



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 3 **ESTABLISH THE "WARP" ON THE LOOM OF CHRISTIAN CHARACTER** **Parent Practices Related to Developing Affective Skills in Children**

Dear Parent,

You are the weaver of soul formation by shaping the structure and framework for the Christian character of your child. Weaving is a process of interlacing threads in a pattern; it results in fabric. In the case of soul formation, you are weaving the fabric of Christian character that contributes to the fabric of society. The first step in the weaving process is to set lengthwise strips of thread or yarn on a loom. The lengthwise strips are called the WARP. After the warp is established the weaver begins to interlace horizontal threads which are called the WEFT or the WOOF. The weaver creates patterns during the process and unique fabric is the product of the weaver's labor. In the process of soul formation the warp is the threads of affective, emotional development; the weft is the threads of cognitive, reasoning development; and the patterning is the repetition of actions that flow from emotional sensitivity and objective reasoning. Both emotion and reason shape moral development. For the Christian soul the weft-reasoning includes the teachings and example of Jesus Christ.

Family is the loom on which the WARP foundation (emotion / affectivity) begins at birth. This communication focuses on developing affectivity, a positive emotional base from which will come values and ideals. Emotion is the first of three dimensions of soul formation and, therefore, the warp of the fabric of Christian character. Psychologists suggest that much of our affective or emotional intelligence is learned in the first year of life when children learn how to react in simple cause-and-effect situations with parents. Through interaction with parents children learn how to name, claim and tame emotions like being disappointed, pleased, anxious, sad, fearful, proud, ashamed, delighted, apologetic, etc.

The foundation for emotional intelligence is created when parents provide loving care, safety, healthy response to stress, hugs, laughter, smiles; when they bond with their child; and when they make it an intentional habit to avoid threats, model empathy, create a joyful home, set clear rules, and

avoid yelling. Parents who voice the affective reason behind their own actions and express the same when correcting behavior situations in early childhood contribute to the emotional intelligence of their child.

Consistently throughout childhood an essential formative task is to awaken and sharpen the young person's moral sensitivity. Developed during this first dimension of soul formation is an inner desire for goodness and truth, a quest for value and ideals, self-awareness, and an internalization of affective skills like empathy, sympathy, and compassion. Experiences of caring and concern foster affective growth. It is from this first dimension of character formation that children make decisions of "good and Bad" based on their intentions and they develop the capacity for self-direction. There is a subjective quality to these decisions that evolves from their perceptions of early affective-emotional experiences.

On the reverse side of this letter are parent strategies for developing affective skills in children of elementary school age. 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 Strategies for Developing Affective Skills
in Children of Elementary School Age
(Christian Character: Dimension 1)**

Adapted from: Himes, K. R. (1992) "Conscience Formation and Moral Decisions" in Sharing the Faith, Volume 2. Washington: National Catholic Educational Association, pp.145-159.

Dimension 1 of Christian Character Development parallels the development of Conscience Level 1. At this stage of development conscience is experienced as an interior reality, the inner voice of the person calling to him out of his deepest sense of self-awareness; it is who he is; it points up the truth that his first task is to be true to himself. The first person hurt in an unconscientious act is the person himself. He betrays himself by not being true to the truth which he believes. Conscience 1 is an inner dynamism within each of us for moral value, for goodness. "Good and Bad" refer to one's intentions. Am I honestly seeking the good? To develop Conscience 1 parents need to instill in their children a love for goodness and encourage in them a sense of moral idealism whereby they do not succumb to a skepticism or even cynicism about moral values.

❑ **Focus on the affective dimensions of moral growth.** Provide opportunities that increase your child's ability to feel the pain or other people (empathy); the discipline to delay immediate gratification for a higher purpose (self-control); and the courage to withstand the pressure of peers or societal expectations (fortitude). The life experiences of your child and those viewed on TV, videos, etc. provide a forum for discussion or value comments from you, the parent.

❑ **Focus on moral disciplines which restrain your child's ego and makes room for moral growth.** Call you child to sacrifice, to share her talents and possessions, to work cooperatively, to deny himself for the sake of another, to work with persistence and care on a project whose rewards are in the future, and to live up to promises.

❑ **Promote the concept that the morally good life is both possible and attractive.** Provide stories of exemplary figures, news accounts of heroic activity, standards of heroism, examples of compassion, experiences which challenge your child's taken-for-granted world of self-interest.

❑ **Broaden your child's range of experiences.** Introduce your child to the lives of ordinary folks who display a quiet heroism in the way they live out their commitments, care for their neighbors, and struggle to maintain personal integrity.

❑ **Directly engage your child in activities that reflect the values you wish to see him develop.**

❑ **Call your child to reflect and talk about moral dilemmas or significant influences in order to promote moral reflection and sharpen her ability to see beyond the superficial.** Even TV cartoons, shows, or comic books can be used as sources of such discussion.

❑ **Let your child experience the consequences of his actions.** Do not permit your child to think that his actions do not really matter, that there is a remedy for every mistake, or a quick fix for every error. Permitting children to suffer the consequences of a wrongful act -- loss of popularity, anger from those harmed, squandered opportunity - - forces a sense of seriousness upon a child's awareness so that future decisions will be made with greater attention and care.

❑ **Be honest about your own reactions to moral issues.** Express honest confusion. Allow yourself the freedom to make known your own sense of moral indignation at evil, or admiration in the face of moral heroism, etc. It gives the child a clearer perception that moral choices are important.

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