Asking for water

Years ago, I took my first child to a “play school”, the British term for preschool, and helped out there as well, since I had nothing else to do while waiting for him. One little girl used to come with her maid, since the family was very well-to-do. She would play and sing like everyone else, then suddenly, she’d throw herself on the floor, or even the yard if she happened to be out there, and start a tantrum. She would scream and holler, roll around, kick her feet, and so on. We all know what that looks like. The maid would come running, and beg her to stop. She would try reasoning, holding her, whatever, until finally the little princess would decide to stop the fuss and say, between sobs and screams, “I want some water.” The maid would get her water, she’d drink it, and then go back to her activities or games.

That little scenario occurred on a daily basis.

What was wrong with that child? Why couldn’t she just ask for water, or bathroom, or snack, without going through that act? The answer is simple; she had been conditioned to do that.

Almost every behavior that we have is a result of training and conditioning. If you don’t pay attention to a child until she kicks a tantrum, then she learns that to get what she wants, she needs to have that tantrum first. If I want something, the way to get it is to fuss and roll and shout.

Some parents are too busy to give that “touch base” hug to their child on a regular basis. The child wants some love and attention, and comes bugging the parent. Mother answers, “Can’t you see I’m in the middle of cooking?” or telephoning? Or laundry, or whatever else is terribly important at the time. What the child learns is: You are not as important as cooking/ telephoning/ laundry. A hug takes a few seconds, and the child learns that you are there for her when she needs you. She is now happy and goes back to play.

Another frequent occurrence is that parents do not give enough attention to a child unless they are sick or hurt. So the child either overacts over tiny scratches or bumps, or makes up stories of being hurt to get the parents’ attention. The solution is simple: give the child more attention for being normal, for being good, and less when they are hurt. Show them how to clean and bandage a scratch, and next time they get one, ask them to take care of it themselves.

On the same topic, many a well-meaning mother condition their child into a hysterical mass of nerves simply by overreacting over small bumps and scratches. The typical setting is when the child first falls down while trying to learn to walk. The mother screams her head off, runs to the child who is rather stunned at the entire scene and proceeds to cradle, hug, and pamper him. “Are you OK? Where are you hurt?” and so on. Better still, if some other child is present, it’s also, “Whose fault is it? Did he push you?” So now, the child starts screaming too. He just learned that, “Oh, that was a very dangerous thing that just happened. A big adult just went berserk over it. So I must too. And it must be someone else’s fault, let’s find whom we should blame.”

A much saner version of the same scenario would be as follows: the child teeters and falls. Let’s face it, it was from a height of barely less than two feet, usually on a carpet or rug, on thick diapers, or fat chubby legs, at a speed of one foot per minute. The chances that he broke a bone are very minimal. The mother barely glances at the child, continues whatever she is doing, and says in a calm voice, “Tommy, (or Ahmed), get up! Come on, get up all by yourself, you big boy!” If he happens to whine, you say, “What? What is that terrible noise? Did someone get hurt? Oh, it cannot possibly be you, since you are perfectly all right!” Then when he does stand back up again, you say, “Come over here, I need to give you a hug, you were so brave!” Do not go to him. Let him crawl, creep or toddle to you. When he does, now you give him the hug and then say, “Oh, does anything hurt? Do you want me to blow on it?” or whatever else your custom is to soothe booboos. What has he just learnt? First, there are ups and downs in life. Most downs don’t hurt much. One can always get back up by oneself. Second, Mom is always there for me, when I’m down, when I feel I need comfort. Instead of Mom, read: family, support, God, etc.

Those first six years of life are the most crucial time in a child’s learning career. They will learn their basic attitudes to life and principles of living. As mothers, we are their model of a sane adult, the rock of their life. It is paramount to remain calm in all circumstances, and always give unconditional love, but only after they learn to stand on their own two feet.