

# CONCERNING PARENTS

By Rev. Edgar Schmiedeler, O.S.B., Ph.D.

## Some Guiding Thoughts

IT IS a commonplace to say that parenthood is a difficult profession. It was always so in the past. It is even more so today. How frequently, for example, do matters of discipline perplex the modern father and mother; how often are they at a loss to know which course is the best to follow in their dealings with their little ones! Shall they punish or shall they praise? Shall they allow or shall they refuse? The decision is often not an easy one to make. And yet upon it may depend in no small measure the future weal or woe of their offspring.

Keenly aware of the many difficulties that confront them in their tasks of child training, not a few parents today are eagerly reaching outside the home for help and guidance. Can the assistance they seek be given them? Can helpful direction be made available to them?

It must be admitted, first of all, that there are very real limitations to what can be done. Matters of child guidance cannot be reduced to rule-of-thumb methods. In other words, hard and fast rules that offer unfailing solutions for all possible cases of discipline that may arise are quite beyond the realm of possibility. The variations in the types of both children and parents are too great. The same is true with regard to the circumstances in which they find themselves.

Still, it is no less certain that some guiding principles can be laid down and that some helpful suggestions can be offered to parents. A number of these are set forth in the following paragraphs with the hope that they may prove of some practical value. They represent in no small measure the work of a group of mature students who, on completing a course in Parent Education under the direction of the writer, pooled their common ideas and thereby provided much of the material that appears in the pages of the writer's Parent and Child (Paulist Press).

## TYPES OF PARENTS

Perhaps the logical starting point for parents who are interested in making the most of their opportunities for the training of their children within the home is for them to turn the searchlight of inquiry upon themselves, to investigate their own attitudes toward child training, and to study their own methods of fulfilling their obligations in this vital field of activity.

And this should be done with the full realization that the present and future wellbeing of the child, rather than their own convenience and the order of the household, should be given first consideration.

Such an examination would undoubtedly show that many parents today fit into one of the following three groups: first, parents who are too strict; second, those who are too lenient; third, those who are inconsistent or alternating in disciplining their children.

## PARENTS WHO ARE TOO STRICT

There are, as a matter of fact, not a few parents who rule their homes like autocrats. They are overstrict and severe. Excessive punishment, ceaseless bickering and endless restriction make the home anything but inviting to their children. The result is only too frequently the cultivation of a disputatious or rebellious character, or of a silent and sullen antagonism, instead of the development of a spirit of loyalty to parent and home. Deceit and double-dealing may even be resorted to by children in such homes in their efforts to escape punishment.

No doubt autocratic parents get a certain thrill out of the realization that their children obey them with unquestioned obedience. But the proper training of children is of far greater importance than a little selfish bit of pride or pleasure on the part of parents. The important question is whether under such rigid rule children will develop a wholesome degree of moral independence and self-control. In other words, will they on leaving the parental nest be able to stand on their own feet in the world? The chances are many against one that they will not.

## INDULGENT PARENTS

More common today than a discipline that is too rigid is undoubtedly one that is too weak and easygoing. As there are parents who are autocrats, so also are there parents who are little more than servants to their children. Such parents

may be simply of an easygoing temperament, or certain environmental circumstances may account for their leniency and failure. The spirit of “do as you please,” for example, is very much in the air these days and is extremely contagious. Some parents, too, may actually persuade themselves that they train their children by yielding to them. They give in to all their childish whims and tantrums as the easiest, if not the only, way of maintaining peace and quiet.

Yet these parents must certainly realize that, by countenancing such a philosophy of the easiest way, they are simply leaving their children unprepared for life. The world into which these youngsters must eventually be turned is emphatically a world of hard knocks. Young people whose rule of life is to avoid what is difficult and to go through with those projects only which appeal to their sense of ease and comfort, are the raw material from which the failures of life are formed. There is much need today for a diligent cultivation of the cardinal virtue of fortitude within the home in order that the creed of softness which has become so characteristic of the times may be effectively counteracted.

### **INCONSISTENT PARENTS**

Most frequent of all and most disastrous is the union of license and severity within the home. In this instance, the parents are inconsistent, spasmodic in their dealings with their children. First they pet and then they punish; -one minute they coax into good behaviour and the next they scold abusively; today they condemn a certain act and tomorrow they pass it by unnoticed.

It is not to be wondered at that under the circumstances children scarcely know what is expected of them. Nor will they ordinarily fail to take the chance offered by their parents’ changing humour for the exhortation of bribery and affection when they want it. Thinking their parents guided more by whim than by principle, the children may even lose all respect for them and all confidence in them.

In this connection it is also well to observe that differences in judgement on the part of parents should always be settled in private, and never be paraded in the presence of the children. If the parents make use of two opposite codes or standards, that, if one constantly shields and spoils while the other remains ever stern and unyielding, the methods of each stultify those of the other. The fact is that the union of license and severity in the home, whether in the person of one and the same capricious parent or in two parents with opposite standards, is both very common in practice and decidedly harmful in effect.

### **THE MIDDLE WAY THE RIGHT WAY**

The type of discipline required of parents will, of course, have to depend to some extent upon the disposition of the particular child that is being dealt with, but it must always be a consistent discipline. Moreover, it must in general lie between the two extremes of severity and laxity.

Obedience in the home is quite compatible with wholesome and wholehearted democracy therein. In fact, a proper degree of independence, initiative and freedom must be recognized and encouraged. Without these there can be no development, no virtue or self-control. A policy of repression stunts and kills, or it incites to rebellion with the subsequent necessity of a host of laws and regulations, all unwelcome because imposed from without.

On the other hand, to permit a child to range entirely at its own will is to prepare it not only for failure in every worthy conflict of life, but in all likelihood for shame and disgrace as well. A controlled freedom should be aimed at.

### **SOME RULES AND GUIDING PRINCIPLES**

With a proper attitude toward the general task of child training in mind, parents should derive some practical help and specific guidance from the following few rules and principles:

1. First of all, parents do well to realize that there can be no training at a distance; hence they must go out of their way if necessary to keep close to their children and to enter in so far as possible into their work and play. Under the older economic order of more rural times, parent and child were constantly brought together through shared work and play. Under the newer and present order, however, which prevails particularly in cities, this is no longer the case. Economic and social conditions have built an ever-widening chasm between the two. The companionship that

formerly came about automatically must today be carefully planned and even sacrificed for. It must in great part, be brought about by artificial effort.

2. Parents should realize that the training of the child is not only the mother's but also the father's task. It is particularly difficult for many fathers today to spend much time with their children; hence they must learn to make the most of the limited amount of time that they do have with them. In other words, they must learn to take an active interest in the hobbies and sports of their children. The child, whether boy or girl, who comes under the guidance of only one parent is in much the same position as a half-orphan and will be very liable to suffer a one-sided development.

3. Another point that parents do well to bear in mind, particularly in this day of a rapidly disappearing patriarchal family system, is the importance of winning the loyalty of their children and of playing the role of sympathetic confidants to them. If a father and mother are trusted friends and confidential advisers to their children in their early years, it is reasonable to hope that they will continue to serve in this highly important capacity during the difficult period of adolescence and afterwards. Certainly it is worthy of the highest commendation that children bring all their problems, troubles and doubts to father and mother for solution. Such, however, will only be the case if parents are truly companions, friends and confidants to their little ones.

4. A principle that is particularly deserving of emphasis is the following: A positive rather than a negative turn should be given by parents to their efforts at child training. In other words, they should be as ready to approve the good acts of a child as they are to condemn the bad ones. Thus, if a child is reprovved for eating too many sweets, why not commend him when he faithfully eats his vegetables and fruits?

5. At times punishment may become necessary in training children within the home. Its aim should always be to bring about regret in the child's mind. He will not readily repeat that for which he has felt sorrow. Many suggest also that wherever possible punishment should follow naturally from the offence committed. Such a practice, at any rate, would tend to focus the attention of the child on the consequence of his own act rather than on the possible anger or resentment of the parent. An extensive use of corporal punishment in the case of the average child is hardly commendable, since it is hard to administer it unemotionally and harder still to receive it in that manner. Undue corporal punishment is perhaps more liable to result in defiance or secretiveness than in penitence.

6. Again, parents should always bear in mind that the proper aim in a child's up-bringing should be to develop self-control and self-training. Hence, at least from his earliest school years, a child should be gradually trained to moral independence. During the pre-school years, of course, his mental capacity is not sufficiently developed for reason to play any considerable part in the training process. The principal method of training during this period, therefore, must almost exclusively depend upon the simple fact that the child will naturally tend to repeat acts which have pleasant consequences and to avoid those which have unpleasant ones. The unpleasant consequences may result from the undesirable action itself or they may be artificially attached to the action by the parent, for example, in the form of a scolding or other act of disapproval.

It is undoubtedly appropriate to demand blind obedience on the part of a young child. But it is a mistake to carry it over into later years. Children of school age are old enough to appreciate the reasons for things and should be taught them. Ideals and principles should play an ever-increasing part in their training. Thus, the child should be taught to obey, not to avoid punishment, but because the law of God expects it of him. Or again, he should be taught to be truthful because lying is essentially wrong, and so on with other acts and omissions. If children have learned no reason for being good other than blind obedience to their parents, their good habits will have no permanent force. They will only be make-believe.

### **SOME SPECIFIC SUGGESTIONS**

1. As few commands as possible should be given to children. Over-correction and domination are naturally resented by a child, as they are by an adult.

2. A child's attention should be secured before a command is given him. An order shouted haphazardly at a little one who is all preoccupied with some playful activity that is almost as serious as a matter of life and death to him, will likely be but dimly recognized and but little heeded. For real co-operation, attention is altogether necessary.

3. Commands given a child should be followed up; that is, parents should let it be known firmly and pleasantly that they unfailingly expect obedience. Otherwise all discipline will be speedily undermined.

4. It is poor policy to bribe a child. He will likely capitalize his disobedience by holding out for a greater bribe the next time. If given a penny to behave today, he will likely expect another, or two of them, before heeding orders tomorrow.

5. Parents should not expect the impossible of a child. If their commands are reasonable, obedience will be fairly easy on the part of the little one.

6. Not a few parents incessantly make use of threats in order to gain obedience. Such a habit ordinarily results either in a hampering fear and timidity on the part of the child or in a realization that the commands of the parent are futile and their observance or non-observance a matter of trivial importance.

7. It is particularly worthy of note that once a child has lost confidence in his parents because of deception or other cause, it will be restored only with the greatest difficulty. Hence the unreasonableness of deceiving children in order to gain obedience.

8. One should be just in dealing with children. In adults the imposition of an unjust command leaves an ugly scar if not even a festering wound; in children it at least lessens respect, for and confidence in their parents.

Such are a few of the guides that can be offered parents to aid them in their difficult tasks of child training. While admittedly far from adequate to solve all the manifold and perplexing problems that confront them, these suggestions are recommended for what helpful service they may be able to render them.

Parents, of course, are human. Hence mistakes will at times be made by them in their dealings with their children. But they should not be too human to admit their mistakes when they see them and to correct them.

### **Parents as Educators**

THERE can be no question that the responsibility of training the child and providing him with a suitable environment in which to grow up, belongs to the parents and should be assumed by them. And, indeed, there is no problem more worthy of the parents' time and effort than that of helping to develop the child's personality so that he may be a happy and efficient adult, as well as of caring intelligently for his physical life, so essential to his general well-being. But it goes without saying that if parents are to meet this obligation adequately and successfully, they must take the task seriously, and give the subject of child training the thought and consideration which it merits. The role of parent-educator in its fulfilment involves more than loving the child and being interested in his welfare.

Born with a certain inherited equipment, what the child becomes within the limits imposed by inheritance is dependent not only upon the love and affection, but also upon the intelligence and understanding, of those adults whose responsibility it is to guide them. Understanding children, however, and the cause of behaviour problems which they represent, is not a matter of intuition or of the anxious desire of parents to meet their full responsibilities. It comes as a result of much study of the physical, mental and social needs of many children, as well as the careful determination of the needs of the individual child. Knowledge is required for this just as it is required for any other important task.

### **PARENTS THE CHIEF EDUCATORS**

Today, apparently, far more educational effort is centred in the school than in the home. In spite of some occasional eulogies of the home, the family is little recognized as the chief educational agency, at least by the unreflecting majority. This becomes evident when, for example, one contrasts the amount and precision of the literature relating to the teaching of school with the paucity of the material that treats the home as an educational organization. Then again, the Catholic press gives generous mention to our schools. Annual "Education Weeks" are held. The pulpit is used to further the interest of Catholic school education. But to what extent do these and other agencies call attention to, and promote, the more fundamental work of the primary educational institution, the home? No one can find fault with the splendid efforts in behalf of the school system, but the lack of interest in, and the complacent taking for granted of, that which is admittedly more fundamental, can only be deplored.

It is of the essence of the parent-education movement to help equip parents with necessary knowledge and under-

standing. There is increasing scientific knowledge concerning child behaviour and methods of guidance. While it is only within recent years that conduct behaviour has been scientifically studied, much has already been learned that can prove of the greatest advantage to parents in their task of child guidance. But real progress does not depend on the accumulation of scientific facts. It depends upon the dissemination of these facts as well. Scientists cannot take the place of the parents, but they can teach them many useful things and enable them to do intelligently not a little of what they now do in accordance with blind instinct or the advice of those who are no wiser than themselves. The parent-education movement seeks to give parents the benefit of the scientists' findings. Prevailing criticism of the family's use of its opportunity with regard to child guidance expresses itself in a programme of reform, with the purpose either of eliminating much of the family's opportunity to mould the child, or of demanding that the family be made more efficient by bringing its methods into harmony with present-day scientific principles. The latter method, and not the former, is of course, the one to be approved of and strongly advocated.

### **CHANGED CIRCUMSTANCES**

There is no doubt that the parent-education movement is a greater need today than it was in times past. When parenthood was less difficult than it is today, there was little need for more formal education, or for specific instruction and guidance from extra-domestic sources as a preparation for family life. Domestic life was reasonably successful without it. Through informal contacts within the confines of the little home world, the children gradually learned the lessons of life that prepared them for the task of founding their own home and rearing a family.

But social conditions have changed radically during the past few decades. One of the unfortunate results is that the more informal educative process of the homes of the past has largely broken down. The shared activities of work and play have more and more departed from the domestic hearth, and the whole question of child training has become more difficult. Family life has become more involved and complex. The untrained parental instinct can no longer be relied upon to provide parents adequately with the necessary knowledge for their tasks. We now have an enormously complex individual coming into contact with a constantly changing environment. Hence, even for those fortunate adults who have had a childhood in a well-balanced, intelligent home under the guidance of far-seeing parents, it is very difficult to carry over this training to their children. The rapid change in social conditions, in housing, in the mechanics of living, in customs, in recreations, which has taken place generally in the past twenty years, makes a demand upon parents for a philosophy and for methods based on the present day. The child of twenty years ago lived in a vastly different world, with different stimuli, different desires and different behaviour.

Whether we like it or not, custom and tradition will no longer suffice for the efficient functioning of the home in the enriched culture of our many-faceted civilization today. In fact, if the home is permitted to continue only in traditional ways on a mere spontaneous and impulsive basis, while other institutions have the advantage of science, and are protected by special educational effort, it will inevitably slip behind in the march of progress. It will fail to function efficiently or to satisfy the home-makers themselves. And the results will speedily be reflected in the whole civilization of the time.

It was, in fact, a realization on the part of some parents of the need for help that gave rise to the parent-education movement. They began to see that the traditional methods of rearing children were not proving adequate for the complicated economic and social conditions prevailing today, and that special care and study are needed on the part of parents properly to understand and rear children. In consequence, parents began to study the procedure which they were using with their children, and to reach out to professional groups for assistance. They turned to educators, religious workers and scientists from many branches of knowledge for information in regard to problems of child development. In response, the findings of science in the field of child guidance were brought to the attention of parents. This was done, for example, through mothers' clubs and through a special literature on child care and training which has sprung up recently, setting forth the findings of clinics, children's foundations, child research departments of universities and the like. Placed within reach of parents, these studies have proved very helpful to them in their tasks of child rearing. Most good, however, is accomplished where there is expert guidance of some kind in addition, for instance, through study clubs competently led.

Scientific methods of housekeeping have given much more leisure time which can be devoted to cultural interests

and to fuller training of children than was heretofore the case. While there is so much in modern life that tends to turn the individual away from the home, parent education should go far in reversing the situation and in creating a very real and worthwhile interest in family life by faithfully and intelligently upholding the home as the primary educational institution. The notion of parent education is very much in keeping with the Catholic concept of the family and its fundamental functions. It answers a very real need today.

### **Parents and Religious Education**

AUSTRALIAN Catholics are justly proud of their school system. It stands a monument to their zeal and devotion to a great cause, the religious education of their children. Few today would deny its need. Few would question that, by and large, its accomplishments have been truly noteworthy.

Yet, assuming for the moment that all Catholic children enjoy the advantages of a parochial school education, or that those not so privileged are at least receiving formal instruction through such subsidiary agencies as Sunday schools, weekday religion classes or religious vacation schools, would the problem of the religious education of our children then be solved? Far from it, indeed, unless at the same time Catholic parents were doing their full duty towards the religious training of their little ones. No matter how necessary the school may be in our modern complex civilization, the fundamental fact remains that the family is the primary educational institution. The school is but an extension of the home.

The late Pontiff, Pius XI, in his Encyclical on Education, places much emphasis upon this basic fact. Speaking, for instance, of the environment necessary for education, he writes: "The first natural and necessary element in this environment is the family, and this precisely because so ordained by the Creator Himself. Accordingly, that education, as a rule, will be more effective and lasting which is received in a well-ordered and well-disciplined Christian family." With these and other words His Holiness again points to the traditional Catholic view, that the family is the school of schools and that its position must remain pre-eminent in any Christian scheme of education. Nor is it without great significance that he constantly refers in this connection to religious and moral education; that even when he includes physical and civic education, he adds, "principally in so far as it touches upon religion and morality."

This is all, of course, in striking contrast to the attitude of those who, because of the alleged breakdown of the home, or for other reasons, would shift the sacred duties of the family to other shoulders. His Holiness admits a "lamentable decline in family education," but the remedy he points to consists in the more effective fulfilment of parental obligations within the home rather than in the shirking of duties and the shifting of responsibilities to others.

### **THE HOME, THE IDEAL SCHOOL**

Reasons for the pre-eminent position of the home in any scheme of Christian education are not far to seek. There is, first of all, the acknowledged importance of the early years of childhood, the years of tender faith. Though apparently of little significance at the time, the early impressions of a child exert an altogether disproportionate influence on the whole course of his later life. Fortunate the little one in whose mind the truths of religion are mingled with his earliest recollections.

Then, too, there are the effective values of the home. Religious instruction in the family is associated with the sacred sentiments of the child's love for his father and mother. Religious truth taught in this wise will have a greater appeal and will exert a more lasting effect than when coming from any preceptor outside of the home. Nor is it a long step from an appreciation of parental love to a realization of the love of God, a realization on the part of the child that "there is Someone Who gives all people greater love than anyone else can give."

### **SOME PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS**

But how can parents best carry out their God-given tasks towards their little ones?

How can fathers and mothers, the child's first and foremost educators, make the most of their splendid opportunities with regard to their children? Space will permit at least a few suggestions here.

First of all it is of the utmost importance that they keep in mind the child's level of intelligence. Their appeal to him must be through the "things of a child" and through the faculties that are most highly developed in him. Their efforts, too, must be confined to teaching him the more elementary truths of religion, the fundamentals that he is

capable of grasping to some extent. Their aim must not be, therefore, to develop a theological prodigy, a species of infant Aquinas. To go beyond the limits of a child's capacities is but to create unnecessary difficulties, to set up insurmountable barriers. The Church does not even expect a complete knowledge of Christian doctrine on the part of the child when he comes to make his first confession and Communion. Much less should it be expected of him several years earlier. Still, with a little patient effort on the part of the parents, the little one can be brought to an appreciation of some of the most sublime truths of religion.

Since it is only after we know God that we can love and serve Him, the first step should be to bring to the child's mind the notion of a Supreme Being. Here particularly will it be necessary to work through the child's senses. These facilities are more highly developed during the first year, than are the mental ones. Hence the tiny boy or girl is better equipped to appreciate things that he can see or feel than he is to grasp purely theoretical matters or abstract ideas. Some abstraction, however, is necessary.

Undoubtedly most can be expected by directing the child's attention to the beauties of nature around him and by constantly referring to the Creator from Whose hand they come. Many opportunities will naturally present themselves for this—a beautiful sunset, the first flowers of spring, the return of the feathered songsters. As these wonderful works of God are repeatedly pointed out, the child will come more and more to see the hand of the Creator in all things. He will grasp with ever-increasing clarity the fact that "God made all things."

A child can have a fair realization of the existence of God by the age of three or even earlier. After this fundamental religious truth has once fully come into his consciousness, it will be but a short step to the appreciation of God's power and goodness, to a grasp of man's independence upon Him and responsibility towards Him. The foundation will then have been laid for the whole structure of religion for intelligent prayer and for the religious motivation of all actions, for the entire group of Christian doctrines. The child's religious knowledge should grow rapidly thereafter and his spiritual life be enriched.

The modern school teacher has come to make much use of visual education. The parent educator does well to imitate him in this in his efforts to make the religious education of his children more effective. Visual education is particularly helpful in the training of the pre-school child. Herein we see one of the values of holy pictures, statues, crucifixes, small shrines or altars in the home. By means of these the child can get a more vivid idea and a more lasting impression of our Lord, His saints and holy things than he can through any purely abstract teaching. Then, too, there are today a number of excellent illustrated books helpful in teaching religion to very young children. These should also be utilized. Certainly they deserve more of an honoured place in the Catholic home than do picture books that deal with birds, animals, etc.

In like manner should religious stories find precedence in a Catholic home over fairy-tales and other stories of field and farm or of our friends in fur and feather. The child, we know, never tires of stories, not even if they are repeated time and again. They take hold of his imagination and consequently, serve as an excellent medium for making religious doctrine and practice both appealing and intelligible to him. There is no question of the value of such stories in the religious training of the child during his years of tender faith, the period of awe and wonder when his trusting heart is readily disposed to the reception of faith. And there is such an endless variety of them for the parent to choose from—the story of the Christ-Child, of the Blessed Virgin His Mother, of St. Joseph His Foster-Father, of the entire Holy Family, of the first visitors, the shepherds and magi, etc.

Or again, there is the natural tendency of the little one to imitate his elders. This fact also will be capitalized by the parent who is conscious of his responsibility before God for the spiritual welfare of his offspring. It is the child's tendency to imitate that gives the home such a powerful influence in the training process. Not only does the example of the parents and grown-ups within the family circle, but also the whole religious atmosphere within the home, react with telling effect upon the religious and moral development of the child. Such practices as grace at table, the reverent repetition of simple prayers with the child while kneeling at bedtime, all seem in some indescribable way to lead the little one to God. While the more informal instruction of the home may later be somewhat supplanted by the school, the training that takes place through example within the family circle can never be superseded. Hence Pius XI adds, after urging upon parents the use of the best methods for making their training effective, "Supposing always the influence of their own exemplary lives."

## **OPPORTUNITY FOR CATHOLIC ACTION**

There is no denying the fact that in our modern civilization our school system is fundamental in the religious training of our children, but it is equally true that the home is still more basic. With parents first and foremost must rest the religious training of the child. That is alike their sacred duty and their inestimable privilege. And what a field this offers for missionary enterprise! What an opportunity for Catholic Action!

Nihil Obstat :  
BERNARD O'CONNOR, Diocesan Censor.

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