



Formative Parenting

Cultivating Character in Children

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

WHAT MAKES THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A HOUSE AND A HOME?

What makes the difference between a house and a home? Nails and wood or bricks and mortar can create a house but it takes love to transform the architecture into a home. Love breathes life and hope, belonging and unity. Love transforms a collection of individuals into a family – a *privileged community* through which members share similar feelings, affections and interests that are rooted, above all, in respect for one-another (CCC # 2206) for, as Bishop Fulton J. Sheen once remarked: “Love grows out of respect.”

Several years ago, while visiting a college fraternity house, I noted a sign that hung above the front door. It read: “What have you done for your brothers today?” Immediately I imagined the effect that a similar signpost might have in a family home: “What have you done for our family today?” Or, in a school setting, “What have you done for class spirit today?” Note! The question is about *doing*. It does not refer to feeling. Love is a verb, an action-word!

St. Paul defined love in very practical terms. Though First Corinthians 13 does not exhaust the possible expressions of love, it can serve as a core-teaching tool for families. Paul cautioned that a person can accomplish all sorts of marvels – “speak the language of angels, prophesy, understand all mysteries, remove mountains, and give away possessions” – and yet, if these wonders are done without love, they amount to noise and emptiness. Perhaps Paul’s most popularly known teaching is contained in I Corinthians 13: 4-7. The paragraph describes love: “Love is patient; love is kind . . .” The description can function as a goal-setting tool. Take a prayerful look at it by substituting your personal name every time the word “love” appears. For example,

***Jean** is patient; **Jean** is kind; **Jean** is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. **Jean** does not insist on her own way; **Jean** is not irritable or resentful; **Jean** does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but **Jean** rejoices in the truth. **Jean** bears all things, **Jean** believes all things, **Jean** hopes all things, **Jean** endures all things.*

Paul went on to say that when he was a child, he “spoke like a child, thought like a child, and reasoned like a child.” But when he became an adult he put an end to childish ways. So it is with us! We are developmental beings. Growth happens through time and experience, through ages and stages. Over time our understanding, perceptions, and reasoning abilities expand from childish ways to adult ways. When it comes to love, however, growth does not occur because of a birthday. Love needs to be demonstrated, received, nurtured and integrated, witnessed and practiced within the home on a regular basis.

Learning to love cannot be left to happenstance. Rather, teaching how to love is the explicit goal in parenting. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says it this way: “Parents have the first responsibility for the education of their children. They bear witness to this responsibility first by creating a home where tenderness, forgiveness, respect, fidelity, and disinterested service are the rule” (CCC # 2223). *Disinterested service* means doing the *loving thing* without thought of reward, notice, or payback. The role of parents in the moral education and spiritual formation of children is so crucial to the well-being of both child and society, explained Vatican Council II, “that it is almost impossible to provide an adequate substitute” (*Declaration on Christian Education*, #3). For children to grow capable of love and skilled in love’s practices they need parent guidance. Intentional instruction and consistent parent example teaches children to be “generous and tireless in forgiving one another for offenses, quarrels, injustices, and neglect” (CCC #2227). This is what love looks like!

Learn to love by loving!

By example and explicit instruction parents teach children how to love. Since each of us is a human being in the process of human becoming, parents continue to learn, to clarify, to refine, or to strengthen their own love-skills as they attempt to teach their children the art of love. What exactly does the art of love include? Basically, the science of love includes (1) the practice of affective skills like empathy, kindness, thoughtfulness, forgiveness, mindfulness of the needs of others and compassion . . . and (2) the practice of virtues like patience, generosity, obedience, perseverance, prudence, and honesty. . . Whatever the love-skill, we can teach it in a manner similar to the process of teaching a child how to read.

- Hear the vocabulary of loving behavior. Say words like *empathy* and *patience*, i.e., “The store clerk showed *patience* by waiting kindly while we counted out our coin.”
- See the word in print. Spell the word; write it down; post it on the refrigerator.
- Define the vocabulary in age-appropriate ways. Engage each child to define the term in his/her own words.
- Give an example of what the love-skill looks like in action (i.e., *generosity*, *thoughtfulness*). Ask each

family member to give an example from real life or from a book or from a TV show where a character practiced the love-skill that is under discussion.

- Read stories that illustrate the love-skill. And/or name the love-skill when you see it in action, either live or in literature or in film.
- Invite self-reflection about particular instances when the child practiced the behavior or times when the behavior would have made a positive difference had it been practiced.

Another way to nurture love-skills within children is to take advantage of “teachable moments” – those occasions when children are already engaged in an activity that surfaces an affective skill or virtue. For instance,

- Make a brief reflective comment during a cartoon or TV show, i.e., “Wasn’t that *thoughtful* for Squirrel to invite Bear to the forest-friends picnic?” or “Can you imagine the *self-control* it took for Ronnie to walk away from that fight?”

• When a playmate grabs a toy you might ask, “Eddie, what is the *sharing* thing to do?” or comment, “I saw that, Eddie. You showed *generosity* to Andy.”

- Involve a child in making predictions while reading or watching a film: “How do you think Squirrel’s choice is going to affect Bear?”

- Ask the question: “What is the loving thing to do?” or “If you were in Brian’s situation, what do you hope that people would do for you?”

- Teachable moments also exist in instances when love is absent – bullying, rudeness, crude language, gossip, misuse of social media, etc. Give a brief, unemotional teaching such as: “Name-calling reduces a person to an object. That is unloving.”

Love versus Like

Jesus spoke of a “new commandment” – to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. The commandment of love is all about relationships – relationship with God, with self, and with others. Isn’t it interesting that Jesus did not command us to *like* one another? It is easy to love when we like, appreciate, enjoy, admire, and resonate with another person. But let’s face it, there are folks we meet that we do not like and that we find annoying or hurtful or maybe even obnoxious. And we trigger similar feelings within some people. How can we love in those circumstances?

Love is a choice to give respectful treatment to others regardless of the way that they treat us. Love is not dependent upon response or like-treatment. Love calls us to form personal relationships that nurture and work toward the best for both people. Love builds community and family. Love cares about the common-good and willingly sacrifices for the sake of the group. This is the ideal. What about the real? How do we move a child away from a “me, myself and I” attitude to putting another person’s preferences first or to sacrificing for the common good? Slowly! With parental guidance and intervention, the moral life develops overtime. Said simply, the moral life is a life of love.

Like the seed-to-bloom stages of plant life, the capacity to love grows through stages of moral development. The foundation for moral readiness occurs in the first three years of life when parents are the moral voice or social compass, saying things like, “Good boy!” “Tell Grandma that you are sorry,” or “Thank you for sharing your toy.” In simple, practical ways parents teach children *what love looks like*.

By nature, **pre-school aged children** are self-centered, motivated by self-satisfaction, and characterized by a “Me, Myself, and I” mentality. You could say that they are at a pre-moral stage. Moral readiness includes the following kinds of practices:

- Toddlers can kiss a boo-boo and say “please,” “thank you,” and “I’m sorry.”
- Preschoolers can cooperate, take turns, play fair, perform acts of kindness, take care of things that

belong to others, show empathy for someone who falls or has hurt feelings, and support the family environment by cleaning up after self. They begin to learn teamwork by participating in household chores and helping to cleanup after a party or meal.

Generally, children in **Kindergarten** are morally motivated by the mentality of reward and punishment. “Right” for them is whatever they can do without getting into trouble and “good” is avoiding punishment. Parents help Stage One souls to grow more loving when they:

- Set standards for acceptable behavior.
- Provide brief explanation as to why a behavior is appropriate or inappropriate; the reason behind a rule.
- Consistently reference “the golden rule” mentality.

- Introduce children to the concept of stewardship, i.e., taking care of the environment and property – both personal and that of others.
- Explain that lying is wrong because it breaks trust and, therefore, blocks relationship.

“Right” for **Primary School Children** (Grades 1-2-3) is looking out for self and being fair to those who are fair to them, in a “you scratch my back; I’ll scratch yours” kind of way! “Good” to them is anything that feeds self-interest. They have a “What’s in it for me?” mentality. Parents stretch the moral aptitude of these youngsters when they:

- Employ the strategy of “tit-for-tat” reciprocity, i.e., “Help me by delivering the laundry and I will use the saved time to drive you to practice.”
- Practice kind, caring actions beyond the family, especially for people who are incapable of reciprocating.
- Appeal to love instead of fairness as a motivation, i.e. “It is a loving choice to initiate a friendly greeting to Terri even though she is unkind to you.”
- Promote personal responsibility for behavior, i.e., “I am responsible for my own choices regardless of the action or inaction of other people.”

During the **Intermediate Grades** (Grades 4-5-6) a child is motivated by interpersonal conformity, that is, being a people-pleaser. “Good” is being thought of as a “good boy/good girl” or a “nice person,” and “right” is meeting the expectations of people that he/she cares about. Approval is motivational. Nurture this stage by expressing clear and reasonable expectations. Work side-by-side on new or difficult tasks before requiring performance. At this stage parents foster moral growth when they:

- Help the child to establish a personal identity within the family and among peers.
- Display affection consistently, as a pattern of behavior.
- Support exploration of personal preferences.
- Promote practice of empathy, compassion, cooperation.
- Encourage independence and self-reliance.
- Create opportunities of service that engage children in the practice of fidelity, reverence, justice, peace and mercy.
- Strengthen family life and cultivate classroom community building.

During the **Junior High** years (Grades 7-8-9), young adolescents are also motivated by approval but the source of approval switches from parents, teachers, and other adults to social acceptance by their peers. “Right” is being a valuable team member, a contributor. “Good” is having peers, particularly the “in” group think well of them. Receiving social approval or disapproval affects their sense of self-esteem. During this moral stage conscience begins to shift from rules to an inner standard. The middle school years are a time of great turmoil and great growth. The following practices support moral maturity at this stage:

- Decrease parental control while increasing teen independence and self-reliance that is balanced by accountability.
- Emphasize that Gospel principles and the Ten Commandments are tools for fostering a loving relationship with self, God and others.
- Value the development of an independent conscience that is based on self-respect, social responsibility, and concern for “the common good.”
- Teach teens to apply to issues the standard “What if everybody did this?”
- Encourage growth in initiative (being a self-starter and goal-setter) and industry (stick-to-it-tiveness) with an emphasis on service to the human family.
- Help teens to develop goals, to imagine themselves as contributing members of society, and to view work as a way of contributing to the welfare of others.

Responsibility to the System and law-and-order thinking characterize **High School teens and Young Adults** who continue to develop their capacity to love. Motivated by a “duty first” attitude, they view “right” as fulfilling responsibility to the social system(s) to which they belong. And for them, “good” is keeping the system from falling apart, maintaining self-respect through keeping commitments and fulfilling obligations to society’s rules. Parents can effect moral growth during the high school years when they:

- Foster a sense of “the common good.”
- Openly discuss ethical issues, controversial topics and moral dilemmas.
- Engage young adults in practices of Catholic Social Teaching.

Moral maturity is not “a given.” It is not an automatic result of age. Probably we all know adults who function at the “Me, Myself and I” level (Stage 0) or “What’s in it for me? You scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours” level (Stage 2). Moral maturity progresses when parents dedicate themselves to the soulful formation of their children, intervening in their lives; challenging them to be more than they are at the moment; and placing before them models and examples to imitate. “Rome was not built in a day.” Neither does the capacity to love expand overnight or because of a single experience or as a result sporadic practices. Steady care over time is the catalyst for moral maturity. The old maxim rings true: “Throw enough mud and some will stick.”

Love’s Curriculum: “What does love look like?”

Once I spoke with a Senior Citizen who had just returned home from having spent a month in a nursing home rehabilitation facility. I asked her about her experience and she remarked, “The service was professional but there was no love there.” What do you think that she meant? The word “love” can be abstract. When folks of various ages say to me, “I don’t feel loved” or “I want to be loved” or “I love you” I often respond, “What does love look like to you?” In other words, transfer the abstract term “love” into practical, observable, objective examples.

This is precisely what the Church does when it places before us topics like *Spirituality of Communion*, the *Ten Commandments*, the *Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy* and the *Seven Principles of Catholic Social Teaching*. This year the **PARENT PARTNERSHIP HANDBOOK newsletters** will focus on these guideposts.

Each formula puts a spotlight on particular expressions of love. Jesus explained that if we understand LOVE and live LOVE, then we are automatically living the commandments. Jesus said, “Treat others the way you would have them treat you: this sums up the law and the prophets” (Mt. 7: 12) meaning, if we grasp and practice love, we actually do not ever need to see the words of the law that the prophets taught since every word is an expression of what love looks like. The desert Hebrews cried for clarity, direction, and rules of conduct and so Moses asked God for the Commandments.

Because human nature continues to be dull of heart, the church in any faith tradition, interprets those commandments and expresses them in modern examples. The common thread, the bottom line, is that such maxims are merely faces of what love looks like in day-to-day relationships.

In closing, take a peek at a modern formula for loving. Consider ways to pass on its message to children. In 2001 Pope John Paul II issued an Apostolic Letter to mark the beginning of the new millennium (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*). He urged us “to promote a *spirituality of communion*, making it the guiding principle of education wherever individuals and Christians are formed . . . wherever families and communities are being built up” (#43). He spelled out what that would look like:

- Find Christ in one another. (If you cannot see Christ, bring Christ!)
- Think of others as extensions of myself.
- Do for others what I would want for myself.
- Honor the joys and sorrows of another.
- Sense the desires of others and attend to their needs.
- Relate in genuine friendship.
- See the positive in others, welcome it, prize it as a gift from God.
- Affirm the efforts and potential of others.
- View others as gifts.
- Make room for others; be inclusive and inviting.
- Practice tolerance and mutual respect.
- Resist the selfish temptations that provoke competition, careerism, distrust, and jealousy.

Twelve goals. Twelve months in a year. Why not lead the family to focus on one goal a month? Weekly at a family meal invite members (1) to share how they practiced the goal during the week or (2) to cite examples that they observed during the week in other family members or (3) to describe a TV show that demonstrated the goal or (4) to tell a story in which the goal was glaringly absent and resulted in a broken or strained relationship.

What makes the difference between a house and a home? LOVE! Who makes the difference between a house and a home? YOU!

**PARENT and LOVE differ only in name.
For the wonders they work are one and the same!**

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 2011) 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, disseminated, transmitted, displayed, published or broadcast, directly or indirectly, in any medium without the prior written permission of Peter Li, Inc.