

How to Cure the Selfish, Destructive Child

The background of the cover is a dark, starry night sky. In the lower foreground, a pair of hands is shown from the wrist up, reaching upwards. The hands are pale and appear to be holding or reaching towards a glowing, ethereal figure. The figure is composed of bright, white, fibrous or root-like structures that form a complex, branching shape. The overall color palette is dominated by dark blues, blacks, and bright whites, with some hints of purple and pink from the child's sleeve.

Ruth
Minshull

*How to Cure the
Selfish, Destructive
Child*

By Ruth Minshull

The Application Series

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CHAPTER 1 A FAMILIAR SCENE

An adult has certain rights around children which the children and modern adults rather tend to ignore. A good, stable adult with love and tolerance in his heart is about the best therapy a child can have.

The main consideration in raising children is the problem of training them without breaking them. You want to raise your child in such a way that you don't have to control him, so that he will be in full possession of himself at all times. Upon that depends his good behavior, his health, his sanity.

– L. Ron Hubbard *Scientology*,
A NEW SLANT ON LIFE

"You can't have that," Tommy screamed, "It's mine!"

"Let me play with it!" cried little Kathy.

"No!"

"I'll tell your mother!"

Kathy ran into the kitchen where her mother, Mary, was trying to enjoy conversation and a cup of coffee with her friend, Phyllis. "Tommy won't let me play with anything," Kathy wailed.

"Tommy," Phyllis called. "You come here."

When the sullen youngster appeared in the doorway, she said, "Now, I want you to let Kathy play with that toy. She's your guest. You should share with her."

She snatched the toy from Tommy and handed it to the triumphant girl.

Tommy, however, was not ready to surrender so easily. "But I want it. It's mine!"

Tommy began screaming and tugging at the toy. Phyllis rose from the table, grabbed him by the arm and marched him off to his room. "Just stay in there. You're being very selfish. I'll talk with you later."

Frustrated and distracted, Phyllis returned to the kitchen and poured fresh cups of coffee. "I just don't know what to do with that boy. He's so selfish. He never wants to share with any of his friends. I always seem to end up intervening and sending him off to his room."

"I know just what you mean," Mary replied. "Kathy's the same way. And my older one, Mark, is every bit as bad. Neither one of them wants to share with each other or anyone else. We have constant wrangling around our place."

Phyllis nodded knowingly. "Tommy's so destructive too. If we didn't keep an eye on him every toy he owns would be destroyed. I've gotten so I put most of them up on the top shelf of his closet and just let him have one or two at a time. Do you have the same kind of troubles with your two?"

"Oh, yes. My husband gets furious at them. They never seem to have anything five minutes before it's broken. Bill says I should quit buying them things, but I just can't go that far."

"Well," sighed Phyllis, "maybe it's just a phase they go through."

"Let's hope so."

Does the preceding scene sound familiar?

Some variation of it is probably occurring in millions of homes every single day.

What makes children selfish?

Have you ever been embarrassed and frustrated by your own child's unwillingness to be generous with his possessions?

What's the cure? Is there a way to turn a selfish, destructive child into a generous and responsible person?

Yes. It can be done.

The cure can be found in a remarkably simple concept...

CHAPTER 2

LET GO!

There's one major rule that strongly influences a child's inclination to be generous:

When you give a child something, it's his. It's not still yours. Clothes, toys, quarters, what he has been given, must remain under his exclusive control.

– L. Ron Hubbard *Scientology*,
A NEW SLANT ON LIFE

You must let the youngster own his possessions *completely!*

Well, you may say, of course he owns his things.

But – does he?

The mistake most of us make with our offspring is to insist on telling them how to care for their possessions, where to put them, when to use them and with whom they must share.

Although we are generally acting with the best of motives when we do this, it seldom works. In fact, the harder we try to combat the problem, the more careless and greedy the children seem to become.

We can start to correct these undesirable tendencies by letting the child do exactly as he wishes with each of his possessions (assuming he is not actually harming someone or something, of course).

Don't tell him how to care for it.

Don't tell him where to keep it.

Don't tell him when or how to play with it.

Above all, don't force him to share his property with someone else.

Put yourself in the child's place. How would you feel if Aunt Agatha gave you a nice new transistor radio as a gift, then popped in unexpectedly several times each day to make certain you were using the gift properly? She might tell you where to keep it, remind you to clean it, tell you when you might and might not use it and, finally, insist that you loan it to the neighbor across the street who ruined her own radio by leaving it out in the backyard during a rain storm.

If Aunt Agatha were harassing you in this manner, would you feel that the radio actually belonged to you? What would be your thoughts about the radio itself? Unless you have an uncommonly placid nature, you would probably want to smash the thing (preferably right over Aunt Agatha's solicitous head).

CHAPTER 3 DESTRUCTIVENESS

If the idea of having someone pick at you about one little radio bothers you, imagine having someone nag you all day, every day, about practically everything you supposedly own.

Rather overwhelming, isn't it?

When you permit your child to take full possession this means that you must also permit him to smash his things if he wishes to do so. But don't run out and replace such broken toys. Instead, understand why he does this.

...he wrecks, on purpose, the possession about which he is so often cautioned. Why? Because he is fighting for his own self determinism, his own right to own and make his – weight felt on his environment.

– L. Ron Hubbard *Scientology*,
A NEW SLANT ON LIFE

I think we could truthfully say that the major cause of destructiveness in children stems from their lack of ownership.

Every human being needs to have a sense of self-importance and independence. A child depends on you for his clothing, shelter, transportation and food. In fact, the only area in which he can begin to establish his independence is with his own belongings.

When we don't let him exercise his own power over his possessions, he thrashes out at the environment any way he can. He harasses us, he accidentally knocks our favorite vase off the coffee table, he "just happens" to drop his milk glass on the floor. And he quite purposefully breaks the possessions we're trying so hard to protect.

A child will destroy everything (his own things, your belongings, the house, and your peace of mind) **just to escape your domination.**

He wants and needs to exercise exclusive control over *something*. As part of his natural development and growing up process, he must learn responsibility and judgment. He can acquire these only by his independence. And learning – sometimes the hard way.

Keep in mind that when a child takes apart a toy, it isn't necessarily a case of rebellion every time. When it is, and he's upset by the loss, we can mildly sympathize but *never* offer to replace the broken toy. Only by such losses will he begin to place a value on his property.

Sometimes a child takes apart a toy simply because it is interesting. Whatever the reason, we have no business interfering. He may want to study the insides. Or he may want to play with the parts.

My youngest son, Lee, nearly always took his toys apart. Instead of one toy used as it was designed to be used, he would end up with forty-seven assorted and unidentifiable parts.

To my repeated amazement, however, he always enjoyed these little pieces of junk more than he ever did the original toy.

The bed from the expensive dump truck might wind up as an important part of the "fort" on the battlefield with his cheap, plastic soldiers. The pegs taken from some game turned out to be perfect missiles for firing across the enemy's line.

It was none of my business that the original toys were gone.

CHAPTER 4

THE BIG YARD SALE

One day when my older son, Paul, was seven years old he held a "yard sale." This was long before adults were holding their garage sales, basement sales, porch sales and the like.

Promotion by word-of-mouth was most effective. By mid-morning every kid in the block showed up with a few pennies in his or her grubby hand. Paul cheerfully dragged out nearly every toy he owned.

I groaned inwardly as I watched him sell his beach ball for twelve cents. His pail and shovel went for three pennies. I nearly cried as the twelve-dollar construction set sold for nine cents and a penny Tootsie Roll.

He finished the day with about eighteen cents and a nifty jeep. He seemed most pleased with his day's endeavor until the former jeep owner's father stormed over that evening to demand the return of the toy. Paul was mystified and indignant at the parental interference, but he gave up the jeep for the return of his own toy.

The following day he went shopping with me and, after much deliberation, he spent his profits on a cheap, plastic, take-apart racing car. He never did regret the absence of his original toys.

The experience taught me a lesson. He enjoyed having his own money to spend as he wished. This was another example of exercising his independence and power of choice.

From then on, at Christmas and birthday time, I always made sure that one gift was an envelope with money which the boys could spend any way they wished.

I also started to find ways in which they could earn their own spending money – a practice that proved to be very important in their lives.

CHAPTER 5

SHARING

What does all this have to do with generosity or unselfishness?

When I first started using this non-interference policy, Paul was about four years old. In the beginning, he was so possessive that I began to wonder if children (mine, anyway) were just naturally selfish.

Then one day he was playing with little Johnny from next door. I heard an argument over Paul's new truck. Johnny wanted it and Paul was saying "no."

Soon Johnny came running out to me. Assuming that, as the guest, he would automatically be favored, he said, "Paul won't let me play with his truck."

"Well, I'm sorry about that, Johnny," I told him, "but it's Paul's truck. He can do as he wants with it."

Shocked and indignant, Johnny announced that he was leaving. And off he went.

The next day Johnny returned, but in less than five minutes they were having the same dispute over the same truck. Again Johnny left.

Paul came out to the kitchen where I was doing the dishes. "Johnny keeps going home just because I won't let him play with my new truck."

"Yes. I noticed that."

"Now I don't have anybody to play with."

"Would you like a suggestion?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Why don't you pick out something you *will* let Johnny play with and give that to him?"

He thought that over for a minute. "I could let him have my two cars. He likes those."

He ran next door and made this offer to his friend. Johnny came back to the house and that was the last argument they ever had about toys.

After this experience, Paul always took his friends to his room and showed them the toys he was willing to allow them to use.

By directing their attention to something they could have, his guests were satisfied – and so was he.

Gradually, as he gained confidence in his right to ownership, he became more and more generous about snaring with others.

We were visiting friends one day when their son, Frankie, refused to share some toy with Paul. His parents were starting to admonish the child. Frankie was howling in righteous protest when I called Paul to me. "Look," I reminded him, "at home you share only the things

you want to share. Let's be fair here. Why don't you ask Frankie to pick out something he's willing to let you use while you're here."

"OK. That's a good idea."

This plan satisfied Frankie, and the rest of our visit was peaceful.

Later Paul improved on this idea by taking a few of his own toys when we went to someone's house. After a few minutes of barter, each child would settle down and thoroughly enjoy playing with the new toy – on loan for the duration of the stay.

CHAPTER 6

THE ROOM

We've discussed the importance of a child owning his possessions – free of interference from us. Generally this applied to his toys. However, the same considerations should be given to his space.

Every child should have a room of his own. If this is not possible, make sure that each youngster (who is snaring a room) is assigned a portion of that room as exclusively his. He should also be given his own drawer space, shelves or other storage space (even if this is merely a cardboard box under the bed). Perhaps a dividing screen can be used to provide him with valuable privacy.

If conditions are very crowded, it might be possible to block off some space for each of the children in the basement or attic – for play and storage.

Work it out any way you can, but make certain that his area belongs to him – to treat as he pleases. Don't tell him where to put things or how to take care of the room.

This last is often a strain on us, for few, if any, children seem to come into this life with any consuming desire for neatness and order.

At one time, I insisted that my two boys clean their rooms at least once a week. In less than two days, however, the rooms always looked as if a small typhoon had passed through.

Despite my repeated insistence that they do this cleaning, they didn't seem to be developing neat habits. The weekly enforcement was exhausting for me and, naturally, a total nuisance to them. I decided it wasn't worth it; I would change my entire approach to the matter.

"From now on," I announced, "you keep your clutter out of the rest of the house, and you may let your own rooms look like the city dump if you want to."

Well, they did (especially the latter).

It took a century or two before they began to develop a trace of pride in their own surroundings. But eventually they did. On an occasional Saturday, they would organize the "Big clean." Mountains of plastic bags full of discards would emerge along with sounds of moving furniture and small arguments about what should be kept and what should be thrown out. (For some reason they always helped each other, rather than each cleaning his room separately.) Finally, they would each wind up with a room that could be left with the door open – for a few days, anyway.

This brings to mind another rule that I made: their doors must be kept closed when the spillover factor became too great or when I expected guests. If the rooms were clean, of course, the doors could be left open.

CHAPTER 7

CLOTHES

Probably the most difficult rule I imposed on myself concerned the boy's clothing – letting them select and care for them as they wished.

The difficulty was not theirs; it was mine.

As soon as they were old enough to dress themselves, however, I bravely let go of this department. If they put their clothing down the laundry chute, it was cleaned and returned. Under no circumstances, however, would I venture into their rooms and attempt to sort out those things that should go into the laundry. (If left to my own devices, I would probably have brought in a bulldozer and plowed straight through.)

It took some time before they cared about the condition of their clothes, but eventually they began to dislike torn, unwashed clothes. They developed the habit of changing their clothing after school and placing torn garments on the sewing machine for mending.

As a bonus, they even learned to wash their own things in an emergency. (There's a dance at school tonight and he hasn't thrown anything down the clothes chute for a month.) They also learned how to mend and iron – if every alternative failed.

Now that women have become more liberated it's not all bad for men to know how to do all of these things. It could be a long time before they find someone else to do them.

There was only one rule I made on clothing: when I offered to take them out someplace that I considered "dress up," they could go or not, but when they went out with me they had to meet my standards of dress.

It didn't take long for them to handle this condition by keeping a clean set of clothing in their respective closets; thus they were ready for any opportunities that came along.

In time, without prodding on my part, both boys began to care about their appearances. There were daily showers, more hours in front of the mirror, increased demands for clothing replacement and other signals indicating that **girls** had entered their lives.

CHAPTER 8

OUR PROBLEM

"But all this would be too painful," many parents say when they first hear these theories.

Of course it is. It hurts us to watch a child sell a ten-dollar truck for fifty cents or trade a scale model jet for a broken yo-yo. It's positively excruciating to see a youngster take apart that cute watch from Grandpa and play with all the little parts. And, of course, our pride suffers when the child runs around looking like a castoff from a refugee camp, not to mention the fact that he's living in a room that, if seen by city officials, would be condemned.

Nevertheless, the child is quite happy with the condition of his possessions – so what is our problem?

Too often we put a dollar value on a toy, while the child puts only an **interest** value on it.

In other words, perhaps he finds the *pieces* of the walking, talking, robot more enthralling than the original robot. The broken yoyo may be more interesting than the jet.

We have no right to enforce our own standards of value on our children. We can influence them, of course – and we do. But many parents have learned, the hard way, that when they come on too strongly about something, the child flips rebelliously and takes a completely opposite stand.

"Yes," parents say, "but the dollar value of those toys he's wrecking represents so many minutes or hours of my work. It has a *real* value."

That's right, of course. But we should examine our purpose in giving the toy in the first place. We could hand the child ten dollars and it would have no value by itself. It is merely worth so many hours of pleasant activity. That is the end result we are seeking – hours of enjoyment.

If the child will get more joy out of the parts of a toy than out of the whole product, who can argue about that? We have (indirectly, to be sure) given him the desired hours of pleasure.

And then we have our own egos. We may find that our only objections are not actually monetary. We are hurt or insulted that the youngster is rejecting our carefully chosen offerings.

Again we must ask ourselves: are we trying to give the child happiness, or are we trying to manipulate him?

Generosity stems from the concept of fulfillment, the security of unchallenged ownership. If we felt poor and insecure we would find it much harder to be charitable to others. It is only when we feel secure, when we have a sense of abundance that we are able to share graciously.

So it is with our children.

CHAPTER 9

THE RIGHTS OF OTHERS

One afternoon, years ago, a neighbor came over with her two preschoolers. I offered her a cup of coffee. While it was perking, I took the young boy and girl to the closet that contained toys both of the boys had "cleared" for the use of visiting children. I told them to help themselves.

As their mother, Jane, and I sat at the kitchen table, the children played quietly upstairs. They didn't come back, so I assumed they were enjoying themselves with the whole closet full of "new" toys.

Jane and I chatted for some time before she called her offspring and went home.

After they left, I found my bedroom in a state of shocking devastation. Dresser drawers were open, clothing scattered around, shoes were out of the closet, perfume and cosmetics were spilled over my dressing table. The room was in a shambles.

As I cleaned it up, I wondered why these children would do such a thing. It would never occur to either of my sons to violate the property rights of another person this way.

I realized then that my taking L. Ron Hubbard's advice on ownership and implementing it had brought side benefits that I had never appreciated. Since they were both allowed to exercise complete control over their own possessions, no one in our household ever used something belonging to another without permission. As a result of this, the children grew up with a respect for the property of others.

There was never the problem of them grabbing the knick knacks off coffee tables or rummaging in my cupboards and drawers. I would simply say (at the first such attempt) "That belongs to me. Your toys belong to you."

A child's sense of ownership makes it easy for him to understand this.

The only significant rules that I established (as far as their possessions were concerned) related to violating the rights of others.

For example, they were not permitted to use their toys to harm the bodies, spaces or properties of someone else.

No squirt guns were allowed to be used in the house. When the boys were older, bow and arrows, BB guns and this sort of thing were used only outside – and they were regarded as weapons rather than toys.

The individual's right of ownership must never supersede observing the rights of others in the house or neighborhood.

Children thrive when they understand the exact boundaries of the freedom they enjoy.

CHAPTER 10

WHAT ABOUT EXPENSIVE GIFTS?

Don't buy a child a gift that's too elaborate or expensive for him to appreciate – especially if his abuse or negligence of that gift would cause you any anguish.

What about the big train set that Dad wants to buy five-year-old Jimmy? The train that Dad never had? The boy is obviously too young for such a toy. Does this mean that everyone must be denied the pleasure it could give?

No. Dad should buy the train for *himself*. You might think this a very strange solution, but you should try it. The child won't think it's odd. Some of the neighbors might – but perhaps they're just envious of your joyous spirit.

When the child has been raised with a certainty that possessions given to him really do belong to him, he'll respect the fact that the train set belongs to Daddy.

Now Dad can set up the trains and track-then let the child play with it, under supervision.

Dad can make all the rules. The boy will be thrilled when he is permitted to handle the controls or rearrange the tracks.

A few years ago Lee and I became interested in the hobby of metal detecting. He acquired an inexpensive metal detector, but it wasn't as effective as the top-quality detector that I owned.

We often went "treasure hunting" together, although I usually let him use my machine. Soon he was asking to borrow the detector to go out on his own. I let him. Later he used it almost exclusively, but I retained the ownership. He always asked to use it, treated it carefully and returned it intact to its place in my closet.

I did the same thing with some fine binoculars, a typewriter, a stereo set and many other grown up toys. Both of the boys used my equipment with respect, and I always retained the "rights" and made the rules for use and care.

CHAPTER 11

MONEY OF HIS OWN

As part of his lessons in generosity and responsibility, a child should develop a sense of money value as early as possible.

The best way I know to do this, is to find methods by which he can earn money of his own – at an early age.

Earn it. Money has little value when it is always given. If you give a child an allowance he should be required to do certain jobs around the house to earn it. This is his first salary and one of the most vital lessons he will ever learn: that you must give a good product or service in exchange for desired possessions.

Some "great authorities" have argued that if you make a child work for his allowance he will never give his services generously.

While this is an interesting theory, it just isn't true.

If you should ask him to help you carry in the groceries and he says, "How much will you pay me for it?" you need only remind him that you don't charge him for all the extra things you do for him. It's time for a talk about the fact that we live in a state of strong dependence upon one another, and that when we are willing to help others freely, it will always be easy to find someone who will return such kindness when we need it.

I never found this to be a problem with my sons. A few years ago I was trying to finish a book I was working on. The boys, who were then eleven and seventeen, offered to take over my household jobs for the summer so I could devote full time to my writing. I gladly accepted the offer. So, for the summer, I secluded myself in my writing studio while they cooked all the meals, did the grocery shopping, cleaned house, did the laundry and handled all phone calls and visitors.

I paid them nothing extra for this, above their regular allowances. They gave up a summer of play because they believed in the book I was writing and felt that it was the most important contribution they could make.

Even a very small child can start to earn money from doing useful chores about the house. Adjust the jobs to the age of the child. He can start by helping Mother pick up the living room, setting the table or raking the leaves with Dad. As he gets older, he can be given increasingly responsible jobs.

It is very important at this stage to express appreciation of the child's help. Don't be critical of his work and don't offer a constant stream of orders and admonitions. You must give the youngster the courage to be imperfect – to try something. How well he does a job is not as important at this point as nurturing his desire to contribute.

There is no better way for a child to learn the value of things than to spend his earned money on them.

Several years ago Lee bought his first bike. It wasn't the first bike he had owned, but it was the first time he had purchased one with his own savings.

He rode the bicycle to school each day, carefully securing it with the lock and chain he had purchased. When he returned home, however, he was not always so careful.

One afternoon he returned from school and left his bike leaning against the side of the house. He was going out again in just a few minutes, so he didn't bother locking it up.

When he emerged from the house, the bike was gone.

He was heartbroken. "I bought that with my own money! What kind of a guy would steal a kid's bike?"

There wasn't much I could say, I sympathized, but resisted the desire to preach.

It took some time, but he saved up enough money to buy another bicycle, and you'd better believe that bike was trussed up with so many locks and chains that Houdini himself couldn't have gotten it undone.

Do you want to see your child take good care of things?

Let him spend his own money for them – preferably money he has earned. Possessions will then represent so many hours of labor; they will have new value.

No matter how little you pay him, he will know that his own time and efforts are worth something.

That's vital to everyone.

CHAPTER 12

NEVER TOO LATE TO START

If your child is still very young, you can implement these ideas and save yourself a great many frustrations later on.

If the child is older, however, a pattern has already formed and the job will be a little more difficult for both of you. It may be necessary to sit down with him and explain that you have made a mistake in the past. From now on his belongings, his toys, games, clothes, and his room are his own to do with as he pleases. Outline any rules that you consider important. Ask him if there are any questions, then turn him loose.

It may take some time for him (and you) to break the old habits, but hold to your position of non-interference. He will probably test you many times at first – to make sure you really mean it. Expect this and understand it. Keep in mind that one day you are going to be very proud of him.

Lee, at the age of twelve, became interested in coin collecting as a hobby. His allowance and any extra money he could earn went into new additions to his collection. He bought, sold and traded. I never interfered with his transactions. Naturally, he made some mistakes. Occasionally he lost money on a deal, but he learned – and every lesson was valuable.

Later I helped finance the purchase of some collections. He always paid me back quickly and with generous interest. By the time he was fourteen he rented a safe deposit box to store his collection – by then worth several thousand dollars.

Both of my sons now have fine jobs and are doing extremely well financially.

I like to believe that their success is due, in part, to the fact that they were always permitted to exercise control over their own possessions. They each developed a shrewd sense of value and an ability to make quick decisions. It probably helped that neither of them had to answer to someone else for any mistakes he made.

A person who is allowed to own his belongings (without interference) develops a sense of worth. He is willing and able to acquire more and to develop self-sufficiency.

When parents deprive a child of this sense of personal ownership, the child may adopt the concept that nobody can actually own anything and that possessions are just too much trouble.

He may become a person who can't have anything – a condition that could last a lifetime.

This won't always happen, of course. But among today's young people we see far too many who are unwilling to work, unwilling to own. They don't want the "hassle" of possessions. Instead, they are convinced that someone should contribute to them. They have no idea of how to take care of themselves in the adult world – and this isn't something they can learn the day after they graduate from school.

All of us want our children to become generous and responsible citizens. However, in our well-meaning attempts to guide them, we often do exactly the opposite of the right action. We tell them they must share and we nag them to take better care of their toys.

Let your child have his own things. Let him care for them and make decisions about them. The power inherent in this decision-making will ultimately teach him independence and responsibility.

He will make mistakes. He may break belongings, lose toys, make uneven trades and suffer the consequences. But those consequences will teach him a great deal more than you or I ever could with years of preaching and admonishments.

That's what life is all about.

We must all experience the consequences of our own actions. Better that children learn with a ten-dollar toy than to throw away an entire college education or wreck a car while still trying to escape our domination.

Remember that your child is a small-sized human being with most of the same needs and frustrations that we have.

He's a nice person (I know there are times it may be hard to believe that!) who merely wants to be recognized as a fellow human being with the accompanying rights. But he has not yet earned a living, been given a raise, won a trophy or received most of the symbols of acceptance that help to remind a person that he's capable.

Give him his rights of ownership while he's young. He'll soon demonstrate his natural capacity for responsibility and generosity.

Try it.

And good luck!