

THE MAKINGS OF PROBLEM STUDENTS

Latest research indicates that the most distinctive characteristic, which is a predictor of success in adulthood among children, is the quality of 'delayed gratification'. M. Scott Peck defines it as follows:

"Delaying gratification is a process of scheduling the pain and pleasure of life in such a way as to enhance the pleasure by meeting and experiencing the pain first and getting it over with. It is the only decent way to live".

This tool or process of scheduling is learned by most children quite early in life, sometimes as early as age five. For instance, occasionally a five-year-old child when playing a game with a companion will suggest that the companion take first turn, so that the child might enjoy his or her turn later. At age six children may start eating their cake first and the frosting last. Throughout grammar school this early capacity to delay gratification is daily exercised particularly through the performance of homework. By the age of twelve some children are already able to sit down on occasion without any parental prompting and complete their homework before they watch television. By the age of fifteen or sixteen, such behaviour is expected of the adolescent and considered normal.

However, a substantial number of adolescents fall far short of this norm. While many have a well-developed capacity to delay gratification, some fifteen- or sixteen-year-olds seem to have hardly developed this capacity at all; indeed, some seem even to lack the capacity entirely. These are the problem students. Despite average or better intelligence, their grades are poor simply because they do not work. They skip classes or skip school entirely on the whim of the moment. They are impulsive, and their impulsiveness spills over into their social life as well. They get into frequent fights, they become involved with drugs, they begin to get in trouble with the police. Play now, pay later, is their motto. So the psychologists and psychotherapists are called in. But most of the time it seems too late. These adolescents are resentful of any attempt to intervene in their life style of impulsiveness, and even when this resentment can be overcome by warmth and friendliness and a nonjudgmental attitude on the part of the therapist, their impulsiveness is often so severe that it precludes their participation in the process of psychotherapy in any meaningful way.

It is not that the homes of these unself-disciplined children are lacking in parental discipline of a sort. More often than not these children are punished frequently and severely throughout their childhood - slapped, punched, kicked, beaten and whipped by their parents for even minor infractions. But this discipline is meaningless. Because it is undisciplined discipline.

One reason that it is meaningless is that the parents (or teachers) themselves are unselfdisciplined, and therefore serve as undisciplined role models for their children. They are the 'Do as I say, not do as I do' parents or teachers. They may frequently get drunk in front of their children. They may fight with each other in front of the children without restraint, dignity or rationality.

If a child sees his parents day in and day out living without self-restraint or self-discipline, then he will come in the deepest fibres of his being to believe that that is the way to live.

Yet even more important than role modeling is love. For even in chaotic and disordered homes genuine love is occasionally present, and from such homes may come self disciplined children. And not infrequently parents who are professional people, who lead lives of strict orderliness and decorum but yet lack love, send children into the world who are as undisciplined and destructive and disorganized as any child from an impoverished and chaotic home.

In summary, for children to develop the capacity to delay gratification, it is necessary for them to have self-disciplined role models, a sense of self-worth, and a degree of trust in the safety of their existence