



Formative Parenting

Cultivating Character in Children

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

HOME ENVIRONMENT NURTURES THE SEED OF SCHOOL SUCCESS

To a gardener, the positive result of a season of growing is called fruit. To a teacher, the result is called student. In both cases, the process involves preparing a growing environment in which a seed can take root, planting, fertilizing, nurturing, pruning and watering. Not only when the initial potential is fulfilled, but during its varied stages towards total fulfillment, the in-process growth beautifies and enriches. It is true of vegetation and of people. Perhaps that is why Jesus applied the image to us in the Gospels and in His Last Supper discourse underscored that we were chosen to go forth and bear fruit that endures (John 15:16). In order for us to bear fruit, however, the seed must take root, the roots must be healthy and strong, and the soil environment must be capable of nurturing life.

School success, characterized by pro-social behavior, academic progress, self-acceptance, and well-formed identity has its roots in the home environment. The home is the primary environment for growth in identity formation (security, autonomy, initiative, industry, and role clarification). It is in the home that a child draws his first conclusions about self worth, value, appreciation, ability, competence, and importance to others. It is from her parents that a child first learns to be accountable for herself and to act responsibly toward others. The home environment nurtures the seed of school success. The family demonstrates the value of effort over result and praises process more than product. In such an environment a child learns that his best effort is praiseworthy and acceptable apart from the results which may fall short from the desired goal. From parents children learn that they have infinite potential; that they are made in the image and likeness of God; that all persons have dignity and, therefore, all are called to make appropriate, life-giving choices at home, at school and in private. Parents establish the foundation on which teachers build. But just how do parents accomplish this task? What are the roots of school success that parents can affect and that teachers can reinforce which eventually bear the fruit of school success?

The roots of school success in the home environment include:

- effective communication (attentive presence, active listening, and reflective speaking)
- consistency and accountability regarding age-appropriate expectations
- identity formation (security, autonomy, initiative, industry, and role clarity)

Providing these roots could seem overwhelming to parents. Indeed, Catholic Church documents since Vatican Council II frequently echo the sentiment that “parents approach their vocation conscious of their limitations but aware also that by persevering effort to meet their responsibilities, even in the face of failure and disappointment, they help their children learn

what faith, hope and love mean in practice.”¹ And repeatedly, Post Vatican II literature charges Catholic educators to “make parents more conscious of their role and help to establish a partnership”² which helps parents to fulfill their duty of formation.

SELF-ESTEEM DEVELOPMENT

Although no simple relationships exist between child-rearing practices and child development, respectable theorists like Adler, Baumrind, Coopersmith, Dinkmeyer, Dreikurs, Erikson, Havighurst and Lickona have identified dynamics of family socialization that shape the self-concept. The evaluation that a child places on his perceived self-concept is called self-esteem. Therefore, when parents contribute to the development of these qualities, they are providing the foundation for positive self-esteem. Research suggests that the following kinds of parent practices provide a structure for growth in positive self-esteem:

- responding to a child vs. conveying indifference
- demonstrating warmth or nurturant behavior vs. conveying hostility
- communicating affection and acceptance in language vs. using derogatory remarks or dissatisfaction statements
- practicing clearly defined and enforced limits vs. permissiveness
- giving a frame-of-reference during correction communication vs. easy-to-communicate rebukes or remarks
- requiring age appropriate conduct in a child
- teaching children to anticipate the desires of others
- fostering the ability of a child to place herself in the position of another child and to use this information to guide behavior choices
- helping a child to understand and to assume the role of another person

Teachers who model the same kinds of practices create the kind of atmosphere that reinforces the development of positive self-esteem within students. It is a democratic atmosphere which focuses on encouragement, mutual respect, discipline linked to the misbehavior, taking time for fun, firm limits, offering choices, making suggestions, communicating love and joint decision-making by the adults and children. Such an environment nurtures school success in children and becomes the catalyst for developing self-esteem as defined by the 1990 California Task Force to Promote Self-esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility:

“Appreciating my own worth and importance
and having the character
to be accountable for myself
and to act responsibly toward others.”³

PRIMARY INGREDIENT FOR FRUITFUL PARENTING

As the home is the primary environment for growth in identity formation which leads to school success; and parents are the primary agents of identity formation; there is also a primary ingredient that underlies fruitful parenting. Cartoonist Bill Keane of *The Family Circus* fame expressed it succinctly in one cartoon panel: “Parents can give children *things* or *time*. Time is better!” Nothing replaces the gift of presence--personal nearness or attentive connectedness

on a physical, social, emotional, or spiritual level, in-tune-ness, awareness without words, open-handed readiness to respond and receive, reverence for another, and on-going conscious attention and connectiveness. *Presence* not *presents* is the primary ingredient needed to develop identity formation, positive self-esteem, and school success. Attention, reverence and devotion remain the hallmarks of the sacrifice of parenting and, when characteristic of the home environment, they will bear fruit that endures.

REFERENCES

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2. Congregation for Catholic Education. (1988). *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School*. #43
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