



Formative Parenting

Cultivating Character in Children

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

Parent as Mentor, Part 3 MENTOR LOVE-IN-ACTION

Love is the primary lesson that parents teach their children. By nature, children are self-absorbed. They live in a world of “me, myself, and I.” That self-centered worldview is necessary for the first two years of life in order to see themselves as loved, lovable, and secure. But with the dawn of language children need to be introduced to the concept of other. Sharing, empathy, forgiveness, repentance, compassion and the other expressions of social-emotional intelligence require teaching and modeling in the first school – the home. Insufficient exercise of love-in-action fosters within children an attitude of entitlement and dis-engagement from responsibility to the common good.

Love is not a feeling. Love is a choice, a decision. Parents teach love through the directions that they give to their children and in the example that they demonstrate. The use of sayings, mantras, quotations, or aphorisms can be useful in stretching a child’s thought process. Parents can mentor the souls of their children to soulful maturity with thoughtful remarks that are repeated often enough that they shape attitudes and actions. Some parents use printed mantras or slogans as house decorations: on a wall, above a staircase, near a light switch, or on a mirror. Helpful one-liners include:

“What does love look like?”
“What look did you give to love today?”
“What would Jesus do?”
“What would you do for Jesus?”
“No matter what the question, love is the answer.”

Love would invite a lonely child to play a game, or share lunch with a student who is without one, read a book to a younger sibling in order to relieve mom or dad, or do chores without complaining.

St. Paul defined love quite succinctly. In First Corinthians 13: 4-7 Paul wrote that love is patient and kind; not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude; it does not insist on its own way, nor is it irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth; it bears all things, believes, hopes and endures all things. True love behaves these ways even on occasions when feeling is absent.

Oscar Hammerstein provided a terrific mantra for teaching love. In the musical Sound of Music we hear:

**“ A bell is no bell ’til you ring it.
A song is no song ’til you sing it.
And love in your heart wasn’t put there to stay.
Love isn’t love ’til you give it away.”**

Early on, involve your children in discussing the meaning of this quotation or another slogan of your choosing. Give repeated opportunities to practice love-in-action. Whenever you observe love-in-action point it out and express approval whether the occasions appear in a TV show, movie, or real life. Repeat your mantra.

Works of Love

Be intentional about teaching the **Spiritual and the Corporal Works of Mercy**. Engage children in literal application and be creative in defining these holy deeds. For instance, “Feed the Hungry” is a corporal work of mercy.

- In a *literal sense* that could translate into serving at a food kitchen, donating money to a food collection, contributing canned goods to a food bank, preparing a holiday food basket for a family in need, supporting legislation that provides food pantries, deciding to give up desserts and give the saved money to the Church poor box, etc.

- In a *creative, critical thinking sense*, “Feed the Hungry” could refer to telephoning a shut-in who is hungry for conversation; inviting to a play date a child who is unpopular; sending a homemade greeting card to a grandparent

who is lonely; speaking affirming words to someone who is starved for attention, etc.

“The works of mercy are charitable actions by which we come to the aid of our neighbor in his spiritual and bodily necessities” (CCC #2447). The **spiritual works of mercy** challenge us to: admonish/correct sinners, share knowledge with others, counsel the doubtful, comfort the sorrowful, bear wrongs patiently, forgive all injuries, and pray for the living and the dead. The **corporal works of mercy** call us to: feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, help those imprisoned, shelter the homeless, care for the sick, and bury the dead. “Among all these, giving alms to the poor is one of the chief witnesses to fraternal charity; it is also a work of justice pleasing to God” (CCC #2447). **“Love does such things!”**

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