



# Formative Parenting

*Cultivating Character in Children*

*A Ministry of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Immaculata, Pennsylvania*

## **Parent Guide to Fostering Self-Discipline, Part 1 COMMUNICATION CLIMATE**

Dear Parent,

Self-discipline is the ability to listen to the voice of another, to understand the message, and to act upon it appropriately whether observed or totally independent of supervision. To obey means “to listen to” and to follow what is heard. Effective communication, therefore, creates a climate for obedience that helps a child to learn how to recognize God’s voice from a variety of destructive voices in our culture.

Your home is the school in which your child first learns how to listen and how to separate or discern which voices lead to life-giving choices and which voices lead to life-blocking choices. That is, which voices create attitudes that create, mend, heal, invite, forgive, include others, share, unite, and contribute to well-being versus the voices that separate, destroy, wound, deceive, divide, exclude, manipulate, and isolate. There are qualities of effective communication that create an environment, climate or readiness that nurtures self-discipline and leads to life-to-the-full, the kind of life that Jesus came to bring. Those qualities are the focus of this newsletter.

Effective communication conveys respect, reverence, and openness. It requires that we make time, demonstrate interest through body language, give full attention, listen for feelings, ask questions, let the speaker finish without thinking of responses, and keep confidences. A home environment in which a child experiences effective communication is one in which presence rather than presents is assured; where care-full speaking and listening are consistent; and where conversation is mirror-ing in nature rather than blaming or authoritarian. **This newsletter explores these four hallmarks of effective communication.**

### **PRESENCE**

Presence is more than physical proximity. Presence implies attentiveness, eye contact, focus, and emotional connectiveness. Parents who practice presence recognize emotional signals of mood like disappointment, anxiety, exuberance, and convey awareness to their child. Presence reveals itself when a parent is able to make connections with previous conversation and interests of their child, know the names of their child’s friends and repeat anecdotes involving their friends. On-going presence can be communicated by an endearing nickname, facial or bodily signal, sound or touch that is particular to the parent-child relationship. Such expressions cannot replace a pattern of interactive communication but they serve as links between significant connections. They convey, “We have a history together. I love you and I like you”.

Attentive listening that results in application is the essence of discernment, obedience, and self-discipline.

Children need to be taught how to listen attentively. How consistently do you practice the components of quality listening?

- Do you speak with your child consistently over time rather than only during sporadic episodes?
- Do you secure your child’s attention before you speak? (eye contact, touch, name)
- Do you wait for acknowledgment from your child before you continue to speak?
- Do you wait for responses to your questions when speaking with your child?
- Do you seek clarification and further development of the initial answers your child gives to your questions? “Tell me what you think I said.” “Explain what my words mean to you.”
- Do you have evidence that your child hears you? Can she repeat your spoken and intended message? Can he re-word an adequate interpretation of your message? Does she follow the direction that you gave or respond appropriately?

### **CARE-FULL SPEAKING – SPEECH THAT IS FULL OF CARE**

Speaking that is full-of-care addresses a child in respectful tones and by name. Care-full speaking never uses negative titles, derogatory nicknames or impersonal references in speaking to or about a child. Care-full

speaking involves saying what you mean and meaning what you say and conveying it clearly and respectfully both in word and mannerism. It is the kind of speaking that will nurture communication, discernment and obedience.

Parents who practice care-full speaking keep their children's business confidential.

Children need consistent practice to become care-full speakers. They learn from the example of their parents and by patient, respectful correction how to use care in their communication. In addition to the attitudes described above, how consistently do you practice the components of care-full speaking?

- Do you determine mutual definitions of terms before discussing behavior-related events so that you will avoid verbal manipulation or semantic language games? Does

### CARE-FULL LISTENING –LISTENING THAT IS FULL OF CARE

Care-full listening can involve ears, eyes, heart, touch and facial expression. It goes beyond the recognition of words to recognize underlying feelings, motivations, emotional responses and emotional blocks. It can summarize what was said and it can "hear" what was not said! Reflective listening is an art that is developed through time and experience. The parent listener focuses on the content of the child and not the parent's own issues. The parent listener does not replace the child's sharing with a parent agenda or interpretation. Care-full listening avoids taking over the conversation, lecturing or pontificating.

Children who are repeated recipients of care-full listening experience freedom and a sense of respect that develops within them the ability to name, claim and tame their emotions and emotional responses. It helps the child to take personal ownership for his actions and consequences. It provides the social skills needed for

- passing a book mean handing a book to another student or tossing a book as though it were a football?
- Does the tone of your voice convey your desired intention? "Will you please clear the table?" can be a request, option or direction depending on the tone of voice.
- Do you address your child with respect in name and in tone?
- Do you express your own needs, feelings, wants and desires using "I Statements" rather than hoping that your child can read your mind? "I need you to turn the stereo volume down to three." "I want you to shower and be in your bed by nine o'clock."

truthfulness, honesty, and integrity to blossom as personality traits. It fosters independence and problem solving skills. Care-full listening develops discernment and self-discipline.

In addition to demonstrating the listening behaviors described above, how consistently do you include the following parent practices in your communication style?

- Restate what you think you heard your child say. "Am I correct that you feel . . .?" "I think I heard you say that . . ."
- "If I understood you correctly you think that . . ."
- Encourage your child with verbal cues. "Go on . . ." "That makes sense." "Explain that to me again."
- Encourage your child with facial cues and body language. For instance, a nod of the head, a twist of your mouth, a deep exhaling, etc.
- Control the urge to be the problem solver. Consider yourself a filter and a road sign; not a magic wand.

### MIRROR-ING CONVERSATION – CONVERSATION THAT IS REFLECTIVE

Mirror-ing is a particularly helpful tool during times that require disciplinary action or decision-making. The parent serves as an impartial reflection glass or mirror for the child that lets the child see himself, his actions, and their effects. A mirror does not create or alter the image in front of it; it merely reports it as a camera might. The parent-mirror does not level blame or say: "I told you so". The parent serves as a facilitator, not an identifier. Facilitation brings the child around to naming her own issues and remedies and thus contributes to maturity in matters of self-discipline and discernment. Parent identification of issues is time-saving but ineffective for the growth of the child. It removes responsibility from the child and denies him the tools needed to be a future problem solver. Mirror-ing causes him to define his own

behavior, its effects, why it is unacceptable or ineffective, and to create useful alternatives.

Mirror-ing is time consuming but the payoff is growth in personal responsibility. It involves the following practices:

- Facilitate rather than identify.
- Reflect back what your child says.
- Summarize what you hear. Question for clarification.
- Check on understanding. "Tell me what you think I said." "How do you understand what I've said?" "Explain what my words mean to you."

Acknowledging choices and accepting responsibility for them leads to a sense of ownership. Only ownership makes possible change, growth, and improvement. James Baldwin captured that reality when he said: "Not everything faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced."

Dr. Patricia McCormack, IHM, a former Catholic schoolteacher and catechist, is a formation education consultant, an author of several books as well as the PARENT PARTNERSHIP HANDBOOK feature of *Today's Catholic Teacher*, and director of *IHM Formative Support for Parents and Teachers*, Arlington, VA. She speaks and writes frequently on topics of child formation. Reach her at [DrPatMcCormack@aol.com](mailto:DrPatMcCormack@aol.com).

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