



Formative Parenting

Cultivating Character in Children

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

Developing Moral Maturity – Part 3 HABITS OF THE MIND

Moral maturity builds upon skills of heart, mind, and action. In addition, Christian maturity (or conscience) integrates Christian principles and prayerful discernment in the decision-making process. Parents and teachers help children to develop a moral mentality by fostering these five habits. This newsletter focuses on **Habits of the Mind**.

A moral life begins in the heart, but moral maturity requires more than a desire to do the good. Unless we know the good and then put it into practice, our loving thoughts remain just that—beautiful intentions.

Morality requires the ability to reason and then a free choice to put that reasoning at the service of love. Dr. Thomas Lickona advised: “We help our kids become moral persons by helping them learn to think.” Parents and teachers are key in helping children to become capable of making sound judgments by developing higher cognitive levels of thinking and reasoning. This newsletter highlights three factors related to critical thinking.

LEVELS OF REASONING

It is never too early nor too late to provide activities that increase perception, memory, comprehension, and problem-solving abilities. For example, provide pre-schoolers with opportunities to distinguish colors, shapes, and pictures, and to recite rhymes. Primary school-aged children can make behavior predictions by observing cartoon characters. They can begin goal setting by planning out the particulars of a birthday party. Intermediate school-aged children can follow a recipe to produce cupcakes or use manipulatives (tangible items) to solve a perimeter problem. These skills of memory and comprehension contribute to developing higher level reasoning skills:

- **Application**—problem solve by applying or transferring information to a situation
- **Analysis**—isolate separate parts contained in a unit
- **Synthesis**—assemble separate elements into a useful whole
- **Evaluation**—determine right, wrong, and appropriate based upon objective criteria

ACTIVITIES THAT DEVELOP CRITICAL THINKING

Intellectual growth requires increased reasoning ability. No amount of urging, drilling, rote memory, or demanding can force intelligence. But an enriched environment that stimulates, encourages, is non-threatening, and provides opportunities for new experiences primes the pump of readiness and interest.

Four levels of thinking require productive use of information. For this reason they are called critical thinking skills. Following are the kinds of activities or processes that develop each level:

- **Application**—demonstrate, translate, dramatize, illustrate, apply, interpret, critique
- **Analysis**—debate, diagram, compare, contrast, experiment, chart, categorize
- **Synthesis**—compose, formulate, construct, design, combine, modify, generalize
- **Evaluation**—select, predict, estimate, assess, support ideas, justify, recommend

PARENT PRACTICES THAT SUPPORT MENTAL MATURITY

Toddlers: Use language, imitation, imagery, symbolic play; limit concentration to one direction at a time; give literal interpretations; play singing games with actions, such as “Eensy, Weensy Spider”

Pre-Schoolers: Play action games with multiple directions or find and replace missing objects; group pictures according to usefulness/purpose: i.e., things we eat with, things we wear; be patient with questions; play conservation games: i.e., equal amounts of liquid, beads, or clay filling two differently shaped containers; help children to recognize differing points of view in real life, stories, film

Primary School: Give concrete examples and specific, literal directions; introduce the ideas of motive and intention, effort and results, and cause and effect; use puzzles and games of classifying; predict outcomes

Intermediate School: Practice summarizing, solve mysteries, predict endings to stories, brainstorm alternate solutions to a problem, use examples to support ideas, identify parts of a whole, develop outlining and word-mapping skills

Middle School: Engage in deductive reasoning; demonstrate high critical thinking skills (application, analysis, and synthesis); work with properties of space, time, and speed; explain ideas verbally and symbolically; encourage hypotheses and imagine possibilities; develop theories; use the scientific method . . .

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