

Self-Mastery 101

Teaching temperance and self-control in the family

Cervantes captured a deep truth when he wrote, *'Many of the greatest foes are within.'* Either our head guides our emotional life and our passions, or we can end up like Aphrodite described by Homer as, *'the slave of her passions'*. Appetites and passions are good in themselves but they need close management; our feelings must not manage us. The Roman soldier-poet Horace, wrote, *'Passions and emotions must stay under the sway of reason. Rule your passion. It will command if it does not obey; restrain it with a bridle and with fetters!'*

Feelings can appear overwhelming. At times we seem to lose some control over what is happening within our own bodies. Our emotions and passions seem to highjack the command centre. Two thousand years ago, Cicero wrote of poor self-control as, *'a fundamental defect in one's mind and reason'*. We rationalize instead of acting rationally. We get upset just thinking of a particular moment years ago. We bristle just when we really do need to stay calm. We just don't seem to be able of breaking out of feeling down. We struggle to motivate ourselves in certain jobs. We buy on impulse. We seem powerless other than to follow our feelings, even if we know deep down the direction is not good for us. If we habitually give in these matters, we have developed the vice of intemperance or poor self-mastery. Not good news.

When our feelings and emotions take over there is a hefty price to pay. A lack of self-control degrades us and is completely counter-productive; we lose control of our lives.

Our feelings are so easily manipulated by films and phone marketing, by peer fashions, by fun-first lifestyles. But nothing is new. Peter the Hermit wrote in the 11th century, *'The young people of today think of nothing but themselves. They have no reverence for parents or old age; they are impatient of all restraint; they talk as if they alone know everything and what passes for wisdom in us is foolishness in them. As for the girls, they are foolish and immodest and unwomanly in speech, behaviour and dress.'* But it is perhaps in Lydia Bennet in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* that we find the archetypical airhead; she was *'one of the silliest girls in the country'* according to her indulgent father. Her portrait would be comical except that her elopement ruins her happiness. She is classic Gen Y before her time: high on whim and feelings, and low on common sense and



Lack of self control would eventually be Lydia's undoing'

conscience. But it is *she* who through her adult life will pay the penalty for the failure of those who had the responsibility for her upbringing.

Rich emotional lives without the baggage

Our focus is on raising children with rich emotional lives, but at all times capable of retaining self-mastery. When we have incorporated this virtue in our character, we more easily control our temper, we are able to delay gratification by a conscious decision, and we can say no to ourselves so as to check our passions when they are not good for us or when they harm others. We learn to be content with pleasures in moderation. We grow in patience and exercise habits of courtesy and good manners, and generous habits of service. The virtue even assists us in overcoming our reluctance to make apologies when they are called for, allowing us to build up the essential life-skill of being able to restore relationships.

Seligman emphasizes respect for others as a key aspect of temperance, which he describes as *'the appropriate and moderate expression of ... appetites and wants. The temperate person does not suppress motives, but waits for opportunities to satisfy them so that harm is not done to self or others.'*

Seligman M (2002) *Authentic Happiness* (NY: Free Press) p152

Educational strategies



As for every other virtue, a key strategy in helping children acquire this virtue is to model it ourselves. Children are more prone to impulse control problems when they witness poor self-management in others: of temper, impatience, curiosity, quickness to sit in judgement of others, laziness, wasting time, disorder, even of infidelity and substance abuse. A different facet may manifest in a child, but at the core it is self-control itself that has not been modelled.



The first years, when emotions are already 'wiring', are so important. Researchers place the most critical period at 10-18 months. A child's experiences of parental affection, and of a teacher's loving encouragement are crucial for development. The brains of newborn infants are wiring simple emotion, stress, and contentment circuits in the brain. The development of other emotional circuitry continues: at eight or nine years of age complex feelings of envy and empathy develop their pathways.



We must teach the children in our care to understand emotion and passion. Let us raise them to read their own emotions, to harness positive emotional responses to their studies, in their community service, in their family life, in their support for their peers. And let us provide them with the wherewithal to limit the destructive effects of fear, hatred, and envy in their self-management. Let us do our best to raise and educate children who not only understand the psychology of emotions, passions and feelings but whose default setting is to look to their intelligence for guidance, not simply to follow their feelings or to do things simply *because* they are enjoyable.



Openness to guidance is crucial. We can all get down over mistakes. Let us raise children who do not lapse into these emotion driven responses. We all need correction and critical feedback to become better persons. Seligman reminds us that failing and negative feedback, handled well, are not bad things.

Source: Institute of Advanced Family Studies, Internatinonal University of Catalonia.
e-MEF program. <http://www.uic.es/en/marriage-education-family>