiting most from the program. They know that there are certain values and skills which students must have to make them ready to be educated. They know too that these are largely formed by parents in the home. A child enters kindergarten with a set of these and they are usually reinforced as home influence continues during his growing years. For these parents are responsible and accountable. What then must Christian parents do to help develop those values and skills which will make for successful, happy school years? Here are a few suggestions:

## PARENTS MUST TEACH RESPECT FOR AUTHORITY

Children must be taught at home to understand and respect authority. God, as creator and sustainer of the universe, constitutes the ultimate authority, and parents and teachers, though sinful and imperfect, have been chosen by Him to exercise authority over children. Even though children may resent or disagree with their superiors, they must realize that God is pleased to rule them through these persons who must be respected and obeyed because of the position or *office* they hold. Given this frame of reference, a child will be open to

guidance and instruction. Without it a child will benefit from a particular teacher's efforts *only to the degree that he likes or agrees with that teacher*. His negative subjective evaluation (That teacher's a bore, a pain) can entirely obliterate the teacher's effectiveness. Having thus categorized the teacher, the child can write him off as someone to be tolerated, ignored, or carefully watched for any infractions. If, on the other hand, a child is taught that the teacher in our Christian schools is there in the place of parents whom God has entrusted with his training, the child will be open to instruction and guidance.

Example:

Son: (Bursting into the family room after his return from school)

Do you know what happened today? Miss A. said that since none of us had done our homework we'd have to do an extra assignment before tomorrow, and if we don't finish it we'll have to stay in until it's done! That's not fair. Her assignments are so long. And we had a game last night!

Parent's Possible Responses:

A. Oh, she was probably in a bad mood. Maybe she had a fight with her boyfriend. They say she's really a crabby person. Why, Mrs. B. was telling me. . . (now follows an expanded anecdote to document teacher's irritability). Don't worry, I'll help you finish the assignment. It shouldn't take too long.

. . . Child hears: I don't have to take teacher seriously. I'll just have to work around her bad moods until I'm through with her. (Hereafter this teacher will have little positive effect on this child.)

B. Well, the school does encourage attendance at games. You got home at 7 and by the time supper was over you were pretty tired. I suggest you and several classmates talk to Miss A. and explain how you feel. I'm sure she'll realize her demands were unreasonable at this point.

. . . Child hears: I have a right to evaluate and change things at school. My ideas are as valid as my teacher's. School is a democracy where majority rules.

C. As parents we are pleased that your teacher is trying to teach you to meet deadlines. Getting things done on time is important if you are to become a responsible adult. Training you to do that is hard for your teacher. Do you think she enjoys having you all angry at her? Or giving up her recesses to supervise you as you work? It would be lots easier for her to forget the whole thing.

But she knows she wouldn't be doing what we parents expect of her if she did.

...Child hears: My parents and teacher are united in trying to educate me. Teacher's strict ways will be good for me in the end.

Now supposing the parent really feels a teacher's action has been unfair, unreasonable, and unwise? Must the child become a martyr to the RESPECT FOR AUTHORITY ideal? Of course not. Help is as near as your telephone. Tell the teacher how you feel. Understanding and cooperation for the sake of the child is almost always the result.

#### PARENTS MUST MAINTAIN A SINGLE STANDARD

Ours is a Christian school. In order to enroll their children parents must subscribe to certain fundamental beliefs. These same principles will be explained and applied in course work, in methods of discipline used, and in social situations. Honesty, Christian charity, loyalty to God, country, and church will be upheld; materialism, profanity, cheating, violence, and unkindness will be condemned.

Imagine the confusion of the child who is subjected to one set of standards at school and a different set at home. Children are black and white thinkers. Something to them is either wrong or right. They don't understand the grey area yet. Ideally they should see their Christian schools as institutions which are extensions of their homes, holding the same set of values which are based squarely on God's word.

#### PARENTS MUST TEACH ACCEPTABLE BEHAVIOR

The human infant comes into the world with an instinct for getting his way. He knows that his basic needs will be met if he cries. So he cries when he's hungry, cold, bored, wet, uncomfortable, or lonely. His cries propel his caretaker into action to determine and meet his need. It works like magic. This new baby-king condescendingly rewards his slavish caretaker with a few gurgles of approval. As the child grows older he discovers more sophisticated methods of getting his way such as whining, arguing, annoying his siblings, or striking out at his playmates. None of these are acceptable ways of gaining desired ends on an adult level. Left to grow "like Topsy" a child will never learn to function acceptably in society. As he begins to emerge from his kingdom of self he will have to learn to consider others and the effects of his behavior on them. Love of neighbor, seeking the good of another — these are not native to the sinful human heart. Wordsworth was in error when he said, "Trailing clouds of glory do they come." Once sin entered the world the first brother became the first murderer

and later on God concluded that "every imagination of the thoughts of his (man's) heart was only evil continually." So our beautiful children, whom we adore because they are part of us, will not grow automatically into happy, well-adjusted adults. Rather, they must be guided, trained, and disciplined. Parents should take advantage of the books, films, and lectures which are available to help them in this most demanding and significant task. Because, unfortunately for the child, if he is not disciplined in the home, society will take up the slack. The pesky, boisterous, selfish, rebellious, or overly aggressive child often receives shocking comeuppance from his peers after he starts school. And the sad fact is that the fault lies with his parents who did not dare or care to discipline.

#### PARENTS MUST HELP CHILDREN DEVELOP A SENSE OF RESPONSIBILITY FOR THEIR BEHAVIOR

Because parents love their children so much they often run interference for them. Unacceptable behavior is excused because the child is tired, hungry, over stimulated, etc. While this may have been true when he was an infant, as a child matures he must learn to lay the cause for his bad behavior not on some external factor, but where it belongs, usually on himself. Children need lots of guidance with this. In fact, most adults never achieve total honesty with themselves. They too pass the buck. It's one of the oldest failings.

Adam, when confronted by God immediately after he had sinned, blamed Eve, and, by implication, God, for his guilt. "The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me the fruit of the tree," not "I chose to believe Satan rather than you, God," which actually was his sin.

If teachers ask any group of junior high students why their work is not finished they seldom get the real answer which probably is, "Because I felt like watching TV last night." Rather they hear:

We had to go away.

My mother made me go to bed early.

I had to go to Cadets/Calvinettes (This one certainly will be accepted in a Christian school!)

To the question "Why did your grades go down this term?" the answers may be:

Kids make too much noise when I'm trying to study.

I have too much to do.

Teachers pick on me.

Some of these answers may be partially true, but a child needs to

learn to reason back to causes and to learn to accept responsibility for his own behavior.

I'm overweight because I eat too much.

I got an F because I didn't study. I often don't listen in class.

I don't have many friends because I'm too bossy.

Such honesty with self leads a child to the next step, that of accepting himself with all his talents and limitations as a unique creature of God. He starts to find out who he is and tries to discover God's plan for his life. There is a saying which encapsulates this whole matter of self-awareness and responsibility for the development of God-given talents which goes as follows:

What you are is God's gift to you.

What you make of yourself is your gift to God.

#### PARENTS MUST TEACH CHILDREN TO ORGANIZE AND COMPLETE WORK

Even though IQ tests actually measure a child's potential for success in the academic environment, a high IQ score does not guarantee success at school. A child may have a lot of native ability but be so impatient, disorganized, restless, and indifferent about results that his achievement never matches his potential. His report card is frequently checked, "Not working up to ability," or "Can do better."

Parents, as the child's earliest and most effective teachers, should early on have their children carry out tasks commensurate with their age and experience. They should insist that these tasks be completed and the child should receive praise for a job well done. Qualities of neatness, organization, perseverance, responsibility, and satisfaction with a job well done, though stressed at school, are essentially taught and practiced at home. Parents must not be satisfied with sending a child out to do a chore. Usually he dislikes working alone. Rather parents should work along with him in a relaxed, friendly fashion. As he brings homework from school, parents must show interest, provide a quiet well-lit place to study and some basic reference tools. However, doing his homework for him will encourage dishonesty because he will present it at school as his own work. He will learn to depend on his parents for help, and tend to become lazy.

#### PARENTS MUST BE ALWAYS TEACHING

When you think of it, the classroom is an artificial community, removed from the mainstream of life. There a child learns the facts of math, science, language, etc., but he must be allowed to see how these

actually function in the real world before they have great meaning for him. Parents must capitalize on every opportunity to teach. Let the young child count spoons for table setting to understand one-to-one relationship. Observe with him the melting snow as the thermometer rises. Notice which birds stay and which migrate. Read signs. Look at different kinds of trees and leaves. Turn off the car radio on long commutes. Then talk together about pollution standards, car makes and models, highway courtesy, season changes. The topics are endless! Observe, prod, encourage, stimulate. Get him to think, articulate. Parents, you are your child's first and most important teacher. Never miss an opportunity. You will find that rediscovering childhood wonders, seeing the world once more through the eyes of a child is one of the sheer joys of parenting. Have fun doing it.

#### PARENTS MUST AIM AT PERFECT ATTENDANCE

A child cannot learn his lessons as well if he's not in school. Obviously. It's very hard to make up missed work at home. True. Some of the missed work can never be made up. Right. How can one make up a Bible discussion, a history lecture, or a science demonstration at home? Certainly not by answering the questions at the end of the chapter! This may help, but when a child misses a day of school he misses a lot. When he returns he will flounder for a few days to regain his bearings.

Some absences cannot be avoided. Sick children should not be in school. "School sickness" is another matter again. A child may conjure up symptoms to avoid something he dreads such as a test. He is usually symptom-free on the day of the game or the school play. Wise parents find ways of dealing with school sickness and try to uncover its cause.

In recent years families increasingly take vacations during school time. Perhaps it is the only time Dad's work allows him to leave. Administration and faculty have resisted this trend with little success. Kids are missing more and more school days to go on vacations. I suspect that the greatest damage to the child's development may be not so much in the gaps in his learning, but in the subtle attitude which he is forming towards school. That may be that school is really not very important. It can be skipped if there is something more enjoyable to do.

#### PARENTS MUST SEND CHILDREN TO SCHOOL WITH HIGH EXPECTATIONS

Many of our immigrant parents and grandparents had something

close to reverence for education. For them it was the key to success in their adopted country. They marveled at the opportunities they found in this land. If the streets were not actually paved with gold, at least here was the country where anyone could get ahead if he tried hard enough. But he would have to learn — the language, a skill, a trade. He needed education.

Such forces do not drive today's children. Somewhere along the line they decide that school is a bore, a drag, too much work. Somewhat mesmerized by the dulling effects of TV watching, school becomes an interruption to their pleasure. And since no classroom is as entertaining as "Happy Days" or "Little House," hours in school are dull and plodding.

Parents must swing this attitude around. First of all, TV watching must be seriously curtailed and monitored. As teachers we are often shocked at the programs our students are allowed to watch, and the sinful TV lifestyles that amuse them. We find it impossible to counter TV's influence by stating what the Bible says about violence, greed, adultery, disrespect, etc. Compared to TV's message, ours is pale, preachy, and ineffective.

Somehow we must convey to our children the idea that they will discover in school the secrets which God has placed in His marvelous universe. In school the whole world of books will be opened to them. There they will find many new friends, learn games, skills. There teachers will be kind and helpful and will try to guide them. There will be movies, filmstrips, gymnastics, sports, playground fun, birthday treats, art and science projects.

But most of all the child must realize that this is his work, his God-given task and opportunity at this time of his life. God expects him to do his best. It is as important for him to try his best at school as it is for Dad and Mom to do their best at their jobs. The privilege of school brings with it a responsibility. School is exciting but serious business.

#### PARENTS MUST TRY TO RAISE CHILDREN IN AN EMOTIONALLY SECURE ENVIRONMENT

For the first time I inject the word "try" because I know it's not always possible. The 60s and 70s were decades of vast sociological change in the Western world. Adults seek personal fulfillment in jobs and marriage. Mothers juggle the demanding dual roles of housewife and career person. Often if marriages run into difficulty the question is not What is my duty before God? but What am I getting out of this? Is life passing me by as I load the dishwasher or drive my semi? There

has been a rising divorce rate with many kids caught in the middle.

Unfortunately, parents cannot control events to insure their children an idyllic childhood. Moving to another environment, death of a close relative, illness, financial reverses — these stressful eventualities will strike some families. Parents are encouraged to deal with them prayerfully and intelligently. There are many books with good advice for parents facing these crises.

During the 70s many juvenile novels were written on themes such as alcoholism, divorce, death, etc. They were called “coping” books and were designed to help kids understand some of these adult problems as a sort of practice run for the time when it might happen in their lives. Not a bad idea. But through it all children should be allowed to be children.

We cannot discuss this at great length here. I wish only to emphasize the fact that children cannot perform well in school if they are not emotionally secure and at ease. If they are preoccupied with the conflict and distress of their homes they will not at that time be able to appreciate and enjoy school.

Parenting is hard work. It often demands total selflessness. The rewards may be few and deferred. But God holds parents accountable for training His covenant children. He will give strength and wisdom to parents who ask in faith.

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...Unfortunately, there are students who think a show of piety will substitute for conscientious study. It is important for students to understand that disciplined and responsible learning may witness to the reality of their faith, that achievement in school may demonstrate spiritual growth as effectively as participation in extra-curricular religious activities.

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“What Has Humanistic Education Done to the Schools”

by Ruth Armstrong