



Formative Parenting

Cultivating Character in Children

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

Parent as Mentor, Part 5 **MENTOR RESPONSIBLE SPEECH**

It only takes a spark to get a fire going. How often have you witnessed that one word, one phrase, or one sentence caused irreparable harm to a relationship? The tongue is a powerful instrument of life or of death. It is also an indicator of personal character. The person who exerts self-control regarding speech, most likely develops self-mastery over other aspects of life. St. James used two analogies to explain the power of speech. He said that the tongue is like a “bit” in the mouth of a horse. Though tiny, it controls the horse’s entire body. And, the tongue is like the very small rudder of a large ship. The rudder is insignificant in size compared to the ship, and yet it is the rudder that guides the vehicle. When mentoring a child towards soulful maturity, responsible speech is a core skill to be mastered.

Jesus remarked that a person’s words depend on what fills his/her heart (Mt. 12:34). The home is the primary place to develop habits of gracious words—encouragement, appreciation, recognition, welcome, affirmation, gratitude, comfort, or apology. St. Paul summarized a proactive approach for cultivating responsible speech in children when he advised: **“Whatever is true, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things”** (Philippians 4:8). To Paul’s wisdom add “talk about such things.” Parents can mentor their children to be people who use their speech responsibly by discussing the meaning contained in Paul’s advice or by other mantras, aphorisms, or slogans like these:

- **“A kind mouth multiplies friends, and gracious lips prompt friendly greetings”** (Sirach 6:5).
- **“Say only the good things that folks need to hear; things that will really help them”** (Eph. 4: 29-32).
- **“Hearts have been broken by harsh words spoken that sorrow can never set right.”**

It is essential to mentor the heart of children with words, thoughts and expressions that bring life and can seep into their soul. Some households post soulful thoughts on the refrigerator or some well-visited spot in the house, like the bathroom mirror or the doorpost to the main door. Others display a thought on an index card mounted on a mini-easel and placed as the dinner table centerpiece.

SPEAK THE TRUTH IN LOVE

Truth spoken harshly loses its chance to help another or to convert behavior. But when truth is spoken in love, it is more likely to bring forth the fruit of peace and growth. Three criteria ought to inform your decision to speak hard information to another person.

- (1) **Is the topic true and whose truth is it?**
Is it reliable information, not hearsay?
Is it a matter of principle and moral living, an expression of the Gospel, or is it your pet peeve? If it is reliable and represents God's will, speak.
- (2) **Is it necessary to speak?** Will silence cause more harm? Would you think it important to say this thing to anyone in a similar situation or only to this particular person? Is it a matter that will benefit the person and others or is it merely a matter of your ego? Is it the cake or the icing on the cake? Speak the cake; skip the icing.
- (3) **Will it be helpful to speak?** Does your relational history suggest that your words will be accepted and, therefore, be an aide to conversion?

After you consider the criteria, if you determine to speak, be brief, be respectful, stick to the point, and then let it go.

Truth is necessary to form and maintain right relationships. Truth builds trust, an essential thread in the fabric of society. The eighth commandment charges us to speak the truth, to preserve the reputation of others, and to keep confidential, information that others have no right to know. Sensitize your children to avoid the following examples of *irresponsible speech*. More detail is available in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, # 2471-2492.

Lie – speaking a falsehood with the intention of deceiving.

Rash Judgment – assuming as true, without sufficient foundation, the moral fault of a neighbor.

Detraction – telling the truth about another's faults and failings to persons who did not know them.

Calumny – lies about another that harms the reputation of the person and creates occasion for false judgments concerning him/her.

Contumely – speaking of a person's faults or defects in his/her presence in order to humiliate the person.

Blasphemy – publicly speaking ill of God or misusing God's name, thereby presenting God to others in a contemptible light.

False Witness – making a public statement that is contrary to truth.

Perjury – telling a lie when under oath.

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