



# Formative Parenting

*Cultivating Character in Children*

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

## **Weaving the Fabric of Christian Character, Part 2** **FOSTER THE PROCESS** **Relating to Children at Each Stage of Development**

Dear Parent,

Almost daily you can find a newspaper item, magazine article, or editorial that expounds the responsibility of parents to form the character and conscience of their children. Statistics and studies abound that correlate faulty conscience formation with the social ills of our time. And yet, who or what prepares you to understand the process of moral reasoning and, even more, how to relate to children at each stage of development in such a way as to nurture positive growth and to challenge further development?

Part One of this series offered a framework to understand the various stages of moral reasoning in children of Kindergarten through Eighth Grade age. It highlighted how children of each stage think and what motivates their actions. This communication will offer suggestions on how to relate to your child in stage-appropriate ways that foster positive growth.

The foundation for moral development begins at birth with physical and emotional responsiveness and bonding between parent and child and extends through age three. Babies are taught obedience through responsive love that is sensitive to baby signals and baby point of view rather than parent wishes, moods, and activities; accepting of baby "business"; giving brief reasons for parent directives; and creating situations that evoke cooperation. Lickona (1988) concluded: "Forming a positive attachment to a parent helps a baby learn to perform one of its first cooperative acts: obeying a parent's simple commands (such as "No, No!"; "Don't touch!"; "Come, here"; "Give it to me".)" (p. 45) Securely-attached babies become self-confident three year olds. But love alone is not sufficient for moral development. Children also need discipline, discussion, direct teaching, and good example throughout all the years of their growth.

Lickona gave seven suggestions for disciplining toddlers which apply also to ages two and three: (1) maximize opportunities for safe exploration, (2) teach limits, (3) teach alternatives, (4) use distraction that avoids

a needless contest of wills, (5) reinforce desirable behavior, (6) when possible, ignore undesirable behavior, and (7) if necessary, impose a logical consequence for misbehavior; and try to avoid spanking. During the "twos and threes", respect the need for growth in independence by offering choices; ask questions that cause your child to think; use storytelling to teach lessons and appropriate behavior; give time-outs; use rhyming rules; give your child reasons for rules you impose; teach manners and the habit of helping.

During the Preschool Years (Age 4 on), reaffirm old limits; teach new ones; spell out rules and enforce them consistently. Require your child to give better reasons than "I want to!" Assign chores that give your child a responsible role in the family. Use the fairness approach to begin to stretch your child's understanding of what is "fair". Make sure your child has opportunities to interact with the viewpoints of peers. Play simple games that help your child to learn to follow rules. Parents who provide this kind of environment for their children prepare them to meet the developmental challenges of the elementary school years ahead.

On the reverse side of this letter are suggestions for relating to children in ways that foster growth in moral development and reasoning. For more extensive support treat yourself to a copy of *Raising Good Children from Birth Through the Teenage Years*, written by Dr. Thomas Lickona. May the information shared in this letter affirm your parenting style and serve as a guide to determine how best to provide for the Christian Character development of your child.

## Parent Advice for Challenging Moral Reasoning at Various Stages of Moral Development

(Adapted from Thomas Lickona. (1988). *Raising Good Children*. Illinois: Bantam Books)

### Kindergarten Age [MORAL REASONING STAGE 1]

- Provide firm external control since inner controls are weak at this stage.
- Reinforce manners and other good behavior.
- Use higher-stage moral reasoning (i.e., fairness, building community, pleasing others, faithfulness to duty) with necessary assertions of authority to help your child develop a better understanding of the reasons for rules. Avoid statements like “Don’t let me catch you doing that again!”
- Teach values which tell your child that certain things are wrong. At the same time work on the process of helping your child to understand why those things are wrong.
- Teach your child two-way fairness by solving family conflicts in a way that considers the feelings of each family member.
- Teach mutual respect by treating your child like a person.

### Early Childhood (Grades 1-3) [MORAL REASONING STAGE 2]

- Understand that “back-talking” comes from Stage 2’s fierce sense of fairness; but insist, still, on respect.
- Appeal to tit-for-tat reciprocity (“I did that for you, so you should do this for me”).
- Be willing to do back-and-forth negotiation in order to work out solutions that are fair to both you and your child.
- Appeal to love instead of fairness as a reason to do what you ask. Teach love as a value in itself.
- Help your child to become more sensitive to the feelings of others.
- Help your child to focus on living up to your expectations rather than on getting concrete rewards of avoiding punishment.
- Offer examples, including your own behavior, of kind and caring actions beyond the family.

### Middle Childhood (Grades 4-6) [MORAL REASONING STAGE 3]

**“Because Stage 3 kids have a self-image they want to live up to, they have, for the first time, a true conscience” (p. 165).**

- Maintain a positive personal relationship with your child and a strong family life. Spend time together and stay in touch physically as well as verbally. Help your child develop a sense of identity within the family.
- Help your child develop a positive self-concept: treat him with love, firmness, and respect; do not compare him with others; help him develop interests and abilities; help him break the “put-down” habit; support his efforts to find friends who help him feel good about himself.
- Teach your child moral values (prudence, temperance, fortitude, justice, etc.), especially the value of independence.
- Balance independence and control. Don’t control through destructive guilt; use indirect control.

### Early Adolescence (Grade 7-8) [MORAL REASONING STAGE 4]

- Help your child develop an independent conscience based on self-respect and social responsibility.
- Discuss social and moral issues that focus on the relationship between the individual and society and the responsibility all of us have to cooperate for the common good.
- Teach your child to apply the concept “What if everybody did such-and-such” to issues that are relevant to their lives.
- Encourage growth in initiative and industry that help your child to act and feel like a responsible member of society, i.e., holding a job, serving the community, helping people outside the family.
- Encourage your child to develop goals for the future and to imagine herself as a contributing member of society, viewing work as a way of contributing to the welfare of others.

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