

# THE PROBLEM OF THE DESTRUCTIVE CHILD

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**W**HAT to do with the destructive child is peculiarly a problem of American mothers. For while destructiveness is to some extent a characteristic of childhood in general, inherited habits of thrift and care count for something. The average American is too sure of tomorrow's supplies to be careful of today's, and the babies just out of their cradles share the happy-go-lucky optimism and extravagance of the nation as a whole.

The destructive child, like other children, must be studied individually. Even when results are identical, causes vary widely. There is the investigating child who cannot see a wheel turn without wishing to know why. He picks his mechanical toy to pieces within half an hour after it comes into his possession, and looks complacently on the ruin he has wrought, provided he has discovered the secret he was after. Tact and wisdom are necessary in dealing with this boy, for the characteristic which has taken so exasperating a way of manifesting itself, is, after all, the secret of the world's progress. It is the people who find out how things are done, who suggest improved methods of doing them. See that you do not suppress a budding inventor by too severe censure of this inquiring disposition, even though the immediate results are unfortunate. A little explanation beforehand will often save much scolding later. Show the boy just how his toy is operated, and he will take double the amount of pleasure in it, and not feel the necessity of tearing it to pieces to answer the questions of his active brain.

The awkward child is in quite another class, and needs fully as careful handling. Like the Newfoundland puppy which is always finding one of its four paws in its way, these dear, clumsy little folks trip over whatever is in front of them, run into everything that projects, knock over such articles as are not screwed down, and break all belongings less fragile than cast iron. The clumsy child never recovers his surprise at the havoc which can be wrought by simple means, and he looks

on the ruin for which he is responsible with the disinterested wonder of an outsider.

The unconscious awkwardness of childhood has a charm of its own, but the same cannot be said of the deprecating, self-conscious awkwardness of maturity. Yet it is the simplest thing in the world to develop one out of the other. Constantly calling the attention of a child to his awkwardness tends to perpetuate it rather than to correct it. The boy who grows up with the conviction that he is the most clumsy being on earth, generally sustains his reputation in after life.

A more serious problem is presented in the case of the child who destroys wantonly, who breaks his toys in a fit of temper, or to vary the monotony. As a rule such a child has too much; and, indeed, the play-rooms of most American homes would show an over-supply. Costly toys are showered upon the children of the wealthy, and the little folks belonging to families in moderate circumstances have about as much, though of cheaper grade. A surfeit always produces indifference. It is only natural that a child should accept philosophically the losses which he knows will be made good the following birthday or Christmas. If our boys and girls had less, they would value them more.

In many cases, with the reduction in quantity there should be an advance in quality. Toys of the cheaper grade encourage destructiveness by making it inevitable. The most careful child cannot handle some of these articles without their falling apart in his hands, and he naturally becomes stoical over the result. Buy toys that will stand proper treatment. Indestructible toys should always be provided for very young children. Otherwise a little later it will be necessary to root out of their minds the conviction that the breaking of their belongings is part of the fun.

It is an excellent lesson for the destructive child to give him a share in the mending of the things he has broken. Initiate him early into the mysteries of cement and glue and mucilage. The torn picture-book and broken toy should at once be laid aside, and the earliest date possible set for repairing the damages. As he realizes how much time and effort are necessary for undoing the harm wrought by a moment of carelessness, he is not so likely to think it a trifle. Impress upon his mind, too, that the article which is patched and mended and repaired is never quite as good as new — that it is much easier to do damage than to undo it.

There is an educative value in having certain toys laid aside as too good for every day. While the best things of all, love, sympathy, and patience, should be made use of daily and hourly in the home, every one knows that it does not contribute to the happiness of a child to be allowed to make mud-pies in the parlor and wear her best frock every day. To have certain toys that are brought out only on certain occasions, that are to be handled with loving carefulness, and put away at a stated time, is not a bad object lesson to that portion of young America which is inclined to destructiveness.

It is well, in considering the problem, to remember that we must make reason-

able allowance for accidents. Little people are not the only ones who occasionally break things. Sometimes the mother who is finding fault with Johnny for a spot on the table cloth spills her own coffee before the words are fairly out of her mouth. Children will destroy the toys not because they are children, but because they are human; and while it should be our aim to reduce the amount of destructiveness to the lowest possible limit, it is not worth while to invite disappointment and discouragement by raising an impossible standard.

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