



# Formative Parenting

*Cultivating Character in Children*

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

## PARENTING THROUGH AGES AND STAGES

Parents' hearts easily resonate with the wonderment expressed by Tevye and Golde, the famous couple in the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*. The song "Sunrise, Sunset" captures a perennial parental sigh: "Is this the little girl I carried? Is this the little boy at play? I don't remember growing older. When did they?" Time flies! In the blink of an eye, infant snuggling and nighttime feedings give way to toddlers, fence climbers, Little League games, pajama parties, fulltime shuttle service, adolescence, coed events, dances, and graduations.

External changes are easy to document in picture frames that house a collage of photos representing the span of school years. Physical growth or maturation occurs on its own time schedule regardless of parent intervention. Proper nutrition, physical stimulation, exercise, and regular medical care contribute to the physical health of a child; but even tender, loving care usually does not manipulate growth independent from the child's internal biological schedule. Of course it is true that children need to receive intentional, adequate care in order to fulfill their potential; but basically, physical development happens when it happens!

Other areas of growth depend more upon parent intervention and attention. Cognitive, emotional, affective, moral, spiritual, and social development are affected by parenting practices, home environment, and the influences of other significant adults, peers, or situations. Growth in these ways cannot be forced, but it can be influenced and encouraged. Conversely, lack of positive interaction and intervention during the formation stages can limit, delay, or even block the positive development of a child. What a heavy responsibility for parents!

Discussion with parents has revealed that many moms and dads second-guess themselves because they are bombarded with advice. Some report feeling overwhelmed, unskilled, and guilty. Though their intellects tell them that they are doing the best that they can, they become discouraged because they feel inadequate. They feel that there is never enough time, that something is always left undone, that they lack the natural instincts of parenting, that they parent on the fly, or that they are missing the pieces needed to put the puzzle together perfectly. What a burden is packed in the word perfect! Would it help to know that in the original language used by Jesus, when he counseled us to "be perfect as [our] heavenly Father is perfect," the word perfect had more to do with being balanced and living with imperfection than with being without flaw? In other words, strive to be balanced like our God who lets the weeds and wheat grow together (Mt. 13:24-30), encompassing success and failure, adequacy and inadequacy.

Each of us can only be who we are, doing the best we can with what we have at the time that we have it. We are limited human beings always in process. I suggest that it would be more helpful to view yourself as a human becoming. Strive toward the ideal; stretch to develop your own infinite potential; always want to be more than you have become; and learn about effective parenting practices, but in that process accept that your present personal best is good enough. God is not finished yet! Your personal life and your parenting life are in process. And other adults and experiences along the way of life make significant contributions to child development. God will have the last word, and that word is LOVE.

Parental love is more than adequate to compensate for missing pieces because it forgives, admits mistakes, gives second chances (and 'seventy times seven' chances). Love expresses its motivation, its reasons for discipline, and its passionate concern. Love reveals its human face in laughter; spontaneous fun activities; shared storytelling; admitting need for help; disclosing age-appropriate personal life history events; and building family rituals, customs, and memories. Though this article focuses on the ways that parents influence child development through ages and stages, loving remains the most important piece. Build on the foundation of who you are and your experience, skills, and knowledge. When you encounter parenting models, affirm what you do already and go from there. Be gentle with yourself. Parenting appears incredibly complicated. Know that you do not have to do it all, nor must you reflect a textbook version of parenting. There will be lapses, things not done, i's not dotted and t's not crossed!

Children develop various aspects of personality and human potential through ages and stages. Emotional maturity, moral character, cognitive abilities, and spiritual development evolve continuously through phases that merge with each other. Growth cannot be forced, but it is influenced by both heredity and parenting formation and also encouraged or discouraged through experiences of significant people and events. Consider what moviegoers viewed in the 1994 animated musical *The Lion King*. Simba, the first-born lion son of Mufasa and Sarabi, changed from a frolicking, carefree lion cub to a feisty pre-teen and a spirit-broken adolescent. Characterized by self-doubt and guilt, he adopted the worry-free philosophy of "Hakuna Matata" to anesthetize his pain. Simba

emerged as a pre-adult capable of reflection, sacrifice, and commitment, and then became a maturing young adult willing to accept the responsibility of his destined role, king of the jungle. As with that of all children, Simba's identity formed on the basis of accumulated actions, inactions, and interactions with significant others, including Rafiki, the wise shaman baboon who challenged Simba to discover his spiritual center. Through Rafiki's intervention, Simba heard his father's spirit speak within him: "You have forgotten who you are and so have forgotten me. Look inside yourself, Simba. You are more than what you have become." Simba accepted the challenge of reflection, and maturity followed.

The film chronicled the maturing of Simba's thinking self, his emotional-affective-feeling self, his moral self, and his spiritual self. Growth in those functions was stimulated by love and disappointment, encouragement and obstacles, stability and disequilibrium. Film viewers saw in Simba that personal development towards infinite potential is progressive. It is a multi-layered process and the work of a lifetime. One phase builds upon another and flows into yet another. Generally, physical growth happens in stages without intervention. The same is not true of the other facets of growth. Children need guidance, intentional formative experiences, practice, reflection, and integration opportunities in order to fulfill their potential intellectually, emotionally, morally, and spiritually. Parents can be more effective instruments in that process when they understand how to nurture and influence age/stage-appropriate growth in each of the aspects of the developing child.

## ROAD MARKERS ON THE JOURNEY TO MATURITY

Stage theories of development attempt to identify normal trends. The word normal suggests that in the midst of great variation, similar sequences of growth are observable among large numbers of children. When theorists speak of normal, they do not intend to create absolutes. Theorists know that maturity is evolutionary and overlapping and that growth is always individual. Though theorists speak of stages, no rigid step-like, time-clock pattern is intended. Instead, stages represent a movement towards adulthood. A variety of conditions influence movement from one stage to the next. Additionally, in each aspect of development, even though a child basically exhibits one particular stage, he/she may move in and out of the stage in a given circumstance. Stage theories serve as guides or road markers on the journey to maturity. They provide a framework for understanding the child

and for influencing growth. For the purposes of this article **NORMAL** is defined to mean ***the standard, average pattern of development for a child who is without physical or psychological challenge and who experiences a nurturing home***. Parent or caretaker presence in life-giving settings is marked by affection; patience; understanding; genuine interest; and regular assurances of love, encouragement, warmth, and friendliness. Daily household experiences include simple, clear routines; manageable choices; and a pattern of respectful parent interaction rather than imposition or interference.

Retail bookshelves are stocked with texts that explain developmental theories. Colleges offer a wide variety of psychology courses to explore the dynamics of child rearing and patterns in human growth. Sufficient books, lectures, videos, and courses exist in any one field of development to keep you reading for years, and Internet sites offer digests of theories and theorists with suggested reading lists. This brief article presents but a simple explanation of the more widely known developmental theories and theorists whose research provides a framework to explain the average growth patterns in the whole-person development of children. These psychologists use age designations for their stages. Such ages suggest the range of normal since each child is an individual and growing within varying circumstances. Within these stated limits let us consider four aspects of the journey to maturity.

## THEORIES OF THE DEVELOPING SELF

### 1. THE THINKING SELF (Cognitive Development)

Jean Piaget (1896-1980) was a Swiss psychologist whose fascination with child responses led him to explore the concept of reasoning. His theory of cognitive development describes four progressive stages of intellect that children master on their journey from basic motor skills at birth to formal, highly reasoned thought at adolescence and beyond. These include **sensorimotor** stage (birth-2), **preoperational** stage (2-7), **concrete operational** stage (7-12), and **formal operational** stage (12+). Piaget believed that motor abilities like lifting one's head without assistance, rolling over, walking, and manipulating objects were genetically preprogrammed in children, but that an enriched home environment might reduce the learning time. Each stage requires the ability to reason through and to understand relationships of increased complexity; for example, to recognize that quantity does not change merely because a container's shape changes (*conservation*).

Piaget observed that children who successfully master stages of reasoning become able to understand cause and effect, to think abstractly, and to function as critical thinkers. Since intellectual growth depends upon reasoning ability, no amount of urging, drilling, rote memory, or demanding can force intelligence. On the other hand, **an enriched**

**environment—one that is stimulating, encouraging, and non-threatening and provides opportunities for new experiences**—primes the pump of readiness and interest. When parents understand their child's cognitive stage, it is wise to provide many opportunities for the child to function in that stage while gently introducing tasks that are proper to the next stage of development.

### 2. THE EMOTIONAL-AFFECTIVE SELF (Psycho-social Development)

Like Piaget, Erik Erikson (1902-1994) believed that children develop in a predetermined order. His interest, however, focused on the interaction of physical growth, psychological development, and social relationships. He examined how children connect with their world and how that connection affects their sense of self. Erikson introduced eight stages that occur between birth and death. Each stage offers two possible outcomes. The outcome affects a child's sense of self. If the outcome is positive, the child transitions into the next stage and thinks well of himself; whereas the child who fails to complete a stage successfully experiences a reduced ability to negotiate further stages and more easily spirals into negative self-esteem. The good news is that it is never too late to remedy the situation. The stages include **trust vs. mistrust** (birth-18 months); **autonomy vs. shame,**

**self-doubt** (18 months-3 years); **initiative vs. guilt** (3-6); **industry vs. inferiority** (6-12); **identity vs. role confusion** (adolescence); **intimacy vs. isolation** (young adulthood); **generativity vs. stagnation** (middle adulthood); and **ego integrity vs. despair** (old age). Healthy personality develops through experiences, choices, and practices that produce a pattern of positive outcomes.

### 3. THE MORAL SELF

Lawrence Kohlberg (1927-1987) applied the developmental approach of Piaget to the study of moral reasoning and explored how people develop moral codes; that is, principles or habits of right and wrong conduct. He proposed **moral dilemmas**, stories of struggle that caused children to experience **cognitive dissonance** (lack of harmony in thought) and **disequilibrium** (moral discomfort). Then he observed how children reasoned their solutions and he found that children based their decisions upon what they considered to be right and what they considered a reason to be good. From the pattern of responses that he observed, Kohlberg determined that there were three basic levels of moral reasoning, each consisting of two stages. The **Preconventional** Level, a self-focused morality, includes stage one (kindergarten) and stage two (grades 1-3); the **Conventional** Level, other-focused morality, includes stage three (grades 4-6 and early mid-teens in grades 7-8-9) and stage four (high school and late teens); the **Postconventional** level, principle-focused morality, includes stages five and six. Contemporary critics point out that Kohlberg's research was biased towards males and limited in cultural diversity and that the ability to achieve moral reasoning does not guarantee moral behavior. Regardless, Kohlberg's work remains the major framework for understanding moral development.

### PARENTING THROUGH AGES AND STAGES

This article suggested the story of *The Lion King* as an image of the process of growth and it suggested stage theories of normal development. But let's face it! The life process does not run as smoothly as a Disney movie; and normal in the family life cycle is textured and complicated by multiple forces, many of which are

### 4. THE SPIRITUAL SELF

James W. Fowler (b. 1940) contributed pioneering research that explored how faith develops. Building upon the theological influences of Paul Tillich and H. Richard Niebuhr and the developmental theories of Erikson, Piaget, and Kohlberg, Fowler interviewed approximately 600 males and females, ages 4-88, who were members of major religious traditions as well as agnostics and atheists. He explored the ways that life had meaning and purpose for them. His research culminated in *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development*, a book that details six stages of faith development:

- **intuitive-projective** faith (ages 2 - 6/7), the stage of imitation;
- **mythic-literal** faith (ages 7 – 11/12), the story-telling stage;
- **synthetic-conventional** (adolescent or adult), the belonging stage;
- **individuating-reflexive** (after 18), the searching stage,
- **conjunctive** (after 30), and
- **universalizing** (achieved by few).

Young children first come to faith through imitation and imagination. During elementary school years children move into a stage that is cultivated by powerful stories that they interpret literally. Motivated by a desire to know, be known, and belong, adolescents look to significant others for validation and feedback. Folks who continue to develop their spiritual self grow through reflection to assume personal ownership for their faith, explained in stages four through six. As is the case with each aspect of development, persons do not automatically evolve stage by stage. Many adults, for example, stabilize at stage three, synthetic-conventional faith. Their values and beliefs come together to form a personal faith orientation and they find satisfactory support and nurturance through membership in an established group.

beyond the control of parents. Add to that the thinking, affective, moral, and spiritual steps toward maturity and one could be paralyzed by the thought. Far from the “problem-free philosophy” of Simba’s jungle buddies, any man or woman might easily feel overwhelmed by the challenge of parenting.

But take courage in the advice of Jesus: “Fear is useless. What is needed is trust” (Mk. 5:35). Trust that “God who began this good work in you will be faithful to complete it” (Phil. 1:6). Trust that God’s grace will be ever present to sustain you. Trust that you are “enough” for your child and that God does not necessarily call the qualified, but that God surely qualifies those who are called. Finally, trust the last words of Jesus before he ascended into heaven: “Know that I am with you always, until the end of the world” (Mt. 28: 20).

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