



Formative Parenting

Cultivating Character in Children

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

ISAIAH PARENTS – MENTORING CHILDREN THROUGH MANTRAS

Isaiah the prophet said: **“The Lord has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to speak to the weary a word that will rouse them.”** (Isaiah 50: 4) Like Isaiah, parents are prophets and teachers whose words have the power to shape tomorrow.

If you, parent, are thinking, “Where’s Isaiah when I need him?” then this article is for you! You have heard it proclaimed repeatedly that parents are the primary educators of their children and yet, some parents report that they do not believe that they have the skills necessary. I need to say, “Yes, you do!” It is no accident that you are the parent to a particular child. God does not make accidents nor mistakes. God knew what God was doing when God created you. You have within you the gifts that you need. Call on the Spirit of God to activate those gifts.

Parenting is a vocation. By that I mean that a **vocation** is a call from God, for God, with God, to God. You were called to parent in partnership with Jesus. With the vocation comes the promise that the Holy Spirit will be with you always to inform your decisions and to bring healing to your failures and hurts. Vocation does not shield you from pain nor guarantee that life will go the way that you want it to go, but when you are in active relationship with Jesus you are able to turn over the pieces to him and then you see in action that “all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose” (Rm. 8:28). God initiated the call. You have the freedom to invite God into your active life and to make time to listen to the advice that God will give. Sometimes that advice is “heard” within the quiet of your soul or in your dreams. At other times God speaks through the Scripture, another person, a song, a TV show, a book, or a magazine article. God will not act instead of you. God chooses to act through you, through the use of your free will.

Parents are the moral compass for their children. Before the age of language, conversation, and formal learning children imbibe their sense of right and wrong, good and bad from the actions and attitudes of parents and from the responses that parents give to the actions of their children. Actually, psychologists believe that the foundation for conscience formation is established by age three. A parent points the way to “true north” by what they say and by what they do. Often actions are far more reliable than words to convey one’s values. We all know the old quip that “actions speak louder than words.” Or, as Emerson said, “What you do speaks so loudly that I cannot hear what you are saying.” While I acknowledge the truth to this wisdom, this article focuses on the power of a parent’s words to mentor a child.

BE AN ISAIAH PARENT

Isaiah took ownership for his vocation of teacher. He acknowledged that God gave to him a well-trained tongue to speak messages that could stir folks into action, even when the folks were weary, tired, overwhelmed, scattered, or confused. Claim the Isaiah power that is within you. Use quotations or mantras – simple sentence questions or declarations – to shape attitudes within your household. Slogans have power within them to raise consciousness. For instance, let's look at a slogan from scripture, from a saint, and from a secular fraternity house. All three have the power to shape a soul and form character.

- ***“What profit is there to gain the whole world and destroy yourself in the process?”*** (Mk. 8:36) How often do we think that we are saving ourselves by gaining something like money, leisure, a collector's item, power, prestige, position, a vacation home, a club membership, or “whatever” and the price for this *something* cuts us off from people or puts a wedge in our relationship, or has us running a rat race that leaves little time for family, friends, God or nurturing our true self? How often have you thought, “Was it worth it?” Jesus captured the futility of these kinds of choices when he cautioned: “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who are willing to lose their life for my sake will save it.” The advice fits all ages and stages. How about the child who attained a coveted *something* but did so by cheating or lying to a parent or betraying or swindling a sibling or a friend. The child had momentary pleasure but at the price of hurt, distrust, anger and a strain on a relationship that may not ever heal. In the end, was it worth it?
- St. Augustine advised: ***“Trust the past to God's mercy, the present to God's love, and the future to God's providence.”*** What useful advice! Yesterday is gone and no amount of fretting or remorse will change the consequences of how we lived yesterday. We can learn from yesterday. The past can teach us what to seek or what to delete from our future choices. We can have better tomorrows from what we learned from yesterday but we cannot change yesterday. Trust it to the mercy of God and let it go. When we live in the past we miss the gift of the present. God calls us to live in the now. God's love is present right here, right now. The choices made in the now affect the past and the future. Live into the truth that Philip Yancey expressed, that nothing you do can make God love you more and nothing you do can make God love you less. You are already loved unconditionally because that's who God is. God is unconditional love. God's love for you does not depend on you. God's love depends on God who is love. Trust God's love in your present. As for the future, tomorrow may not come! Why spend useless energy worrying about it, living in fear, or expecting doom and gloom? Do your best with today to prepare for tomorrow but do not lose the power of today by fretting about tomorrow. Trust that Divine Providence holds you in care and calls you to live life-to-the-full. Regardless of future events, even those that will cause tears, hurt, anger, and discouragement, or those that will deprive you of goals that you had set, or dreams that you held, trust that God can write with crooked lines. Trust Divine Providence is “our resource in all our wants; our anchor in storms, our security in danger, our guide and safe haven....” (Litany of Divine Providence).
- A few years back I was helping a college grad move out from his fraternity house. As I descended the steps from the second floor I faced the front door and above the door frame was a computer-generated poster that read: “What have you done for the brothers today?” What a thought-provoking question. Predict what an effect it could be in your household if members were faced daily with such a reminder. Family and community is nurtured when we anticipate the needs of others, practice random acts of kindness, go the extra mile, offer a helping hand or listening ear, restrain our ego in deference to another person, and look for ways to love. An unfortunate characteristic of some in our culture is a “Me, Myself and I” attitude that drives people to disregard others and, actually, to turn a deaf ear to the needs of another, or to look away so as to pursue a personal agenda or avoid responsibility or inconvenience. Some children display a sense of entitlement in body language and spoken word that communicates that they are above menial tasks or that others are

“employed” to pick up after them. Asking the question, “What did you do for the family today?” is an easy antidote and a proactive way of forming your child to be conscious of others and of the common good.

PRACTICE MANTRA MENTORING

Usually the term “mantra” refers to a sacred word, chant, or a sound that a person repeats during meditation. Or, as experienced at group events like an athletic competition, a mantra is an expression or idea that is repeated, often without thinking about it. In both usages the mantra sinks into the unconscious. This article is using the term **“mantra” as a synonym for “quotation” that is repeated often enough that it shapes attitudes and actions.**

What mantras come easily to your heart? Speak them aloud and post them in strategic places within your home: on the refrigerator, bathroom mirror, above the entryway, on the family prayer table, on top of the TV, or anywhere that is an easy “eye catcher.” In other words, share wisdom through verbal soundbites and visual reminders.

Some parents establish a sacred center in the home. It might be a small table or a bookcase or a corner, tiered stand. One family has a wide window sill at the stairway between two floors. That window sill serves as the sacred space. Whatever the place, it holds the family bible, objects of devotion, prayer books, a statue, etc., and serves as a place to post a mantra or scripture thought. The family sacred space could be as simple as a placemat table centerpiece. On it, place a mini-easel and display a thought for the week or for an occasion. If you collect family quotations, consider writing one per slip of paper and then, on a weekly basis pull a slip to be practiced for the week and reported upon during a dinner meal.

Mantras for family formation can come from any source – religious or secular – but I

urge you to let the weekly Mass Scriptures serve as the curriculum for shaping the character of your family. As Paul said to Timothy, “All Scripture is inspired of God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, correction, and training in holiness. . .” (2 Tim. 3:16). Take advantage of it! Let Scripture shape the thoughts and philosophy of your family. Consider, for instance, the power of John 15: 13-14: **“There is no greater love than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.”** Several themes emerge – true love, sacrifice, common good, friendship with Jesus, and the commandment of love. Children easily connect love with good feelings when things are going well, but parents know that true love takes the high road when times are rough. True love puts the welfare of another first, makes sacrifice for the good of another, resists self-gratification in order to serve the common good, and chooses the loving thing even through tears. This scripture mantra reveals that friendship is a two-way street that includes choice and responsibility. It also sets the stage for discussing what love looks like in practical every day living. Imagine what family discussion can occur from either one of these two sentences as you evoke from the children examples of sacrificing their preferences for another family member or a typical scenario of witnessing to their friendship with Jesus. Imagine, too, the effect on your children when you use a reference out of context. In the midst of sibling rivalry you could say, “You have an opportunity to lay down your life for your sister.” Recently at a public pool I witnessed a mother receive a cell call telling her that her eight-year old son’s soccer team needed him. She and two sons had just arrived poolside when the call came. She said to her child, “I know that you are

disappointed to leave the pool but we gave our word to the team and true friends keep their word. This is part of being a team member.” Had the Gospel mantra been familiar to this family, Mom could have said to the younger son who was protesting, “By this decision your brother is laying down his life for his friends.”

Love does such things! When Jesus told his apostles that they were his friends if they did what he commanded, he was clear that the command was love. He urged them to love one another in the manner that he demonstrated love for them. They knew the faith tradition of their Hebrew heritage. The Shema was sacred: **“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these”** (Mark 12: 30-31). This mantra surely provides parents with a criteria for family character. This “great commandment” points to the understanding that the commandments are about relationships, not a set of sterile rules

TOPICS FOR SHAPING FAMILY CHARACTER

Admittedly, mantras for character are all around us. To honor the conclusion of the Year of St. Paul (June 28, 2008 to June 29, 2009) I here present for parent consideration one quotation from each of the thirteen letters that Paul wrote to the Church. Some thoughts could have multiple applications, since parent creativity and insight will expand it in ways unique to the family.

Romans 12: 17,21 “Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

I Corinthians 10: 13 “God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.”

II Corinthians 9: 6-7 “The one who sows sparingly shall reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully shall reap bountifully. . . God loves a cheerful giver.”

and regulations. A person who is participating in a relationship with God would surely put the love relationship above all things, publicly claim the relationship, respect the name of God and things related to God, and join in communal worship not because of a rule but because love does such things! A person who appreciates that all people are created in the image of God and that we are interconnected would honor legitimate authority, promote life, safeguard spousal commitments, respect private property, protect the reputation of others, cultivate a healthy attitude towards sex, avoid jealousy, retribution, envy and such. Why? Because love does such things! The Ten Commandments are about sustaining a love relationship with God, neighbor and self. Self? Yes! Teach children early how proper love for self is stewardship for the gift of life that God gave to them. Gospel love for self includes taking precautions for safety and making lift-giving choices in terms of eating, drinking, exercising, and leisure activity. For instance, sufficient sleep is a component of physical, psychological and social health.

Galatians 5: 22 “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”

Ephesians 4: 29 “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.”

Philippians 4: 8 “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.”

I Thessalonians 5: 21-22 “Test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.”

II Thessalonians 2: 16 “May our Lord Jesus Christ himself, may God our Father who loved us and in his mercy gave us eternal consolation and hope, console your hearts and strengthen them for every good work and word.”

I Timothy 4: 12 “Let no one look down on you because of your youth, but be a continuing example of love, faith, and purity to believers.”

II Timothy 4: 2 “Proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is convenient or inconvenient; convince, rebuke, and encourage with the utmost patience.”

Titus 2: 12 “Reject godless ways and worldly desires. Live temperately, justly, and devoutly in this age.”

Philemon 6 “I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ.”

PARENT PARTNERSHIP HANDBOOK

During the 2009-2010 school year the Parent Partnership Handbook newsletters will feature, *A Parent Guide for Mentoring through Mantras*. The newsletters will suggest mantras, slogans, aphorisms, or quotations that have the potential to teach character. The mantras will be organized around six themes:

- Issue 1: Focus on the Present
- Issue 2: Competence
- Issue 3: Love-in-Action
- Issue 4: Perseverance
- Issue 5: Responsible Speech
- Issue 6: Personal Responsibility

Parents, you are True North for your child. Your words, your actions, your reactions and responses are crucial to the character formation of your child. Rather than be paralyzed by the awesomeness of your vocation, celebrate it! God knows that you have exactly what it takes to mentor your child to soulful maturity. Embrace God’s call and call on God’s embrace! Cling to the encouraging mantra that Matthew records as the last words of Jesus spoken on earth: “Remember I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Mt. 28:20)

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