

HOW TO BE GOOD PARENTS

DONALD F. MILLER, C.S.S.R.

Here are the principles, with some of the practical applications, that all parents must know and observe if they are to rejoice in the children whom God entrusts to their care.

It is not easy to be good parents today. One may go farther and say that it is never “easy” to be such, because parenthood begets very serious obligations, and fallen human nature rather instinctively rebels against being obliged to anything. Today it is especially difficult to be good parents because so many persons who have brought children into the world have taken the easy way out and evaded the obligations that parenthood imposed upon them.

It is good, therefore, to review the principles that underlie the obligations of parents toward their children, and to point out some of the practical applications that must be made of the principles by fathers and mothers. The fourth commandment of God reads: “Honour thy father and thy mother.” Implicit in this command, which is directed primarily to children, is the law that parents must rightly fulfill their obligations toward their children. To fulfill those obligations, parents must know them and ponder on them often.

Since there is so much abdication of parental responsibility today, with the result that patterns of wrong conduct are widely followed in the world, it is important that individual parents not only read the following principles and explanations for themselves, but that they get together with other Christian and Catholic parents and set up patterns of conduct that will oppose the fashions and standards followed by parents who don’t know or don’t care to know how rightly to exercise their parental authority. Groups of parents, therefore, should study and talk about these principles together, and encourage one another to put them into practice.

PRINCIPLE I.

The authority of parents is a delegation of the authority of God, transmitted to them by the very fact of their becoming parents, through which they are to direct their children first, toward heaven, and second, toward a useful and happy life in this world.

God cooperates with parents in bringing children into the world, but God does the major part. He creates an immortal human soul for every child and has supreme authority over that soul. This authority He delegates to the parents for the proper upbringing of the child.

Therefore the authority of parents over their children must be exercised with definite ends in view, and with a clear knowledge of the proper means to those ends.

The first end is always the salvation of the child’s soul. The secondary end is the living of a good and useful and happy life on earth.

The means are threefold: 1) a knowledge of God, attained through faith and reason, and of all that God has revealed to man; 2) observance of God’s laws, as made known through the teachings of Christ and His Church; 3) the use of prayer and the sacramental system Christ established as the means of growing in positive grace.

Leading a child toward its proper goals, through the right means, will require personal instruction, correction of faults, discipline of the will, and, at times, reasonable punishment.

PRINCIPLE II

The authority of parents will never be effective in directing a child properly unless it be exercised against the background of manifest love.

God never commands human beings without at the same time showing His love for them. Indeed, all the commands of God are in some way expressions of His love. It was this love that inspired Him to go so far as to die for mankind.

Since the authority of parents is a delegation of the authority of God, its exercise must be accompanied by the same kind of love that God has shown to all His children. This love must be *manifest* so that the children will see that the same parents who command them love them whole-heartedly.

The love of parents is made manifest only through sacrifice, respect for the human nature of their children, companionship and a deep interest in the studies, the work, the play and the progress of their children. It does not injure the children by coddling them; it does not stunt them by unreasonable severity in its demands and punishments. It makes the children constantly aware that the parents want their happiness, both eternal and temporal, even when discipline and correction and punishment are required.

PRINCIPLE III.

The authority of parents will rarely be effectively exercised unless it is backed up by their good example.

In all moral and spiritual matters, the example of parents should be the first teacher of their children; explanations, commands, prohibitions, corrections are of little lasting value unless the good example is there.

Thus parents who rarely receive the sacraments, who are guilty of frequent profanity and even obscenity in speech, who often quarrel with each other, will accomplish little or nothing by commanding their children to do otherwise than they do. The children may obey for a while, at least when they are very young; but almost inevitably and eventually the children will follow the example of their parents and not their commands.

PRINCIPLE IV.

The authority of parents must be exercised with full recognition of the differences of treatment required by the differences of temperament, sex and age in their children.

Every child born into the world is a distinct human personality, with its own particular disposition and temperament, with the special characteristics of its sex, and with a need for different kinds of treatment as it advances more and more toward maturity.

Basic to the needs of all children, however, is that they be trained to respect the authority of their parents from their earliest years. Parents who let their children have their own way throughout childhood will never win them to obedience in later years. It is hopeless to try to direct a child toward good and to rescue it from evil by beginning to exercise authority only when the child is advancing into its teens.

At the same time each child must be looked upon as an individual boy or girl, and is subject to growth and development requiring changes of approach on the part of parents as the child advances toward greater and greater maturity.

Thus the father will be on guard against trying to deal with his daughter in the same manner as he directs his sons; and the mother will beware of trying to mould a son's character according to the same pattern as that of a daughter.

Thus both parents will study to learn the individual temperaments of their children and to direct them accordingly. They will come to realize that a moody child needs encouragement and the building up of self-confidence; an extrovert child needs discipline, order and frequent correction; a child with a tendency to want to dominate others needs praise and at the same time humility; a lazy or phlegmatic child needs frequent prods administered with patience and understanding. Despite all this no child can get along without respect for parental authority instilled at the earliest age.

As the child grows into its teens, the authority of parents gradually expresses itself more often in suggestions, directives and even wishes rather than in sharp commands. This will work out only if the children have always been trained to respect the authority of their parents and to recognize their love. Too many parents make the mistake of commanding a fifteen-year-old to do things in the same manner as they would a five-year-old child.

PRINCIPLE V.

The authority of father and mother must be mutually exercised, each contributing what is most natural to their particular role.

The mutual exercise of parental authority means that neither one will abdicate authority, nor delegate to the other the making of all decisions concerning the direction, correction and punishment of the children. Fathers, in particular, do great harm to their children (and, incidentally, to their wives) who, in all problems and questions that arise concerning the children, say to them: "Let your mother decide."

Each parent has something to contribute toward the proper development of a child. By the design of nature, a father leans toward justice and severity; the mother toward mercy and leniency. Both these shadings of authority are needed for the rounded development of the child. Children need to see the father and mother working together, complementing each other, in bringing them up. Above all, it is important that they never be given grounds for "playing" their father and mother against each other.

Therefore the father must permit his masculine sense of justice to be tempered at times by the mother's leaning toward mercy; the mother must want her feminine leniency to be bolstered by the father's instinct toward strictness. Yet decisions must appear to the children as coming from both parents, the one always supporting and upholding the other when the decision has been mutually made.

PRINCIPLE VI.

The authority of Christian parents must be exercised with full recognition of the fact that false, dangerous and bad standards of conduct are approved or tolerated by many parents in the world today, and that Christian parents must band together to reject and resist all such standards.

The grave mistake of many Christian parents is to let themselves be swayed by customs, practices and permissions that are indulged by children who have parents "who don't care," or who are guided by wrong principles. They cannot resist the plaintive appeal of children: "Other parents allow these things; why shouldn't they be allowed to me?"

Children, even in their teens, cannot be expected to make the distinction between the good and the bad, the dangerous and the harmless, in the customs that are prevalent around them. Indeed, they of all human beings are most apt to call upon the false principle that what is widely done is rightly done. At the same time, widespread experience proves that children want to be guided; they want to be told by their parents what they should do and not do.

Therefore parents are bound to use their own knowledge and experience, their own faith and principle, to guide and direct their children toward what is good and away from what is bad, no matter what the popular modes of juvenile conduct may be. And because the weight of false principle and bad example is so great, they need to get together with other parents like themselves, and to establish norms and rules that all will observe together. The effect will be that no child of Catholic parents will be able to say:

"You are the only parents in the world who ask or demand such-and-such of me."

A number of clear examples of the contradiction between what is popular or widely permitted and what is right can be set down. Under each heading below the wrong principle or practice will be set down followed by the right.

1. *Recreation outside the home.*

Wrong: Parents need not be concerned about the circumstances in which their children seek recreation outside the home.

Right: Parents are bound to know and pass judgment on 1) where their children (including teen-agers) go for recreation; 2) with whom they go; 3) how long they will be away from home. In a rightly run home, definite rules regarding these three points will be laid down and enforced for the children from their earliest years to their late teens.

2. *Recreation in the home.*

Wrong: Parents are justified in discouraging gatherings or parties of their children with their friends in their own home. If on occasion such parties are permitted, the parents need not be bothered with supervising or chaperoning them in any way.

Right: Parents have an obligation to welcome the friends of their children into their home for informal or formal gatherings, because this is the only adequate way in which they can get to know the kind of company their children

keep. Further, they are *obliged* (this word should be unnecessary: it were better said, “they should desire”) to chaperone and take part in such gatherings, and enforce definite rules concerning modesty, decency and propriety at all times. “Crashing” should be prohibited, and break-up times agreed upon and observed.

3. *Company-keeping*

Wrong: There is no harm, and perhaps some good, in permitting a youngster in the eighth grade or in the three early years of high school, to keep steady company, that is regularly to have “dates” exclusively with a certain individual.

Right: Steady company-keeping is lawful only when marriage is considered possible and desirable within a reasonable period of time, which may be estimated at about a year. There are two reasons for this. The first and most important is that steady company-keeping without prospect of marriage within a reasonable time practically always leads in due course to sins of impurity. The second reason is that no child can acquire a worthwhile high school education if it is distracted from its studies by an immature love-affair.

On this principle parents are bound to prohibit steady company-keeping to their children at least until the latter part of their senior year in high school. Even then it may be permitted only if the teen-ager is willing, with the seriously considered advice of parents, to face the prospect of marriage shortly after the completion of high school. If a high school senior seriously plans on going to college or university, the parents should inform him (or her) that steady company-keeping in high school represents a decision to give up all thought of college or university, and that they (the parents) will enforce that decision.

4. *Sex-instruction*

Wrong: Parents may trust that their children will learn all they need to know about sex from their teachers, their companions, and from books and magazines.

Right: Parents have the primary responsibility for seeing to it that their children are not only properly informed on matters of sex, but prepared to meet the problems that will arise in this matter.

On no point in the upbringing of children, is it more important today that Christian and Catholic parents inform and train their children properly than in the matter of sex. On no point should they be more aware of the false principles their children may learn from companions and bad reading than here. For the task involved they should prepare themselves by well-directed Catholic reading and study, and by discussions with other responsible Catholic parents.

There are many other topics on which a false or dangerous principle for parents might be set down, and true norms succinctly stated. Some such topics are 1) the use of the family car; 2) money and allowances for children; 3) the use of alcohol; 4) the taking of jobs by children and the disposition of the income from such jobs; 5) proper attitudes toward school authorities, and toward the pastor and the parish church. Serious thinking about these matters, and discussions from other parents, against the background of the principles set down above, will reveal to them what sort of program will be to the best eternal and temporal interests of their children.

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John N. McCormick, C.S.S.R.
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✠ Joseph E. Ritter
Archbishop of St. Louis
