

## Fostering Moderation and Self Control

Feelings can sometimes 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 can't break 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. Not good news.

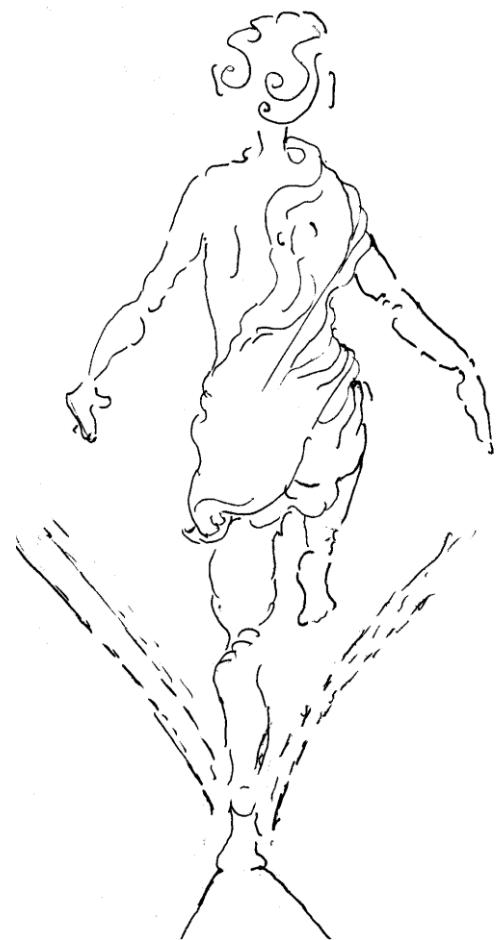
When our feelings and emotions take over there is a hefty price to pay. A lack of self-control not only degrades us but it is completely counterproductive; we lose control of our lives.

Cervantes captured a deep, self-evident truth when he wrote, *'Many of the greatest foes, those whom we must chiefly combat, 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 wonderful in themselves but they need close management. Our feelings must not manage us. Let us raise children with rich emotional lives, but at all times capable of retaining self-mastery.

Young people are easily manipulated by clever marketing and by peer fashions. 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.'* An indulgent upbringing works much mischief. Lydia Bennet in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is *'one of the silliest girls in the country'* according to her doting father. Her portrait would be comical except that her elopement ruins her happiness. It is *she* who, through her adult life, will pay the penalty for the failure of those who had the responsibility for her upbringing.

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 full development.

Are we raising children to seek pleasure in what is good, true and beautiful? When we have incorporated self-control in our



Step carefully  
Choose wisely  
I am master of myself

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 sensual appetites and 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.

## Strategies for parents



**Example is always the best teacher. Show by example that self-control brings happiness.**

Children with impulse control problems are, more often than not, the children of parents with self-management challenges of temper, impatience, curiosity, quickness to sit in judgement of others, laziness, wasting time, disorder, even of infidelity and substance abuse.



**We must teach the children in our care to understand emotion and passion.** Let us raise them with a high EQ, to read their own emotions, to harness positive emotional reactions in their studies, in their community service, in their family life, in their support for their peers. 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.



**Parental guidance is crucial.** The natural path for all of can be to develop an aversion for those who give us negative feedback, or who cause negative emotions. But let us raise children who do not lapse into this emotion driven response. We all need correction and critical feedback to become better persons. Seligman reminds us that failing and negative feedback are not necessarily bad things.



**Teach about what is right and what is wrong.** With a map we are less likely to get lost.



**Consult your children.** Give children the experience of making their own decisions as they are growing up... it would be inviting problems if parents would so restrict a young person that he or she would enter adulthood without any personal convictions about the need and importance of self-control. Teenagers most at risk are those who have been obliged to conform throughout adolescence, but who have not internalised the behaviours. Bring children into decision making. At least consult them and ask their opinions and advice.



**Give plenty of responsibilities and measured freedoms.** Insist that there are no privileges without responsibilities. Neither give too much freedom whereby a young person could end up in situations for which he is unprepared and in moral or physical danger, nor too little room to move.



**Beware of pitfalls to self-control:** TV or computer game addictions, exposure to pornography in the media or on TV, poor eating habits, behaviours which isolate, *Facebook* at study time, slack habits of use of time on weekends, sleeping in excessively. Don't let bad habits become entrenched because a lack of

parental will. Set clear expectations, talk to their hearts, and help them to set realistic short term goals. Win these battles early as it can be much harder in mid-adolescence.