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Qualities of Successful Parents

JAMES STENSON

James Stenson outlines the proven methods and techniques of effective Christian parenting today.

The entire purpose of children's upbringing — that which unites discipline, schooling, and the myriad details of family life is this: that children be led to become competent, responsible, considerate men and women who are committed to live by Christian principles.

Knowing the catechism alone is not enough. Children must be led to become humanly stalwart men and women — responsible, educated, discerning, tough-minded, compassionate, and courageous. These are the kind of adults whom the Church will need over the next several decades to “renew the face of the Earth.”

In other words, the children need to internalize the seven great virtues of Christian life: faith, hope, charity, prudence (sound judgment), justice (responsibility), fortitude (personal toughness & persistence), and temperance (self-control, an ability to control one's feelings & appetites). Children



acquire these strengths of mind and heart and will in three ways:

- (a) **example** - what they see in their parents and other adults whom they respect.
- (b) **practice** - what they repeatedly are led to do, or are made to do, by parents and others.
- (c) **word** - verbal explanations for what they see and are led to do.

All three of these approaches are necessary, and in this order. Talks and lectures, scoldings and corrections — these are minimally effective without ongoing example and practice at home.

A great number of parents succeed at this task of upbringing. These successful parents vary considerably in temperament, background, tactics of discipline, and experience. Nonetheless they manage to raise their children well. Experience indicates that they have several common approaches and principles operating in family life. These are outlined below, and they are expressed here in the form of advice:

1. Bear in mind: you are raising adults, not children. Don't make the common mistakes of many parents today: (a) seeing discipline mostly as punishment, and (b) seeing its end as mere cooperative behavior, effective "child domestication," peace and quiet at home. Discipline is actually the process of leading children toward responsible Christian adulthood. Keep this aim constantly before you: what kind of adults your children should become, and therefore what needs to be reformed within them now to bring this goal about.

By their late teens, the children should have lifetime practice in living the seven great virtues. The tactics of discipline — rules, regulations, punishments, etc. — are far less important than striving toward the children's later life as strong men and women. This is why so many different approaches to discipline among various parents are equally effective. What effective parents have in common is the ideal: their

children's future lives as men and women.

2. Work as a unified team. Put your spouse first. This does more than anything else to put children firmly on the right track toward responsible adulthood. The children notice everything, and they learn by example. Bear in mind: the children's honor toward each parent will mirror the attitudes of the other parent. When a husband honors his wife, the children honor their mother. When a wife esteems her husband, the children quietly see him as a hero. Differences of opinion in important family matters (e.g., approaches to punishment) must be resolved somehow for the children's sake. Each child has only one mind and one conscience, and therefore must receive one and the same direction coming from both parents. Well-raised children see each parent as "the boss."
3. Practice "affectionate assertiveness" with your children. Be neither weakly sentimental nor harshly aggressive. Give steady affection in abundance, combined with clear and confident assertion of what's right. "Hate the sin, love the sinner" — show your children that you love them too much to let their faults go uncorrected. Give praise when they do what's right, even if they've been made to do it. Make praise as specific as blame; we tend to make blame specific but praise vague.

Be conscious that no is also a loving word, and a necessary means for the children's growth in self-control. This self-mastery is an absolute necessity for life; in adolescence, it may even be a matter of life or death.

Direct your children, but don't overmanage them. They need to learn from mistakes, and they need to grow in confidence from pitting their powers against problems. From time to time, they need to hear from you: "You can do it. Keep trying. Don't give up." Children who are directed in youth grow to respect and trust their parents' judgment, and they turn to parents later, even in adolescence, for guidance and sound advice.

4. Do not permit what you disapprove of. Your confident judgment of right and wrong is the basis for your children's growth in strength of conscience. You may sometimes doubt the rightness of a given decision, but never doubt your right to make a decision in the first place — and make it stick. If the children see you habitually back down from what you judge to be right, they may later let their conscience be overwhelmed by “feelings,” peer-pressures, and the allurements of materialism.

Do not surrender in their attempts — ages 2-5 and later at 13-17 — to be “boss.” If you are “boss” when they are young, you will give leadership through their adolescence; but if you capitulate when they are young, you may lose them in their teens. They will have neither your control nor any self-control, and this can lead to disaster.

When should you punish severely, even physically? In three fundamental circumstances. First, if they show deliberate disrespect for you personally. Secondly, if they deliberately defy your rightful authority. Third, if they break their word of honor, telling a cold-blooded, deliberate lie. Everything you have to teach them — everything — depends on their internalizing respect for you and for their own word of honor. (This is analogous to what happens in the criminal-justice system — contempt of court and perjury are extremely serious matters. Everything else in the system depends on respect for the court's authority and reliance on one's truthfulness under oath.) Therefore, serious flaws in these matters must never go uncorrected.

5. Teach children habitual courtesy, good manners toward everyone. That is, teach them habitual considerateness for the rights and sensibilities of everyone. Work to build within them the four great pillars of civilized adulthood: “please,” “thank you,” “I'm sorry,” and “I give my word of honor.” These are not just pleasant decorations to our speech; they reflect the inner values of responsible, considerate, self-disciplined adults. The attitudes underlying courtesy lead to chastity in adolescence and a solid, stable Christian marriage. Note, too, their relation to religion — a lifelong loving relation with God means

saying, over and over again, "please," "thank you," "I'm sorry," and "I give my word."

6. Don't let the media win as rivals for your children's minds and hearts. Keep television under your discriminating control. Your control of this powerful medium enhances your children's perception of your strength. Have as a dictum in your home: "We will have nothing in this house that considers or treats other people as mere things — no pornography (or anything like it), no gratuitous violence, no disrespect or rudeness, no gossip or backbiting."

Keeping the media under control leads to enrichment of family life: more reading, more conversation, more leisurely meals together, more family solidarity, more respect for the parents' leadership.

Therefore, this rule - Use television in the same way that you use wine: when it enhances family life, is of good quality, is used in moderation, and is under parental supervision.

7. Cultivate a sense of personal and family honor. The truth first, foremost, always in family life. Realize that all children will lie spontaneously to defend themselves; but what cannot be tolerated is the cold, deliberate falsehood to avoid responsibility. Therefore, for serious matters, have a fallback position by which you put children on their honor — "Take a few minutes, think it over, then tell me the truth on your honor. Whatever you say on your honor, I will believe. But you must tell the truth. There's a big difference between telling a lie and being a liar." (Then, when they tell the truth under these circumstances, praise them for their courage and integrity.)

Also cultivate children's sense of how they represent the family in the outside world, for good or for ill. (Teaching manners is a sound way to reinforce this; when children are courteous to adults, they bring honor to the family.) Everyone in the family takes healthy pride in the children's accomplishments. And everyone is endangered by disgrace if the children do something seriously wrong. Teach much about grandparents and forebears, especially how they struggled to preserve the Faith, often at great personal

sacrifice. We are all descended from real heroes.

8. Teach the children indifference to being "different." What others think of us is not really important — not compared with loyalty to God's will, maintaining a clean conscience, upholding family honor. Anyone who tries to live an honorable Christian life will inevitably be somewhat different from others. Therefore, be strong enough to withstand "peer pressures" and ignore them.

When children plead for fad items (clothing, toys, jewelry) simply because "everyone else is doing it," then make them wait. No impulse purchases; you will take several weeks to think about the matter before deciding. By making the children wait, you show them several important things: (a) the desired item is not particularly important, certainly not urgent; (b) comments by peers can be withstood and eventually pass away; (c) fads come and go; (d) you are in control, and you exercise prudential judgment for the children's welfare, taking your responsibility seriously.

Bear in mind that one day the children will be under pressure to go along with the crowd — with drugs, alcohol, promiscuous sex, abandonment of religion. By that time, they should have long practice in ignoring what others think and doing what's right regardless of public opinion.

9. Bind family life with prayer and the sacraments. Make clear to the children that you, as parents, are also children of God. Teach them to love God, to console Him, to revere Him in the Blessed Sacrament, to ask His help and forgiveness. Lead them to see Him as friend, consoler, the object of our loving devotion all our lives.

Let your children see you have confident recourse to the Mother of God and our Mother. Like all good mothers, she has eyes for our small but important needs. She is the protectress of the family.

Teach them by example to love the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Christ said that we must become like little children to enter His kingdom. He gives us this gift of spiritual childhood with every sincere, contrite

confession. Christ rewards our contrition by giving us once again the innocence and purity, the happiness and peace of mind that we enjoyed in childhood. No matter what our age, we become children again through confession.

Finally, bear in mind that God chose you as His instrument to bring greatness and holiness to your children. Put your children in His hands, and you will find the wisdom and strength to do what's right no matter what the obstacles. God will not leave your prayers for your children unanswered.



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