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Educating for Life

“Loving children rightly requires helping them to acquire self-mastery, making them persons who are free and responsible.”

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Other articles in the series on the family

Helping young people to form their character is an exciting endeavor, a task that God has entrusted, in the first place, to parents. It requires both delicacy and strength, patience

and joy, and is not lacking in challenges that spur those involved to seek God's help, to ask him for light.

Educating is the work of an artist who wants to see each child develop his or her capabilities to the fullest possible extent. It means helping children discover the importance of being concerned about others, teaching them to form relationships that are truly human, overcoming the fear of committing oneself. In the final analysis, it means preparing each child to respond fully to God's plan for his or her life.

Although the environment will always present problems and things we don't like, St. Josemaria encouraged parents to be optimistic and young at heart. Then they will "find it easier to react sympathetically towards the noble aspirations and even towards the

extravagant fantasies of their youngsters. Life changes, and there are many new things which we may not like. Perhaps, objectively speaking, they are no better than others that have gone before, but they are not bad. They are simply other ways of living and nothing more. On more than one occasion conflicts may arise because too much importance is attached to petty differences which could be overcome with a little common sense and good humor.”[1]

Our starting point is the realization that we can always improve in the difficult task of educating children. There is no system of education that is perfect, and we need to learn also from our mistakes. It is worthwhile improving our own formation with a very clear purpose: we are educating for life.

Freedom and authority

Sometimes parents confuse happiness with well-being, striving to ensure that their children have everything they want, that they have as enjoyable a time as possible and never suffer setbacks. By doing so they forget that the most important thing is not just *loving their children a lot* (which is usually the case) but *loving them rightly*.

From an objective point of view, it is not good for their children to find everything already done for them, with no need to struggle. Struggle and the effort it entails are absolutely essential in order to grow, to mature, to take control of one's life and direct it freely, and not give in unthinkingly to outside influences.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that failing to recognize man's real condition, his wounded

nature, gives rise to serious mistakes in education.[2] In order to form persons who are free, it is absolutely essential to take into account original sin and its consequences: personal weakness, the inclination to evil and the resultant need to struggle, to overcome oneself.

A child or adolescent who readily gives in to natural inclinations will slide downwards on a slope that leads to the constriction of freedom. If young people fail to fight against this tendency, with the appropriate demands that encourage them to struggle at each particular age, they will have serious difficulties in doing anything worthwhile in life. “Loving children rightly” requires helping them to acquire self-mastery, making them persons who are free and responsible. This is impossible to achieve without setting limits and imposing rules that both children and parents fulfill.

Educating children requires fostering virtues: self-sacrifice, industriousness, loyalty, sincerity, purity, etc., doing so in an attractive way but without reducing the demands. Parents need to teach their children to do things as well as possible, and not to become upset when something doesn't work out, taking advantage of the experience gained. They need to encourage children to strive for noble goals, not making things too easy for them. And above all, they need to foster a spirit of self-demand and struggle, not as an end in itself but as a means to learn how to act well when their parents are not present.

A child when young finds it hard to understand the meaning of many obligations. To make up for lack of experience children need the firm support of people who, having won their confidence, can advise them with authority. A child needs the

support of the authority found in parents and teachers, who should realize that part of their role is to teach children to act with freedom and responsibility.

As St Josemaría said, “after giving their advice and suggestions, parents who sincerely love and seek the good of their children should step tactfully into the background so that nothing can stand in the way of the great gift of freedom that makes man capable of loving and serving God.”[3]

Parental authority over children is not the result of a rigid or authoritarian attitude. Rather, it is based on the parents’ good example: on the love between husband and wife, on the unity of criteria that the children see in them, on their generosity, on the time they spend with them, on the affection—the demanding affection—that they show them, on the tone of Christian

life at home. And also on the openness and trust with which they treat them.

This authority should be exercised with fortitude, deciding on what it is reasonable to demand at each age and in each situation. It should also be practised with a love combined with firmness, rising above a mistaken affection that seeks to avoid at all cost causing any unpleasantness for one's children, which can lead in the end to a passive and whimsical disposition.

“There is a great love of comfort, and at times a great irresponsibility, hidden behind the attitude of those in authority who flee from the sorrow of correcting, making the excuse that they want to avoid the suffering of others.”[4] Parents have to guide their children, balancing authority and understanding. To allow the whims of their children to

prevail at home usually means taking the easy option of avoiding uncomfortable situations.

With patience, it is good to point out to children when they have acted badly. This is the way to form their conscience, not allowing opportunities to pass by to teach them to distinguish between what is good and what is bad, between what they ought to do or ought to avoid. By being given reasons suited to their age, children will come to realize what is pleasing to God and others, and why.

To attain maturity requires getting out of oneself, and this entails sacrifice. Initially a child is focused on *its own private world*; children mature when they begin to understand that they are not the center of the universe, when they begin to open out to the world and to others around them. This leads to

making sacrifices for one's brothers and sisters, to serving others, to fulfilling duties at home, at school and towards God. It also involves learning how to obey and striving not to disappoint one's parents. It is a journey that no one can make alone. Parents have the mission to bring out the best in their children, even when it may cause them to suffer a bit at times.

With affection, with imagination and fortitude, they need to help their children acquire a solid and balanced personality. Over time the children will come to understand more deeply the reasons for many of their parents' practices, restrictions and instructions, which may at one time have seemed somewhat arbitrary to them. They will be very grateful, also, for the strong words and moments of strictness that made them suffer, which were not the result of anger but of love. In

addition, this will help teach them how they themselves need to raise the next generation well.

Educating for life

Educating children requires preparing them for life, a life that will always involve difficulties. Effort is needed to attain any goal in the professional, human or spiritual sphere. Why then are parents so often afraid that their children will feel “frustrated” when they lack some material means?

Children have to learn what it costs to earn a living, and how to get along with those who are more intelligent or have greater social prestige. They have to learn to confront shortages and limitations, whether material or human; to take risks and handle failures, without succumbing to a personal crisis.

The desire to make their path as smooth as possible, to shield them from the slightest obstacle, rather than doing them good makes children weak and incapable of facing up to the difficulties they will find at university, at work and in their relations with others. One only learns to overcome obstacles by facing them.

There is no need for children to have absolutely everything, and certainly not right away, which would mean giving in to their whims. Quite the opposite. Children have to learn to deny themselves, and to wait. Isn't it true that in life there are many things that *can wait*, and many others that *must wait*? As Benedict XVI stressed, "we shouldn't be dependent on material possessions; we should learn to live with detachment from material goods, with simplicity, austerity and temperance." [5]

By being overly protective, by shielding children from any difficulty, parents will make them unable to confront today's world. Such an overly protective attitude is radically opposed to true education.

The word “to educate” comes from two Latin words: *e-ducere* and *e-ducare*. The first etymology is connected to providing values that lead to the full development of a person. The second refers to the action of extracting from a person the best that one can give, just as an artist “extracts” a beautiful statue from a block of marble. In both meanings, the freedom of the person being educated plays a decisive role.

Rather than being overly protective, parents would be wise to find opportunities for their children to make decisions and to face up to the consequences, helping them to resolve their own small problems. In

general, parents should foster situations that encourage personal autonomy, a high priority in any educational effort. At the same time, one needs to ensure that this freedom is in proportion to their capacity to exercise it. It would not make sense to give young children a lot of money or goods if they are unready to use them wisely, nor to leave them alone in front of a TV or surfing the net, nor to be unaware of the type of video games they are playing.

Educating in responsibility is the other side of educating in freedom. The eagerness to find excuses for everything children do makes it difficult for them to feel any responsibility for their mistakes. It deprives them of any real evaluation of their actions and as a result they miss out on an essential source of self-knowledge and experience.

For example, if instead of helping them to overcome a poor school result parents were to blame the teachers or the school, it would give children an unsatisfactory way of facing up to life. They would only feel responsible for the good things that happen and place the blame for any mistake or failure on external factors. This breeds an attitude of always complaining, of blaming the system or colleagues at work, and leads to feeling sorry for oneself and seeking compensations that make a person immature.

Always educating

All these concerns are not restricted to adolescence or to the more intense stages in the life of a child. Parents, in one way or another, are always educating their children. Their actions are never neutral or indifferent, even if their children are only a few months old. In fact, it is

not unusual to find a “little tyrant” at home, when the child is 4 to 6 years old, who imposes his or her own law through whims, stifling the parents’ ability to educate.

Not only are parents *always educating*; they have to *educate for all of life*. Education is not very useful if it is limited to resolving specific situations of the moment, forgetting about future repercussions. One has to strive to help children attain the personal autonomy and self-mastery they need. Otherwise they will be at the beck and call of all types of enslavements. Some are more obvious, such as those connected with consumerism, sex or drugs; others are more subtle but no less dangerous, such as those stemming from the latest fashionable ideology.

Another point to have clear is that children are not going to be at home forever. Even most of the time they

spend living at home during their childhood is spent out of sight of their parents. Therefore the time spent with them is immensely valuable. Many people today find it difficult to spend time with their children, which is one of the causes for some of the situations described above.

When parents see little of their children it is difficult to demand from them, since they don't know what they are up to and don't really know them all that well. Also it can be hard to "complicate" the brief moments of family life with serious demands. Nothing can replace the time spent at home.

Trust

The parents' authority depends to a great extent on their children seeing that their affection for them is real. They feel truly loved when their parents show interest in their

concerns, and when they see they do everything possible to spend time with them. Parents can find the right solution for their children's problems and exercise their authority when they know their concerns, the difficulties they are going through in their studies or with their friends, the environment they move in, how they use their time, what makes them happy or sad, whether they have had a victory or a defeat.

Children, adolescents and young people need to be able to speak with their parents without fear. How much we parents contribute to our children's formation when we make it easy for them to communicate and dialogue with us!

As St. Josemaria said, "I always advise parents to try to be friends with their children. The parental authority which the rearing of children requires can be perfectly

harmonized with friendship, which means putting themselves, in some way, on the same level as their children.

“Children—even those who seem intractable and unresponsive—always want this closeness, this fraternity, with their parents. It is a question of trust. Parents should bring up their children in an atmosphere of friendship, never giving the impression that they do not trust them. They should give them freedom and teach them how to use it with personal responsibility.

“It is better for parents to let themselves ‘be fooled’ once in a while, because the trust that they have shown will make the children themselves feel ashamed of having abused it—they will correct themselves. On the other hand, if they have no freedom, if they see that no one trusts them, they will

always be inclined to deceive their parents.”[6]

We always have to foster this environment of trust, believing what our children say, without raising suspicions, never allowing such a large gap to be created that it becomes difficult to bridge.

The professional educators in the schools and universities that our children attend can be a great help in our efforts; the tutoring and mentoring offered there can provide children with valuable personal formation. But this counseling work can never replace the primary role played by the parents. Parents need to dedicate time to their mission, being aware of their children's situation, looking for the best moment to help them, showing acceptance of them, fostering trust etc.

Our family should be our primary investment. This requires finding time where none seems available, and taking advantage of it to the maximum. It requires a lot of self-denial and not infrequently great sacrifices, which could even affect one's financial situation. Professional prestige, when properly understood, is seen to be part of something much bigger: human and Christian prestige, where the good of the family takes precedence over success at work. The dilemmas, sometimes apparent, which can crop up in this area need to be resolved with the help of faith and prayer, seeking God's will.

It is very important for parents to foster the virtue of hope. Raising one's children well gives rise to a lot of satisfaction, but also to disappointments and worries. One should refuse to give in to a feeling of failure, no matter what happens.

Rather, with optimism, faith and hope, we can always begin again. No effort is ever wasted, even though results could appear to be late in coming or are not seen at all.

Being a father or a mother is a mission that never ends. Children always need their parents' prayer and affection, even when they are living independently. Our Lady did not abandon Jesus on Calvary. Her example of self-giving and sacrifice right to the very end provides light for the inspiring task that God entrusts to mothers and fathers. Educating for life is a task of love.

A. Villar

[1] St. Josemaria, *Conversations*, 100.

[2] Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 407.

[3] St. Josemaria, *Conversations*, 104.

[4] St. Josemaria, *The Forge*, 577.

[5] Benedict XVI, General Audience, May 27, 2009.

[6] St. Josemaria, *Conversations*, 100.

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