

Rule 5 — Do not let your children do anything that makes you dislike them

I confess to having struggled over and over for this one, for neither myself nor my intended readers here have any children. How then does one advise on parenting? Perhaps one should do well to treat one's own mind as a child first, for free will is far less 'free' than we think.

Peterson started this chapter with the extreme facets of parenting without discipline: utter chaos and oppressive order. A three-year-old is able to throw tantrum in a supermarket like a Godzilla because parents enable him, while other parents who cannot say no to their precious kids end up on another extreme and micromanage their children as if they were unfit for human company, depriving them of opportunities to interact *independently* with other people.

Some other parents have a hypocritical bend of double standard: spoiling the sons but not daughters and claiming to be fierce advocates of gender equality. While Peterson understands that sons are traditionally favoured in eastern cultures for evolutionary and psychological reasons, this treatment in western cultures does not square with bringing up a boy to respect women when he grows up.

Peterson's neighbour on pages 116-7 informs us how discipline can be draconian. No mother can easily let her son go hungry all day and the one described in these pages certainly has an issue emotionally.

Everybody Hates Arithmetic

Habits shape our destiny and the minutiae in our everyday lives can make or unmake — for lack of a better word — our lives. But why this point? In highlights how children are spoiled first over the most minor issues: an extra scoop of ice-cream after dinner, 20 extra minutes on the game console tonight, not locking the iPad and letting the seven-year-old watch YouTube on his own — the minute (pronounced 'my-NEWT') things. These problems get worse, thanks to the assumption that innocent children cannot be bad, that there are only bad parents but never bad children. This naively romantic (here the word means 'irrational' and has nothing to do with two people in a relationship) notion solves nothing and doctrinally creates another problem: that whatever is wrong with individuals **must be a social issue** and must be remedied with drastic social change. The daughter of my Black neighbour cannot get into Harvard despite their hard work — it must be systemic racial discrimination, so let's set a lower exam score for Black people to enter Harvard! One can easily see that in a few years, many Harvard undergraduates will not have university scores good enough to graduate and a lot more Asian kids will not get their just desserts (not food). Keep on this path and we will get a lot of real social problems in a decade or so! Soon this will de-stabilise traditions for the sake of diversity, the irony being that diversity is not achieved in the end.

This adolescent ethos of the 1960s (signified by the hippie lifestyle) — according to Peterson — made parents today unwilling to take up the mantle of parenthood and deny their responsibility of authority. They think that parents must be friends to their children and believe that discipline must be bad. This facile thinking, just like the 'my problem must be a social problem' mentality, turns many children in western cultures today into savages.

The Ignoble Savage

Rousseau assumed that a child is pure, perfect and unsullied. In this vein, the savage before civilisations started must also be pure and gentle. Not so. Civilisation makes people kinder, more understanding, more conscientious and emotionally stable. Peterson justifies his idea with the

chimpanzees Jane Goodall studied in 1974: primal instincts of these primates are certainly not innocent and definitely not gentle. They would gladly tear each other literally to pieces for power and control.

Those of us who have read *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding will know this idea about how absence of adult supervision and civilisation can turn boys in primary schools into murderous savages on an unknown island. On the other hand, some state control and social structure in cities makes murder rate way lower than in wild tribes: civilisation is good for us.

On children, Peterson observes that they need training and socialisation so they can be 'effective and sophisticated communal players' (p. 122). Children also signal the need for care and teaching with their naturally attention-seeking behaviour. They need to be shaped and informed. Too many children are damaged not by active abuse but by neglect and omission of their friendly parents. Neglected children turn out to be dull and annoying but they still crave for adult guidance and parenthood, making them immediately dependent on any adult who do not push them away. In short: very annoying.

Parent or Friend

This brings us to another important topic that I believe applies to teachers almost as much as to parents: whether they should be dominantly friends to the children in their care. Parents fail to discipline their children and exert authority when they should because they want to be friends with the kids. But then a child has only two parents at most and a small number of teachers while they can have an unlimited number of friends. Disciplining children is not an expression of anger or revenge for a misdeed. It is a duty, sadly evaded by parents who believe **any** discipline will destroy their beloved children. (If this sounds like Medieval torture chambers, relax: you'll see what Peterson proposes for good discipline later.)

Many assume that rules limit creativity but think about high culture, elevating music and art. All great works of human creativity and cultural achievements are bound by many rules, whereas kitsch and rubbish pieces often hide behind the names of 'modern art' and 'contemporary music'. (This is not to say all modern art and music is gimmick but one surely sees a lot more crap in this particular genre.) The 'painting' *L.H.O.O.Q.* (I promise you'll be surprised by this one just looking up Wikipedia, the secret lies in the French pronunciation) by Marcel Duchamp versus the real masterpiece by Leonardo da Vinci shows us clearly what rules are about, not to mention Duchamp's 'sculpture' *Fountain* (a urinal placed upside down), which should never be mentioned with Michelangelo's *La Pietà*. Rules are neither tyrannical nor arbitrary. Children naturally seek limits and boundaries, so they know exactly what can be done and what cannot. They are also naturally good at inflicting violence if not taught to refrain from it. In fact, even for the world, violence is the natural state and peace is achieved with rigorous and concerted effort by a lot of parties.

As Peterson illustrates on pages 125-6, children instinctually use aggression to test for limits exactly due to their innocence: they have a very limited arsenal of tools to express themselves. This is where teaching is called for, so that bad behaviour is corrected and limits are set. (How hard can they hit you? Till you feel pain of course. Just don't hit them back with equal force to 'correct' them.) Without correction, no child can temper their impulses and organise their minds to live in the social world. How can they correct themselves when even their parents refuse to teach them?

The three-paragraph example given by Peterson on pages 126-7 ('My son was particularly ornery when he was a toddler... And he liked me a lot better when he woke up than he had before he was disciplined.) tells us how disciplining works: it is about setting limits clearly and firmly while rewarding good behaviour. Of course, good advice is only for those ready to listen, 'do not cast pearls before swine'.

Discipline and Punish

Frightening words in this topic, aren't they? Parents understandably evoke images of prison and interrogations in dark rooms but they are not the same. They must be done consciously: the parent must know how to exert discipline to convey the right message. Besides, discipline also involves positive reinforcement. See Skinner's training of pigeons on pages 130-2 here.

This does not mean we should shun the use of negative emotions, which are potent because they protect us from danger through our evolution. Negative emotions should also be used to help children learn. Given that children already experience plenty of negative emotions even when they are learning to walk and dealing with siblings, peers and uncooperative people, this line sums up the rationale succinctly:

'The fundamental moral question is not how to shelter children completely from misadventure in failure, so they never experience any fear or pain, but how to maximise their learning so that useful knowledge may be gained with minimal cost.'
(p. 132)

Children are constantly frustrated growing up and will be hurt even more if they are shielded from negative feelings. The case of overprotective parents is shown in the story *Sleeping Beauty*, the Disney film, where the king and queen shield their princess from all evil. So when the princess sees evil for the first time, she chooses to sleep! The argument here is: when parents refuse to discipline their children, they are not protecting them but merely handing over the power to punish to the real and uncaring social world — strangers who have no reason to care. Refusing to be the bad guys for a while, they deliver their defenceless children to harsh reality, where some really bad guys would not even blink to maliciously and gleefully hurt the vulnerable.

Some 'progressive' people see discipline as 'subjecting a child to arbitrary dictates of a parent'. This, says Peterson, is unfounded: children need to obey parents because they depend on adult care and guidance — which is only too obvious — and hence it is better for a child to behave in a way that invites genuine affection and goodwill, not to mention optimal adult attention from teachers and mentors. There is a reason why a courteous and kind child is favoured even by other people's parents, something 'progressive' people have a hard time understanding.

Nor is discipline 'arbitrary dictates' at all — they are bound by social rules and norms to ensure productive behaviour. Those who know early how to find favour from their elders and superiors naturally get more opportunities and are taught with more knowledge and better skill by the same teachers and masters.

This also means poorly socialised and disciplined children grow up to have terrible lives. 'The issue is therefore not whether to use punishment and threat. The issue is whether to do it consciously and thoughtfully.' (p. 135).

Minimum Necessary Force

Rules are like laws. They should not be multiplied beyond necessity: the less and the simpler the better. Peterson calls it the ‘ethical’ equivalent of Occam’s razor: limit the number of rules and figure out what to do when any of them is broken. Here the concept of English common law helps. English common law allows people to defend their rights in a reasonable manner; so defend your home against an intruder reasonably — start with a verbal warning and then very little force and upgrade in stages (so don’t give a ‘warning shot’ to the head). Equally with discipline, use the least force **necessary**. Some examples of specific rules are shown on page 137.

The aim of discipline is not to show authority but to dutifully use minimum force so that children will grow to be well-socialised and likeable adults. Therefore, avoid creating situations where rules are easily broken, such as not telling the child to stop playing the PS5 when you are about to play it yourself. Here Peterson refutes against two doctrines about physical punishment, something forbidden in education and even parenting today:

‘There is no excuse for physical punishment.’ — some forms of misbehaviour like theft and assault should be sanctioned. These sanctions often involve psychological and physical punishment. Loss of liberty (A lot of us are experiencing that in other forms, being stuck at home a lot in 2020.) causes psychological pain similar to that of physical harm — the same brain areas respond to the two punishments. Prison and ‘time out’ are clearly physical punishments even when nothing violent happens. Also, some bad actions must be stopped **immediately and effectively**, before irreparable harm is done. How do you talk a toddler out of poking a metal fork into an electrical socket? How do you discuss with a child when he is running and laughing in a crowded car park? Failure to stop either is fatal! Also, children not stopped from violent behaviour get worse when they grow older: a two-year-old that won’t stop kicking people or snatching others’ toys grow into a teenager who gangs up on weak classmates in the school bathrooms at recess. Unruly and violent behaviour must be stopped early rather than late. Now we have seen so many ‘excuses’ for physical punishment.

‘Hitting a child merely teaches them to hit.’ — there are myriad forms and degrees of physical punishment and calling them all ‘hitting’ is like calling a plastic knife the *Excalibur*. They are obviously different in so many ways. Magnitude matters and so does context — would you call the police when a classmate gives you a friendly slap on the back after a good football match? One can tell between magnitudes and contexts. Also, flicking a finger at a two-year-old boy after he smacks his younger sister with a wooden block does not teach him to hit: it teaches him to **stop** hitting. Talking to them will not help and certainly cannot protect the younger sister from harm!

The decision, Peterson says, is whether to discipline effectively or ineffectively, for not disciplining a child only leaves nature and society to punish them years later much more severely and unforgivingly — giving a child time out for cheating in a quiz may help avoid a prison sentence from fraud as a bank executive or for forgery as a lawyer decades later. With the proper conditions time out can be good education: tell him to come back when he can control his temper again and he will learn that violent behaviour is shunned by society. He can be left alone to combat his anger and come back when he defeats that anger. This also teaches self-control: win-win, really.

A Summary of Principles

It is always better for parents to work in pairs: single-parent families have an uphill battle to fight because a one-person team is always prone to mistakes and misjudgement. Of course this cannot be

helped but a single parent can take more time reflecting on their decisions or ask a friend for evaluation and advice more often.

Parents should also understand that they can get draconian sometimes. This happens often when one is in a fit of rage. To err is human — we could be harsh, vengeful, arrogant, resentful, angry and deceitful at times. If we do not acknowledge our own dark side, we are much more likely to let that dark side win. Even the best-intentioned parents can be resentful of their tantrum-happy kids. Hence, discipline must be planned with the most awareness and checked by an equally aware and cautious partner. Parents act as proxies of the real world. This duty is far more important than ‘fostering creativity’ and ‘ensuring happiness’.

The Good Child — and the Responsible Parent

A properly socialised child has a much happier future than one spoiled by cowardly parents who refuse to discipline. Peterson advises planning on which behaviours to reward and which ones to punish for — with the willingness to admit a mistake when one is made, apologise to the child and then move on.

I find this quote particularly convincing to conclude the ideas of the chapter:

‘A child who pays attention, instead of drifting, and can play, and does not whine, and is comical, but not annoying, and is trustworthy — that child will have friends where ever he goes. His teachers will like him and so will his parents. If he attends politely to adults, he will be attended to, smiled at and happily instructed.’ (p. 144)

Addendum — Our Minds as Children

So ends the summary of this chapter but what of reflections for ourselves? Even Peterson advises us to acknowledge that we all have a dark side and need to be aware of it. This is why I started by saying that the mind is like a child a lot of the time. The mind drifts like a twig in the ocean: as if free but really isn’t.

Especially in this era, where we are far less aware how the joined insidious forces of Big Data and intrusive technology manipulate us. Social media has algorithms to make sure we only read certain things we find palatable and likeable, locking us in echo chambers. Even the mainstream media is strangely unified at some points and lose the virtue of diversity of opinion only too often. There is plenty of diversity of race, gender and sexual orientation in the west but very little diversity of opinion! How then do we know we are being manipulated? There are no easy paths indeed.

Perhaps the first step is to admit that our minds are not always free. This way we may observe our minds more often. There are many schools to achieving awareness and alertness. *The Analects* describes how Confucians reflect on their minds and behaviour every day and Buddhists even tell us to be aware every waking moment. The only thing clear is: the power from reflection is to be practiced and perfected slowly but resolutely.

One good master of reflections is the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius, who went on to write a booklet for himself, filled with advice on how to make good the responsibilities and obligations of his position. I strongly recommend his *Meditations*. He became the epitome of wise governance because he ruled his mind first. This idea of self-governance before asserting it to our surroundings segues into Rule 6 but more on that later.