

Wise Parenting Uses Natural Consequences

The great slogan of classical liberalism is “Life, Liberty, Property.” Essentially this means, don’t murder, enslave, or steal. And this in turn is essentially what we teach children when we say no hitting, bullying, or grabbing. Yet, when kids are introduced to the concept of government, suddenly murder/hitting (war, police brutality), slavery/bullying (conscription, regulation, prohibition, imprisonment for victimless “crimes”), and stealing/grabbing (taxation, fiat money inflation, eminent domain) are okay if the perpetrator has a certain badge or title.

We add injury to inconsistency when we ourselves inflict upon our own children assault/hitting (spanking, slapping, and worse), slavery/bullying (ordering our kids around), and stealing/grabbing (confiscating and redistributing toys and other belongings, or never allowing them to own anything in the first place).

The Freedom Philosophy Applied to Parenting

For many libertarians, “Life, Liberty, Property” is encapsulated in the principle of non-aggression. Should this principle extend to children?

Some libertarian theorists contend that because children are not capable self-owners, they must be held “in trust” by their guardians, and that therefore parental coercion, short of abuse, is justified. Even, for the sake of argument fully granting this, it would obviously be foolish and disastrous for a parent to assert such “justified coercion” to the hilt, controlling each and every move the child makes. It is easy to see how such complete, though “conditional,” quasi-slavery would be nearly as damaging to the moral and mental

development of the child as complete chattel slavery is to the character and psychic health of the slave.

But what is true of the extremes is just as true of the approach to the extremes. Temporary and incomplete quasi-slavery (like that of the child under his parents in many cases), even if consistent with libertarianism, is morally and psychologically damaging to the individual for similar reasons as permanent and incomplete actual slavery is as well.

After all, it makes sense that when one is preparing for a future challenge, one should practice under the conditions that characterize that challenge. If you practice under wildly different conditions, you will end up prepared for something else entirely, and poorly prepared for the actual challenge. As Herbert Spencer wrote,

“Were your children fated to pass their lives as slaves, you could not too much accustom them to slavery during their childhood; but as they are by and by to be free men, with no one to control their daily conduct, you cannot too much accustom them to self-control while they are still under your eye.”

We wonder why, after years of allowing them very few decisions, our children end up such poor decision-makers. We give them little responsibility and wonder why, as young men and women, they are so irresponsible. We endeavor to inculcate strict obedience to every parental dictate, and wonder why every generation is so servile and submissive to the state.

But if unchecked by parental authority, will not a child yield to his impulses, to the detriment of his socialization, education, and even physical safety? How can the child mature, if there are no consequences for misbehavior?

Two Kinds of Consequences

It is not a question of consequences or no consequences. The question concerns the *kind* of consequence. There are two kinds, as distinguished by Spencer in his [groundbreaking and foundation-laying essay](#) on education.

On one hand there are the artificial consequences imposed by authority. "If you tease your sister, I will send you to your room." "If you break that, I will spank you." Such consequences may indeed, however ineptly, inculcate "good habits" that would serve the child later in life. But it will also inculcate a broader habit of appeasing involuntary authority.

Furthermore, good habits, inculcated in this way, then rest chiefly upon internalized authority, and not on a true understanding of what *makes* those habits good. This is not true prudence, but merely residual obedience. Such a basis, if it holds at all, can lead to an inflexible life ridden by irrational guilt. Often however, it is a thin reed, that will snap once the child is out from under the parental gaze.

On the other hand there are natural consequences imposed, not by arbitrary authority, but by the laws of justice and physical and social reality. Spencer called these "true consequences" or "natural reactions," and they are far more constructive and edifying than the other kind.

To extend Spencer's analysis, misbehavior can be divided into 4 categories:

1. Personal Vices (unwise behavior)
2. Interpersonal Vices (non-violent antisocial behavior)
3. Injustices (violent antisocial behavior)
4. Catastrophically dangerous actions (behavior with high-probability risk of loss of life, limb, or liberty).

The natural, constructive, and edifying consequences of each are:

1. Personal Vices: Consequences imposed by physical reality
2. Interpersonal Vices: Non-coercive social consequences
3. Injustices: Coercive (if necessary) and proportionate retributive and protective justice
4. Catastrophically dangerous actions: Emergency coercive intervention.

The natural consequences of unwise or antisocial behavior (like a child being careless with her Gameboy or rude with her siblings) are the ones given by physical (a broken Gameboy) and societal (not being invited to play cards one evening) reality, not the ones given by authority (spanking, forced labor, confiscation, etc).

The former will teach a child to treat her possessions better so as to deal better with the material world and her friends better so as to deal better with society. The latter will teach a child to treat her possessions and friends better so as to appease the giant bully she's trapped with (It will also teach the child to resent the parent for physically assaulting, expropriating, or enslaving her for reasons she doesn't fully understand.)

Unlike those imposed by parental authority, the consequences imposed by material reality and non-coercive society follow the child into adulthood. By letting physics and society give her the consequences (as long as those consequences don't threaten life, limb, and liberty), you teach her how to be a better free person in the world. By giving her coercive and violent consequences yourself, you only teach her to be a better slave.

The only cases in which consequences imposed by force are called for (other than to immediately save life, limb, and liberty) is, with children as with adults, when it is a proportional and restitutional response to force initiated by the child.

Justice is the natural, constructive, and edifying consequence of injustice. If your child aggresses against you, another adult, or another child, it is beneficially instructive and moral to take from the child's possessions to make the victim whole. (This is one of the many reasons it is important to allow the child to fully own things in the first place.) But this never justifies spanking. Physically assaulting your own child does absolutely nothing in the way of providing restitution to a victim; it only creates one more victim.

Here is an example of this approach from my own recent parenting experience. The other day, my wife and three-year-old daughter were playing Chutes and Ladders, and my wife said something in a silly voice. My daughter must have been cranky, because she loudly and rudely told her mommy to not say that.

Rather than scold her in return, my wife just looked a bit sad, and went into the other room. I was working at the dining table, and sweetly explained to my daughter how what she said made her mommy feel. She said "No!" so I too withdrew, saying, without a hint of harshness, "bye bye," and returned to my work.

My little girl sat there for a moment, and then went to find her mother in the other room, hugged her, and said, "I'm sorry Mommy." My wife said "it's okay," we had a family hug, and they happily returned to their game.

We afford our daughter her dignity and freedom as an individual, yet also assert our own dignity and freedom to withdraw our company if we are being mistreated. This way, she learns to avoid being rude to avoid the natural consequences of being rude, and not simply to appease intimidating authority figures that won't always be present. That is how children learn character, and not mere obedience.

Thinking Outside the Authoritarian Box

This approach to parenting, which may be termed "Spencerian"

after Herbert Spencer, is like libertarianism in that they are both so radically different from the authoritarian ways we do things now, that people are prone to simply dismiss them out of hand at first.

People are so habituated to automatically resorting to coercive solutions to social and family problems, that their powers of imagination totally break down when faced with the idea of either a society or a household without masters. “Who will build the roads?” is akin to “How else will she be made to learn?”

Murray Rothbard skewers the “who will be build the roads” objectors by pointing out that if the provision of shoes had long been a state monopoly, people would be baffled at the thought of the market providing shoes.

“And who would supply shoes to the public if the government got out of the business? (...) Which people? How many shoe stores would be available in each city and town? How would the shoe firms be capitalized? How many brands would there be? What material would they use? What lasts? What would be the pricing arrangements for shoes?”

Similarly, the authoritarian approach has been so long the modus operandi of parents, that they can’t fathom doing without it. “If I can’t strike, boss around, or confiscate things from my child, how will I influence her?”

Of course, while not every detail can be predicted by proponents of liberty, the market does manage to handle shoes, and it would manage to handle roads. And both, far better than the state.

Similarly, while general best practices and sample solutions can be offered, not every detail of parental practice can be unerringly prescribed to other parents (especially of children they’ve never met) by proponents of the freedom-based approach

to parenting.

But devoted, imaginative, venturesome, and principled parents can figure out what non-coercive solutions work for their child's individual needs. And whatever unique particular approach the parent arrives at, the child will be far better off for not having gone through the first 18 years of her life spiritually shackled to another person's will.

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