

Children Should Not Be Reasoned With

By Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Excerpt from *Emile* (1762)

Reasoning should not begin too soon—Locke's¹ great maxim was that we ought to reason with children, and just now this maxim is much in fashion. I think, however, that its success does not warrant its reputation, and I find nothing more stupid than children who have been so much reasoned with. Reason, apparently a compound of all other faculties, the one latest developed, and with most difficulty, is the one proposed as agent in unfolding the faculties earliest used! The noblest work of education is to make a reasoning man, and we expect to train a young child by making him reason! This is beginning at the end; this is making an instrument of a result. If children understood how to reason they would not need to be educated. But by addressing them from their tenderest years in a language they cannot understand, you accustom them to be satisfied with words, to find fault with whatever is said to them, to think themselves as wise as their teachers, to wrangle and rebel. And what we mean they shall do from reasonable motives we are forced to obtain from them by adding the motive of avarice, or of fear, or of vanity.

Nature intends that children shall be children before they are men. If we insist on reversing this order we shall have fruit early indeed, but unripe and tasteless, and liable to early decay; we shall have young savants and old children. Childhood has its own methods of seeing, thinking, and feeling. Nothing shows less sense than to try to substitute our own methods for these. I would rather require a child ten years old to be five feet tall than to be judicious. Indeed, what use would he have at that age for the power to reason? It is a check upon physical strength, and the child needs none.

In attempting to persuade your pupils to obedience you add to this alleged persuasion force and threats, or worse still, flattery and promises. Bought over in this way by interest, or constrained by force, they pretend to be convinced by reason. They see plainly that as soon as you discover obedience or disobedience in their conduct, the former is an advantage and the latter a disadvantage to them. But you ask of them only what is distasteful to them; it is always irksome to carry out the wishes of another, so by stealth they carry out their own. They are sure that if their disobedience is not known they are doing well; but they are ready, for fear of greater evils, to acknowledge, if found out, that they are doing wrong. As the reason for the duty required is beyond their capacity, no one can make them really understand it. But the fear of punishment, the hope of forgiveness, your importunity, their difficulty in answering you, extort from them the confession required of them. You think you have convinced them, when you have only wearied them out or intimidated them.

What results from this? First of all that, by imposing upon them a duty they do not feel as such, you set them against your tyranny, and dissuade them from

loving you; you teach them to be dissemblers, deceitful, willfully untrue, for the sake of extorting rewards or of escaping punishments. Finally, by habituating them to cover a secret motive by an apparent motive, you give them the means of constantly misleading you, of concealing their true character from you, and of satisfying yourself and others with empty words when their occasion demands. You may say that the law, although binding on the conscience, uses constraint in dealing with grown men. I grant it; but what are these men but children spoiled by their education? This is precisely what ought to be prevented. With children use force, with men reason; such is the natural order of things. The wise man requires no laws.

¹. John Locke (1632–1704), English philosopher.—Eds.