



Formative Parenting

Cultivating Character in Children

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

GOSPEL ABCs: Attitudes, Behaviors, & Consequences

“May the word of God be in my mind, on my lips and in my heart.” The combination of those words with the sacred gesture of signing the cross on one’s forehead, lips and heart heightens alertness for the Word. What a great start! An even better start is to prepare children for the Sunday Scriptures prior to arrival at church.

Readiness is a key element for participating in the Liturgy of the Word. In an ideal world, before children join the praying community at worship, parents and catechists share conversation about the theme of the Sunday readings, set a tone, and suggest a focus for listening to the word of God. Then, after listening to God speak through the Scriptures, adult teachers facilitate a process of breaking open the word. They encourage children to let the Word of God intersect with their daily living and, from that meeting point, take application for the days ahead. Without some form of reflection, children (and adults) are likely to become the idle listeners that St. James warned against. Adults entrusted with the formation of souls agree with his admonition: “Humbly welcome the Word that has taken root in you, with its power to save you. Act on this word. If all you do is listen to it, you are deceiving yourselves” (James 1: 21–22).

This scenario speaks of an ideal world, a perfect family or efficient catechists who are without time limits, obstacles, pressures or multi-tasking demands! But readers of this article are more likely to have limitations and conflicting responsibilities. Many parents and catechists desire to provide children with a process for readiness, reflection and application but feel inadequate or thwarted in the attempt. **Gospel ABCs**— the **Attitudes, Behaviors and Consequences found within a Gospel story**—provide a technique for breaking open the word by providing a framework for reflection and a tool for children to use independently throughout their lives, any time they experience the Gospel.

Attitudes

Attitude reveals itself in the manner in which a person speaks to or about another, or in the feeling that the character shows toward a person, thing or event. For instance, in the Gospel story of the wedding at Cana (John 2: 1–11), Mary noticed that the wine was running low. You might say that she showed an attitude of vigilance for the needs of others, sensitivity, willingness to improve things for others, and anticipation of ways to be of service.

Behaviors

Attitudes give way to behavior. Behavior is an action or reaction of a person to a circumstance. In the situation of the wedding feast, Mary brought the plight of the bride and groom to Jesus’ awareness. Even though Jesus responded that it was neither his business nor the time for him to become public, Mary told the servants to be ready to do whatever Jesus commanded. This behavior suggests to me that Mary had confidence that her son was a man of

compassion and responsiveness, just like his mother. Additionally, Mary demonstrated that she felt free to approach Jesus with concerns and expected that Jesus would respond to her.

Consequences

There are consequences to every behavior that we perform. A consequence is the effect or result of an earlier action. The effect of Mary's intercession and Jesus' response was an abundance of superior wine that saved the newlyweds from embarrassment.

Introduce the concept of Gospel ABCs to children.

Lead them in prayer to the Holy Spirit, asking for openness to hear in the Gospel story an issue that God wants them to reflect upon and apply in the week ahead. Together, brainstorm qualities within the Gospel story that teach how to imitate Jesus or a Gospel figure. Assure children that the Spirit works on a personal basis and, therefore, there could be as many different insights as there are people sharing the story. For example, in the story of the Cana wedding, the qualities to imitate would include, but not be limited to, the following ideas: vigilance for and awareness of the needs of others; sensitivity; willingness to improve things for others; anticipation of ways to be of service; raising awareness; helping without needing to be asked; compassion for others; saving people from embarrassment; obedience to Jesus; confidence in Jesus; responsiveness; freedom to approach Jesus with concerns; expectation that Jesus will respond; doing more than expected; not settling for less than your best.

During such a brainstorming session, parents and catechists function as secretaries, collecting the ideas. I suggest writing them on a 3" x 5" index card. When the session is completed, place the card on a small tabletop easel or place card holder that sits on the family meal table or in the prayer center of the classroom. Guide the children to use silent reflection time to choose one of the qualities (attitudes, behaviors or consequences) that they will practice or imitate daily during the week. Encourage them to be specific—for example, "I will help in the cafeteria without being asked," or "I will do more than expected by reading a story to my younger brother each day after school," or "I will invite [an unpopular student] to play a game with me during recess," or "I will make a visit to the Blessed Sacrament each day and ask Jesus to show me how to help [name] become more comfortable in class." The easel will serve as a visual reminder of the child's resolution. Daily, during classroom prayer or family meal conversation, give a few seconds of time to focus on it. Discuss progress and reassess as necessary. In a family setting, in particular, this custom leads to a growing comfort with spiritual discussion. Another variation is for the family to agree on one particular quality for application, then to report to each other daily how they enlivened the quality.

Once children grasp the concept of identifying qualities or issues in the Gospel, then they are tooled to break open the Word on an independent basis, assuming personal responsibility to "let the word of Christ, rich as it is, dwell in [them]" (Colossians 3:16). Though family or class interaction on the Sunday Gospel remains the ideal, it would no longer be essential. It would be sufficient (1) to establish a designated time after the Sunday liturgy, possibly even the car ride home, to merely exchange ideas, and (2) to have each child make his or her own ABC card for a personal space in the bedroom. Whether the practice is communal or private is secondary to the goal of providing a process for prayerful listening, reflection and personal application (resolution).

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