



# Formative Parenting

*Cultivating Character in Children*

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

## HOME WAYS FOR SCHOOL DAYS

Students and teachers share time and space, mind and soul for at least five hours a day. Consequently, the Catholic school becomes a privileged place for the total formation of children. Minds are challenged, souls are nourished, and Christian principles set the standard for every effort in the classroom, at the computer lab, on the playground, or during a school assembly. The vocation of Catholic-school teacher challenges the adult to view every moment as an opportunity for formation. This responsibility was expressed most clearly in the words of the Congregation for Catholic Education (1998): "...there is no separation between time for learning and time of formation, between acquiring notions and growing in wisdom." What a privilege it is to form souls!

Soulful formation is the primary purpose of the Catholic school. Academic excellence, self-discipline, student responsibility, and productivity are hallmarks and goals of Catholic schools. Nevertheless, soul formation is the reason that the Catholic school exists. Ongoing formation in Gospel values that is integrated into every aspect of the school day distinguishes a Catholic school from other quality schools across the nation, public or private. In a Catholic school it is ordinary to hear a teacher interject a comment about compassion in the midst of a spirited competition, to speak of the dignity of the human person while instructing students how to function effectively during small group projects, or to make a teachable moment in the midst of a science class of an observed student virtue.

### TEACHER AS FORMATION AGENT

Without question, parents are the primary educators of their children. It is the right and privilege of parents to choose the kind of school environment that will best support their own vocation to provide education for their child. Because privilege and responsibility are inseparable, it then becomes a parent duty to support the policies and decisions of the school, and to expect the same of children. A parent who chooses to enroll a child in the Catholic school entrusts the continued formation of the child to the staff of the school. Teachers stand "*in loco parentis*" (*in the place of parents*). They serve this role for long periods of quality, interactive time daily. I suspect that there are very few parents of children in elementary or secondary school who can match that reality. Even in vacation times, how many parents spend several hours a day in uninterrupted quality interaction with their child either alone or with a group of the child's peers? Teachers do so daily.

What do I mean by the expression "quality, interactive time"? Obviously, one-on-one time in a class of 20 or more students is limited in schools that are unable to provide paraprofessionals or classroom aides. However, the teacher is regularly aware of a student both as an individual and as a member of the class during instruction, deskwork, group work, homework review, and times of sustained silent activity.

Very frequently, elementary school teachers also observe or interact with their students during playground periods, cafeteria time, assemblies, and extracurricular activity. Sometimes teachers are in a position to observe their students when another professional is teaching the group. Interaction with a student during any of these times and observing the student interacting with other students during group times provides allows the teacher a privileged view into the soul of each student. Consequently a teacher can be an invaluable resource for parents. Two factors make objectivity more possible to the teacher: (1) The teacher is not related by blood or family ties to the student. (2) The student is one of many others of the same age. That, along with the probability that the teacher has spent other years with children of the same grade level, assists the teacher to identify “baseline” norms and to detect “red flag” behaviors. This is not to suggest that the teacher is an all-knowing god but the perceptions of the teacher can suggest valuable guidelines, especially for parents who are living through this particular grade-age/stage for the first time.

## **PARENT AND TEACHERS AS PARTNERS**

Teachers are most effective when they experience the support of parents. Lack of support has a demoralizing effect and, consequently, frustrates the ability of the teacher to bring about good for the students. It reminds me of the gospel scene in Mark 6. Jesus had cast out demons; healed many at Simon’s house; restored life to a child; and cured a leper, a paralytic, a man with a withered hand, and a woman who had hemorrhaged for 12 years. Then he went to his own hometown, Nazareth. The townsfolk took offense at him, saying that he was only a carpenter! Mark reported that Jesus could do no miracles there because of the peoples’ lack of faith.

I have seen this unfortunate scenario in action personally and through shared stories. Students benefit most when home and school work in partnership. Frankly, lack of partnership defeats the purpose for enrolling a child in the school and it grows a counterproductive attitude within the child. If a parent criticizes the teacher or school in front of the child or displays anger toward or about the teacher or principal, the child assumes permission to disrespect or disregard the authority of the teacher. That is not good for the moral development nor for the psycho-social development of the child. In extreme cases it can even cause a child’s development to freeze (or stop). When a parent disagrees with a teacher action or school policy it benefits the child for the parent to suggest a coping skill appropriate to the situation like, “It sounds like we need to ask the Holy Spirit to inspire your teacher and to strengthen your patience. Write up that intention and add it to our family prayer dish.” If the issue is one that involves a parent value (principle), it is best followed up with a private teacher appointment, unknown to the child. Adults thus interact like adults and the child remains a child who is unaware of parent-teacher conflict and, therefore, remains “free” to be a child. If the situation is one that requires both sides of the story, then the child would be present in a second teacher appointment. Of course, all parent-teacher encounters require respectful listening and speaking. Always parents and teachers must model for children the kind of behavior and interaction that we want children to acquire. Let me share a personal story to illustrate this wisdom.

On the first day of school in second grade, my teacher asked aloud, “Patricia, is it true that you had honors last year?” With quite a bit of pleasure I responded, “Yes, Miss X.” She then said, “Well, you won’t get them this year!” What I did not compute until I was much older was that it was the teacher’s first year of teaching and she had 100 students in the room! She was trying to establish that the students would have to work very hard that year.

I went home crying. I told my mother what the teacher said and she responded with a single sentence. The sentence did not focus on the teacher. It focused on me. My mother said, "Pat, if you give the teacher honors, the teacher has to give you honors." She then hugged me and changed the topic.

My mother gave me a great gift that day. In one sentence I learned that I had autonomy. I was responsible for my product and my result. I believed my mother. And so I went into the world believing that I controlled my destiny. As I grew into adulthood I learned that I do not always have control over the results but at the time that I needed to believe that I did! I learned to put my energy into my efforts. Funny! Usually results match effort!

Many years passed before I learned that there was a second part to the story. My mother visited the teacher privately. They had a meeting of minds; and my mother concluded the meeting by telling the teacher that I would not know about the meeting, nor would any other parent. What a gift my mother gave to both the teacher and to me. The teacher was able to grow while saving face in front of parents and other children, and I was free to be a second grader who never knew that my teacher was in trouble with my mother.

My mother knew the damage of gossip. Gossip means telling information to others that they have no right to know. Negative gossip about teachers spreads like cancer and it has the same effect! Once faith in a teacher is publicly broken then he or she, like Jesus at Nazareth, can do no miracles for the current class, even though miracles were done for previous classes of students. The scripture offers the sage advice: to say only the good things that people need to hear, things that will really help them. (Ephesians 4, 29-30)

## RESOLVING CRISES

Seasoned parents defuse teacher-student crises by asking clarifying questions. For instance, a parent might say: *"Getting a detention for merely walking to the wastebasket does sound bizarre. Tell me what preceded your action. What was going on in the classroom? Did the teacher give any directions about walking around the room?"* Chances are that such questions will elicit important information. Perhaps the teacher had already corrected this child twice for getting out of the desk without permission or the students were given explicit instructions to maintain a testing environment until the teacher pronounced that the exam was finished. Getting the facts and making an attempt to determine a **mutual definition of terms** are essential elements in diffusing a catastrophe. For sure, a wise parent checks both sides of the story before concluding that the teacher is in the wrong. I have a concrete example of the kind of disaster that occurs when a parent makes a conclusion before gathering all the available facts.

On a Friday afternoon a seventh grade boy earned a detention. As instructed, he filled in the reason on the detention slip and then obtained the teacher signature. The student indicated that detention was issued for "passing a book in a crowded classroom." When he arrived home he argued that the detention was not fair. His parents quickly took his point of view and went storming back to school, demanding to see the teacher. The teacher had students in the classroom and so she took the situation into the hallway. Loud, angry parent voices drew me out from my classroom two rooms away to see what was the problem. I remained as a silent witness.

Failing to ask teacher input, the parents verbalized in accusatory tones that the school and she were a disgrace to the Catholic religion. They argued that helping another student by sharing a book was a gospel value. Their son ought not to be punished because he passed a social studies book to another student. They accused the teacher of picking on their son and they demanded an apology. The son was present during this encounter.

The teacher softly replied that she believed that the parent opinion was based on a misinterpretation in language. She invited all four of us into her classroom. She instructed the boy to place her in the position of the boy who received the book and to then put himself in his own position. This gave a visual of a distance between aisle one, seat five and aisle four, seat two. She then asked to boy to describe the classroom at the time. The event occurred during dismissal preparations when 35 students were in various stages of packing books and not expecting an object of weight to fly through the air! Finally she instructed the student to re-enact the position of his body at the time that he passed the book.

What the parents and I saw was that the offending student took the pose of a football player with one leg in the air as he “passed” (hurled) the football (heavy book with sturdy corners) to a team member. Clearly, this was an accident waiting to happen.

The teacher then spoke very calmly. She said, “I have three things to say: First, I praise God that no student was injured. Second, your son acted irresponsibly and in violation of our written safety precautions that forbid throwing objects, running, jumping over furniture, or any movement that can cause an accident. And third, the detention stands. It will be served on Monday.”

The parents instructed their son to apologize to the teacher for his behavior and for wasting her after-school time. Then they, too, apologized for believing the worst of her before corroborating the story.

Asking clarifying questions that included the definition of “passing”— or, at least, asking what the child thought the teacher would say if the parent protested the detention—could have eliminated this entire nasty Friday afternoon. Perspective, too, could have nipped the situation in the bud. Let’s face it. This was not a premeditated crime! It was an impulsive act on the part of a 13-year old boy. Instead of a detention the teacher might have engaged the student in conversation or assigned a composition explaining the possible ramifications of his impulsivity. And the parents might have elevated the attitude of “boys will be boys” to “boys become men when they take responsibility for their actions.”

This true story illustrates what a wise school-worn teacher once said to me: “Children do not lie. You just don’t ask the right questions.” The student wrote the truth on the detention slip when he wrote “passing a book in a crowded classroom.” It was his parents who interpreted the term to mean to hand a book to another student close by. Of course the child allowed the parents to persist in their inaccuracy. But let’s save that point for another day!

A parent-teacher partnership implies that parents and teachers extend the benefit of the doubt to the other. Whether in conference or in writing, both use respectful tones. Both demonstrate courtesy and self-control. Both approach the other with a spirit of partnership. Both precede encounters with prayer and thoughtful planning. And both exercise charity in order to be ready **to respond rather than react** to any matter of controversy and to practice the meaning of the phrase “to speak the truth in love.” Partners never speak negatively about the other to the children or to other parents or teachers.

Both hold sacred the reputation of the other and, therefore, both practice the discipline of confidentiality.

### SUPPORT AT HOME

In addition to providing emotional support to teachers, other crucial “home ways” make a positive difference in the education of children. Parents advance the education of their children when they provide the following kinds of SUPPORT:

<b>S</b>	Supervise homework. Establish a time, place, and space where the child reports for school work, even if he announces that there is no assigned homework on a given day. Check over work for completeness and neatness. In the primary grades in particular, check also for accuracy and mastery.
<b>U</b>	Unite with school authority by complying with the particulars in the school handbook and by backing up teacher decisions.
<b>P</b>	Provide honest, respectful feedback to both student and teacher. Inform teachers about stresses in the child’s life that may impact learning or socialization.
<b>P</b>	Promote responsibility and maturity in your child through chores, checklists, deadlines, and reasonable standards of performance.
<b>O</b>	Organize the household for school success. Provide a box for each child for storing the schoolbag, project, lunch, PE shoes, etc., in readiness for the next day. Establish habits of adequate sleep that begin with a quiet atmosphere and soft lighting at least 20 minutes prior to bedtime and with no electronic media in use during bedtime. Plan nourishing meals, school lunch, and snacks that limit sugar intake. Teach personal hygiene skills like teeth brushing and hair care. Determine a time for daily bathing.
<b>R</b>	Regulate a balanced schedule to include schoolwork, play, extracurricular interests, family time, leisure, and prayer time. Limit TV on school days and limit extracurricular interests to two per year.
<b>T</b>	Teach your child to <i>name, claim, and tame</i> personal behavior, in other words, to accept ownership for his/her choices by admitting to a choice, accepting the consequence without shifting blame to others, and apologizing when necessary.

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](mailto:DrPatMcCormack@aol.com).

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