



Formative Parenting

Cultivating Character in Children

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

A Guide to Catholic Parenting: CATHOLIC PARENTS CREATE A CULTURE OF MERCY

One day Jesus said that if a brother sins against you seven times a day, and each time says, 'I am sorry,' you are to forgive him (Lk. 17:3-4). Jesus was speaking to adults but the advice applies equally well to children. It is an ideal that Christian parents try to instill in their families.

Hurts come from varied sources. Easily children (and adults) feel left out, betrayed, cheated, overlooked, wrongly accused, discounted, violated regarding space or possessions, ignored, put-down, embarrassed, ridiculed, disrespected, used, or bullied. Because egos are fragile these slights fuel anger, defensiveness, standoffs, shutdowns, shutouts, and, perhaps, retaliation. These cause-effect dynamics occur at a single offense so what about multiple offenses? Forgiveness is more likely when the culprit expresses sorrow. But what about when the offender does not own up to responsibility? What about hurts that are never followed by the words, "I am sorry" or hurts that are repeated over and over again?

Surely we have all heard the expression "forgive and forget" and the expression "I can forgive but I will never forget!" The first remark requires thoughtful interpretation, otherwise we mistakenly conclude that brainwashing is a component of forgiveness. The second remark fails to recognize that releasing the hurt from memories is the essence of forgiveness and necessary for personal peace.

Forgiveness is first, a gift that you give to yourself. Secondly it is a gift that you offer to the offender who may or may not accept it. If the offender does accept your gift of forgiveness he can be converted and possibly even be restored to your friendship. If the offender does not accept responsibility, he chooses to remain outside your circle of friendship but you release yourself from the paralyzing effects of un-forgiveness.

What are the paralyzing effects of un-forgiveness?

When we hold onto a hurt, we let that event or person continue to hurt us over and over again. Un-forgiveness makes your own heart hard. Un-forgiveness spreads into general distrust of others. When you hold onto anger or hurt, you stop smiling and laughing. You cease to see the world around you with optimism. You isolate yourself. You go into a pity world of one. You cannot recognize and accept blessings that are right under your nose because you exist within an inner world of "I'll show you" or "I'll get even with you" or "I'll punish you; I'll make you pay!" or "You'll be sorry!" By these kinds of thoughts and reactions, you actually continue to hurt your own self. Your soul shrivels up. You become bitter and life stops for you. Meanwhile, the offending person may be totally unaware of hurting you or worse, he or she may be totally unconcerned for causing hurt. That person continues to be just fine while you are destroying yourself – emotionally, psychologically, and even physically. Anger affects health.

What is forgiveness?

Forgiveness is a proactive choice. It is a freedom that you give to yourself to “let go” of the paralyzing effect of the offense. As a result you continue to grow happy, healthy, and more whole. You admit that someone has offended you. You name it for what it is. You do not condone the wrong. Rather than keeping the hurt alive by ruminating over it, you make a decision to grow beyond the offense and to release the negative emotions associated with the person or event.

Cultivate an Environment of Love

Anger and hurting behaviors poison family life. Love is like preventive medicine! Pope John Paul II suggested that practicing a “[Spirituality of Communion](#)” would create a culture of love. Catholic families observe these proactive practices thereby preventing or, at least, minimizing fractures to relationships.

- Find Christ in one another. If it is difficult to find Jesus, bring Jesus!
- Think of others as extensions of myself.
- Do for others what I would want for myself.
- Honor the joys and sorrows of another.
- Be sensitive to the “core” needs of others.
- Relate in genuine friendship.
- See the positive in others. Welcome it and cherish it as a gift from God.
- Affirm the efforts and potential of others.
- View others as gifts.
- Make room for others; be inclusive and inviting.
- Practice tolerance and mutual respect.
- Resist the selfish temptations that provoke competition, distrust, and jealousy.

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