



## Clanking Chains: The Blackboard System: Child Training Should Emphasize Volitional Responsibility: Commitment to Contracts & Development of Integrity

Roberts, Monty. "Respect: The Blackboard System." Chap. 5 in *Horse Sense for People*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 133-34:

### THE BLACKBOARD SYSTEM

For decades now I have used a system that has worked well to provide parents with an objective way of dealing with the behavior of their children.

If you can give your student the chance to choose his or her own consequences you will instill a sense of responsibility over his or her own actions—taking yourself out of the punishment business.

Once the horses taught me, through their own actions, how it worked, I knew I could apply the same methods to the young people we began to bring into our home. Naturally, there were aspects of this system that changed when applied to human students, but it amazed me how easily it translated from Equus to English. (p. 133)

The essential elements of this system are as follows: each child has two boards that are about two feet by three feet. These belong to both parent and child and are placed in a prominent position where it is easy for both to view them without difficulty. I prefer to have them outside the child's room, and in an area that is open to the entire family. (pp. 133-34)

The primary objective of this system is to bypass the parent as the administrator of discipline or punishment. It sets up a contract whereby child and parent bilaterally agree on the response to positive or negative behavior. A secondary goal is to bring the young person to an understanding of contracts and responsibilities. I have found this system extremely effective in educating young people in the principle "My word is my bond." There was a time when a high percentage of people lived by this theory. It could have been the rural nature of the environment where I was raised, but I can recall a time when shaking a man's hand while looking him in the eye was considered more binding than today's legal contracts. It would be wonderful if that were the case today. Unfortunately it is not. Can you imagine, however, how much better a chance your children would have in life if that became a guiding principle for them? Today, with integrity in such short supply, your child could be a real hero if people knew they could count on his word. (p. 134)

1. The Blackboard System, about to be described, is a method that emphasizes volition and stresses both the benefits of making good decisions and the consequences of making bad ones.
2. Roberts insists that the parents are removed as the administrator of discipline or punishment. We have established that they most certainly are not. However, Monty's system does place the burden of whether the child falls under discipline or receives reward squarely upon his free-will decisions.
3. It might be better phrased that parents serve as intermediaries who are bound by the system to carry out either punishment or reward. They are not the cause of either but the conduit.
4. The child soon learns that his own free-will decisions cause either punishment or reward and his parents are simply the conduit through which they travel.
5. This sets the child up for the Christian way of life. Once saved, the Blackboard System is joined by the Bible System. The policies that establish good behavior and identify bad behavior are learned from the Word of God. The child must be taught that God is the conduit of reward for keeping His policies and of punishment for not doing so.



6. Just as his earthly father punished him for violations of policies established in the Blackboard System, so also his heavenly Father will punish him for violations of policies established in the Bible System.
7. Further, the child learns the principle of contracts—the act of entering into agreements which require compliance with established standards. He learns that once he signs on to a concept he is honor-bound to fulfill it. This builds personal integrity as the child learns how to trust others and to be trusted.
8. This system enables parents to become professional administrators of policy. The child learns to conform to policy by the exercise of free will. Benevolence is emphasized through reward while severity is emphasized through punishment.

### Roberts, *Horse Sense for People*, 134-36:

It is not a bad idea if the two boards you supply to each child are a different color, or identified by different frames or some other distinguishing feature. A different visual appearance dramatizes the different content of the boards. One board should be labeled POSITIVE and the other NEGATIVE.

NOTE: Prep School has a color code that the children learn the first day in class. In learning about volition and choices, green indicates decisions made from positive volition while red indicates decisions made from negative volition. When the child decides for Bible doctrine he “pushes” the Yes Button of his volition. When he makes a decision opposed to Bible doctrine he “pushes” the No Button of his volition. The Yes Button is green while the No Button is red. This color code is perfect for the Blackboard System: The POSITIVE board with a green frame or ink and the NEGATIVE board with a red frame or ink.

In addition, the names of the child and parents should appear on both boards. The clear implication is that one board will deal with the positive factors of the child’s life and the other with the negative. Further, it clearly establishes that the young person and the parent are involved with the board and its objectives. (p. 134)

It is critical that the parent first sit down with the child and calmly talk through this procedure, allowing no emotion to come into the explanation. Initiating this system should never appear to the child to be an act of a desperate parent who is seeking some bizarre method of dealing with the problems of their relationship. (pp. 134-35)

I recommend that you deal with the positive board first. I recommend the blackboard system for children as young as two years old, despite the fact that they may not be able to read or write. The parent can describe what’s on the board and then, taking the child’s hand with the marker, help the child place his or her initials under a one-line contract. It is amazing what young brains can comprehend. (pp. 135-36)

The parent then initials the contract as well. After signing, the parent should make eye-to-eye contact with the child, shake hands and say, “We now have a contract.” (p. 136)

On the positive board the parents should write down the policy that is designed to address misbehavior. For example, Fred, a three-year old boy, is discovered trying to hit his one-year old sister, Maureen, over the head with a toy hatchet. The policy would state:

*No hitting your sister over the head with a toy hatchet for two full days and I will take you to visit your grandmother.*

You read the policy to Fred, you each initial the contract, and shake hands. Then you move to the negative board where you have written:



*If you hit your sister with a toy hatchet within the next two days, you will scrub three tiles in the shower.*

You read the penalty clause, each signs it, and shakes hands. The impact is greater if the penalty clause states an action to be accomplished rather than a privilege denied. Monty Roberts explains the objectives of this disciplinary procedure:

**Roberts, *Horse Sense for People*, 137-38:**

Make it clear to the child that he or she is working as a negative consequence. I have found this to be an effective negative activity for tiny children because they can complete the procedure fairly easily and without creating an enormous mess. (Fred) should be notified that should the negative behavior persist, the number of tiles will be increased.

The parent has *no excuse* for not going to Grandma's house if (Fred) doesn't (hit his sister with the toy hatchet). And there is no reason why (he) should not clean the tiles if (he) does (hit his sister). Some children will attempt to control the parent by throwing a tantrum when faced with the prospect of cleaning a tile or some other chore. I suggest that, just as I do with my horses when they act out in a negative fashion, the parent simply step back and smile. The parents needs to hold fast to the belief that they are doing the right thing—a tantrum is part of the training procedure and should be viewed as such. When the tantrum is over, then the child cleans the tile.

Parents must judge how far to press the issue of cleaning the tile. Begin by accepting the slightest positive you can find and then reward the child by stating (he) has completed the task. I recommend that the parent view this moment as a victory, give the child a hug and say "I love you," letting (him) know that you are members of the same team. (p. 137)

It is incredible how effective parents can be when creating paths for children to follow. Lifelong patters of behavior can be established. The psychology of positive reinforcement is most effective and parents need to thoughtfully reinforce the paths they would like their children to follow. (P. 137-38)

During the two-day probationary period, the parents need to keep a sharp eye on Fred. Although he never did hit his little sister with the toy hatchet he did on one occasion pick it up and head her way with a telltale glint in his eye. Parents should let this go until critical point to see if Fred's volition will control his desire or if the sinful nature will influence him to commit the act. If he draws back in attack mode then intervention is required. However, if he refrains from the act then his volition has performed the corrective procedure. Only when necessary should parents become involved in either encouraging a positive decision or discouraging a negative one. It is the child's volition that is important. When positive decisions are made by the child great progress has been made. When Fred completes the two-day period successfully then reward is in order:

**Roberts, *Horse Sense for People*, 138:**

If (Fred) arrived at the designated time without committing the negative act, I recommend that the parent take the time to shake (his) hand, look (him) in the eye and congratulate (him) on (his) victory with another hug and a big smile, which never hurts. The child should feel loved and accepted by the parent and feel that the presence of the parent has created a place of safety for (him). And don't forget to agree on a time for the enactment of the positive consequence—the visit to Grandma's house.



When you are at Grandma's house, I strongly suggest you say, in the presence of the child and (his) grandma, "Fred has been a good little (boy)." Make it clear in (his) presence that (he) is being rewarded for good behavior. The parent need not mention the negative behavior because it would only be a source of embarrassment.

9. The objective of this system is to develop a process by which the child's behavior is controlled intrinsically rather than extrinsically.