



Communicating Humanity: Essential Aspects of Parental Care

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... In his “Letter to Families,” Pope John Paul II declares that all parents have an obligation to educate their children. This education is not simply of an intellectual nature, but also moral, with parents called to “communicate their own mature humanity to the newborn child.”¹ Indeed, the most important obligation of parents is to act as moral guides for their children, to help them mature into productive, honest and compassionate members of the larger community. In this role, the child’s natural parents have no equal. Rousseau, for example, argues that a child is better educated by his natural parents than by the most gifted teacher in the world. The reason for this, according to Rousseau, is that a parent’s zeal for the child’s welfare “makes up for lack of talent—better than lack of talent does for lack of zeal.”² Parents, therefore cannot shirk off their responsibility for the care and education of their children onto others.

Most couples who have had a child will spend an inordinate amount of time trying to decide what to name her, how exactly to fix up her bedroom, what kind of clothes to buy for her—all rather unimportant issues if you come to think about it. What few couples take the time to think about when they have given birth to a new child is what kind of qualities of character—or virtues—they would like their child to possess. This, in the end, is the most important question for any new parents to reflect upon, but the one most likely to be forgotten in the excitement surrounding childbirth.

Parents as Primary Teachers of Virtue

Remember, children are not born generous or selfish, compassionate or mean spirited, truthful or dishonest, polite or rude. Parents have to make a concerted and unified effort to instill moral qualities in their children. And, in general, the virtues that most parents will want to instill in their children don’t have to be very subtle or sophisticated either. All young children should be taught, for example, to respect their elders, play fairly, to treat others politely, to be as honest as possible, to take pride in their work, to keep their promises, to be generous with their possessions and to be compassionate towards those who are suffering or in pain. The virtues that are taught to children should be fairly black and white; shades of gray can wait until the child is old enough—probably while he is in high

school or college— to be able to appreciate the complexities of the moral life.

Of all the virtues, however, none is more important for a child to possess than the ability to defer gratification. Sadly, this is an ability that is sorely lacking even among many adults in our society. Most children, of course, have a tendency to want to have what is pleasurable immediately. From the moment of birth the infant constantly cries out to have its needs met, and a good parent will naturally try to satisfy these needs as quickly as possible. In doing so, the parent helps his child to develop a sense of trust in his environment and in those the child is dependent upon. Eventually, however, it becomes necessary for a parent to help his child to learn to defer or inhibit his desire for immediate gratification. This is something that can be done quite early on in the child's development in a relatively simple manner: for example, by making him finish his homework before letting him watch television or telling him he can have his dessert only when he has finished eating his meal. By teaching the child to defer gratification early in life, a parent is laying the foundations for that child's future success in life. The child who never learns to defer gratification, on the other hand, is bound to be unsuccessful, unhappy and something of a menace to society.

Parents need to be in agreement on what virtues are necessary for their child to possess, and then consistently attempt to reinforce them on a daily basis. Nothing is worse for a child than to be taught, for example, that rudeness will not be tolerated in the household and then have one or both parents turn a blind eye to offensive behavior. In general, if parents are both on the same page with respect to the virtues they want to instill in their children and are consistent in reinforcing proper behavior, most children will eventually come to embrace these virtues as their own. This is nothing other than the process of moral habituation, and it has been practiced by good parents since the beginning of time.

Of course, it is not enough for parents simply to express guidelines verbally to their children. More important is that both parents set a positive moral example themselves for their children to follow. Robert Coles reminds us that virtue—what he refers to as moral intelligence—is not acquired by memorizing rules and regulations, but by learning from the example of those around us.

The child is a witness; the child is an ever-attentive witness of grown-up morality—or the lack thereof; the child looks and looks for [guidance] as to how one ought to behave, and finds them galore as we parents and teachers go about our lives, making choices, addressing people, showing in action our rock-bottom assumptions, desires, and values, and thereby telling those young observers much more than we may realize.³

Wade F. Horne further notes that “...most complex human behavior is acquired not through instruction, but through observational learning. Children, for example, are much more likely to do as a parent does than what a parent says.”⁴ A parent can make all the rules in the world to prevent his child from lying but if the parent is a liar, the child will probably be one too. One of my favorite stories is that of a parent who tried to teach his child not to curse. Experiencing great frustration one day, however, the child inadvertently let a choice expletive slip out of his mouth. His father dutifully concerned with correcting bad behavior responds by shouting, “What did I f—ing tell you about cursing in this house!” No matter how many lessons a parent like this tries to impart to his child, these

lessons will ultimately be subverted by the parent's own bad example.

From fairly early on in the child's life parents should also be teaching the child to give something back both to his family as well as the larger society. It is important for children to realize that they are not just passive recipients of the benefits of their community, but also have a role to play in working for the good of that community. William Kilpatrick suggests that even something as simple as household chores can help a children to gain a sense of contributing in a meaningful way to the good of his family.⁵ While the child is young he can be given responsibility for such tasks as setting the table for dinner and perhaps clearing the dishes away afterwards. As the child gets older his responsibilities in the household should increase: he might also be made responsible for taking out the garbage, washing the family car, helping to prepare dinner on occasion or assisting his parents with yard work. Most children actually want to contribute to their family, but many parents unfortunately don't give them the opportunity to do so. It is often easier for them to do the work themselves than to take the time to show their children how to do it properly. This is a shame, since a child who is given the opportunity to contribute to the good of his family in a meaningful way gains a sense of his own individual potency within the world.

The child's responsibilities, however, should not end at the door of his house. He should also been given the opportunity to make some kind of contribution to the larger community. As John Paul II observes,

In a society shaken and split by tensions and conflicts caused by the violent clash of various kinds of individualism and selfishness, children must be enriched not only with a sense of true justice, which alone leads to respect for the personal dignity of each individual, and also more powerfully by a sense of true love, understood as sincere solicitude and disinterested service with regard to others, especially the poor and those in need.⁶

Even young children can be encouraged to visit sick neighbors with their parents or to shovel the snow off an elderly neighbor's sidewalk. Once again, the example of parents is crucial in developing civic-mindedness in children. Imagine what a powerful example it would be if a parent was to take time out of his busy schedule to volunteer on a weekly basis at a homeless shelter or hospital. An hour or two a week is all that is necessary, particularly if, on occasion, the parent was to take his child with him to help serve. Is there any doubt that such a child will grow up convinced of the importance of lending a helping hand to those in need in his community? And if enough children were taught this very simple lesson, imagine how many social ills in our society could be eradicated— or, at least, greatly mitigated—by the presence of an army of young men and women committed to working for the good of their communities.

Family Structure

In his "Letter to Families," Pope John Paul II defines family as a "community of persons whose proper way of existing and living together is communion."⁷ To be in communion essentially means to exist as one. This kind of unified living, however, cannot come about without some design, and often requires a highly structured way of life within the household.

In many American families a tension often exists between the desire of individuals within those families to act as completely autonomous agents freely pursuing their own end and the attempt to keep families healthy and intact. Without structure and at least some rules to bind members together a family cannot help but fall apart:

Healthy families have stability because they are organized, with clear responsibilities and guidelines that are consistent and predictable....This is no plea for greater rigidity or for families to be run like tightly disciplined armies. But when rules are not clear, duties are not recognized, discipline is non-existent, and structure is lacking, the family members live without stability...and in the midst of confusion and uncertainty.⁸

In healthy families structure and rules often work to bind the individuals within a family together. And these rules do not need to be that lofty: it might be agreed upon, for example, that all family members will eat together at a certain time each night, that homework is to be done before children can go out to play or that TV will be limited to a few hours per week.

The importance of family members spending some significant amount of quality time together each week cannot be stressed enough. It has been estimated that American parents spend only about 15 minutes a week in serious discussion with their children, and that fathers spend an average of 17 seconds a day in intimate contact with their children.⁹ With parents spending more and more time working to provide their children with stuff, is it any wonder that the very “stuff” that children really need—quality time with their parents—is often sorely neglected in many American families?

In the absence of adult supervision, children are often left to their own dubious devices, or, worse still, are placed in front of a television set for entertainment. According the American Academy of Pediatrics, the average television set is on 60 hours per week and TV is still the number one after school activity for children 6-17 years old. Many children it seems are spending more time with Barney than with their own parents, and many parents, it seems, are using TV as a surrogate babysitter for their children.

Fortunately, the solution to this problem is fairly easy: parents simply need to make greater efforts to spend more time interacting in meaningful ways with their children. Having common dinner hours in which all members of the family gather together to talk about their experiences of the day is a simple activity that even the most hectic families can make part of their daily schedule. Parents might also try the more radical solution of selling or giving away their televisions sets and using the hours that would otherwise be spent in front of it reading to or playing with their children.

The Role of Discipline

Despite what some pop psychologists are saying, a parent is not supposed to be his child’s best buddy; nor is a parent first and foremost expected to be able to “relate” to his child as a fully autonomous individual. A parent, first and foremost, is to provide the guidance and discipline that a child needs to grow up into a well-adjusted and self-controlled adult. The problem in our society is that quite often discipline has become equated with abuse or brutality or with blind submission to some tyrannical overlord. If this is what discipline is

all about no wonder it has gotten such a bad rap.

In the hands of a reasonable parent, however, discipline can become the most important instrument in exercising parental care. Remember, the goal of any good parent is to raise children who develop into morally responsible adults who are also capable of taking control over their own lives. If a child is disciplined properly by his parents early on, he will then have the possibility of developing self-discipline, which is a key to future success and happiness; if, on the other hand, a child grows up without any sort of discipline, society itself will ultimately prove a stern task-master to him. Although the world can tolerate a spoiled child, it has no use for a spoiled, undisciplined and self-indulgent adult.

No child enjoys being disciplined. Given a choice, most children would much prefer to be able to do whatever they want with little regard for the consequences of their actions. The responsible parent, however, realizes that some degree of discipline is necessary during the child's early years if he is to grow up to be a reasonable and self-controlled adult. It is for this reason alone that a parent will place limits on the kind of food a child eats or how much TV he watches. It is also the reason why a parent will punish a child who engages in behavior that is harmful to himself or to others.

The question is not whether discipline is necessary for a child, but rather what sort of discipline is optimal for his proper development. A number of recent studies seem to show that those children are best off whose parents avoid the pitfalls of authoritarianism and permissiveness in their parenting styles. The authoritarian parent evidences a high degree of control over his children without allowing them any freedom, even as they get older. This sort of parent typically will use forceful, punitive measures to ensure absolute compliance with his will, and is unwilling to listen to the child's concerns or to compromise with his needs in any way. Such parents often produce children who are withdrawn and predisposed to aggressive behavior.

The permissive parent, on the other hand, allows complete freedom for children without any expectations of proper behavior. The child is allowed to act on his impulses without any fear of sanction by the parent. The permissive parent sees himself as little more than a tool for the child to use in order to fulfill the child's own wishes, and not as "an active agent responsible for shaping and altering the child's ongoing and future behavior." The children of permissive parents, not surprisingly, inevitably grow up self-centered, hedonistic and easily bored by life.

In contrast to these two types of parents, the authoritative parent exerts control and discipline over his child developmentally. When the child is young the parent maintains fairly tight control over his behavior. Rules for proper behavior are laid down by the parents and are reinforced by sanctions as necessary. Unlike the authoritarian parent, however, the authoritative parent also takes time to listen to the child's concerns, demonstrating a willingness to compromise on occasion. As the child grows older and demonstrates responsibility, parental controls are gradually withdrawn to allow the child to develop his own sense of autonomy.¹⁰

Studies also seem to indicate that the ideal parenting style is the one that combines a high degree of warmth and support with moderate degrees of control. "It seems that for children to develop self-control," writes Wade Horn, "they first need parents who understand the need to exercise control over them. When a moderate degree of parental control is present and combined with a high degree of warmth, the child is likely to internalize the parents' rules about behavior, eventually exchanging self-regulation for regula-

tion by others.” Horn maintains that it is also necessary for parents to combine moderate levels of control with explanations for rules and punishments as the child grows older. Such explanations, he maintains, help children to internalize rules and also to develop a higher degree of empathy and altruism.¹¹

Conclusion

Certainly no one would deny that parenthood is the most arduous of vocations. A good parent gives up 18 or more years of her life and devotes herself almost entirely to the well-being of her child. Furthermore, if a parent is not extremely diligent about how her child is being raised, the corrupting influences of the secular culture could undo all of her hard work. “Vigilance, patience and firmness,” writes Rousseau, “these are the qualities in which you will not be able to relax for one instant, without the risk of losing everything—absolutely everything. One moment of impatience or neglect or forgetfulness may rob you of the fruits of six years labor, without even the possibility of recovering it by the labor of 10 more years.”¹² In this sense, parenthood should be seen as a heroic vocation, and the parents’ role in shaping the moral character of their child the greatest of all achievements.

In the end, parenting provides men and women with an opportunity to receive a lesson in true humanity and selfless love. A parent’s ultimate reward, however, comes only after the child has grown up and leaves home. If parents have done their job properly, their children, hopefully, have grown up to be a credit to them. They have become generous, hard-working, compassionate, responsible men and women who are now capable of sharing the tremendous gift of love that they have received with others in their communities—in short, a wonderful reflection of the parents who have raised them so well.

NOTES

1. John Paul II, “Letter to Families” 16
2. Rousseau, *Emile*, 18.
3. Robert Coles, *The Moral Intelligence of Children* (NY: Random House, 1997) 5.
4. Horn, 8.
5. *Why Johnny Can’t Tell Right From Wrong* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992) 258-259.
6. John Paul II, “Familiaris Consortio” 37.
7. John Paul II, “Letter to Families” 8.
8. Collins, 90-91.
9. *Wall Street Journal* (April 6, 1990) B1; cited in Kilpatrick, 246.
10. The most interesting studies on parental discipline have been done by Diana Baurind over the past three decades. See “Parental Disciplinary Patterns and Social Competence in Children.” *Youth and Society* 9 (March 1978): 239-276; “Child Care Practices Antecedent Three Patterns of Preschool Behavior,” *Genetic Psychology Monographs* 75 (1967): 43-88. See also E.E. Macoby and J.A. Martin, “Socialization in the Context of the Family Parent-Child Interaction.” *Handbook of Child Psychology*. Vol 4 (New York: Wiley, 1983): 39-51; Johannes Van der Ven. Formation of the Moral Self (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1998) 48-60.
11. Horn, 82-84.
12. Rousseau, “Extracts from Three Letters to the Abbé M., Who had Undertaken the Education of a Boy by the Method of Emile.” *Rousseau: Minor Educational Works*. Ed. William Boyd (New York: Teacher’s College, Columbia University, 1956) 92.

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