

Reasoning with Children

John Locke

§81. It will perhaps be wondered that I mention *reasoning* with children: and yet I cannot but think that the true way of dealing with them. They understand it as early as they do language; and, if I misobserve not, they love to be treated as rational creatures sooner than is imagined. 'Tis a pride should be cherished in them and, as much as can be, made the great instrument to turn them by.

But when I talk of *reasoning* I do not intend any other but such as is suited to the child's capacity and apprehension. Nobody can think a boy of three or seven years old should be argued with as a grown man. Long discourses and philosophical reasonings at best amaze and confound, but do not instruct children. When I say therefore that they must be *treated as rational creatures* I mean that you should make them sensible by the mildness of your carriage and the composure even in your correction of them that what you do is reasonable in you and useful and necessary for them and that it is not out of *caprichio*,* passion, or fancy that you command or forbid them anything. This they are capable of

understanding; and there is no virtue they should be excited to nor fault they should be kept from which I do not think they may be convinced of, but it must be by such *reasons* as their age and understanding are capable of and those proposed always in very *few and plain words*. The foundations on which several duties are built and the fountains of right and wrong from which they spring are not perhaps easily to be let into the minds of grown men not used to abstract their thoughts from common received opinions. Much less are children capable of *reasonings* from remote principles. They cannot conceive the force of long deductions: the *reasons* that move them must be *obvious* and level to their thoughts, and such as may (if I may so say) be felt and touched. But yet, if their age, temper, and inclinations be considered, there will never want such motives as may be sufficient to convince them. If there be no other more particular, yet these will always be intelligible and of force to deter them from any fault fit to be taken notice of in them, viz. that it will be a discredit and disgrace to them, and displease you.

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