



# Formative Parenting

*Cultivating Character in Children*

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

## **GOOD NEWS FOR BAD NEWS TIMES**

Good news! We are creatures made by God into God's own image and God does not make mistakes. What could be better news than that? Each one of us is a unique reflection of our Creator. That means that we share in God's own life through our ability to know and to love and that we are created for relationship, connection with God and with others. This is the source of our human dignity and essential worth. We are precious because we are "chips off the old block" -- God's block. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says it this way:

"Being in the image of God the human individual possesses the dignity of a person, who is not just something, but someone. He is capable of self-knowledge, of self-possession and of freely giving himself and entering into communion with other persons. . ." (#357)

We are precious to God because God made us. We are the handiwork of God. We are precious and preferred before we are capable of responding to God's love and even if we are incapable of responding to God's love. We are loved unconditionally for who we *are*; not for what we *do*. We were created for friendship with God and to live in harmony with ourselves and with all creation. To the degree that we are in harmony, we are *good news* in our world. Remembering *who we are and Whose we are* is important to maintaining balance and to making life-giving choices.

When they hold their child for the first time parents are acutely aware of the innate worth of the human person. Incapable of doing anything for itself, an infant cuddles, sleeps, drapes its body over shoulders or knees, and lays trustfully abandoned to the care of a parent. Profound silence and an awareness of the sacred fill those moments. Love is present and yet unearned. Times of laughter, effort, accomplishment, spontaneity, bed-time peacefulness, and positive interactions among family members are other occasions when parents are consciously aware of the worth and dignity of their children. These are *good times* when expressions of love and appreciation are effortless. In a perfect world harmony is a constant. But we live in an imperfect world whose experiences of good times are sprinkled among neutral times and bad times. No matter what the times, it is important that parents communicate recognition and genuine affection for a child on a consistent basis. To communicate love only in the good times leads a child to conclude that love is earned or conditioned and, therefore, so is personal value and self worth. Communication of appreciation on a regular basis conveys to a child that he is lovable, likable, appreciated, and vital to the family. That goes a long way toward self-esteem and positive family relationships. This author has met parents who do not like their own children and convey it through body language, verbal cues, flippant remarks to others, absenteeism, emotional distance, awkward silences, or disrespectful name-calling. The author has worked with students who communicated that they felt unloved, dis-liked, and dis-counted by their parents. Often they choose negative behaviors or withdrawal because of their feelings.

A child who experiences himself as being inconsequential or dis-liked by his parents is plagued with feelings like revenge, retaliation, aggression, hurt or self-destruction. He finds it difficult to perceive himself as loved, valued, and worthwhile.

### **NURTURING GOOD NEWS TIMES**

Benjamin Franklin once commented that “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure”. It is sage advice for parents. Brief words and small gestures on an on-going basis can satisfy a child’s need for belonging, recognition, preference, and affirmation and set a child on the path of positive self-esteem. Following are 20 parent practices that serve as an “ounce of prevention” and bond parent to child. The suggestions were offered by 156 parents who represented 93 children from kindergarten through grade 11. The parents were part of a research study. School personnel identified these children as students who displayed positive self-esteem on a consistent basis. These parents were asked to tell what practices they used to communicate recognition and genuine affection for their child. McCormack (1999) reported that parent responses included but were not limited to the following ideas:

- Often say “I love you”; especially at bed time.
- Let your child hear you talk of her proudly to grandparents, relatives, friends, etc.
- Display examples of your child’s effort; do not restrict displays to accomplishments.
- Do not interrupt him when he is telling of an achievement, activity, etc. Show genuine interest in his activities.
- Look at him while he is speaking. Use facial expression and body language to convey that you are listening.
- Tell your child often that you asked God for him and you would not trade him for anyone. Then name his siblings and his friends.
- When you observe her getting along well with a sibling, congratulate her and reinforce the importance of family bonding.
- Be affectionate. Be generous with hugs, kisses, and loving touches.
- Create a special pat on the head, a tug of the hair, or a pet name that signals a connection that only he and you share.
- Look pleased and energized by her appearance into the house. Let your look say: “I’m so glad you are here”.
- Send “Good Times” to relatives out of town that report the uniqueness of each child for the month.
- Relax together. Snuggle, hug, laugh, joke, smile, wrestle, or any activity that demonstrates that you are glad to spend time with him.
- Pray together. Admit feelings and fears to God and each other.
- Tell your child how lucky she is to have her sibling. Name the virtues of the sibling.
- Stick around for his activities. Avoid merely dropping him off and picking him up after the event. Cheer him on.
- When you see her perform a good deed, verbalize that you noticed.
- Put surprise notes under his pillow or in his lunch box.
- Celebrate small accomplishments with her choice of dinner, family entertainment, favorite snack, or using a YOU ARE SPECIAL dinner plate.
- Name his virtues, talents, strengths, i.e., “You are patient; you have a mind for detail; you have a great memory; you read with expression.”
- Plan outings together, i.e., bowling, movie, hiking, picnic, visit to a nursing home.

## BAD NEWS TIMES

Knowledge of human nature suggests that children sometimes exhibit behaviors that cause disharmony. For the purposes of this article the term “**bad times**” refers to **occasions that are characterized by faults, irritability, distress, disfavor, negative choices or regret, spoiled relationships or behaviors that are harmful, detrimental, or deliberately disobedient**. Such times require correction in a spirit of love. Failure to correct spoils a child for himself and for relationship with others. Loving correction . . .

- (1) tries to understand the child’s goals, behavior, and emotions;
- (2) is both kind and firm in approach;
- (3) uses rational, non-emotional language and tone;
- (4) separates the deed from the doer, thereby correcting the deed while loving the child;
- (5) helps the child to recognize and claim ownership for the wrong doing;
- (6) refuses to fight with the child or to give in; and
- (7) allows the child to accept responsibility and make restitution.

Punishment is ineffective as a discipline tool. Natural or logical consequences are effective because they are related to the behavior, respectful of both child and parent, and reasonable. For a more developed explanation of the goals of misbehavior and the use of consequences for effective correction, refer to *Parent Partnership Handbook*, (January-February, and March 2000).

Communicating genuine affection is a practice appropriate to all seasons but most definitely is the good news for bad news times! By virtue of vocation parents must provide correction and direction for the negative choices of their child. Failure to do so undermines the positive development of a child and handicaps his socialization skills and the ability of others to accept and respect him. Parents can find the key to successful correction in the words of Paul to the Colossians:

. . . clothe yourselves with heartfelt mercy, with kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another; forgive whatever grievances you have against one another. Forgive as the Lord has forgiven you. *Over all these virtues put on love*, which binds the rest together and makes them perfect. . . . (Col. 3: 12 - 17)

Parents in the research study were asked to report ways that they communicated recognition and genuine affection for their child during difficult times when correction was needed or disapproval required because of negative choices made by their child. Their responses included but were not limited to the following 20 suggestions:

- Calmly explain why the behavior is unacceptable. If the child is old enough to reason, have her explain how the behavior is hurtful, etc.
- Explain that loving him means that you are responsible to set limits and enforce rules that will help him to grow happy and positive in relationships.
- Say something like, “You are not bad. You are made in the image of God and God is good. But the behavior is bad because it . . .”
- If your child is emotional, try to remain calm. Acknowledge your child’s mood, anger, frustration, etc. and send her to “time out” before continuing correction.

(Time out is not a punishment; merely a time to regroup. Make it one minute for each year of age.)

- If your child hurt another ask him how he would feel if that action were done to him.
  - Tell her that we all have an occasional bad day. Involve her in imagining how she can handle the situation better if it ever happens again.
  - Teach him that mistakes can become friends if we learn from them. Ask what lesson(s) he can learn from the present mistake.
  - Finish every correction with a hug, kiss, or a tangible sign of affection.
  - When possible express admiration for how well she accepted the correction.
  - Involve your child in deciding a logical consequence for her actions *in order to restore harmony to the situation*. Or if a natural consequence is possible, remind her that she knew the consequence before she acted on her negative feelings and that this consequence restores harmony to the relationship.
  - Let your child tell his side of the story. Listen respectfully. Ask clarifying questions where appropriate or necessary which help him to see the whole picture.
- Encourage honesty as the cement that holds together the bricks of a relationship. Express respect for your child when she faces the truth.
  - Make corrections in private. Keep the situation confidential. Do not refer to it in future conversation.
  - Reflect back that you understand how he is feeling but that feelings do not erase responsibility for a problem.
  - Review how the situation might be better handled in the future. Let your child do as much of the talking as possible.
  - Put a note of encouragement and assurance of love under her pillow or on the bathroom mirror.
  - Resolve all difficulties by bedtime. Assure your child that today will be history when she awakes tomorrow.
  - Explain rather than just say no. Give your reasons and listen to those of your child.
  - Apologize when your own behavior is offensive, i.e., raising your voice, showing impatience, freezing your face.
  - Create a customized list of affirmations to use every time you need to correct your child, i.e., “I respect ..., I enjoy ..., I admire ..., I like ..., I love you unconditionally, but I disapprove of this behavior because . . .”

## PARENT PARTNERSHIP HANDBOOK

Beyond the advice to create a climate of love during and after “bad times”, what support exists to help parents through the difficulties of child-rearing? McCormack (1995) reported parent research in which the most frequently listed parent concerns included self-esteem, conscience or character formation, and discipline. These were the foci of the Parent Partnership Handbook pages published in 1996 through 2000. The Handbook consists of removable and reproducible pages suitable for distribution to parents. This year the Handbook will feature “A Parent’s Guide for Difficult Behaviors.” Each edition of *Today’s Catholic Teacher* will focus on one of six difficult behaviors that are associated with childhood: (1) sibling rivalry, (2) lying, cheating, exaggerating (3) irresponsibility, (4) angry behavior, (5) deliberate disobedience and destructive behavior, and (6) peer relationships. These are topics for which parent research participants expressed a desire for information. The presentation of each topic will include practical advice given by the parents of 93 students whose teachers identified them because they demonstrate characteristics of positive self-esteem on a consistent basis.

## THE CHALLENGE: BETTER VS. BITTER

Perhaps the principal element in the formula “Good news for bad news times” is understanding the redeemable potential of mistakes and the role that mistakes, sin, and bad news can play in the transformation of a soul. Can not Jesus redeem all things? Does not the Catholic Church label the sin of Adam and Eve the “happy fault”, “the necessary sin of Adam”? Have you not learned more from your mistakes than you have from your successes? This is not to say that sin and intentional difficult behaviors do not matter. Of course they matter. Every choice a soul makes matters. But what matters most is learning, growing, forgiving, and allowing the Spirit of God to transform you.

God wastes nothing in our transformation. Have you ever observed a child playing with a transformer toy? With a few twists of the wrists a dinosaur can be changed into a space ship without losing any pieces. Actually, all pieces of the one become important pieces of the other. This is an image of what our sins and mistakes can be in the hands of God. Parents who take this attitude into their relationship with their children will convey that all is redeemable, the person is loved and lovable, and the behavior can be transformed through attention and effort. This is good news and it is the secret to becoming **better** instead of **bitter**. The spelling difference in the two words is one letter. When we focus too much on the “I”, we become bitter. Separate the “I” from the deed. Love the “I” (the self, the person) and correct the behavior. Put on the mind of Christ which will put the incident into perspective. And at all times, trust in the Lord. God will never disappoint. In your hardest times you might be tempted to cry out, “God, do something!” Be assured that God will respond, “I did so something. I gave her you.”

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