

Raising Children in the Early 17th Century: Discipline

In 17th-century England, parents were expected to raise their children to be good Christians, loyal subjects of the Crown and productive members of society. To accomplish these goals, it was necessary to curb a child's natural tendencies towards vice and sin. Supported by Proverbs 13:24 "He spareth his rod, hateth his son, but he that loveth him, chasteneth him betime" or its more colloquial verison, "Spare the rod and spoil the child," the caring parent kept careful watch over his children and disciplined them when needed. To ignore or wink at petty misbehavior was to set a child's feet on the road to destruction.

One metaphor commonly used was that of the top, which will only spin if constantly whipped. If the whipper stopped and the top fell, no amount of whipping would cause the top to rise and resume spinning. So it was with children. Without constant correction and discipline, a child would naturally turn to vice. A good parent was constantly on the watch and quick to correct small faults, to prevent them from growing larger.

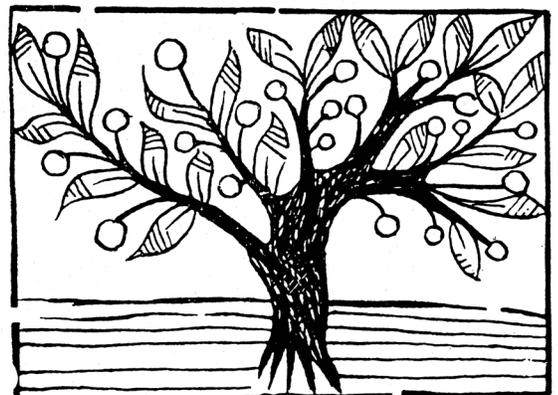
"Correction" could take several forms. In all cases, it was necessary that the child understand the reason behind the punishment. At its mildest, it involved talking to the child calmly, pointing out the fault and explaining why it was wrong. Physical correction was used if necessary, particularly if the child displayed willfulness or obstinacy, which generally consisted of a whipping or beating with a birch rod. In other cases, the erring child was banished from the parents' presence for a time. Cotton Mather's views set a high standard for parents:

The First chastisement, which I inflict for an ordinary Fault, is to lett the Child see and hear me in Astonishment, and hardly able to believe that the Child could do so base a Thing, but beleeving that they will never do it again.

I would never come to give a child a Blow, except in Case of of Obstinacy: or some gross Enormity.

To be chased for a while out of my Presence, I would make to be looked upon, as the sorest Punishment in the Family.

The ultimate purpose of correction was to give the child the internal discipline required to lead a good and virtuous life. Adults sought to instill an active conscience which would guide the child as an adult as well. They repressed any tendencies towards idleness, vanity, deceit, etc. Parents also tried to control their own feelings, fearing that the love they felt would cause them to overindulge their children. This overwhelming love was one reason parents were advised to send their children to be raised in another household or away at school, where others would be much less likely to spoil them.



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