



Formative Parenting

Cultivating Character in Children

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

Developing Moral Maturity – Part 1 **HABITS FOR MORAL MATURITY**

Parents and teachers are essential moral agents in the lives of children. Children absorb a moral mentality first from observing moral activity in significant adults. Actions surely speak louder than words. As Cardinal Bernardin said, “Children will walk the way parents [and teachers] walk, not the way they point.” As children grow more capable of discernment and instruction, adult moral agents expose children directly to the skills of moral development.

A moral life is a life of love. Children become “readied” for moral living when they experience care. The United States Catholic Conference expressed it this way:

“Within our families, we need to teach—by word and example, by our priorities and our lives— the values that help our children grow to be responsible, faithful, caring, and disciplined. Our love, our values, and our faith are passed on not only by what we say, but also by how we live. Parents, especially, show love for their children by providing for their emotional and spiritual needs, as well as their material needs. This occurs, for example, when parents spend time with their children, when they discipline and guide them, when they show affection, and when they teach their children to pray and grow in faith.”

Adults who serve as moral mentors enter into a reciprocal process. As we try to help children hone the skills necessary to grow into moral maturity, we ourselves gain clarity. Often our efforts for the child become personal conversion points.

Moral maturity builds upon skills of heart, mind, and action. These three components— **affective-emotional skills**, **thinking-reasoning skills**, and **decision-making skills**— are necessary to moral formation for persons who practice a faith tradition as well as for folks who do not. People of faith apply the tenets of their religion to fine-tune their moral beliefs. Christian conscience integrates Christian principles and prayer into the decision-making process as well. Adults help children to develop a moral mentality by fostering the following five habits.

Habits of the Heart cultivate a capacity for relationship. Such habits begin in the womb and continue throughout life with experiences of security: feeling safe, being able to count on significant others, and knowing that needs will be met. Heart habits include age-appropriate expressions of respect for others; developing affective-emotional skills; creating teachable moments; and learning how to name, claim, and tame emotions.

Habits of the Mind cultivate a capacity to put heart-desires into action. Love will not translate into moral action unless we possess the ability to reason and then put that ability at the service of love. Adult mentors understand levels of reasoning, engage children in activities that develop critical thinking ability, and apply age-appropriate practices to foster moral maturity.

Habits of Action lead to moral maturity when action reflects wise decision making: seeing reality clearly, determining what is good, perceiving how best to accomplish the good, and recognizing personal feelings and motives. Decision making includes four core principles: (1) Explore the situation honestly. (2) Seek advice from sources of wisdom. (3) Pray to know the will of God. (4) Test the decision before acting on it.

Habits of Christian Principles model the attitudes and priorities of Jesus. Consider seven criteria for Christian conscience: (1) example of Jesus, (2) Gospel teaching, (3) Ten Commandments and the Law of Love, (4) Beatitudes, (5) Moral Virtues, (6) Works of Mercy, and (7) Principles of Catholic Social Teaching.

Habits of Prayer are essential to Christian conscience. Prayer is communication with God who loves you. All prayer forms are useful in teaching us the mind of Christ: mental prayer, praying with the Gospels, Eucharistic devotions, the rosary, the stations of the cross, etc. Particularly effective for shaping moral maturity are two aspects of Eucharistic devotion: (1) participation at Mass and (2) visits to the Blessed Sacrament.

Moral maturity requires a long season of growing. Every contribution is important. Remember:

Plant a thought; reap an act.
Plant an act; reap a habit.
Plant a habit; reap a virtue or vice.
Plant a virtue or vice; reap a character.
Plant a character; reap a destiny.

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