

# *Helping the Child Towards Discipline*

*By Zarin Malva*

We think that in order to help the child towards discipline we must guide him, we must make him move towards discipline. This is how we look at the child. We think we should help him. We see a baby that is concentrating on some part of the environment, and instead of helping him by leaving him we disturb him, we interrupt him. We think that by collaborating with him he will reach this goal.

The onus will always fall on us, the adults, to discover who the child is really and to implicitly believe in him. We must understand that the child knows what he needs, his knowledge of himself comes from within him, nature has given him that power. After all it was nature that did everything for him before birth. Then why is it that after birth, we suddenly think we have become the child's masters? Why do we think that we have to do everything for him? So let us think about what happened before birth. The environment was prepared by nature. Everything was there. This child did everything by himself. He became a human being. Why is it that we have no faith in him after birth? So we have to convert ourselves and we have to start thinking in a new way about this child. He needs help and he needs spiritual care. Giving him the liberty to act by himself is necessary. It is not neglect. It supports his inner needs. We must respect the child, accept that this child has an inner teacher whom he obeys. The child obeys the laws of nature.

We must accept that the child obeys inner laws. Only then can we understand how to function sensitively with the child. So we therefore have to observe his movements, his cycles of activity, and we need to follow him. In terms of his physical development we of course, recognise all this. We feed him. We bathe him. We dress him. We help him in many ways. However we do not seem to understand that his intelligence is working. His will is forming, he is functioning with his movements, his language is coming about, his movements are becoming co-ordinated. We must follow up with all these powers and learn with him. We have to know how he develops, so that we can help him in the proper manner. We will help him as we understand his movements, as we understand his experiences.

So we must observe the child, we must watch his movements, his cycles of activity. We must follow him. Physically, we recognise all his needs but now

we need to recognise his psychical needs. We must observe his language we should watch his movements, his forming intelligence we should understand. We must learn how he develops and what he develops. We must not from birth tie him up when he needs to move. We should not be silent we must speak to him. We must him watch us our language, our movements, our attitudes, our behaviour. This is the psychical nutrition that we must offer him. Often the child is denied this mental food as often we do not give it to him. So we do not see him progress the way he should. The child is born with a great potential. We must cater to the child's developing intelligence which needs support as he develops. We do things with him or for him all the time. We do not help him to become independent. The psychical nutrition that we want to give him comes through interaction, interaction with us. So the parents of the child should understand that from birth he should be part of the family. He should learn to become and to belong which we often do not allow. Though we feed him, though we do things with him, though we talk to him, it is not enough. We have to feel with him, we have to understand his movements, we have understand his language though he is not born with language as we know it. If not he is always left on his own most of the time. So this is what we have to realise. So till he is around 2 years old, we let him be.

At around 2 years when the child starts to interact with the environment, that is when our biggest problem begins. When he starts interacting with the environment, when he begins to reach out to the world, we say do not touch this, do not go there, do not do this! We forget that this is how he learns – he learns with his experiences, he learns with his movements, he learns with what he finds in his environment. So we are the raw material that we have to give him. Whether before birth, or after birth and all through his life, or life for the first six years, this is important for us to understand. He needs psychical nutrition, we have to help him.

We must understand that he has to make his own choices. Even a baby will make choices. If a baby sees a lot of things and he sees a few things, he will choose the lot of things which are there! Why? It is because he can understand that this is more and this is less. First we give him just two choices, and then he will know through his own experiences the choice he prefers, what will help him.

This liberty and opportunity, this freedom given to him will prepare him to be independent. With the independence that he gets he will learn to correct himself and will become responsible. He gains the discipline by himself. If we let him make his own efforts and become independent in doing what he

wants to do, he will realise his own inner discipline. We have an idea that we have to discipline from outside, but that is only authority. If we discipline him we only create fear. That will not help the child. So our responsibility is to provide the right conditions, to provide the proper environment, to give him the activities that he needs. If we let him work he can become his own master. When he is doing something positive, when he is doing something spontaneous, it comes from within so we must not stop it. When we observe his interests, and collaborate with all his psychic powers, when we are patient, and do not interfere in his concentration, we help the child towards discipline.

We must help the child and collaborate with him. We must try to understand what he needs, and try to help them in the best way we can. If we do not, if we impose ourselves, impose our ego, break his concentration, then the child will withdraw and he will not cooperate. Instead, his tantrums will begin. At this point we feel that we are going to be the master and we try to stop his behaviour. No! It is his inner teacher that is his master. So he will try his best in every way possible, to satisfy his own inner needs first, because that is how the laws of development unfold. If we ignore his need we will not be able to help him.

We need to actually look at how we can stop ourselves from creating obstacles for the child. We must actually look within ourselves, to understand our own egos in order to create a free path. By a lack of understanding, if we place an obstacle in the child's path, if we do not recognize that the child can be active on his own, then we will create an obstacle, which then leads to bad behaviour. We then blame the child for the bad behaviour without understanding the obstacle. So we need to look inward when the child is frustrated, when the child is upset. We must not assume that it is the child's fault. We must understand that the frustration is the outward expression of the child's difficulty.

We always seem to be advising the child, we always seem to be correcting him. We always encourage them and give them false praise continually. This advice, this praise, often breaks his concentration. When he is so occupied in his own activity, even a baby, and we interrupt the child we break his concentration. This activity is physical and mental movement. It is development, and we should observe very closely without interrupting it. If the child engages with the activity which motivated him, if his choice came from his own thought, it will bring about his own construction. Adults think that we can help him by doing for him. We cannot do it for him. It is not for us to do. He must do it for himself. We have to understand that his

construction will be his own. For the child the activity is action and thought. To him the activities are important, the experiences are important. So he has to be part of his home. He has to collaborate with us and help us. Instead of thinking that we are doing the work, we must understand that he has his own work to do of building himself, of developing himself.

We must understand the child, only then he will reach his own inner discipline. He will only then become freed. Once he begins to pursue his own actions he becomes responsible. It is through his own actions, through his own experiences, that he gains the responsibility. Once he is responsible, he becomes independent. He can think for himself then he can act on his own. We must ensure his freedom. We always think of freedom as a state of chaos with no rules. However adults must apply themselves to holding limits. These limits have to be carefully set up even in a home, without these limits children cannot be free. How can we help the child to become independent? We are not going to let the child place his hands in the fire. That is not freedom. Freedom comes with responsibility that we have to set and hold firm. Ultimately only the responsible person can be free.

Mahatma Gandhi said that self-understanding and self-freedom will come when we are ready to work for it from within. This responsibility is needed. We have to develop inner discipline and inner freedom. One cannot be without the other, both go together. So therefore we need to have the right attitudes, and good behaviour. When parents fight, they may tell us we did not fight in front of the child, only in the next room. He cannot hear us. He may not be able to hear – but the child feels, he knows all that is happening, particularly the child under two years. He can understand much better than we can, that is his power, the absorbent mind. He can and does understand the world, but that is not what we believe because we do not see him move or talking, we do not see his powers. The psychical being is not complete yet at birth. The child, Dr. Montessori says, has been given time, two years to form himself, two more years to complete his psychical being. In these two years he gets his whole life, the time to develop himself, to form his powers, to complete his balance. Between three and six years, when we usually see him in school, he is consolidating those powers.

All the organs of the child's body were formed when the baby was in the womb. If we study embryology, we understand that it takes time. Those nine months are very important. By seven, the child is complete. He is ready to come out from the mother's womb, but he gets two more months to consolidate all that he has gained in that seven months, only then at nine months is he born. Dr. Montessori says that the psychical being is formed in

the same way after birth. The child takes two years to form his psychical powers from all the experiences that he has in the environment that we have offered him. What is our behaviour like? What is our environment like? What is our order like? The children take in everything, they have the absorbent mind and they are absorbing everything like a sponge. We have to accept that this psychical being is most important. We cater to his physical needs beautifully, we create a beautiful room for him, and by so many things, thousands of things. Parents will think of, that is his physical being but what about his mental being?

To understand the development of the human being, helps us to understand how this child learns, how he gains his own discipline, how he can manage his freedom if it is offered at the right time, in the right manner, in the right way. The child is a child of today. He will adapt to what is happening around him. We call it adaptation when he becomes part of his society, he establishes his belonging to society in those first three years. Then he gets the time to consolidate what he has taken in from three to six years.

Once we see the child, we begin to understand. Dr. Montessori says “His disorderly behaviour will automatically disappear. He only needs to work in some interesting occupation, an activity that he wants, that he needs to achieve.” We must understand that he has to choose. We do not tell him what to do. He has to choose, he has to know what he wants. He does know what he wants. If he sits and just watches the other children work, that is what he wants at that time. So, why do we stop him? He wants and he knows. This is the greatest discovery. He knows what he needs. This is what we need to remember. Thanks to these activities Dr. Montessori says that the child becomes wonderfully integrated, a healing takes place in his infant soul, and as a result of which he becomes calm, happy, forgets himself, lost within the activity and gets completely transformed.

In a Montessori environment, we see the child at 2½ years coming to us with all his crying and his tantrums and all his problems. We then see the same child at 5½ and we think back and remember him as he used to be. “Oh! Do you remember him when he came? What has happened?” All we did was put him in touch with his prepared environment where he did his own work. He became an individual in his own right because in the Montessori environment his needs were met. So by his own effort he became a man!

We must remember that some of the things that he has missed from birth to 3, he will never get back. It is as though Dr. Montessori says while knitting a garment there are some dropped stitches. His sensitivities will disappear. If he does not get what he needs at the right time, his construction of his own person will get affected. What is the important thing he needs from birth? We must understand that it is order that is most important for him! Even though the first three years are crucial in these years of consolidation, he still has a fighting chance to rectify some of the things he might have missed in the earlier three years.

So from birth to 6, he gets a great fighting chance. So if we give him that help that is needed, we will see a very transformed child. Every living being is free when he is able to follow the laws of nature and complete himself by fulfilling his needs. We know that every creature is born with instincts. A fish is free. But where is it free? It is free only in water. Where is a bird free? It is free only in the sky. Dr. Montessori said that if the proper environment is offered, the child will become free. We must help all parents to understand this.

We know that that life is sustained by these natural laws, we must try to give this young child a suitable environment so that he can adapt to life. The child has to live in this environment, so he needs to gain experiences. Do not ask any child to stop moving! He learns with movement. Language, intelligence, will and movement are all very important powers. We create obstacles to all these powers of the child in traditional education. If we create obstacles, how can a child learn? Free thought is only possible when the child is free to develop without us trying to mold his mind according to an external dictate. What we could not fulfil, we want the child to fulfil. "I did not learn to play the piano, but I want my child to learn to play the piano." This of course whether the child is interested or not!

It is important never to interrupt the inner powers that the child has, otherwise we will not see his independence, we will be curbing it. We curb the child by very sweetly cajoling him, or by very severely scolding him. Finally we give him medicine or take him to the psychologist to find a cure for his problems. None of the cures will work if first we do not understand the problem and stop ourselves from interfering with development. The child must first find what he needs in his environment. Unless we stop all these hindrances, we stop the flow that he has within. Flow is concentration. His concentration should not be stopped from the day of his birth. In fact we have to create conditions in the environment so that it is supported.

A river will flow. It will keep flowing unless we put a dam in the way. What will happen then? The river will flow but it will not go along the path it wants to go. It will veer away, this way, that way, anyway. The river will still flow. It cannot stop. In the same way we will not be able to stop the energies of the child. If we do not help the child in the right way, if we put all these obstacles in his way he will deviate. We cannot cure these deviations. We are not God. We only have to help him to return to activity, to find his concentration, the attention that he experiences when he is absolutely absorbed in his own work. Work is the only answer.

We must learn to change, we have to learn to accept, we have learnt to see. This is what our whole way of life should be. We must have humility, and an understanding of who the child is. The Bhagavad Gita says that a child is only loaned to us for this lifetime. We do not possess him. We must not impose ourselves upon him. We must not think of ourselves as the child's masters. We must give that up completely. We must collaborate with the child. No matter what difficulties we perceive, all that we can do for the child is to help his development.



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**Question:** My 6-year-old boy is becoming very mischievous. He spoiled the doors and walls of the house. I got very angry and spanked him. Even so his bad behaviour does not stop. How should I handle him?

**Answer:** We must understand that spanking a child can have a lifelong negative impact on his personality. More than physical pain it creates psychological wounds that may never be seen and may never heal. We love

our children, and therefore we want them to behave well. The problem is our anger. It has to be dealt with. When we see a child behaving inappropriately let us first understand that it is an expression of his need for guidance. It will help us to breathe deeply to steady our own emotions. We must remind ourselves that the child knows that this is inappropriate but has lost control over his emotion. We need to stop the child immediately. Approach the child firmly, but calmly. We can place our arms close around the child and move him away from the scene. React in the same way every single time this happens. Do not reason with a child who is behaving badly. Do not ask him why he is behaving badly. At all times the child needs enough to do. Give children responsibility around the house. Help them become independent and do things for themselves. This will have a lasting impact on the child's self-esteem and the bad behaviour will gradually reduce.

**Question:** What would be a few tools that we can use as adults to recognise and reflect on the obstacles to our growth as guides of children?

**Answer:** As this is a philosophical path there are no tools or checklists. We have to learn how to reflect and what to reflect on. It will help you to discuss your encounters with children with colleagues and friends. You can look into doing an AMI Montessori course near you. You can read Maria Montessori writings for inspiration.

**Question:** My son is shy when he meets a stranger or an unfamiliar person. How can I correct this?

**Answer:** It is natural to feel shy. It is not necessary or possible to correct this. Most children do not have good experiences with strangers who pinch their cheeks or talk about them teasingly without giving them any time to get used to them. We must not force children to greet strangers. When you are with the children let them notice how you greet strangers so that they see appropriate greetings between the adults in their environment. When you meet a stranger, introduce your child to the stranger respectfully using the child's name and introduce the child to the person using the person's name and mention the relationship. This also helps the stranger deal with the child with respect. Protect your child from pinched cheeks and other familiarities from strangers.

**Question:** My 6-year-old son does not want to stick to a routine. He just wants to do what he likes to do. How do we make him realise the importance of routine?

**Answer:** We can only help a child understand a routine by maintaining a routine ourselves. As a family everyone needs to follow an orderly day with a predictable sequence of events. Consistency is extremely important. We first need to be aware of ourselves, change ourselves. Talk to your 6-year-old about the routine to be followed and prepare the child for the routine. Let the child participate in planning the routine. Outline all the expectations and responsibilities of the child. Write a list of all the things to be done. Help the child over time to consistently follow the routine that is agreed on together. Remember to plan some time to talk to the child after a week and discuss the challenges.

**Question:** My child behaves differently with my in-laws and differently with his parents. There is zero discipline with my in-laws. How to tackle this situation?

**Answer:** Grandparents play a unique role in the child's life. Turn your attention from your in-laws to yourself and things that you can keep consistent. Your child will easily make the switch. The discipline and consistency and rules that you provide, without anger or irritation, with firm resolve and great clarity will give your child an important foundation.