Courage & Determination

Among human values, certain qualities are generally regarded as inborn. We think of a person as being courageous, another as being stubborn, and so on. Few educators have spent time thinking about whether these qualities are teachable skills, and if they are, how to do so.

One of the main stumbling blocks in this path is Jean Piaget, the universally acknowledged pioneer in the field of child development. Piaget developed his theories based on his observations of his niece. He himself never became a father. Mothers all over the world observe their children 24/7 and come up with some pretty sharp conclusions. Unfortunately, if someone with a title, say of Child Psychologist, tells them otherwise, they will bow to the god of academia and quickly disregard their own field observations. To compound the problem, the fields of psychiatry and psychotherapy rarely interact with the field of education, thus resulting in a disjointed view of how to raise children. Let me illustrate.

Years ago, when my third son was graduating from toddlerhood, Jeddah opened its first McDonald. This was the full deal, with an indoor playground of colorful balls and plastic jungle gym. We promptly paid it a visit, kids in tow, together with some friends. One of them was a psychology graduate, raising her own toddler along the lines of no-pressure, frustration-avoidance parenting. The children made a beeline to the playground and we sat back, waiting for our orders.

While the other children climbed, slid and romped about, my third son carefully picked his way up the ladder to the first tower. Then, he took one look at the rope net that followed, and picked his way back down the ladder. I immediately jumped up, though my friend made a slight sound of disapproval. I squatted by my son and told him to go back to the tower. He resisted slightly. I assured him I’d be there with him. So up he went again up that ladder, with me right behind. When we reached the rope net, he tried it out with his hand. The net moved, swung and bounced. He turned around, groping for the ladder. I barred his way out. “No, go back. You WILL go through that net. Go!” The poor boy had by now tears hovering on the brink of his eyes. I grabbed him and turned him around. I pushed his behind. “Go! You can do this! I’m here, right behind you.” It took him a good five minutes to make it over the fat squares of rope netting, shaking and trembling. But he got through. So did I, despite the fact that I was surprised to find it more scary than I’d anticipated! Now, we were in the second tower. A tube slide with a slight twist ran down the front of it. My son took one look at the dark hole and turned around, trying to return to the rope net. Again, I sat squarely in front of the exit, barring the way. “Go! Go down the slide! It’s fun!” His facial expression certainly did not agree with that statement. So I grabbed him and held him on my lap, and pushed ourselves down the slide. Whoosh! That was way too slippery and fast! We landed together on the soft flooring. I sat there dazed for a while. But already my son had jumped up and run off. By the time I was able to stand up, he was already climbing the ladder for another round of fun!

I slowly made it back to our table. My friend had her jaw hanging in disbelief. She kept saying, “Look, look, he’s going again, and again!” I threw a quick glance in his direction, “Yes, he is!”

Today, this particular son of mine has achieved quite a few things that are pioneering in scale. I would say these deeds take courage and determination. And I ponder on whether he would have done them if way back I hadn’t pushed him through that rope net and that tube slide. Psychopathology clearly identifies phobias as being behaviors born of avoidance of a feared object or situation. The vicious cycle builds up every time the person avoids or runs away from the feared situation, and eventually becomes part of the personality. Yet, most parents and educators still encourage children to turn and step away from feared situations, building a strong foundation for phobias.