

THE LONE RANGER

BY FRAN STRIKER



Successful Parenthood

Mrs. Catherine C. Edwards Associate Editor, Parents Magazine

DEVELOP SENSE OF RESPONSIBILITY

Not long ago a friend was showing me some keepsakes of her childhood. One of them was a quaint white silk dress, scarcely more than 18 inches long, yet in the grownup style in which children's clothes were once made—a square yoke, waistline with sash, and kick pleats in the skirt.

"You must have looked like a tiny lady in that," I remarked. "And that's exactly how I felt," my friend answered. "When I came across this dress, not having seen it for 30 years, I suddenly had a vision of myself as I had looked and felt when I wore it. In this flash of understanding I knew that I had felt then as complete a person as I do today—and just as responsible. Not that I was a precocious child—I was no brighter than any other five-year-old, but I knew what was expected of me and that I alone was responsible for my actions. I didn't feel like a partial adult—I was a person."

Psychologists have been telling us for years that a child is a distinct individual at each stage of growth. My friend's experience of reliving her five-year-oldness for a second provided proof from actual experience that a child is capable of accepting responsibility within the bounds of his knowledge of life.

Since this is true, then parents should make the most of it in the character education of their children. Too many parents give a child an "out" every time he fails to live up to their expectations. "Bobby was too tired to put away his tricycle," Mother will explain to an exasperated father who has had to get out of the car and remove the tricycle from the driveway before he could put the car in the garage.

Occasionally, of course, it is true that a child is too fatigued to do an expected chore. In which case it would be better for Mother to say, "Bobby, I can see that you are very tired. Come have your supper and I'll put your tricycle away so Daddy won't run into it when he drives the car in the garage."

But most of the time when a child fails to do what he knows is his own task, he is aware of his shirking. He doesn't want to do it so he takes a chance on the consequences. If he discovers that his mother will find an excuse for him, part of his innate sense of responsibility is lost. But if he finds out that the penalty for his failure to do what is expected of him is a logically unpleasant one (such as not being allowed to ride his tricycle for several days) the sense of responsibility, which had prompted him to do right and which he had disregarded, is justified in his own eyes and becomes an even stronger part of him.

Children learn much by trial and error. If this sense of responsibility, or conscience, is discredited by repeated experiences of getting away with what they know they shouldn't do, or getting by without doing what they know they should do, they soon cease to put much stock in it.

