



# Formative Parenting

*Cultivating Character in Children*

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

## **DISCERNING VOICES TO MAKE LIFE-GIVING CHOICES**

Life-giving behavior is a choice and a biblical challenge of both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. Moses challenged Israel to choose life and he defined that choosing life means to love God and to hear and obey God's voice. Jesus told his listeners that he came so that we might have life and have it to the full! (Jn. 10:10) His followers, he said, are those who hear the word of God and live according to it. (Lk. 8: 21) Listening is the core of obedience. The word *obey* comes from the Latin language. It is the equivalent of *ob + audire* which means *to listen to another*. Obedience implies the kind of listening to another that leads to action. How important it is to recognize the voice of God and to let that voice be the one that guides our choices. This kind of listening is called discernment and it leads to positive living. A disciple is a person who listens to instruction, understands the teaching, and applies the teaching to concrete life situations. The root of the word disciple or discipline is the Latin *disciplina*, meaning *instruction*, and *discip(ere)*, meaning *to grasp; to take*. **Authentically understood then, discipline means the ability to listen to the voice of another, understand the message, and act upon it appropriately.**

Jesus' words and actions consistently demonstrated that choosing life is listening to and living out the will of God. In his letter to the Galatians, St. Paul identified that the fruit of life-giving choices is love, joy, peace, patience, endurance, generosity, kindness, faith, mildness, and chastity. How wonderful is life when it is shaped by the will of God. Our homes, schools, work places, and society are fed by life-giving choices or diseased by life-blocking choices. The ability to discern the voices that lead to life-giving choices is critical to personal and societal well-being. Attitudes and behaviors that create, mend, heal, invite, forgive, include others, share, initiate, unite, build up, and contribute to improvement are life-giving choices. Life-giving choices free a person to be open, honest, peace-loving, and approachable. When effort is intentionally focused on giving life, the result is positive and the benefits overflow to many other people. Life-blocking choices, however, bring sorrow and destruction. They are attitudes and behaviors that separate, destroy, wound, deceive, divide, exclude, manipulate, tear down, and alienate. It is the fruit of life-blocking choices that fills our newspapers and news reports, leaving us fearful, disappointed and discouraged.

Parents are the first to introduce their children to the voice of God. Consequently, parents are charged with the responsibility to help their child to learn how to recognize God's voice from a variety of destructive voices in our culture and to respond positively to God's will for them. Parents are the primary agents in the formation of self-discipline or discipleship within their child. When discipleship is fostered, life-to-the- full follows. A child, for instance, who hears and understands the meaning of Jesus' law of love would be more likely to live the spirit of the commandments and experience the positive results of disciplined choices. He would willingly respect God, God's name, and the things of God; participate in Sunday worship; lovingly fulfill the wishes of a parent or lawful adult; respect and protect life in all ways; exercise control and reverence in sexual matters; develop wholesome relationships; be honest and responsible with material things as well as with the reputation and character of others; keep relational commitments and honor the personal relationships of others. A self-disciplined child knows and accepts personal boundaries; exercises freedom with responsibility; tries to cooperate; upholds the common good; and accepts the logical consequences of her choices. Self-discipline, self-esteem, and character formation are interrelated concepts. They share basic principles that are rooted in formation provided by parents.

## Parent Partnership Handbook

How can parents foster the development of self-discipline within their child? This question surfaced as a primary concern of parents from a variety of schools in both North and South America. Parents were asked: "For what child-rearing practices or parenting issues would you welcome information or assistance? List, in order of importance, your top three parenting concerns". The result of the free-form response to the research question was (1) self-esteem, (2) conscience formation, and (3) discipline. *Today's Catholic Teacher* provided parent support for self-esteem and conscience formation through the Parent Partnership Handbook pages published 1996 through 1999. The Handbook consists of removable and reproducible pages suitable for distribution to parents. This year the Handbook will feature **A Parent's Guide to Fostering Self-Discipline**. Six topics will be discussed that support the formation of self-discipline and cooperation: (1) communication skills; (2) parent authority styles; (3) understanding the connection between child needs and behavior; (4) remedies for mis-behavior that develop discipline and foster positive identity formation (5) establishing consequences rather than punishment; and (6) using encouragement rather than praise in positive discipline. An overview of each topic follows here. A more detailed development of each topic will be the focus of subsequent issues of *Today's Catholic Teacher*.

### Communication Climate

There is a difference between talking at a person and talking with a person. Only one dynamic has the potential of effectiveness. Practicing effective communication skills creates a climate in which a child is more likely to be able to hear the message not only with ears but, more importantly, with her heart. When the heart "hears", application is only a breath away. Four qualities of effective communication include presence, speaking with care, listening with ears and heart, and conversation that facilitates clarity and ownership within the child rather than identifies, blames or names issues for the child.

implies a democratic atmosphere in which all members of the family contribute to discussion and goal setting; knowing the expectations and the logical consequences related to choices. Parents are the final authority in a democratic family but, as much as possible, the individual children take charge of their lives and accept the consequences of their decisions. A democratic atmosphere fosters ownership, internalization of values, responsibility, cooperation, security, autonomy, initiative, and industry. Behavior problems are minimal in a democratic family because true discipline is fostered; discipline that is defined as listening, understanding, integrating, owning, and responding.

### Parent Authority Style

Generally speaking, there are three styles of authority practiced either primarily or in combination with each other. STEP Program literature (Systematic Training for Effective Parenting) refer to the styles as (1) giving orders, (2) giving in, and (3) giving choices. They are titles for the classical terms authoritative, laissez faire, and democratic leadership styles. **Giving orders**, focuses on parental power and control. A child may comply while the adult is present to enforce the adult wishes but she will probably not internalize the value. And, in the absence of the authority figure, she may act in retaliatory or non-cooperating ways. **Giving in** to a child's demands or whims, or assuming the attitude that he ought to make decisions however he desires, without setting boundaries or expectations, contributes to the development of (1) insecurity within him, (2) inconsistency, or (3) behaviors that become socially unacceptable or annoying to others. **Giving choices**, however,

### Needs and Behavior

All children have four basic needs. They need (1) to be loved, i.e., feel a sense of attention, involvement, contribution, belonging; (2) to be in control, i.e., to have a sense of power, autonomy, responsibility for their own behavior; (3) to be treated respectfully, justly, and fairly, i.e., to experience fairness, trust, reasonableness, consideration, recognition; and (4) to be competent and relied upon, i.e., to have a sense of accomplishment, capability, skillfulness. Whenever one of the four needs is not met, the child displays misbehavior by seeking attention, power, revenge, or displaying inadequacy. Learning how to recognize what motivates misbehavior is a key to turning things around in the life of the child. Guidelines for identifying needs from behavior and what to do about the findings will be explained in a future issue.

### **Remedy for Misbehavior**

Four basic human needs were mentioned above and it was suggested that misbehavior signals which need or needs are unfulfilled. A life-giving remedy for correcting or avoiding misbehavior is rooted in the identity formation elements of security, autonomy, initiative, and industry. These elements are foundational to self-esteem. Through the intentional development of these elements, parents prepare their child for a future full of hope, willpower, purpose and competence and nurture a personality characterized by drive, self-control, direction, and method.

### **Consequences vs. Punishment**

Discipline is the ability to listen to the voice of another, understand the message, act upon it, and integrate it into your value system. It leads to true obedience or discipleship; that is, listening to the voice of God and responding positively. Discipline formation involves mutual respect, listening, truth, boundaries, standards, expectations, accountability, acceptance of logical consequences, and the intentional efforts of parents and teachers. Discipline is not a synonym for punishment. Punishment is a penalty inflicted for an offense. At best, punishment is an ineffective tool in the formation of authentic self-discipline. At worst, it motivates further misbehavior in vengeance seeking ways because punishment, by its very nature, will be perceived by a child as unfair, arbitrary, hurtful, unreasonable or disproportionate. Neither is the reward method effective for character building. It

makes the parent responsible for their child's behavior and prevents children from learning to make their own decisions and internalizing a code for positive discernment. The reward dynamic also encourages the idea that appropriate behavior is an expectation only when an adult is present or another person is looking at me or evaluating me. Natural or pre-determined logical consequences, however, help a child to learn boundaries, social order, mutual rights and mutual respect from the natural cause and effect of her actions. Consequences hold the child responsible for his own behavior and consequences promote appropriate decision-making in an impartial way. Consequences are just or fair; of the child's own choosing; and within the control of the child.

### **Encouragement vs. Praise**

Encouragement is a process of focusing on the assets and strengths of a child which results in self-confidence and self-esteem. Because it is specific and skill-related it motivates a child internally and helps him to believe in himself, his ability, and to have future direction. For example, "It was thoughtful of you to include Susan in the game. I admire your initiative and compassion". How much more helpful, directional, and empowering those words would be than "You're a good boy! I am so proud of you". Praise is a type of reward. It motivates a child externally and, in doing so, it is a type of social control. Over-reliance on praise can discourage and a child can grow to believe that her worth depends upon the opinion of others.

### **Children Learn What They Live**

To be effective in providing discipline training or discipleship formation for their children, parent efforts must reflect the wisdom of an old adage: "What you are speaks so loudly that I cannot hear what you are saying". To obey means "to listen to" and the reality is that "actions speak louder than words". Children listen with their ears, eyes, and hearts. Indeed, children learn what they live! Parent example and family atmosphere nurtures or impedes discipleship, discernment and obedience. Parents and teachers alike may benefit from reading the book [Children Learn What They Live -- Parenting to Inspire Values](#) (1998) that was co-authored by Dorothy Law Nolte and Rachel Harris. The book expands on the values captured in the following poem (Nolte ©1972):

If children live with criticism, they learn to condemn.  
If children live with hostility, they learn to fight.  
If children live with fear, they learn to be apprehensive.  
If children live with pity, they learn to feel sorry for themselves.  
If children live with ridicule, they learn to feel shy.  
If children live with jealousy, they learn to feel envy.  
If children live with shame, they learn to feel guilty.  
If children live with encouragement, they learn confidence.

If children live with tolerance, they learn patience.  
If children live with praise, they learn appreciation.  
If children live with acceptance, they learn to love.  
If children live with approval, they learn to like themselves.  
If children live with recognition, they learn it is good to have a goal.  
If children live with sharing, they learn generosity.  
If children live with honesty, they learn truthfulness.  
If children live with fairness, they learn justice.  
If children live with kindness and consideration, they learn respect.  
If children live with security, they learn to have faith in themselves and in those about them.  
If children live with friendliness, they learn the world is a nice place in which to live.

May the process of leading our children to true discipline and obedience be a call to each of us to deepen our prayer lives and sharpen our listening skills so that we will hear the voice of our God who calls us to live life-to-the-full. May we discern the will and presence of God within the circumstances of each day. And may our pattern of response be so immediate and whole-hearted that our children see in us a model for imitation. Through our faithfulness may our children learn to discern the voices that lead to life-giving choices.

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