



Formative Parenting

Cultivating Character in Children

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

Developing Moral Maturity – Part 2 HABITS OF THE HEART

Moral maturity builds upon skills of heart, mind, and action. In addition, Christian maturity (or conscience) integrates Christian principles and prayerful discernment in the decision-making process. Parents and teachers help children to develop a moral mentality by fostering these five habits. This newsletter focuses **on Habits of the Heart**.

A moral life is a life of love. Morality begins with love, makes choices that reflect love, and leads to healthy relationships of love. Rabbi Neil Kurshan teaches that “relationship is at the core of human life, even as it is at the core of our human connection to God. Being human means being for others.” Good relationships, or the lack of them, have a formative effect on a child’s development of maturity, morality, and even spirituality. This newsletter highlights five factors that prepare the heart of a child for good relationships.

ESTABLISH SECURITY

Readiness for relationship is rooted within a context of security. Just so, a moral mentality begins in the womb when a fetus regularly senses comfort and calm. Security continues to develop outside the womb when the pattern of life is characterized by the following kinds of practices:

- routine, procedure, and system
- physical and emotional safety
- consistency, continuity, predictability
- saying what you mean and meaning what you say

- Pre-school children can cooperate, take turns, play fair, perform acts of kindness, and take care of things that belong to others.

- Primary school children can practice sharing, forgiving, and kindness; be responsible for action choices; refuse to blame others; and learn that lying is wrong because it makes people unable to trust.

- Intermediate school children can apply fidelity, reverence, justice, peace, mercy, and compassion to opportunities of service.

- Middle school children can cooperate in group projects; develop the affective-emotional skills of love like empathy, compassion, self-control, appreciation, sensitivity to others’ need, sympathy, sorrow, regret, and healthy guilt; and practice social virtues like patience, understanding, generosity, helpfulness, and respectful acceptance of differences.

EXPRESS RESPECT FOR OTHERS

We cultivate the capacity for relationship through honesty and sensitivity to others’ needs. At every age children can express respect toward others:

- Toddlers can kiss a boo-boo and say “please,” “thank you,” and “I’m sorry.”

TRANSMIT AFFECTIVE-EMOTIONAL SKILLS

Parents and teachers “ready” children for relationship in the same way(s) that we ready them to read:

- Hear the vocabulary of affective-emotional behavior, i.e., empathy, compassion
- Define the vocabulary in age-appropriate ways.
- Give an example.
- Read about the skill in a story or name the behavior when it appears in a video.
- Invite self-reflection about particular instances of a child’s behavior.

CREATE TEACHABLE MOMENTS

Casual exposure to emotional skills and virtues happens when children are already engaged in activity and a teachable moment occurs:

- Make a brief reflective comment during a cartoon or TV show, i.e., “Wasn’t that thoughtful for Squirrel

to invite Bear to the forest picnic?” or “Can you imagine the self-control it took for Ronnie to walk away from that fight?”

- When a playmate grabs a toy you might ask, “Eddie, what is the sharing thing to do?” or comment, “I saw that, Eddie. You showed generosity to Andy.”
- Involve a child in making predictions while reading or watching a film: “How do you think Squirrel’s choice is going to affect Bear?”

LEARN TO NAME EMOTIONS

Consider the difference between “I hate going to the after-school study program” and “I feel—*anxious, awkward, bashful, discouraged, or embarrassed*—about going to the after-school study program.” Learning to pinpoint the nerve center of an emotional feeling contributes to moral maturity. An “**ABC Emotional Vocabulary**” list is accessible in the book *Building Moral Intelligence* and the website www.moralintelligence.com. In both sources Michele Borba provides multiple resources for parents and teachers to help children grow as moral people.

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