

# The Preventive System Of St. John Bosco

*(This and the following chapter are a synthesis of Don Bosco's ideas on the Preventive System, as written by the Saint himself.)*

## **TWO WAYS IN EDUCATION**

There are two systems which have been in use through all ages in the education of youth: the Preventive and the Repressive. The Repressive System consists in making the law known to the subjects, and afterwards watching to discover the transgressors of these laws, and inflicting, when necessary, the punishments deserved. According to this system, the words and looks of the Superiors must always be severe, or rather menacing, and they themselves must avoid all familiarity with their dependents.

The Educator, in order to give weight to his authority, must rarely be found among his subjects, and as a rule only when it is a question of punishing or warning. This system is easy, less troublesome, and especially suitable in the army, and in general among the old and judicious, who ought of themselves to know and remember what the law and its regulations demand.

The Preventive System, on the contrary, makes a friend of the pupil, who looks upon his educator as a benefactor who advises him, wishes to make him good, to save him from trouble, from punishments, and from dishonor.

The Preventive System enables the pupil to take advice in such a manner that the language of the heart presents a strong appeal to him not only during the time of his education, but even afterwards. The educator having once succeeded in gaining the heart of his subject can afterwards exercise a great influence over him, can caution, advise and even correct him, although he may already occupy some position in the world.

## **PREVENTION**

This system consists in making the laws and regulations of an institution known. Then the Educator and his staff, like loving fathers, supervise students, converse with them, give advice and correction in a charitable manner; in other words, this system minimizes the possibility of committing faults. Based entirely on reason, religion, and charity, this system excludes all violent punishment and tries to do without even the slightest chastisement. It seems preferable for the following reasons:

- (a) The primary reason for this system is seen in the thoughtlessness of youth, which in one moment forgets the rules of discipline, and the punishments which they threaten. Consequently, a child often becomes culpable and deserving of punishment which he had no thought of, and which he quite forgot when heedlessly committing the fault which he would certainly have avoided, had a friendly voice warned him.
- (b) The pupil, being previously advised, does not remain downcast by the faults he has committed, as is the case when they are brought to the notice of the Principal. Nor will

he be irritated by the correction he receives, or by the punishment which is threatened or inflicted, because it is always accompanied by some friendly warning, which appeals to his reason, and generally wins over his heart, so that he sees the necessity of the chastisement and almost desires it.

- (c) The Repressive System may stop a disorder, but can hardly make the offenders better. Experience teaches that the young do not forget the punishments they have received, but often foster bitter feelings, along with the desire of throwing off the yoke and even of revenging themselves. It sometimes appears that they do not heed it, but one who can follow them in their future life knows that the reminiscences of youth are terrible, that they easily forget the punishments of their parents, but with great difficulty those of their teachers. There are cases of some who in later years have in a brutal manner taken vengeance for certain chastisements received during the period of their education.
- (b) The pupil will always be respectful towards his educators and will ever remember their care with pleasure. He will look upon them as fathers and brothers. No matter where they may be, these pupils are generally found to be the consolation of their families, useful citizens and good Catholics.

Some may say that this system is difficult in practice. I reply that, for the pupils, it is easier, more satisfactory and more advantageous. To the teacher it certainly does present some difficulties, which, however, can be diminished if he applies himself to his task with zeal. An educator is one who is entirely consecrated to the welfare of his pupils, and should, therefore, be ready to face every difficulty and endure fatigue in order to attain his object, which is the civil, moral and intellectual education of his pupils.

### **BASIC PRINCIPLES**

The practice of this system is wholly based on the words of St. Paul who says: 'Charity is patient, is kind. It beareth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things, (Cor. xiii: 4, 7). Hence only a Christian can apply the 'Preventive' system with success. Reason and Religion are the means which the educator ought to apply constantly, which he ought to teach, and which he himself ought to practice, if he wishes to be obeyed and to attain his end.

Care should be taken that the pupils never remain alone. As far as possible, the teachers ought to go beforehand to the place where the boys are to gather together, they should remain with them until others come to relieve them, and the pupils should never be left unoccupied.

Let the boys have full liberty to run, skip and play as much as they please. Gymnastics, music, reciting, acting and hikes are most efficacious means of promoting discipline and improving good conduct and health; care, however, must be taken that the games, the persons who take part in them, and the conversations held, are irreproachable. 'Do anything you like,' the great Saint of youth, St. Philip, used to say, 'as long as you do not sin.'

Frequent Confession and Communion and daily Mass are the pillars which must support the edifice of education, from which we propose to banish threats and the rod. Never force the boys

to frequent the Sacraments, but encourage them to do so, and give them every opportunity. On occasions of retreats, triduums, novenas, sermons and catechism classes, the beauty, the grandeur and the holiness of our Religion must always be dwelt on; for, it offers to all in the Holy Sacraments, a means so easy and so useful to attain peace of heart and eternal salvation. In this way, the pupils are readily taught to love these practices of piety and to make use of them willingly, with pleasure and with fruit.

Each day the Principal, or someone in his stead, should address a few kind words to the students giving advice or counsel concerning what is to be done or what is to be avoided. He should try to draw some moral reflection from facts which have happened during the day in the school or outside; but he should never occupy more than two or three minutes. This is the key to a moral life, to good conduct and to success in education.

### **A WORD ON PUNISHMENTS**

What rules should be followed in inflicting punishments? *If possible, never make use of punishments;* but when necessity demands it, let the following be borne in mind:

1. The educator must strive to make himself loved by his pupils, if he wishes to obtain their respect. When he succeeds in doing this, the omission of some token of kind-ness is a punishment which rekindles emulation, revives courage and never degrades.
2. With the young, punishment is everything that is meant as a punishment. Thus it is known that a reproachful look is more effective than a blow. Praise of work well done, and just blame when duties are neglected are themselves reward and punishment.
3. Except in very rare instances, corrections and punishments should not be given in public, but privately and apart from the others; and the greatest prudence and patience must be used to bring the pupil to see his fault, by aid of reason and religion.
4. To strike one in any way, to make him kneel in a painful position, to pull his ears, and other similar punishments, must be absolutely avoided, because the law forbids them, and they greatly irritate the boys and lower the reputation of the educator.
5. The educator must see that the laws of discipline, and the rewards and punishments entailed, are made known to the pupil, so that no one can make the excuse that he did not know what was commanded or forbidden.
6. All who hold office or have the care of the boys, whom Divine Providence has entrusted to us, have the duty also of giving advice and counsel to any boy of the school every time there is reason to do so, and especially when it is a question of preventing some offense against God.
7. Every educator must make himself loved, if he wishes to be feared. He will attain this great end if he makes it clear by his words, and still more by his actions, that all his care and solicitude are directed towards the spiritual and temporal welfare of his pupils.
8. The teacher should be a man of few words but prompt action, and he should give his pupils every opportunity to express their thoughts freely. Attention, however, must be paid to rectifying and correcting all expressions, words and actions which are not in accordance with Christian Education.

## **CHARACTERS CLASSIFIED**

Boys soon begin to show one of the following characters: good, ordinary, wayward, or bad. It is our bounden duty to study how to keep lads of these different characters together, so as to do good to all, without allowing some to do harm to others.

For those who are naturally of a good disposition, a general supervision is sufficient, provided that the rules of discipline are explained and their observance recommended.

The greater number consists of those who possess an ordinary disposition, somewhat inclined to fickleness and indifference. These have need of short but frequent exhortations and advice. It is necessary to encourage them to work, even by means of small rewards, and by showing them that we have great confidence in them, without, however, neglecting our watchfulness.

But all our care and solicitude must be especially directed towards those in the remaining categories: the wayward and the bad. The number of such boys can be averaged at about one in every fifteen. The educator should obtain information regarding their past. Everyone in charge of them should show himself their friend, should allow them to speak freely, but should limit himself to few words, and these consisting mainly of short examples, maxims, episodes and the like. These boys must never be allowed out of the teacher's sight, but they must not be given to understand that no confidence is placed in them.

Whenever blame, advice or correction has to be given to this class of boy, it should never be given in the presence of companions. But use can be made of facts and episodes which have befallen others, to point out thereby what praise or blame is likely to come to those of whom we now speak. Remember, however, that all need patience, diligence and prayer, without which I believe all rule is unavailing.

## **Correction and Counselling**

### **CHARITY ALWAYS**

I have often been asked and begged by my Salesians to set down various norms regarding the difficult matter of punishments.

In these times of ours you know that this is no easy problem in education, for in solving it even the slightest imprudence may cause serious consequences. Very anxious, therefore, to comply with your requests, I intend to give you some directions that will guide you. The education of the young, though indeed a delicate task, is a holy vocation and, if properly carried out, is of the greatest advantage to society. I am confident, therefore, that you will make very effort to put my recommendations into practice.

The system in use in our schools, as you know, is the Preventive System, which consists essentially in disposing the pupils to obey not from fear or compulsion, but from persuasion. In this system all force must be excluded, and in its place, charity must be the mainspring of action.

Human nature is prone to evil and at times must be dealt with severely. Yet charity should prompt all our actions, for, indeed, the inspiration of my whole life, of my priestly efforts and ideals has been my love for poor, abandoned youth. As all know, this is also the firing ideal of our Salesian Congregation. We are the friends of our boys; we take the place of their parents. You will obtain anything- from your boys if they realize that you are seeking their own good. To gain their confidence, act towards them as a good father, who punishes and checks his children only from a sense of duty, when reason and justice manifestly require it.

Punishment should be your last resort. In my long, career as an educator, how often this has been brought home to me! No doubt it is ten times easier to lose our patience than to control it, to threaten a boy than to persuade him. No doubt, too, it is much more gratifying- to our pride to punish those who resist us, than to bear them with firm kindness. St. Paul often lamented how some converts to the faith too easily returned to their inveterate habits; yet he bore it all with patience as zealous as it was admirable. This is the kind of patience we need in dealing, with the young.

We should, therefore, correct them with the patience of a father. Never, as far as possible, correct in public, but in private, or as they say -- *in camera caritatis* --apart from the others. Only in cases of preventing or remedying- serious scandal would I permit public corrections or punishments.

If your first effort to correct the culprit has proved unsuccessful, find out if there is anyone in the school who has gained the confidence of that lad. If so, let him try correcting him. In the meantime you should pray that some good may result from his attempt. When the people of Israel committed sin, Moses besought God not to wreak His vengeance on them. Like Moses, the educator should endeavor to moderate his own just indignation, for a sudden chastisement will rarely succeed where other means of correcting have not even been given a trial. Only moral strength can win the human heart which, St. Gregory tells us, is like an impregnable fortress, never to be conquered except by affection and kindness.

Be exacting when it is a matter of duty, firm in the pursuit of good, courageous in preventing evil, but always gentle and prudent. God will surely reward you if you are persevering in these virtues. He will make you the master of your pupil's hearts even when they are stubborn and rebellious. What I recommend is hard, I know, especially for young teachers, whose first inclination in obtaining discipline is to act on the spur of the moment and inflict punishments. But I assure you, real success can only be the result of patience. Impatience merely disgusts the pupils and spreads discontent among the best of them. Long experience has taught me that patience is the only remedy for even the worst cases of disobedience and irresponsiveness among boys. Sometimes, after making, many patient efforts without obtaining, success, I deemed it necessary to resort to severe measures. Yet these never achieved anything, and in the end, I always found that charity finally triumphed where severity had met with failure. Charity is the cure-all though it may be slow in affecting its cure.

At times a boy seems to reap no fruit from our corrections; yet down deep in his heart a wonderful change is taking place. And this good effect would be entirely destroyed if we were to inflict some severe punishment on him. Boys often commit faults through thoughtlessness. At other times there are hidden motives for their misbehavior. On several occasions I have recalled

some troublesome lads to order and, on inquiring with kindness why they persisted in being stubborn and self-willed, received as an answer:

‘That teacher has it in for me!’ or ‘They are always picking on me, so I’m giving them something to pick about.’

To my surprise, I have found that such explanations were not always without foundation. In fact, sometimes it was only too true; the boy was almost entirely innocent, or at least not deserving of such treatment. Oftentimes-I hate to admit-we ourselves are partly to blame for the misbehavior of our pupils.

Strange to say, those very teachers who are most exacting and who refuse to overlook even the slightest disobedience, are often the very first to ignore the advice of their own Superiors. They themselves will forgive nothing, but they expect any fault of theirs to be entirely overlooked.

To learn how to command we must first learn to obey; and to make ourselves feared we must first make ourselves loved. However, after all other means have obviously failed, we may have recourse to severe measures, provided we do not act through passion. We must make it clear by our demeanor that we are acting from good motives.

#### THE PROPER MOMENT

Choose an opportune moment for correction. “Everything in its own time,” is an expression found in Holy Writ that can well apply to corrections. I can tell you with certainty that we must use utmost prudence in selecting the right moment to correct someone at fault; otherwise we will exert useless energy! If we are so careful in remedying the sicknesses of the body, why aren’t we at least as painstaking when curing the ailments of the soul? Nothing is more dangerous than giving medicine at the wrong moment, and a wise doctor bides his time in applying his prescription.

Experience is the best teacher. If you have enough courage and good will to put my suggestions to the test, you will find that I am right. First of all, master your own character, and then you will succeed in mastering those of your pupils. Show them that uncontrolled emotion plays no part in your actions; they will respect you for that, and their respect will prompt their obedience. But betray the least sign of weakness, of passion, of impatience, and your authority and prestige will not long endure. Besides, your punishment will not be taken as a remedy for the boy’s fault, but as a vent for your own passion. It can bear no fruit!

You are acquainted, no doubt, with the words Socrates addressed to a slave who had caused him displeasure: ‘If I weren’t angry, I’d strike you.’

‘Even a slight flush of the countenance or a small change in the tone of the voice caused by anger is betraying and incites the boys to lose their esteem and confidence in us. Then all punishment is useless, because the boys feel that reason alone ought to be used in correcting them.

A second thing I would ask you to practice is never to correct a boy while he is still under the influence of his own temper. A correction given at that time would only serve to embitter him all the more and make things worse. Give him time to reflect, to enter into himself-he will realize that he is in the wrong.

Correct at the proper time, if you wish correction to do any good. I have often reflected on the story of St. Paul's conversion. He had gone to the High Priest 'breathing threats of slaughter against the disciples of the Lord.' See how Our Lord bides His time. He lets the persecutor give vent to his passion. He waits for him to complete his journey. Then at the very gates of Damascus, after Saul has had plenty of time for reflection, when he is far away from those who might encourage him to persist in his resolution to persecute the Christians, Jesus reveals Himself in all His authority and power! By the strength of His meekness he converts Saul's hatred and opens his eyes to his error; from a persecutor, Saul becomes the Apostle of the Gentiles and a vessel of election. All educators should strive to imitate this divine example of Jesus and model their zeal after His. Then they will give corrections at the proper time, in all enlightenment and charity, after waiting patiently in the name of God for the moment of grace.

### KINDNESS AND CALMNESS

In punishing, it is easy to be moved by anger or by the desire to make one's authority felt. Hence, we must be continually on our guard that we act from just motives, especially if we ourselves happen to possess an impulsive character; otherwise, passion will run away with us without our even realizing it. Passion in correcting is unworthy of a father's heart, and we must strive to be fathers, considering our pupils as our children. Jesus, Who is our model, came to obey, not to command; we should, therefore, abhor that air of superiority that characterizes the lords and rulers of this world. Our authority over our pupils consists almost in serving, them, in looking after them. We should perform this duty with pleasure. Keep Jesus before you. He bore patiently with the ignorance and rudeness of His apostles. He had to put up with their faithlessness. The friendly hand He extended even to sinners aroused surprise in some and scandalized others. Yet His one interest was to inspire confidence and hope in the hearts of sinners. Well could He command us, then: 'Learn of Me, for I am meek and humble of heart.'

To be real fathers in dealing with the young, we must not allow the shadow of anger to darken our countenance; or, if at times we are taken unawares, let the bright serenity of our minds immediately disperse the clouds of impatience. Self-control must rule our whole being-our mind, our heart, our lips. When someone is at fault, arouse sympathy in your heart and entertain hope in your mind for him; then you will correct him with profit.

In certain difficult moments, a humble prayer to God is much more useful than a violent outburst of anger. Your pupils will certainly draw no profit from your impatience, and you will not be edifying anyone who may observe you.

Do you remember how Jesus answered those Apostles who wanted Him to call down fire and brimstone upon those cities which had refused to hear their teaching about Him? He had only words of pardon for them.

Through David, the prophet, the Holy Spirit recommends us always to be calm: 'Be angry and sin not!'

If too often we see our efforts cast to the winds, devoid of any good results, if the fruit of our labors is nothing but a bunch of thorns and thistles, I believe we are to attribute this sad failure to the fact that we have not yet learned the way of keeping discipline in the manner I have explained above.

This is not the place to relate in full the story of the prophet Elias which you will find recorded in the Third Book of Kings. He, too, was on fire with zeal for the conversion of Israel and all ardor for God's cause. I will be satisfied with merely repeating the brief lesson which was taught by God Himself: 'The Lord is not in the whirlwind.' 'Let nothing disturb you!' was an expression often on the lips of St. Theresa. It is a good counsel which can be drawn from the above words of Scripture.

St. Francis of Sales, that meekest of Saints, never allowed his tongue to speak when his spirit was disturbed. 'I am afraid,' he once said, 'to lose in a quarter of an hour that little sweetness that I have gathered up, drop by drop, like dew, in the vessel of my heart through the efforts of twenty years. A bee works for months to make a little honey that a man consumes in one swallow. Besides, what is the use wasting words on one that won't understand them?' On another occasion, when he was reproached for having treated with too much kindness a young man who had seriously offended his mother, he explained: 'This young man was not in the mood to profit from any good advice. His bad disposition completely overshadowed his better judgment. A sharp correction would certainly have done him no good and would have brought great harm to me. By becoming angry with him, I would have imitated a man who drowns himself in an effort to save another.'

These admirable words of Saint Francis of Sales show that he was a wise and a meek master of hearts. I would like you to impress them deep in your memory and often call them to mind.

#### CORRECTIONAL TECHNIQUES

Many times an indirect method in correcting is useful. For example, while in the presence of one at fault, speak to another about the folly of those who so lose their self-respect and good sense as to deserve punishment. Sometimes, to obtain the amendment of our pupils it is enough to withdraw those marks of confidence and friendliness usually shown them, unless some misfortune should befall them and you see they are in special need of consolation. Many times, by the grace of God, this expedient has been of great assistance to me. Never, except in very extreme cases, expose the culprit publicly to shame. Often make use of a third person to talk well to your offender about you, to advise him, to tell him what you cannot very well tell him yourself. Look for one who can more easily gain his heart. Perhaps the lad has something to say which he is afraid to tell you directly. Or perhaps he does not care to reveal it to you. Our Lord acted in a similar way-He sent His disciples before Him to prepare the way for His own coming.

Let the one you correct understand that you act out of duty and according to reason. Try to make him realize his fault, and that it deserves punishment. Then mitigate it. In this way he will willingly accept it. One last thing: when once you have gained the boy's heart, do not be content with merely inspiring him with the hope of forgiveness, but assure him that by his good conduct in the future he will make up for past failings.

Correction at times brings about anxiety and fear. A word of comfort can easily offset this. A person who forgets, and helps the culprit to forget is a true educator. We are sure that Jesus

never recalled Mary Magdalen's past faults; and to make Peter realize his guilt, He very delicately made use only of a father's glance.

When the pupil is convinced that his superiors have high hopes for him, he is drawn back again to the practice of virtue. A kind word or a glance does more to encourage than a severe reprimand, which only serves to dampen youthful enthusiasm.

Applying these methods, I was able to draw many to God and to the Religious life. Any other means would have been impossible. Just as we all had to undergo the trials of teen age, so, too, it is with every boy. Woe to them, if they are not helped to pass these days quickly and without reproach! Oftentimes to close an eye to their faults is the best means to prevent their falling in the future. Again, at times, though they are really guilty, they wish us to believe them innocent. We shall be indeed fortunate if we learn to apply these means in our educational endeavors. Perhaps you think that what I am suggesting is too easy or not practical enough. Yet I assure you that if you abide by what I say, you will be successful. You will see that by these means you will win over those who in the beginning had not given the least cause for any hope.

But you might ask me here, just what punishments can we use? My dear friends, know that God likens Himself to a '*virga vigilans*' -- a watching rod -- in order to keep us from sin also by the fear of punishment. We can, therefore, imitate God's example in this respect and prevent disorder by threatening punishments. But we should be prudent and sparing in our use of this means for obtaining discipline. If we are also kind and use our good judgment in employing punishments, we will obtain the desired effect--the betterment of our youthful charges.

Force, indeed, punishes guilt, but does not heal the guilty. No one cultivates a tender plant with harsh treatment, much less with violence. Likewise, you ought not to expect to train the will of the young by imposing a heavy yoke upon them.

#### FORMS OF PUNISHMENTS

A reproachful or severe look often serves as an excellent means of moral restraint over the young. By it, the guilty person is moved to consider his own fault, to feel ashamed, and finally to repent and turn over a new leaf. A fatherly word in private is worth much more than many sentences of reproachful language. Instill in the young the desire of reward or the thought of doing honor to their dear ones or of showing gratitude towards them. In this way they are at times incited to acts of great generosity.

If they fall into the same faults repeatedly, without losing sight of charity warn them in more serious terms, contrasting your own conduct towards them with theirs towards you. Show them how concerned you are to save them from chastisements and how little they repay your leniency towards them. Never stoop to humiliating expressions; on the contrary, make it clear that you entertain high hopes for them and assure them that you are ready to forget their faults as soon as they take a turn for the better.

What about written punishments? Unfortunately, this way of punishing is only too common. As regards this point I have looked up the opinions of the best educators. Some approve it; others criticize it as useless and dangerous both to the pupils and teachers. You may use your own judgment; however, I would warn you that it is very easy to go to excesses. By an abuse of punishment you acquire no advantage for yourselves. You will only afford the pupils an

occasion for criticism; they also might make capital of it to win the sympathies of others, as if you were unduly persecuting them. Mere writing will certainly not correct the culprit who will always look upon it as a hateful punishment. However, I know of one educator who used this punishment to good advantage. He ordered someone at fault to write some selections of profane and sacred poetry which he had assigned for study. As a result, he secured greater attention in class on the morrow, and his students acquired greater intellectual knowledge. This is a proof that, for those who love God, who work for His glory, and seek souls, 'all things work together unto good.' By this means, this particular educator actually wrought conversions. He succeeded because he was animated by a true spirit of charity and was blessed by God. However, I think this case deserves to be called rather unique.

Till now we have been dealing with disciplinary measures. In case of scandal or sin, the culprit should be sent immediately to the Principal, who will take those measures that seem best to him. If a boy, drawing no profit from all these mild attempts to correct him, should give serious scandal to his companions, he should be expelled. However, he should never be denied that moral support that will protect his good name. This can be done either by inducing the boy to leave of his own accord or by advising his parents to change schools, with the assurance that he will do better elsewhere. In this way, only a pleasant memory of the school will remain in the minds of both pupil and parents, even in very sad cases.

#### CONCLUSION: LOOK TO CHRIST

Remember that education is a difficult art, and that God alone is its true Master. We will never succeed in it, unless He teaches us the way. While depending humbly and entirely on Him, we should try with might and main, to acquire that moral strength that is a stranger to force and rigor. Let us strive to make ourselves loved, to instill into our pupils the high ideal of duty and the holy fear of God, and we will soon possess their hearts. Then, with natural ease, they will join us in praising Jesus Christ, Our Lord, Who is our model, our pattern, our exemplar in all things, but especially in the education of the young.