



Formative Parenting

Cultivating Character in Children

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

MOM AND POP AS MORAL MENTORS

Two big questions present themselves to every parent in one form or another: "What kind of human being do I want my child to become?" and "How can I go about making that happen?" — Family therapist and author Virginia Satir

Recently I heard Bob Dylan's song *Forever Young*. The song reveals his answers to the first question. I have applied poetic license to his lyrics:

Always do for others and let others do for you.
Grow up to be righteous, and grow up to be true.
Know the truth. Be courageous. Stand upright and be strong.
Have a strong foundation when winds of change shift right to wrong.

It strikes me that the song promotes the Golden Rule; loving relationships; integrity; and insight to recognize truth, courage, justice, and wisdom. Quite a set of moral goals! The songwriter expresses the hopes he has for someone whom he loves. But surely Dylan, you, and I all know that wishing won't do it! To develop into the kind of person that Dylan saluted, children need • adults who are "steady enders," models and mentors; • adults who answer the question "What kind of human being do I want my child to become?" and then establish the responses as goals for parenting; • adults who cultivate a moral mentality through consistency, intentionality, and perseverance.

Moral formation is a reciprocal process. Mentors determine the values that give meaning to life and then, through word and example, transmit those ideals to children. At the same time that mentors are striving to be True North for children, they encounter issues of their own that can be opportunities of transformation into clearer vessels of truth. Rabbi Neil Kurshan recognized the struggle that parents experience during the quest to be moral mentors. He wrote:

"With the breakdown of the traditional institutions which convey values, more of the burdens and responsibility for transmitting values fall upon parental shoulders, and it is getting harder all the time both to embody the virtues we hope to teach our children and to find for ourselves the ideals and values that will give our own lives purpose and direction."

Moral mentors benefit from reflecting on the following questions:

- What ideals and values give my life purpose and direction?
- What do I offer children that will carry them through life in both good times and in times of stress and trial?
- What part of me will inspire, direct, and advise children when they are away from me and after I die?

The responsibilities of moral mentoring will overwhelm parents who operate from a "job mentality." Birthing a child and parenting are separate functions. Parenting is a vocation. Anything less will break both parent and child.

CULTIVATE A VOCATION PERSPECTIVE

Coaching moral growth is central to the vocation of parents and their helpmates, Christian educators. Notice the use of the word vocation rather than task or job. Vocation feeds and fuels during times of difficulty, uncertainty, and frustration. Viewing parenting merely as a job allows times of struggle and sacrifice to disintegrate into counting the cost and weighing and measuring who does what and whose turn it is. After all, parents rarely experience immediate gratification, and many a child takes parental love for granted, failing to voice gratitude. Vocation nurtures relationship. Job mentality fosters emotional distance.

The vocation of parenting is incredibly complex. It begins with two people who themselves are in the process of becoming. Both persons own a personal history of strengths, limits, dreams, frustrations, visions, fears, successes, and failures as well as memories of their own childhoods. Sometimes their heads tell them that they are doing the best that they can, but their hearts continue to feel inadequate and to whisper judgment. Too often their experience is that they feel unfinished, and that they lack what it takes to be an effective parent, or that they are missing the pieces needed to put the puzzle together perfectly or, at least, the way that they want. What a burden to carry! At such times a sense of vocation brings perspective and comfort knowing that “God’s love does not call where God’s grace cannot keep.” Vocation originates in God. Through the person of Mom or Dad, God’s love is made manifest to children. That love takes root and translates into moral action. Love becomes the guiding principle of life.

CREATE HABITS FOR MORAL MATURITY

Knowing what kind of person parents want their child to become is the first step in moral mentoring. Parents must also know how to go about making that happen. There is a science for moral formation that consists of a two-pronged process: (1) Create a moral atmosphere in the home (2) Establish habits of heart, mind, and action that foster moral maturity.

By practicing what they preach, parents and teachers are essential moral agents in the lives of children. Cardinal Bernardin was on target when he said, “Children will walk the way parents [and teachers] walk, not the way they point.” Both before children reach the age of reason and forever after, actions do speak louder than words! As children grow more capable of discernment and instruction, adult moral agents expose children directly to the skills of moral development. Moral skills are necessary and common to all people regardless of culture or creed. They include skills of heart, mind, and action. These three components—ffective-emotional skills, thinking-reasoning skills, and decision-making skills—are the building blocks of morality. They are necessary habits for moral maturity for those who practice a faith tradition as well as for those who do not.

Character development requires that we know what is good, desire what is good, and do what is good. The understanding of good begins in the home. Additionally, most cultures define good as treating others the way that you wish to be treated. Beyond culture, people of faith relate good to God. Because Christian conscience is a fine tuning of moral character, it will be described in a separate section.

I say principle—not rule or regulation! No amount of rules can cover the infinite variety of concerns that arise in family life and life in general. That is precisely why rules are ineffective. A “rule” mindset requires a live-in policing agent! Unless the reason behind the rule is understood and valued by children, they fail to internalize it. The rule/behavior dynamic interferes with the development of personal responsibility and inner direction. Multiple rules frustrate rather than facilitate personal maturity.

Principles rather than rules foster moral maturity and positive relational living. Ralph Waldo Emerson suggested: “If you learn only methods, you will be tied to your methods, but if you learn principles you can devise your own methods.” Consider that a principle is like an umbrella or a wheel— a single object that includes several ribs or spokes. Principles are broad values that include a variety of specific behaviors. If you embrace a principle, you can apply it to unique situations that arise. For instance, suppose that family members mutually define respect as a principle that means reverent care for the rights and needs of others. The principle would automatically include specifics like conversational tone, toy-free floor space in the family room, volume of the stereo, and use of common space or common equipment. Respect would automatically exclude name-calling, irresponsibility in matters that concern the family, or invading privacy. One well-thought-out principle can replace multiple rules.

Basic character formation readies the hearts of children for relationship, readies the minds of children for reasoning, and readies the soul of children for “response-ability.” Response-ability means the ability to make decisions that demonstrate the choice to respond rather than react to persons and situations.

HABITS OF THE HEART

Habits of the heart (affective-emotional skills) cultivate a capacity for relationship. Children who lack the ability to connect emotionally with others fail to develop a conscience. When deprived of human bonding, a child can develop a psychopathic or sociopathic personality. How tragic for the child and for society!

Having a sense of security is a prerequisite for life-giving relationships. Security—that is, feeling safe, receiving nurturance, being able to count on significant others, and believing that needs will be met—begins in the womb. After birth, security continues to grow when consistency, predictability, routine, procedure, system, and genuine affection are the child’s usual experience.

We cultivate the capacity for relationship whenever we reach out to others, become sensitive to others’ needs, and are honest with self and others. Toddlers can learn to kiss a boo-boo, or gently pat another person who is crying, and say things like, “I’m sorry” or “thank you.” As they grow they can learn to share, forgive, speak truth, and practice affective skills like empathy, compassion, self-control, appreciation, sympathy, sorrow, and regret. Adolescents are capable of practicing social virtues like patience, understanding, generosity, helpfulness, and respectful acceptance of differences.

Affective-emotional skills are teachable. Parents and teachers can prepare children for affective maturity in the same kinds of ways that children first learn to read.

- Speak the vocabulary like, empathy, compassion.
- Define the term in an age-appropriate way.
- Give examples.
- Read about the skill in a story or view the behavior in a video.
- Invite self-reflection.

Moral mentors take advantage of examples that pop up in casual circumstances—teachable moments. They also plan and are intentional about teaching affective-emotional skills.

Through adult teaching, children can learn how to name their emotions and it is essential that they do. Unless we can name the trigger points in our circumstances we remain at the mercy of the emotions. Either we control an emotion or it controls us! It is so necessary to name (specifically pinpoint) an emotion in order to then claim it/acknowledge it. It then loses its power. Only after

naming and claiming can we come to tame the emotion, to put it at our service instead of our destruction. Consider the difference between “I hate going to the after-school study program” and “I feel: anxious, awkward, bashful, discouraged, embarrassed” about going to the after-school study program.” Learning to pinpoint the nerve center of an emotional feeling contributes to moral maturity. An “ABC Emotional Vocabulary” list is accessible in the book *Building Moral Intelligence* and the website www.moralintelligence.com. In both sources Michele Borba provides multiple resources for parents and teachers to help children grow into moral people.

If you are interested in reading a summary of the theory of affective-emotional development in age-stage levels and parenting practices that support relational growth, refer to *The Emotional-Affective Self* at

<http://www.peterli.com/archive/tct/770.shtm>.

HABITS OF THE HEAD

A moral life begins in the heart, but moral maturity requires more than having a desire to do the good. Unless we know the good and then put it into practice, our loving thoughts remain just that—beautiful intentions. Morality requires the ability to reason and then a free choice to put that reasoning at the service of love. Dr. Thomas Lickona advised: “We help our kids become moral persons by helping them learn to think.” Parents and teachers are key in helping children to become capable of making sound judgments by developing higher cognitive levels of thinking and reasoning. It is never too early nor too late to provide activities that increase perception, memory, comprehension, and problem-solving abilities. It is important, though, to understand age-appropriate capability and practices for developing thought processes. Otherwise we run the risk of expecting too much, which frustrates a child, or expecting too little, which insults and leads to mediocrity. Skills of memory and comprehension contribute to developing higher-level reasoning skills.

Intellectual growth requires increasing the ability to reason or to think critically. No amount of urging, drilling, rote memory, or demanding can force intelligence. But an enriched environment that stimulates, encourages, is non-threatening, and provides opportunities for new experiences primes the pump of readiness and interest. Four levels of thinking require productive use of information. For this reason they are called critical thinking skills. Following are the kinds of activities or processes that develop each level.

- **Application**—solve problems by applying or transferring information to a situation. Plan activities that demonstrate, translate, dramatize, illustrate, apply, interpret, critique . . .
- **Analysis**—isolate separate parts contained in a unit. Plan activities that debate, diagram, compare, contrast, experiment, chart, categorize . . .
- **Synthesis**—assemble separate elements into a useful whole. Plan activities to compose, formulate, construct, design, combine, modify, generalize . . .
- **Evaluation**—determine right, wrong, and appropriateness based upon objective criteria. Plan activities that select, predict, estimate, assess, support ideas, justify, recommend . . .

Moral character develops much in the same way that critical thinking skills take root. Character is developmental. It requires (1) information, (2) formation, and (3) age/stage growth of reasoning ability. The more complex a moral issue, the greater the need for logical thinking. By providing opportunities for children to develop these reasoning skills, parents and teachers ready children to be make sound judgments.

HABITS OF ACTION

Decision-making skills are necessary to move the heart and head into appropriate action. Wise decisions represent objective thinking rather than emotional desires or subjective whims. Moral maturity does not happen overnight. Making wise decisions is a skilled process that must be learned just like heart skills and reasoning skills. Parents and teachers help the process by providing children with regular opportunities to (1) exercise thinking skills; (2) analyze behavior from real life, literature, TV, video, or cartoons for elements of decision-making; (3) participate in discussions and problem-solving; and (4) see their adult mentors demonstrating good decision-making skills on a consistent basis.

Many formulas for decision making exist. Regardless of the source, all approaches focus on seeing reality clearly, determining what is good, considering how best to accomplish it, and recognizing personal feelings and motives. Religious sources also include prayer in the decision-making process. I suggest four core principles for making wise decisions:

- Explore the situation honestly.
- Seek advice from sources of wisdom.
- Pray to know the will of God.
- Test the decision before acting on it.

FOSTER CHRISTIAN CONSCIENCE

Often the expressions moral development and conscience are treated as synonyms. Generally, the human sciences like psychology, sociology, and politics use the term moral development and theological, religious circles refer to conscience. But there is a defining difference between the two. For Christian conscience, Jesus is central to formation. You need not be a Christian in order to be moral, but you must be moral in order to be Christian! As Pope Benedict XVI explained, morality can exist apart from or alongside of Christ (God is Love, #14) but the Christian notion of conscience exists only within Christ. Conscience is the capacity for discerning the truly loving thing to do. Catholic Christians view Jesus Christ as the source and model of love. They accept the person, life, and teachings of Jesus and his Church as the criteria for understanding what love looks like in the concrete circumstances of daily living. They also follow his lead and seek the will of the Father in prayer.

HABITS OF CHRISTIAN PRINCIPLES

Parents and teachers guide children to moral maturity by modeling a moral life and by teaching the foundations of Christian love. Children who cultivate the habit of living according to the following foundations evolve into spiritually mature, moral persons. Those habits incorporate

- example of Jesus
- Gospel teachings
- Ten Commandments and the Law of Love (CCC #2052-2557)
- Beatitudes (Mt. 5: 3-12 and CCC #1716-1729)
- moral virtues (CCC #1805-1809, 1833-1839)
- works of mercy (CCC #2447)
- principles of Catholic social teaching (CCC #2422, 2423)

HABITS OF PRAYER

Jesus witnessed that prayer was a primary pattern in his life. The intimate relationship that he cultivated with his Father was his source of identity, strength, direction, and re-fueling. Simply put, prayer is communication with God who loves us. In the human realm, consistent communication with another person often leads to shared attitudes; preferences; and, often, even to mutual mannerisms. The same is true of prayer. A steady diet or regular pattern of prayer brings us to unity with the will of God. That is the direction that souls must travel in order to develop moral maturity. Carmelite Christopher O'Donnell wrote: "It is impossible to face God daily in silent prayer and remain obstinately in opposition to his love. It may take time, but prayer has the power to transform moral attitudes and finally produce a conversion."

Spiritual maturity is developmental. Age, reasoning ability, and circumstances combine to define prayer at a given moment in personal history.

St. Alphonsus Liguori, patron of moral theology, suggested that the following practices are helpful to moral formation, particularly when they are exercised habitually:

- practicing a life of virtue,
- praying with the Gospels,

- Eucharistic devotion (Mass, frequent reception of Holy Communion, visits to the Blessed Sacrament, acts of spiritual Communion),

- the Sacrament of Reconciliation,

- meditating on the mysteries of the rosary.

What a privilege it is to be the adult who leads a child to Christ. Imagine the gratitude that Jesus holds for a parent who equips a child with the tools for lifelong spiritual growth!

Moral maturity results from a long season of growing. Be mentor and model; be patient with yourself and gentle with your child. Trust that every effort contributes to the goal of moral maturity.

Dr. Patricia McCormack, IHM, a former Catholic schoolteacher and catechist, is a formation education consultant, an author of several books as well as the PARENT PARTNERSHIP HANDBOOK feature of *Today's Catholic Teacher*, and director of **IHM Formative Support for Parents and Teachers**, Arlington, VA. She speaks and writes frequently on topics of child formation. *Reach her at DrPatMcCormack@aol.com.*

This article originally appeared in the **(August/September 2006)** issue of *Today's Catholic Teacher*, © Peter Li, Inc. Reproduced with permission. All rights reserved. This article is protected by United States copyright and other intellectual property laws and may not be reproduced, rewritten, distributed, redisseminated, transmitted, displayed, published or broadcast, directly or indirectly, in any medium without the prior written permission of Peter Li, Inc.