Never Give a Command Which You Do Not Intend Shall Be Obeyed.

There is no more effectual way of teaching a child disobedience, than by giving commands which you have no intention of enforcing. A child is thus habituated to disregard its mother; and in a short time the habit becomes so strong, and the child's contempt for the mother so confirmed, that entreaties and threats are alike unheeded.

Sometimes a child gets its passions excited and its will determined, and it cannot be subdued but by a very great effort. Almost every faithful mother is acquainted with such contests, and she knows that they often form a crisis in the character of the child. If the child then obtain the victory, it is almost impossible for the mother afterward to regain her authority. . . . When once entered upon, they must be continued till the child is subdued. It is not safe, on any account, for the parent to give up and retire vanquished.

The following instance of such a contest is one which really occurred. A gentleman, sitting by his fireside one evening, with his family around him, took the spelling-book and called upon one of his little sons to come and read. John was about four years old. He knew all the letters of the alphabet perfectly, but happened at that moment to be in a rather sullen humor, and was not at all disposed to gratify his father. Very reluctantly he came as he was bid, but when his father pointed with his pencil to the first letter of the alphabet, and said, "What letter is that, John?" he could get no answer. John looked upon the book, sulky and silent.

"My son," said the father pleasantly, "you know the letter A."

"I can not say A," said John.

"You must," said the father, in a serious and decided tone. "What letter is that?"

John refused to answer. The contest was now fairly commenced. John was willful, and determined that he would not read. His father knew that it would be ruinous to his son to allow him to conquer. He felt that he must, at all hazards, subdue him. He took him into another room, and punished him. He then returned, and again showed John the letter. But John still refused to name it. The father again retired with his son, and punished him more severely. But it was unavailing; the stubborn child still refused to name the letter, and when told that it was A, declared that he could not say A. Again the father inflicted punishment as severely as he dared to do it, and still the child, with his whole frame in agitation, refused to yield. The father was suffering from the most intense solicitude. He regretted exceedingly that he had been drawn into the contest. He had already punished his child with a severity which he feared to exceed. And yet the willful sufferer stood before him, sobbing and trembling, but apparently as unyielding as a rock. I have often heard that parent mention the acuteness of his feelings at that moment. His heart was bleeding at the pain which he had been compelled to inflict upon his son. He knew that the question was now to be settled, who should be master. And after his son had withstood so long and so much, he greatly feared the result. The mother sat by, suffering, of course, most acutely, but perfectly satisfied that it was their duty to subdue the child, and that in such a trying hour a mother's feelings must not interfere. With a heavy heart the father again took the hand of his son to lead him out of the room for farther punishment. But, to his inconceivable joy, the child shrunk from enduring any more suffering, and cried, "Father, I'll tell the letter." The father, with feelings not easily conceived, took the book and pointed to the letter.

"A," said John, distinctly and fully.

"And what is that?" said the father, pointing to the next letter.

"B," said John.

"What is that?"

"C," he continued.

"And what is that?" pointing again to the first letter.

"A," said the now humble child.

"Now carry the book to your mother, and tell her what the letter is."

"What letter is that, my son?" said the mother.

"A," said John. He was evidently perfectly subdued. The rest of the children were sitting by, and they saw the contest, and they saw where was the victory. And John learnt a lesson which he never forgot—that his father had an arm too strong for him. He learned never again to wage such an unequal warfare. He learnt that it was the safest and happiest course for him to obey.

But perhaps some one says it was cruel to punish the child so severely. Cruel! It was mercy and love. It would indeed have been cruel had the father, in that hour, been unfaithful, and shrunk from his painful duty. The passions which he was then, with so much self-sacrifice, striving to subdue, if left
unchecked, would, in all probability, have been a curse to their possessor, and have made him a curse to his friends. It is by no means improbable that upon the decisions of that hour depended the character and happiness of that child for life, and even for eternity. It is far from improbable that, had he then conquered, all future efforts to subdue him would have been in vain, and that he would have broken away from all restraint, and have been miserable in life, and lost in death. Cruelty! The Lord preserve children from the tender mercies of those who so regard such self-denying kindness.

2 The Mother’s Book by Lydia Maria Child, 1831

Lydia Maria Child was one of the most distinguished women authors of nineteenth-century America, an outspoken advocate for the rights of women, Indians, and African Americans. Early in her career, she edited a successful children’s magazine called Juvenile Miscellany and published The Mother’s Book, a best-selling volume of child-rearing advice literature. The excerpts below are from Child’s recommendations for dealing with teenage daughters.

The period of twelve to sixteen years of age is extremely critical in the formation of character, particularly with regard to daughters. The imagination is then all alive, and the affections in full vigor, while the judgment is un-strengthened by observation, and enthusiasm has never learned moderation of experience. During this important period, a mother cannot be too watchful. As much as possible, she should keep her daughter under her own eye; and above all things she should encourage entire confidence towards herself. This can be done by a ready sympathy with youthful feelings, and by avoiding all unnecessary restraint and harshness. I believe it is extremely natural to choose a mother in preference to all other friends and confidants; but if a daughter, by harshness, indifference, or unwillingness to make allowance for youthful feeling, is driven from the holy resting place, which nature has provided for her security, the greatest danger is to be apprehended. Nevertheless, I would not have mothers too indulgent, for fear of weaning the affections of children. This is not the way to gain the perfect love of young people; a judicious parent is always better loved, and more respected, than a foolishly indulgent one. The real secret is, for a mother never to sanction the slightest error, or imprudence, but at the same time to keep her heart warm and fresh, ready to sympathize with all the innocent gayety and enthusiasm of youth....

I would make it an object so to educate children that they could in case of necessity support themselves respectably. For this reason, if a child discovered a decided talent for any accomplishment, I would cultivate it, if my income would possibly allow it. Everything we add to our knowledge, adds to our means of usefulness. If a girl has a decided taste for drawing, for example, and it is encouraged, it is a pleasant resource which will make her home agreeable, and lessen the desire for company and amusements; if she marries, it will enable her to teach her children without the expense of a master; if she lives unmarried, she may gain a livelihood by teaching the art she at first learned as a mere gratification of taste. The same thing may be said of music, and a variety of other things, not generally deemed necessary in education. In all cases it is best that what is learned should be learned well. In order to do this, good masters should be preferred to cheap ones. Bad habits once learned, are not easily corrected. It is far better that children should learn one thing thoroughly, than many things superficially.

My idea is this—First, be sure that children are familiar with all the duties of their present situation; at the same time, by schools, by reading, by conversation, give them as much solid knowledge as you can, no matter how much, or of what kind; it will come in use some time or other; and lastly, if your circumstances are easy, and you can afford to indulge your children in any matter of taste, do it fearlessly, without any idea that it will unfit them for more important duties. Neither learning nor accomplishments do any harm to man or woman if the motive for acquiring them be a proper one. I believe a variety of knowledge (acquired from such views as I have stated) would make a man a better servant, as well as a better president; and make a woman a better wife, as well as a better teacher.

It is certainly very desirable to fit children for the station they are likely to fill, as far as a parent can judge what that station will be. In this country, it is a difficult point to decide; for half our people are in a totally different situation from what might have been expected in their childhood. However, one maxim is as safe, as it is true: A well-informed mind is the happiest and the most useful in all situations. Every new acquirement is something added to a solid capital.

A knowledge of domestic duties is beyond all price to a woman. Every one ought to know how to sew, and knit, and mend, and cook, and superintend a household. In every situation of life, high or low, this sort of knowledge is a great advantage. There is no necessity that the gaining of such information should interfere with intellectual acquirement, or even with elegant accomplishments. A well regulated mind can find time to attend to all. When a girl is nine or ten years old, she should be accustomed to take some regular share in household duties, and to feel responsible for the manner in which it is done, such as doing her own mending and making, washing the cups and putting them in place, cleaning the silver, dusting the parlor, etc. This should not be done occasionally, and neglected whenever she finds it convenient; she should consider it her department. When they are older than twelve, girls should begin to take turns in superintending the household, keeping an account of
weekly expenses, cooking puddings and pies, etc. To learn anything effectually, they should actually do these things themselves, not stand by and see others do them. It is a great mistake in mothers to make such slaves of themselves, rather than divide their cares with daughters. A variety of employment, and a feeling of trust and responsibility add very much to the real happiness of young people.

There is one subject on which I am very anxious to say a great deal; but on which, for obvious reasons, I can say very little. Judging by my own observation, I believe it to be the greatest evil now existing in education. I mean the want of confidence between mothers and daughters on delicate subjects. Children from books, and from their own observation, soon have their curiosity excited on such subjects; this is perfectly natural and innocent, and if frankly met by a mother, it would never do harm. But on these occasions it is customary to either put young people off with lies, or still further to excite their curiosity by mystery and embarrassment. Information being refused them at the only proper source, they immediately have recourse to domestics, or immodest school-companions; and very often their young minds are polluted with filthy anecdotes of vice and vulgarity. This ought not to be. Mothers are the only proper persons to convey such knowledge to a child's mind. They can do it without throwing the slightest stain upon youthful purity; and it is an imperious duty that they should do it. A girl who receives her first ideas on these subjects from the shameless stories and indecent jokes of vulgar associates, has in fact prostituted her mind by familiarity with vice. A diseased curiosity is excited, and undue importance given to subjects, which those she has been taught to respect think it necessary to envelope in so much mystery; she learns to think a great deal about them, and to ask a great many questions. This does not spring from any natural impurity; the same restless curiosity would be excited by any subject treated in the same manner. On the contrary, a well-educated girl of twelve years old would be perfectly satisfied with a frank, rational explanation from a mother. It would set her mind at rest upon the subject; and instinctive modesty would prevent her recurring to it unnecessarily, or making it a theme of conversation with others.

It is a bad plan for young girls to sleep with nursery maids, unless you have the utmost confidence in the good principles and modesty of your domestics. There is a strong love among vulgar people of telling secrets, and talking on forbidden subjects. From a large proportion of domestics this danger is so great, that I apprehend a prudent mother will very rarely, under any circumstances, place her daughter in the same sleeping apartment with a domestic, until her character is so much formed, that her own dignity will lead her to reject all improper conversation.

1 Sexuality.
2 Household servants.
CHILDREN’S LITERATURE

3 The New-England Primer, 1807

_The New-England Primer_ was first published in the late seventeenth century, but it remained the most common textbook for teaching children basic lessons in reading, writing, and religion throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. No author was ascribed to it, but the first editions were published by Boston printer Benjamin Harris in the 1690s. Over the next 150 years, many other printers published versions of it, varying the content little from one edition to the next. These excerpts illustrate _The New-England Primer's_ moral instructions to boys and girls. Note how the material addressed to boys is rendered in prose form, while that to girls is in verse.

Description of a Good Boy

A Good boy is dutiful to his father and mother, obedient to his master, and loving to all his play fellows. He is diligent in learning his book, and takes a pleasure in improving his mind in every thing which is worthy of praise: he rises early in the morning, makes himself clean and decent, and says his prayers. If he has done a fault, he confesses, and is sorry for it, and scorns to tell a lie, though he might by that means conceal it. He never swears, nor calls names, nor uses any ill words to his companions. He is never peevish nor fretful, but always cheerful and good-humoured; he scorns to steal or pilfer any thing from his companions, and would rather suffer wrong, than to do wrong to any of them. He is always ready to answer when a question is asked of him—to do what he is bidden, and to mind what is said to him. He is not a wrangler nor quarrelsome, and refrains from all sorts of mischief into which other boys run. By this means he becomes, as he grows up, a man of sense and virtue, he is beloved and respected by all who know him; he lives in the world with credit and reputation, and when he dies, is lamented by all his acquaintances.

Description of a Bad Boy

A Bad boy is undutiful to his father and mother, disobedient and stubborn to his master, and ill natured to all his play fellows. He hates his book, and takes no pleasure in improving in any thing. He is sleepy and slothful in the morning, too idle to clean himself, and too wicked to say his prayers. He is always in mischief, and when he has done a fault, will tell twenty lies, in hopes to conceal it. He hates that any body should give him good advice, and when they are out of his sight, will laugh at them. He swears, wrangles, and quarrels with his companions. He will steal whatever comes his way, and if he is not caught,
the Source; Advice Literature on Child Rearing and Children's Literature, 1807-1833

thinks it no crime, not considering that God sees what he does. He is frequently out of humour, sullen and obstinate, so he will neither do what he is bid, nor answer any question which is asked him. In short, he neglects every thing which he should learn, and minds nothing but play or mischief, by which means he becomes as he grows up, a confirmed blockhead, incapable of any thing but wickedness or folly, despised by all men, and generally dies a beggar.

The Good Girl

So pretty Miss Prudence,
You've come to the Fair;
And a very good girl
They tell me you are;
Here take this fine Orange,
This Watch and this Knot;
You're welcome my dear,
To all we have got:
For a girl who is good,
And so pretty as you,
May have what she pleases,
Your servant, Miss Prue.

The Naughty Girls

So pert misses, prate-space, how came you here?
There's nobody wants to see you at the fair;
No Oranges, Apples, Cakes, or Nuts,
Will any one give to such saucy sluts.
For such naughty girls, we here have no room,
You're proud and ill-natur'd.—Go hussies, go home.

4 The Busy Bee, 1831

The American Sunday School Union, a voluntary association formed by several Protestant denominations in 1824 to promote children's religious education, published thousands of short children's stories aimed at teaching proper values and habits. Like The New-England Primer, these stories usually appeared without any attribution to authorship. This typical story features the characters of Fanny and Jane, two eight-year-old orphans who live with a pious old woman, referred to in the story as their mother.

The kind lady took the same pains with Fanny as she did with Jane, and taught both these little girls all those things which she thought necessary for children in their station. She endeavoured to teach them to read and write well, to cipher, and to do neatly all kinds of plain work, as well as to understand household business: but though, as I before said, she bestowed the same labour on both children, yet there was great difference in their improvement. Little Jane took every opportunity of profiting, not only by the instructions of her mother, as she called the lady, but like the busy bee, who gathers honey from every flower which comes her way, she strove to gain some good thing, some useful piece of knowledge, from every person she became acquainted with.

Her mother kept only one servant, whose name was Nanny. Nanny was a clever servant, and understood many useful things, though she was often rude and ill-tempered, and spoke in a vulgar manner. But little Jane had sense to know, that although she was not to imitate the manners of Nanny, and her improper way of speaking, yet she might learn many useful things from her: therefore, when she went into the kitchen with the lady, she shut her ears against Nanny’s disagreeable way of speaking, and gave her whole mind to learn how to iron, or to make pies and puddings, or whatever useful thing she might be doing.

When any ladies came to drink tea with her mother, Jane would take notice what work they were doing; and if it was pretty or useful, she would try to do something like it for her doll; and thus she taught herself many useful works.

But while Jane was thus daily learning all that is good, Fanny, in the mean time, was gathering all that is evil. Into whatever company she might chance to fall, she always first took notice of what each person was saying or doing wrong, and afterwards tried to do the same. Whenever she went into the kitchen with her mother, instead of learning to do any thing which might be useful from Nanny, she noticed her way of talking or moving, and then tried to do like her.

But I can scarcely tell you (and indeed it would only give you pain if I could) how many naughty things Fanny learned from the young people she met with, when she went with her mother to pay a visit in the town. She came home, I am sorry to say, much worse than she went, and that indeed was bad enough.

One afternoon, at tea, she said to the little girls, “To-morrow will be my birthday, and I mean to give you a feast, in which I intend to consult the taste of each of you.”

The little girls said they were very glad to hear it, and the lady told them to come the next evening into her dressing room, where she said the feast would be set out.

When Fanny and Jane came, at the hour which the lady had fixed upon, to the dressing room, they found their mother sitting reading by the fire, and two little round tables were placed in the middle of the room. One of these tables...
was covered with a neat white napkin and a little dessert set out upon it in
doll's dishes, made of white china with blue edges. There were four little dishes
on this table: one contained an orange, another a few yellow apples, another a
roasted apple, and a fourth a few biscuits; and in the middle was a little covered
china cup, made in the shape of a bee-hive, which contained honey in the
honey-comb.

The little girls had scarcely time to examine this table, so neatly laid out,
before their eyes were caught by the other table, which was set out in a manner
so strange, that they stood still with surprise, and were not able to move. This
second table was covered with straw instead of a table cloth, and instead of
dishes, there was a great empty wooden bowl.

The lady got up when the little girls came in, and, drawing her chair be-
tween the two tables, she said, "Come, Fanny, come Jane; come and enjoy
yourselves. I have been trying to make a feast suitable to the tastes of each of
you." She then pointed to the table neatly set out with china and fine linen,
and invited Jane to seat herself at it, and directed Fanny to place herself by the
other table. . . .

"And now," said the lady, as soon as they were seated, "I will divide the
feast." So saying, she began to peel the oranges, pare the apples, take the
roasted apple out of its skin, and pour the honey from the comb. And, as she
went on doing these things, she threw the rind of the orange, the parings of
the apple, and the other refuse of the feast, into the wooden bowl, while she
placed the best parts on the dishes before Jane. When all this was done, she in-
vited the children to begin to eat . . . Fanny looked very red, and at last, broke
into a violent fit of crying.

"What do you cry for?" said the lady. "I know that you heartily love, and
have for a long time sought after every thing that is hateful, filthy, and bad;
and like a pig, you have delighted in wallowing in mire. I therefore am resolved
to indulge you. As you love what is filthy, you shall enjoy it, and shall be
treated like a pig."

Fanny looked very much ashamed; and throwing herself on her knees be-
fore her mother, begged her to forgive her, and promised that she would never
again seek after wickedness, and delight in it, as she had done.

"Fanny," said the lady, "it is very easy for little girls to make fine promises,
and to say, 'I will be good,' and 'I am sorry I have behaved ill.' But I am not a
person who will be satisfied with words, any more than you can be with
orange-peel and skins of apples. I must have deeds, not words. Turn away from
your sins, and call upon your God to help you to repent your past evil life. If
you do not wish to partake of the portion of dogs and swine and unclean
creatures in the world to come, you must learn to hate sin in the present
world." . . .

I am happy to say, that this day was the beginning of better things to
Fanny: for she at once forsook her evil habits, and, with God's blessing upon
her endeavours, and the care of the good old lady, she so far overcame her
faults, as to be allowed, by the next birth-day, to feast with little Jane.
George Washington was a fixture in nineteenth-century children's literature, and his life was used to teach moral lessons about honesty and piety as well as civic lessons about patriotism and citizenship. In children's biographies of Washington, his mother also played a prominent role and served as an exemplar of motherhood for the new nation.

Mrs. Washington was an affectionate parent; but she did not encourage in herself that imprudent tenderness, which so often causes a mother to foster the passions of her children by foolish indulgences, and which seldom fails to destroy the respect which every child should feel for a parent. George was early made to understand that he must obey his mother, and therefore he respected as well as loved her. She was kind to his young companions, but they thought her stern, because they always felt that they must behave correctly in her presence. The character of the mother, as well as that of the son, are shown in the following incident.

Mrs. Washington owned a remarkably fine colt, which she valued very much; but which though old enough for use, had never been mounted; no one would venture to ride it, or attempt to break its wild and vicious spirit. George proposed to some of his young companions, that they should assist him to secure the colt until he could mount it, as he had determined that he would try to tame it. Soon after sunrise one morning, they drove the wild animal into an enclosure, and with great difficulty succeeded in placing a bridle on it. George then sprang upon its back, and the vexed colt bounded over the open fields, prancing and plunging to get rid of its burden. The bold rider kept his seat firmly, and the struggle between them became alarming to his companions, who were watching him. The speed of the colt increased, until at length, in making a furious effort to throw his conqueror, he burst a large blood-vessel, and instantly died.

George was unhurt, but was much troubled by the unexpected result of his exploit. His companions soon joined him, and when they saw the beautiful colt lifeless, the first words they spoke were: "What will your mother say—who can tell her?" They were called to breakfast, and soon after they were seated at the table, Mrs. Washington said, "Well, young gentlemen, have you seen my fine sorrel colt in your rambles?" No answer was given, and the question was repeated; her son George then replied, "Your sorrel colt is dead, mother." He gave her an exact account of the event. The flush of displeasure which first rose on her cheek, soon passed away; and she said calmly, "While I regret the loss of my favourite, I rejoice in my son, who always speaks the truth."