

HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION IN THE FAMILY (2/3)

**Developing the Human Rights Family
How Adlerian Principles and Methods
Contribute to Human Rights in the Family**

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RESPECT

All Human Rights are based on the principle of universal respect for the dignity of the individual. Conversely, any failure in respecting the person as human being would violate the individual's Human Rights. Adler emphasised the importance of teaching children to be considerate of the feelings of others and to treat them fairly. However, parents often seem to forget that children become respectful, when they are treated respectfully. Without wanting to be categorical, one observes that often parents act disrespectfully to their children when, for example, they reward or punish them for some act which they consider praiseworthy or disgraceful, as the case may be. Again, interfering in a child's school work is often considered as an act of caring when in fact it often shows a lack of trust in the capabilities of the child. As parents develop respectful attitudes in children, children, in turn, learn to treat others with respect and dignity, mindful that each person has a right to live his life without undue interference or pressure from others. When treating this topic Dreikurs has this to say:

"Mutual respect means treating every person with respect, recognising the worth of his ideas, accepting his plans and contributions and also, when necessary, rejecting his contributions as having no value in a particular situation while at the same time not rejecting him as a person."

ENCOURAGEMENT

As a teacher and even more so as a counsellor, I notice a great difference in attitude and behaviour between the child who is encouraged at home and the one who is not. The child who is timid, afraid to make mistakes, lacks self-confidence and is unable to hold his own in class, is more often than not the child who lacks the encouragement that he needs and does not get from home. Quite often, in fact, he or she is discouraged by the attitude the parents take regarding the child's need to belong and feel important in the family. On the other hand, in school and during counselling one meets the child who is out-going, confident, able to tackle any task

and is easily interested in all that goes on in school. This child reflects the parents' attitude of encouragement. The family that builds its relationships on encouragement is bound to focus upon the assets and strengths of its members in the belief that each person has an innate capacity to deal effectively with the challenges of life. Adler assigns an important task to the teacher:

"An educator's most important task, one might say his holy duty, is to see that no child is discouraged at school, and that a child who enters school already discouraged regains his self-confidence through his school and his teacher." (12)

Dreikurs puts it differently and also figuratively when he says, "a child needs encouragement like a plant needs water." I am sure I need not emphasise that the encouraged person is the one who not only treasures his own dignity but also promotes the dignity of every other person.

COOPERATION

One of the greatest enemies that threaten Human Rights in the family is the tendency, if not the sheer strife, for competition – competition between spouses, competition between siblings and competition between parents and children. Often, one suspects there is a struggle in the dysfunctioning family that drives its members to try to get to the top position even at the cost of causing discomfort to others in the family. This is most often noticeable especially in the big families of past generations in Malta, where often the many siblings were pushed to 'fight for survival', moving from a minus (or inferior) to a plus (or superior) position. These same siblings who later married and formed their own families, often carried with them and adapted the same style of, and attitude to, life in their new families.

We live in a competitive society. Unfortunately, competition is still encouraged in some of our schools too, forgetting that the survival of society depends on the practice of cooperation. Both parents and teachers, perhaps unintentionally, reinforce competition in children by comparing one child with another and communicating this comparison to them, either verbally or nonverbally. Competitions, contests, even praise and rewards tend to undermine the notion of cooperation. Thus competition often creates many alienated individuals who feel inferior to others and a few individuals who consider themselves privileged. In Adlerian terms this means that,

"the discouraged person, operating on the useless side of life under the burden of increased feelings of inferiority, makes the error of supposing that (*since he feels inferior to others*) his task is to attain a position of superiority **over others**. Since this movement only invites the antagonism of others, it contributes to his further defeat and creates a disturbance in the life of the community." (13)

Adlerian Psychology teaches cooperation. Ansbacher describes Adler's concept of Social Interest and Cooperation as "the morally desirable or 'mentally healthy' human relationship." (14)

I should like to quote here quite a lengthy passage from the book, **Personality and Personal Growth**, which suggests a practical way of cooperating with others. You may want to put it into practice during the rest of this meeting with your colleagues, or wait until you are back home with your family and acquaintances!

"In order to understand more clearly what Adler means by cooperation and social interest, for one week devote as much time as you can to helping others. Keep a record of your choices and how they made you feel. Resolve that you will not refuse any reasonable requests from others, even if they take up some of your valuable time, energy, or some money. If you want to make the exercise more demanding, let all your friends know that you are carrying out this exercise and you will be available to serve them for a week. Don't simply wait for someone to ask you, but actively look for opportunities to offer your help to others. At the end of the week, review your experiences. How did other people react to you? What were your reactions to helping others? What did you learn from the exercise?" (15)

DEMOCRACY

I have left the subject of Democracy to the end in the wide spectrum of Adlerian principles because it embraces all the parts into one unity and because Democracy is the summit, as it were, of all human rights whether we are talking of the State or the family. At the same time, it is the epitome of all that Individual Psychology stands for. In its turn this topic offers strong suggestions to our debate on Human Rights in the Family.

Democracy has often been defined as, 'government by the people, exercising their rule through their elected representatives in parliament'. This is often referred to as Political or Parliamentary democracy. Yet, we all know that Democracy is not simply born at the demise of autocracy. Oftentimes the collapse of autocracy leads to anarchy as we have been witnessing in recent years and months. While I do not want to go into the political arena, it is worth pointing out that developments in Politics are bound to affect significantly, life and attitudes in the family. However, we are here concerned with Democracy in the family and with all its implications.

Democracy is committed to fundamental Human Rights. All rights are based on the recognition of the equality of all persons, in our case, in the inter-personal equality of all the members in the family. The democratic style that is advocated by Adlerians is not based on majority rule but on consensus. This last point must be emphasised. Decisions that are taken in the family are the result of agreement by all - parents and children. The system that Painter and Corsini and other Adlerians promote includes the following features:

1. All members contribute to the family in proportion to each person's ability and capacity.
2. An orderly way of family functioning is established democratically through discussion.
3. No one in the family forces his or her will upon the others.
4. No manipulations, such as bribes and blackmail, play a part in the family.

5. Straight and honest dealings between family members are promoted.

6. Family relationships are based on logic and reason and not on pure sentiment.

7. Parents are friendly and fair but at the same time firm with their children.

8. A unanimous and harmonious effort is made by all in order to endorse mutual as well as individual goals." (16)

Some may think that this style of family life stifles spontaneity and mutual love relationships. Far from doing this, I hope it is amply clear, this style of family management not only upholds the rights of all, but also goes a long way in establishing strong, mature and lasting relationships between parents and siblings based on the fundamental entitlements of the individual. Rather, the above features are practical steps one can adopt to develop the family in line with what this World Forum is advocating, that is, "Promoting Families for the Wellbeing of Individuals and Societies".

Two points need clarification. First, Adlerians do not advocate permissiveness in any form or manner, where everybody is free to do his own thing without due consideration of the rights of others. Rather, Adlerians consider that Democracy is best served when persons - young and adult - feel mutually responsible for the general good, and act in such a way that they respect the wishes and needs of the others. Second, by promoting democracy in the family, Adlerians are not in any way destroying the authority of parents over their siblings. I submit that parents who often feel that they are losing their authority as Democracy is developed in the family, are, in fact, afraid of losing control over their household. They themselves may have been brought up in an autocratic environment where they were used to a different style of family life which was quite often marked by conflict, aggression, submission and general bad feeling which in turn blocked all spontaneous interactions at home.

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(11) Dreikurs, Rudolf; Grunwald, B. B.; Pepper F. C., *Maintaining Sanity in the Classroom*, p. 68

(12) Ansbacher, Heinz L. and Rowena, R., *The Individual psychology of Alfred Adler*, p. 299

(13) Griffiths, J. and Powers, R.L., *An Adlerian lexicon*, p. 22

(14) Ansbacher, Heinz L. and Ansbacher, Rowena, R., *Superiority and Social Interest*, p.7

(15) Frager, Robert and Fadiman, James, p. 112

(16) Painter, Genevieve and Corsini, Raymond J., *Effective Discipline in the Home and School*, p. 15