



Formative Parenting

Cultivating Character in Children

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

PARENTING FORMATION –The Contemporary Mission of the Catholic School – HELPING PARENTS TO HELP THEIR CHILDREN

A new school year begins! With renewed effort, energy and enthusiasm, teachers and principals recommit to approach their vocation of providing for the total formation of youth, formed in the Gospel. Faculties reaffirm that parents are the primary educators of their own children and that they, the faculty, pledge to support parents in those efforts. Religious Education Programs and Campus Ministry Offices plan how they can best be catalysts that deepen the spirituality of the student body during the year. Sacramental programs initiate a calendar that aims to nurture the spiritual growth and development of both candidates and parents while preparing youth for reception of the Sacraments. And voices everywhere call upon schools to shape the moral character and conscience formation of the children enrolled in the school, to prepare those children to respond in healthful ways to an ever growing number of societal problems, to produce a generation of critical thinkers and to accomplish all of this while assuring academic excellence and achievement in matters of curriculum. Ah, yes! The new school year begins with inherent challenge and with keen awareness of the need for resources and support that stretch beyond the preparation received in degree, certification, or teacher competency programs, but also with confident assurance that “he who has begun the good work will carry it through to completion.”¹

Basic to each of these noble goals is a child, made in the image and likeness of God, who possesses the foundation of psychosocial development that makes possible conscience formation, moral attitudes, spiritual development, pro-social behavior, healthy relationships, and personal accomplishment. Without this soul structure or with a damaged soul foundation, negative results seem predictable. The child limps into school relationships or avoids relating or has a defeatist attitude or exhibits inferiority or practices self-defeating behaviors or takes a disproportionate amount of attention or energy in the classroom or conveys neediness to a handicapping degree. On the journey to provide for the total formation of students, classroom teachers sometimes become aware that individual academic progress, socialization among peers, classroom atmosphere, class productivity and group cohesiveness are affected negatively because of poor self esteem experienced by one or more students. What can a teacher do? How can a teacher accomplish the goals of schooling unless the soul foundation of the student is secure?

Where does this work of soul foundation begin for a child? Is it not the work of the home upon which the school builds? How can parents provide for the soul formation, the whole person formation of their child? How can the Catholic School help parents to set the foundation of psychosocial development in their child and then to develop or maintain it continually in age-appropriate ways? And what practices does the school use to develop and maintain age-appropriate psycho-social development of the children entrusted to its care, particularly practices which, when misinterpreted or misunderstood by some school parents, lead to a build up of adversarial attitudes between teachers and parents?

IDENTITY FORMATION

While theologically directing parents as primary educators of their children, the Church recognizes the need to incorporate into child-rearing practices the insights provided by scholars of modern psychology. Three documents in particular: *Declaration on Christian Education*², *To Teach As Jesus Did*³, and *The Catholic School*⁴ advised parents and Catholic schools to use modern psychology and knowledge of child development to provide for the holistic development of children. A study of the literature developed by a body of scholars from the psychological community suggests that there are child-rearing practices related to the holistic formation of children and within the competence of parents to accomplish and teachers to inform. **The practices most needed to establish a sound foundation for psychosocial development relate to developing a sense of security, autonomy, initiative and industry within the child.** Each characteristic has an optimum time to be initially established within the child's psyche but each characteristic also needs continual development and maintenance in age-appropriate ways during the years of elementary school. A child's sense of identity, which will carry him/her through adult life, depends upon the healthy foundation of security, autonomy, initiative and industry. What age-appropriate practices can a parent perform to maintain the healthy psycho-social development of their child or, where necessary, to remediate, repair, redirect or reinforce within their child? What practices would you, the teacher, suggest? How can the parent or the teacher recognize which foundational characteristic needs attention and what kinds of practices would best address the need? With this issue and five successive issues, *Today's Catholic Teacher* intends to provide teachers with information needed to address these precise needs.

FORMATIVE PARENTING RESEARCH

Formative Parenting, "the process of preparing parents and/or increasing parent adequacy to perform the responsibility of fostering the whole person formation of their child through parenting practices that are foundational to the psycho-social development of a child"⁵ is the topic of current research with parents of children from Kindergarten through grade twelve enrolled in 16 Catholic schools in the diocese of San Jose, California. The schools are representative of the socioeconomic and cultural diversity of the diocese. The children were identified by their principal and teachers as representative of the following description:

- seems secure and comfortable vs. rigid or nervous
- has a sense of personal boundaries; knows personal limits
- demonstrates positive social behavior and interaction
- is responsible and follows through with tasks or expectations
- is accountable for actions and consequences of choices
- is able to work independently; does not require step-by-step supervision

Ninety-three (93) families participated and, in many cases, both parents of the family attended sessions. The parents met with the researcher on five evenings for two hour sessions and, within grade groupings, they suggested what parenting practices they applied in the previous year only that may have contributed to the development of security, autonomy, initiative or industry within their child at that particular stage of their child's life. In addition, the children in grades five through twelve devoted a two-hour session to suggest what they believe their parents did to establish such characteristics within them. The children also suggested advice for parents of children that they know who seem to lack security, autonomy, initiative or industry. Data collection was completed in the Spring of 1996 and compilation of this invaluable parent advice is now in process. A portion of this work will be shared in each of the 1996-1997 issues of *Today's Catholic Teacher*. During the course of the year, pull out pages will provide readers with working definitions, profile descriptions, key factors that foster identity development and a sampling of parent practices that are associated with developing, maintaining or remediating each of the foundational components of identity formation.

Educational Arm of the Church

Addressing the formative parenting needs of school families is a contemporary mission and duty of the Catholic school teacher. Since the Catholic school is viewed by the Bishops as the educational arm of the Church, the Catholic school teacher is the instrument of an education that attends to the holistic formation of souls. In *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School*⁶ the bishops declared:

The Catholic school finds its true justification in the mission of the Church; it is based on an educational philosophy in which faith, culture and life are brought into harmony. Through it, the local Church evangelizes, educates, and contributes to the formation of a healthy and morally sound life-style among its members. (34)

Focusing on how to identify, establish, develop, maintain or remediate a child's sense of security, autonomy, initiative and industry contributes, most surely, to fostering a soul foundation that results in spiritual, moral, social, psychological and civic well-being. It is the mission of Christ; the mission of the Church; the mission of the Catholic School. Is there a more important vocation?

During this 1996-1997 school year, accept the challenge and discipline to grow in awareness of how your own tried and true classroom practices, teaching strategies and school policies support the age-appropriate development of security, autonomy, initiative or industry. Be intentional about identifying such practices, share them with other teachers and let this consciousness stimulate the development of additional teacher practices where needed. In so doing you will contribute to the formation of souls, support parent efforts to provide for the holistic formation of their child, and shape a better tomorrow.

CITATIONS

1. Philippians 1:6.
2. Vatican Council II. (1965). Declaration on christian education. In W.M. Abbott (Ed.), The documents of Vatican II. New York: Herder and Herder.
3. National Conference of Catholic Bishops. (1972). To teach as Jesus did. Washington: United States Catholic Conference.
4. Congregation for Catholic Education. (1977). The catholic school. Washington: United States Catholic Conference.
5. McCormack, P. M. (1995). Catholic elementary schools as agents of parent formation needs as perceived by parents (Doctoral Dissertation, University of San Francisco, 1995), p. 308. Dissertation Abstracts International, 56, 2, 420A.
6. Congregation for Catholic Education. (1988). The religious dimension of education in a Catholic school. Washington: United States Catholic Conference.

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.

This article originally appeared in the (August/September 1996) issue of *Today's Catholic Teacher*, © Peter Li, Inc. Reproduced with permission. All rights reserved. This article is protected by United States copyright and other intellectual property laws and may not be reproduced, rewritten, distributed, redisseminated, transmitted, displayed, published or broadcast, directly or indirectly, in any medium without the prior written permission of Peter Li, Inc.