

POPE FRANCIS ON PARENTING

Excerpts from *Amoris Laetitia (The Joy of Love)*

The Essential Role of Parents

Parents always influence the moral development of their children, for better or for worse. It follows that they should take up this essential role and carry it out consciously, enthusiastically, reasonably and appropriately (n. 259).

Parents need to consider what they want their children to be exposed to, and this necessarily means being concerned about who is providing their entertainment, who is entering their rooms through television and electronic devices, and with whom they are spending their free time. Only if we devote time to our children, speaking of important things with simplicity and concern, and finding healthy ways for them to spend their time, will we be able to shield them from harm. Vigilance is always necessary and neglect is never beneficial (n. 260).

Helping Children Mature

What is most important is the ability lovingly to help [children] grow in freedom, maturity, overall discipline and real autonomy. Only in this way will children come to possess the wherewithal needed to fend for themselves and to act intelligently and prudently whenever they meet with difficulties. The real question, then, is not where our children are physically, or whom they are with at any given time, but rather where they are existentially, where they stand in terms of their convictions, goals, desires and dreams (n. 261).

Inevitably, each child will surprise us with ideas and projects born of that [inherent inner personal] freedom, which challenge us to rethink our own ideas. This is a good thing. Education includes encouraging the responsible use of freedom to face issues with good sense and intelligence (n. 262).

Moral Training of Children

A person's affective and ethical development is ultimately grounded in a particular

experience, namely, that *his or her parents can be trusted* [emphasis added]. This means that parents, as educators, are responsible, by their affection and example, for instilling in their children trust and loving respect. When children no longer feel that, for all their faults, they are important to their parents, or that their parents are sincerely concerned about them, this causes deep hurt and many difficulties along their pathway to maturity (n. 263).

Parents are also responsible for shaping the will of their children, fostering good habits and a natural inclination to goodness. . . . Moral formation should always take place with active methods and a dialogue that teaches through sensitivity and by using a language children can understand (n. 264).

Good habits need to be developed. Even childhood habits can help to translate important interiorized values into sound and steady ways of acting (n. 266).

Moral education has to do with cultivating freedom through ideas, incentives, practical applications, stimuli, rewards, examples, models, symbols, reflections, encouragement, dialogue and a constant rethinking of our way of doing things; all these can help develop those stable interior principles that lead us spontaneously to do good (n. 267).

Correcting Children Lovingly

It is also essential to help children and adolescents to realize that misbehavior has consequences. They need to be encouraged to put themselves in other people's shoes and to acknowledge the hurt they have caused. Some punishments—those for aggressive, antisocial conduct—can partially serve this purpose. It is important to train children firmly to ask forgiveness and to repair the harm done to others (n. 268).

Children who are lovingly corrected feel cared for; they perceive that they are individuals whose potential is recognized. This does not require parents to be perfect, but

to be able humbly to acknowledge their own limitations and make efforts to improve. Still, one of the things children need to learn from their parents is not to get carried away by anger. A child who does something wrong must be corrected, but never treated as an enemy or an object on which to take out one's own frustrations. Adults also need to realize that some kinds of misbehavior have to do with the frailty and limitations typical of youth. An attitude constantly prone to punishment would be harmful and not help children to realize that some actions are more serious than others. It would lead to discouragement and resentment . . . (n. 269).

Patience is Needed

In proposing values, we have to proceed slowly, taking into consideration the child's age and abilities, without presuming to apply rigid and inflexible methods. The valuable contributions of psychology and the educational sciences have shown that changing a child's behavior involves a gradual process, but also that freedom needs to be channeled and stimulated, since by itself it does not ensure growth in maturity (n. 273).

The Importance of Family Life

The family is the first school of human values, where we learn the wise use of freedom. Certain inclinations develop in childhood and become so deeply rooted that they remain throughout life, either as attractions to a particular value or a natural repugnance to certain ways of acting (n. 274).

. . . One of the most important tasks of families is to provide an education in hope. . . . When children or adolescents are not helped to realize that some things have to be waited for, they can become obsessed with satisfying their immediate needs and develop the vice of "wanting it all now." This is a grand illusion which does not favor freedom but weakens it. On the other hand, when we are taught to postpone some things until the right moment, we learn self-mastery and detachment from our impulses. When children realize that they have to be responsible for themselves, their self-esteem is enriched. This in turn teaches them to respect the freedom of others (n. 275).

The Need for Sex Education

The Second Vatican Council spoke of the need for "a positive and prudent sex education" to be imparted to children and adolescents. . . . It is not easy to approach the issue of sex education in an age when sexuality tends to be trivialized and impoverished. It can only be seen within the broader framework of an education for love, for mutual self-giving. In such a way, the language of sexuality would not be sadly impoverished but illuminated and enriched. The sexual urge can be directed through a process of growth in self-knowledge and self-control capable of nurturing valuable capacities for joy and for loving encounter (n. 280).

Young people need to realize that they are bombarded by messages that are not beneficial for their growth towards maturity. They should be helped to recognize and to seek out positive influences, while shunning the things that cripple their capacity for love (n. 281).

Passing on the Faith

Raising children calls for an orderly process of handing on the Faith. This is made difficult by current lifestyles, work schedules and the complexity of today's world. . . . Even so, the home must continue to be the place where we learn to appreciate the meaning and beauty of the Faith, to pray and to serve our neighbor. . . . Handing on the faith presumes that parents themselves genuinely trust God, seek Him and sense their need for Him . . . (n. 287).

Children need symbols, actions and stories. Since adolescents usually have issues with authority and rules, it is best to encourage their own experience of faith and to provide them with attractive testimonies that win them over by their sheer beauty. . . . It is essential that children see that, for their parents, prayer is something truly important. Hence moments of family prayer and acts of devotion can be more powerful for evangelization than any catechism class or sermon (n. 288).

In all families the Good News needs to resound, in good times and in bad, as a source of light along the way. All of us should be able to say, thanks to the experience of our life in the family: "We come to believe in the love that God has for us" (1 Jn. 4:16).