

Persuasive speech

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Freedom, democracy and equality in child rearing

General purpose: to persuade, to inform.

Specific purpose: At the end of my speech I want the audience to be able to explain that neither enforcement of discipline nor absence of it is good for a child. They should be able to describe that a child must be approached with respect and equality instead, giving him freedom—but not license.

Proposition statement: Children must be taken seriously, on an equal basis, providing them freedom, but not license.

Introduction: “We *either* have discipline in the classroom *or* we have disorder and, quite often, danger.” That is, what President Clinton claimed in front of the American Federation of Teachers, according to the July 22 issue of the Columbia Missourian (Anonymous, 1998). Well, I guess he presented the “either-or”-fallacy here. While I agree that total absence of discipline serves no good, strict enforcement doesn’t either. I’d like to point out to you today, what Erich Fromm in the Foreword to Alexander Neill’s book about his school Summerhill (Neill, 1960) said: that education is an effort without the use of force by appealing to a child’s curiosity and spontaneous needs, and thus to get him or her interested in the world around. Such an education needs such ideas as freedom,—not license—democracy, and equality between children and adults.

I learned about many educational experiments back in my high school in lessons called ‘educational sciences’. Their results, for example the Summerhill boarding school in Summerhill, UK, founded in 1921, remain true today—nevertheless many shout for discipline and rules, rules, rules.

Preview: I will begin by showing you that such rules are not successful. In fact, they carry a great danger—they made the German holocaust possible. On the other hand, of course, children need guidance. I am not proposing to let them do what they want, an educational theory with the French name “Laissez faire”. This doesn’t work either, since these children couldn’t learn any values. After that I will use the rest of my time

to present some of the basic ideas for Neill's Summerhill school I mentioned before, since we can apply them to everyday life.

I. Of course, there are rules at the Summerhill school. So, what is it exactly, that's bad, when I say, rules can be dangerous? Well, they are not, as long as they have good reasons *and* you explain them to the kids. But if the only reason for a rule is that you or someone else is more powerful than the kid and you can make them obey, or just enforce fear, you shouldn't be surprised if they seek relief in a way you don't approve.

A. My mathematics professor in Germany told us his conclusion about a fire attack by some Germans on a Turkish house; based on his experience as father and teacher, saying that it might be the most important thing he can teach us. He said, that he believes that the fear these people experience about their life, their jobs is caused by decisions of power centers that don't explain their decisions. So, they can't understand them. Everytime parents, teachers, the tax people, employers, the government make decisions, that they don't explain, that seem to be unjust and that give the feeling that the people can't do anything to change them, it hurts—and it can lead to extremist attacks on foreigners, or maybe the Oklahoma city bombing or the attack on the Congress some days ago.

The way to counteract such feelings is to give kids trust. In the parents love, in just decisions and in reasons for rules.

B. Another effect of rules without reason is to shut down critical thinking. A web site of "Outlook videos" (Outlook Videos, 1998) states "Could the holocaust happen in America? It did... Well, sort of...". In 1967 the teacher Ron Jones at a Palo Alto high school had the idea to explain facism to his class through a game. He wrote the word "discipline" on the blackboard, let the students sit up straight in their chairs and lectured about discipline in this setting. On the next day, he invented a special sign, a wave, and during the rest of the week students learned: "strenght through discipline, strength through community, strength through action". By the week's end the experiment spread to 200 students. Some students reported others that didn't conform. The experiment was so blindly embraced, that the teacher cut the experiment short. It is really frightening that we can't be sure that the most horrible part of Germany's history "never could happen again". It can, everywhere. That's, why I listen carefully when I hear 'military camps' and 'discipline' in one sentence. I am sure, though, that these camps that Lorenza told us about explain the reasons for their rules and encourage critical thinking.

II. Now knowing that rules without reasons are bad, one might think that no rules at all might be a good solution. An ultimate freedom for the kids. Well, at young ages, it's not freedom, it's neglect.

- A. Ironically I can again mention the worst part of Germany’s history. Hitler tried this idea, too, by inventing the so-called “Lebensborn”-project. Racially pure women, you know this blue-eyed, blonde hair idea, were regarded as birth machines for some SS men. Catrine Clay and Michael Leapman (Clay and Leapman, 1995) describe in their book “Master race” that the “chief attraction of the homes, as far as the mothers were concerned, was that their responsibility for their children could, if they wished, be taken entirely off their hands almost immediately after birth. All children in the homes became in effect the property of the SS”. They were cared for by nurses that fed them food above the average at war times. But the nurses were not able to give enough love to the children. Many Lebensborn children report a sense of isolation and rejection. The missing trust in the world prevents them from participating in life fully.
 - B. It is this missing love, the missing time spent with the kids playing, no encouragement of curiosity about their environment, that’s the mistake. When Kristin told us about the V-chip, I wondered, why letting the children watch TV 25 hours a week in the first place? Because it’s a cheap babysitter? It might be cheap, but it’s not a babysitter. Children love and need interaction—to determine their limits, physically and in society. They want to explore their environment. A TV delivers input—that’s fine—but the kid’s reactions are ignored. It’s just not a form of interaction that makes the kids think, explore and create values. You need other humans for that.
- III. Now that we know that rules are important, but never should be given without reasoning, what is the right attitude towards children? You just heard that adults should not play a role of power or a role of neglect.
- A. Neill, founder of the Summerhill school in England that I mentioned in the beginning, is quoted in the book “Living at Summerhill” (Snitzer, 1964), saying “In a good home the children and the parents have equal rights. In a bad home either the children have all the rights or the parents have all the rights”. It’s a question of respect towards the child as another human being. John Holt, professor of education at the University of California, Berkley, describes in the book “Summerhill: For & against” (Hart, 1970): “I like to talk to little children, and to listen to them talk. I take their talk and ideas seriously. I do not think that their view of life or their opinion on it are trivial because they are based on little experience. I like to do what many sneeringly call ‘getting down on their level’—play games with them, foolish games, rough games, even games where they hit me or call me names, provided only that the spirit is joyous and friendly. I do not demand of them the kind of enlisted-man-to-officer deference that most adults think is their right. But I will not buy children candy and junk every time we happen to go in a store, and I make this clear to them before we go in. We must take children seriously and treat them courteously and respectfully.”

- B. This touches a second issue besides the respect towards and equal acceptance of children—the question of freedom, not license. Neill writes in his book of the same name, “Freedom—not license” [not cited, since quote is from (Hart, 1970)]: “I define license as interfering with another’s freedom. For example, in my school a child is free to go to lessons or stay away from lessons because that is his own affair, but he is not free to play a trumpet when others want to study or sleep.” In another book, “Talking of Summerhill” (Neill, 1967), he writes: “[Sometimes,] children [get] too much of the wrong type of freedom. Instance: I would visit someone worth talking with... a professor, teacher, doctor. When I arrived his wife and two children would be in the room. The children remained and monopolised the conversation. When a visitor came today three children were in my room. ‘Come on, kids’, I said, ‘buzz off; I want to talk to this visitor.’ They went, but it might have been the other way round, for often my pupils have told me to clear off when they were wanting privacy—when rehearsing a play for example.” I think these examples show, how rules, reasons and explanations, respect, equality of adults and children, freedom, and love are brought together.
- C. [optional, depending on time ;-)] Since I have a little time left, I want to tell you some examples, where the kids were not respected as equal, their feelings were hurt.
1. When I visited my best friend Dirk in Germany and his then two-and-a-half year old daughter, Sophie, I played with her like John Holt described it: I listened to her and let her decide what she wanted to play. But when the sister-in-law of my friend and her boy friend came down they stood around this little kid and said to her: “Hey, go and get your doctor toys. Hey, go, you wanted to play with this yesterday”. Imagine, how you would feel, when two giants would surround you and demand that you should do something you don’t want to do right now. Later, they discussed with Dirk why Sophie doesn’t seem to like the sister-in-law’s boy friend, maybe the shirt he was wearing. I beg to differ...
 2. Another example is presented by Laura Sessions Stepp, author of a book about the interaction between adults and adolescents, in the July 3 Columbia Missourian (Stepp, 1998): “About 18 month ago, I was sitting in a restaurant [...] with a 13-year-old girl and her mother, when the daughter casually asked: ‘Mom would you take me to buy some new clothes this weekend?’ Her mother sighed and sipped her Dr. Pepper. ‘I just took you shopping two weeks ago,’ she replied. And then, to her daughter’s wide-eyed disbelief, she turned to look at me and continued, ‘Sometimes, I wish I had never had children.’ Sound unlikely? What’s striking to me about this scene is not how exceptional it was, but how typical.” Yes, indeed. Would we dare to say this to adults? Like: Hey, Julie, I wish you were dead. What?—No, we wouldn’t dare. It seems,

that adults perceive children as inferior, not equal, far too often.

3. Another example by the same source: “Take one 11-year-old boy I got to know in South Central Los Angeles. I remember a particular day I spent with him and his family when his father started teasing him about girls. ‘Have you kissed a girl yet?’ his dad asked. ‘First kiss? Not yet,’ replied the boy, a skinny creature who barely came up to his father’s ample waist. ‘You ain’t kissed no girl—that girl you liked, she didn’t give you no kiss?’—‘Nope.’—‘Do you look at their bods?’—‘Their what?’—‘Their booties. Have they got nice booties?’—‘This is nasty. I don’t want to talk no more.’—‘I think he’s scared of girls,’ the father suddenly said to me. Then turning back to his son, he asked, ‘You scared of girls?’ This line of questioning didn’t appear to be mean-spirited, but it continued for several minutes despite pleas from his son to stop. Finally, the boy left the room and returned seconds later, tears in his eyes and a blue tissue in hand.” Do I have to explain to you, that this boy was hurt? Again, freedom ends when it interferes with freedom of others. That is also true for the freedom of parents.

Conclusion: I hope I could show you, how important it is to take children seriously, on an equal basis, providing them freedom, but not license. Rules without reason is a hurting demonstration of power, no rules at all are neglect. Both extremes do not acknowledge the need for equality between children and adults. Ashley Montague, an anthropologist, describes in the book “Summerhill: For & against” (Hart, 1970) that Neill, by showing respect towards kids, giving them freedom and providing limits, “tried to bring out the good that was in his children rather than misguidedly attempting to repress an evil that was not there.” Or, maybe my speech should be compressed in the short words of my math professor: “I know it doesn’t apply to you right now, but—*love your children.*”

References

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