

BEHAVIORAL CAPACITY VERSUS BEHAVIORAL DESIRES

Most parental instruction for children prior to age two comes in the form of training. That is because children at these ages are not cognitively ready to be educated in specific cause and effect relationships. During the early toddler years they are only learning how to act appropriately and not why it is so.

This means a misbehaving child under the age of two is acting out of his nature and not a moral sense of right and wrong. He clearly demonstrates a capacity for wrong, but not a significant working knowledge of right and wrong.

By age two however, parents gradually begin adding education to a child's diet of learning. Educating teaches how and why and works with the child's head and heart. Training only teaches the head knowledge of how. Unfortunately, too many parents merely train their children in life, rather than educate about life. What are the developmental implications of these factors? We are of the conclusion that young toddlers have a capacity to do wrong which is born out of their nature, but do not possess an awareness of wrong as the adult moral conscience understands it. For example, when a sixteen month old takes a toy from another child in the nursery, it is a "moral violation" requiring correction, but is it really a moral crime for the child?

For the one year-old plus, his actions are simply the operation of his nature. He looks, he sees, he wants, he takes. Me, myself and I are dominate thoughts. He is attempting to satisfy an impulse of desire. He does not possess any moral counterbalance that offsets his wrongful impulses. The moral notions of sharing, kindness and otherness considerations are beyond his mental reach for now. Possibly this is why the toddler period is often referred to as the "terrible twos." Of course the period is not really terrible, just frustrating. This is because toddlers are old enough to maximize their Me, Myself and I desires, but not old enough to fully wrestle with the rightness or wrongness of their actions.

Please do not misunderstand this point. In the kingdom of God, wrong is still wrong, but personal resident knowledge of wrong begins to manifest itself around three years of age during the early formation of the higher conscience. This means a misbehaving child under the age of two is acting out of his nature and not a moral sense of right and wrong. He clearly demonstrates a capacity for wrong, but not a significant working knowledge of right and wrong. One of the great witnesses to

this idea is offered by the first century leader of the Christian community, the Apostle Paul, when he makes the point, "I would not have known sin (wrong), except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, Thou shall not Covet". (Romans 7:7) When you filter out the old style language you come to the modern translation. One does not know



wrong until the standard of right and wrong has been brought to bear on the mind, and so it is with our children.

This is also why infants cannot manipulate their parents - in anyway. Nor in the technical sense is there such a thing as a rebellious cry of a two month old. Such behaviour would require resident



knowledge of right and wrong, which infants do not possess and will not gain for a couple of years. The cry that many of you write us about is the cry of their natures and not the cry of their wills. It is not until a child approaches age three that he begins his moral journey of understanding right and wrong and that is when the will of a child is impacted by the conscience as much as it is by his nature. The impulse Me, Myself and I of toddler-hood then begins to transition to a type of self-regulating behaviour, where actions carry meaning beyond the pleasure of self.

So when your two year old stamps his feet and say's "No" and runs away, remember you are witnessing the controlling power of his nature working without the benefit of the restraining power of a developed conscience. During this season of training, you have the task of constraining his nature while looking towards the day of educating his heart. In our next posting, we shall take this one step further and discuss toddler correction and answer the question: Is a toddler truly capable of obedience?

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