

Positive Parenting

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It is an honour to speak at the St Thomas More Forum. St Thomas More has always been a favourite of mine. He inspires us all in his famous defence of faith against temporal power. A Saint to emulate in family life and one who so succinctly explained the relationship between Church and state. "The Kings faithful servant but God's first".

Any time people engage in an important, responsible undertaking for the welfare of others'--whether a business, a job, government affairs, or a family--there's a need for clear, competent leadership. The more serious the challenge, the greater the need for someone to direct everyone's efforts in an inspiring, encouraging way toward the ultimate goal.

The real mission for parents is to raise their children toward responsible adulthood. All the dynamics of family life lead to this: what kind of men and women the children will grow to be. No challenge is more important than this, and so great parents emerge in family life as real leaders.

How do they do this? How do fathers and mothers lead their children effectively? To form a picture of parental leadership, let's look at the characteristics of leaders and see how parents fit the profile of leadership in family life.

Leaders are moved by a distant vision, and they thus win people's respect.

Here's a broad statement that you'll probably agree with: In business and professional life and in affairs of state, our most respected leaders are those who look farthest toward the future and foresee oncoming perils and opportunities. Respected leadership and strategic foresight go hand in hand. The farther and clearer the vision, the greater the respect.

It seems that this dynamic works in successful families, too. Parents--all kinds of men and women with different temperaments--succeed in family life through their confident leadership. Successful parents base their confidence in knowing they have this sacred mission to carry out with their children.

They see themselves *raising adults, not children*. They have been called by God to carry out a job, and that holy task is this: to lead their children--with daily sacrificial effort--to grow into confident, responsible, considerate, generous men and women who are committed to live by Christian principles all their lives, no matter what the cost. Being conscious of this mysterious and sacred mission, holding it always before their eyes, is what turns these parents into great men and women themselves, real heroes to their children, and makes their family life together a great, rollicking, beautiful adventure.

Effective parent leaders look at their children and picture them 20 years from now, as grown men and women with job and family responsibilities of their own. They seem to understand a truth of life: Children will tend to grow *up* to our expectations or *down* to them. So, these parent leaders set high ideals for their children's later lives. They think of their children's future along these lines--

- The children will have excellent judgment, especially in the choice of a spouse and the upbringing of their own children.
- They will centre their lives in a stable, permanent, happy marriage--raising a great family like the one they grew up in.
- They will succeed in their careers, whatever these may be--doing work they enjoy, putting their powers up against problems for the welfare of others.
- They'll be able to support their families comfortably but not luxuriously, for a life of excess, they know, may destroy their children (the parents' grandchildren).
- They will be generous to friends and those in need.
- They will never live as quitters, slackers, whiners, or cowards--nor will they let their own children live this way.
- They will be nobody's fool or pushover. They will not be swayed by charlatans. They will know bulldust when they see it.
- When they've done wrong, they'll face the truth and apologize. They will not let their pride stand in the way of truth and justice, especially in family life.

- They will be esteemed by all who know them for their honesty, integrity, hard work, generosity, religious commitment, and good humour.
- They will remain close to their brothers and sisters for life, giving and receiving encouragement and support.
- They will live by their parents' principles. They'll have a conscience for life--the voice of their parents' lessons of right and wrong--and they'll pass these lessons on to their own children.
- Their whole lives will be moved by love--the willingness to endure and overcome anything for the welfare and happiness of others, starting with their family.

All leaders understand, and shun, the lamentable consequences of neglect.

Consider this: Public monuments are never set up to honour someone who *intended* to do something.

Leaders act. Though they spend time in study and planning, they mostly act. For leaders, study and planning are a ramp-up for action, not a substitute for it.

Moreover, real leaders never let indecision lead to inaction. When confronted with several tough choices of action, they do not shrink back. They brace themselves, choose what they judge as the best way forward, and then set to work as best they can.

Sometimes-great leadership means just this: doing the best you can with what you have. If you're climbing a mountain, you sometimes have to backtrack --but as long as you keep moving upward, you'll reach the summit. The one thing you don't do is quit. Neglect--to do nothing--is the worst mistake of all.

Parent leaders, too, understand the consequences of neglect. They know they have a job to do--a change to effect--in the minds and hearts of their growing children. And they draw courage to act from foreseeing what awful things could happen to their kids if that job remains undone, if their children retain the flaws and selfishness of childhood into adult life. For instance:

- If our children remain self-centered--"Me first!"--they will neglect or mistreat others, and their marriages and careers will fly apart.
- If they have no conscience, they will have no inner force to resist temptation. They could cave in to peer-pressures and meet with disasters: drugs, alcohol abuse, recreational sex, trouble with the law.
- If they never learn to say "please" and "thank you" on their own, without prompting, they will remain as self-centered ingrates. They will neglect or mistreat their spouses and think the world owes them a living.
- If they do not respect their parents' authority, they will have trouble with all other rightful authority: teachers, employers, the law, God Himself.
- If they receive no life-directing guidance from their parents in childhood, they may desperately need guidance later from parent-substitutes: marriage counsellors, physicians, mental-health professionals, and even cult gurus.
- If they form no principled framework for assessing people's character, they may marry a jerk.
- If they cannot manage their own affairs, they cannot take care of others.
- If they do not keep their promises, they cannot keep commitments--not to spouse, or children, or employers.
- If they never learn to set and meet goals, they cannot set and meet ideals.
- If they form a habit of lying, they will someday get fired.
- If they never learn to balance healthy work and play, their lives could shuttle between drudgery and debauchery. If they never learn to be confident producers, they will live as lifelong adolescent consumers.
- If they remain lazy and sloppy in work, they'll get shoved aside by their competition.

- If they see work as "hassle" to be shunned, they will have wobbly, precarious careers--or will see work as adolescents see it: just a source of "spending money."
- If they always expect to have their way, their adult lives will be ravaged by rage and frustration--and their marriages will implode.
- If they sulk and bear grudges, they will muddle through life as smouldering, self-pitying "victims"--and never amount to anything.
- If they remain as egocentric children, they may shun having children of their own.
- If they do not stand for something, they will fall for anything.

Discipline: What Works and Why

Here are some basic ideas about the parents' role of moral leadership in the family, often referred to as "discipline."--

1.) Let's start with an absolutely basic principle: your rights of authority in the family.

Effective parent leaders understand that parenthood is not an elective office; you do not have to curry favour with your children. Your rights as a parent come with the job, with your responsibility.

In the home as in business, authority and responsibility--rights and duties--must go hand in hand; you cannot have one without the other. The two have to be proportional, of equal weight. If you were handed a tough assignment at work but were denied the power and resources to carry it out, you'd be stymied with the burden of your duties, and you'd seethe with resentment at this injustice. Nobody--in any human situation--can bear responsibility without the power to carry it out.

As a parent, you take on enormous responsibility. You are responsible for your children's welfare, and for this you answer to the law, to society, to your conscience, to your Creator. In fact--and this is something parents seldom think about--you will even answer later to your grown children; someday they will look back and judge you, up or down, for the way you dealt with them in childhood.

So when a man and woman become parents, they take on rights as well. They confidently claim the authority--the power to choose and decide--

that they must possess to lead their children responsibly, to keep them from harm.

Authority means, among other things, the right to be obeyed. They do this with understanding and affection: they're "affectionately assertive," and this is the essence of parental leadership.

2.) The word "discipline" has had a bad press. It's widely misunderstood to mean punishment. But it does not mean punishment. Nor does it mean control for its own sake. And it does not mean enforcing rules just for the sake of minimizing hassles at home, a kind of "damage control."

Discipline certainly involves occasional punishment and some control as well as clear guidelines for behaviour. But its real meaning is far deeper and more important. Discipline really means confident, effective leadership.

Look at it this way. The word "discipline" is related to the word "disciple," and it springs from the Latin word meaning "to learn." Discipline is what happens when some leader teaches and his "disciples" learn. Broadly speaking, discipline means teaching and learning, leading and joining.

To repeat the key idea here, discipline in family life means teaching the children to acquire--by personal example, directed practice, and verbal explanation (in that order)-- the great virtues of sound judgment, a sense of responsibility, personal courage, self-control, and magnanimity. These take root in the give and take of family life and then flower to healthy maturity through the steady nourishment of confident, unified parental leadership. All this takes years.

So, discipline (teaching) requires planning and patience as much as occasional swift corrective action. It calls for example giving as much as rules, and encouragement and praise as much as loving denial and just punishment.

It means living in the family such that children are made to do what is right--as the parents see this--and shun what is wrong, and to explain the differences so compellingly that the children will remember the lessons all their lives and then pass them on to their children. That's the long and the short of it.

3.) All the effective parents I've known practice what might be called *affectionate assertiveness*. That is, they *assert* correct conduct and attitudes by their example, action, and words. At the same time they're unfailingly affectionate with their children. They correct their children because they love them, want to protect them, and care above all else for their future welfare and happiness.

They set out to *correct the fault, not the person*. They "hate the sin, love the sinner." They're willing, on occasion, to risk being temporarily "unpopular" with a wayward son or daughter--knowing that their future happiness is at stake and that their children will someday thank the and revere them as great parents.

How do you show affection to your children?

You physically touch them. You welcome them on your knee and embrace them. You take their hand while walking together. You playfully squeeze them on the shoulder or arm. When walking by them as they're sitting someplace, you pat them on the head or ruffle their hair a bit. You invite them to sit next to you and pat them when they sit down. You give them a wink and a smile. You tell corny jokes and laugh at theirs.

You show happiness and pride in their accomplishments. *You make praise every bit as specific as blame*. Praise them for a job well done, even when they've done it as punishment: "You did a great job making your bed this morning.... Your room is spic and span, just the way it should be.... Your homework looks neat and professional, and I'm proud of you...." Children need sincere praise from time to time. In fact, we all do. One of people's greatest needs, at any age, is sincere appreciation.

Most of all, with both sons and daughters, you show affection with your eyes.

You should *listen to your children with your eyes*. When you deliberately make eye contact with them, especially when they're speaking to you, you show how much you care for them. In your eyes they can read your soul--your love for them, your pride in them, your hopes for their future.

Somehow, mysteriously, normal children sense when their parents correct them out of love. Great parents correct *because* they love. Even though kids dislike the correction itself, deep down they grasp the love behind their parents' direction. Sooner or later as they grow up, they understand that their parents' occasional wrath is aimed at their faults, not them personally.

4.) So, these things being said, what can you do to punish misbehaviour in fairly serious matters? Here is a list drawn from parents' experience:

- Physically, but painlessly, restrain the children. Take them by the hand or arm and remove them to someplace private. Take both hands or wrists in yours, hold the children still, and look them in the eye. Say what you have to say in a low but "I-mean-business" way and keep at it until they've understood and said they are sorry.
- Remove them physically and make them spend what some parents call "time out"--a few minutes of isolation away from the family, even in a closed room. Don't let them return until they've said they're sorry.
- For older children, remove privileges. This means no games or television or use of the telephone.

Get them to contribute by helping out at home.

- If two siblings are quarrelling and won't stop after one warning, put both of them to work on the same project: cleaning dishes, raking leaves, gardening, washing the car, whatever. This treatment usually brings about a reconciliation. Misery likes company.
- From what I can see, many healthy families hold firmly to this policy: each child's bedroom is a place for study, reading, and sleep--period. Entertainment gadgets are only for common areas of the house, where people can enjoy them together.
- In any event, whatever method of correction you use with your small children, see it as an investment that will later yield high return. Once you've established your authority in their youngest years, then you've won most of the battle.

- When they're older, just a businesslike warning or flashing-eyed glare from you, or even your expression of "disappointment," usually works to restore cooperation. By that time, the kids know you mean business. In child rearing as in law (and especially with the Tax Depart), there are few things as effective as a sincere threat.

5.) Smart parents--those who live this affectionate assertiveness--work with each other to plan out different lessons of responsibility (that is, punishments) in response to their children's varying types of misbehaviour. This is important. The more carefully these responses are thought out beforehand, and thus made routine in family life, the calmer and more consistent both parents can be in handling their kids' provocations.

Establish three levels of misbehaviour,

First, *misdemeanours*. These are minor infractions, just kiddish misdeeds arising from childish inexperience, thoughtlessness, reckless impulsiveness. You don't need to correct minor mistakes every single time, and you might go crazy if you tried.

Secondly, *serious transgressions*. These are acts where children infringe on the rights of others, especially siblings--causing offence by name-calling, taking property without permission, physical aggression, refusing to give or accept apology, using profanity, and similar deeds of barbaric injustice. Though you can occasionally overlook the misdemeanours mentioned above, you *must* correct these serious lapses of justice and charity practically every single time.

Never forget, every time you correct your children's injustices, their infringements on the rights of others, you are forming their lifelong conscience and ethics. You are preparing them for the way they will later treat their spouses, children, and professional colleagues. So there is a lot at stake here. Don't let up and don't give up.

Third, *felony infractions*. These are serious matters that endanger your children's welfare, either now or later in life, and they call for the severest punishment every single time, whatever this might be. The kids should have the roof fall in on them.

You must impose swift, serious punishment every time your children do the following:

- Show disrespect for you personally--call you names, try to strike you, raise their voice in anger at you, say that they "hate" you.

- Attempt to defy your authority--say "no" or otherwise refuse to comply with your direction, or deliberately "forget" to do so. This pertains even in relatively minor matters, especially after you've given warning. If you direct your child to clean up a mess of his and he refuses or just walks away, then the issue becomes one of authority, not just clean up. You must not permit him to get away with this defiance.

Deliberately lie to you, especially after being put on their honour to tell the truth.

These three areas are vitally important for your children's welfare. *Everything you have to teach your kids depends on their respect for you and for your authority and for their own word of honour. If you lose this, you lose them.*

6.) Effective parents combine rightful authority with respect for their children's rights.

Children do have rights, of course. Not because they're children, but because they are people; and all people, even young ones, have certain basic rights. Here are the rights that great parents keep in mind as they exercise moral leadership in the family:

- *Right to privacy (up to a point*
- *Right to presumption of innocence.*
- *Right not to be publicly embarrassed.*
- *Right to just punishment.*
- *Right to a second chance.*

From time to time, through rage or oversight, you may blunder in doing justice to your children. Nobody's perfect. Whenever this happens, follow up with an apology.

So, what you're really teaching your children is ethical conduct among responsible adults. You are treating your children as adults-in-the-making, and you begin by respecting them as people.

7.) Sometimes negative guidelines are at least as helpful as positive ones, often much more so. It's sometimes useful for a parent to know what not to do--that is, what to avoid--in a complicated situation.

If you asked veteran parents what warnings or negative know how they'd pass on to young parents here are some of the bits of hard earned wisdom they'd share.....

- To husbands: Don't neglect your wife. She needs what we all need: understanding, affection, gratitude, support, and appreciation. For sure, she doesn't get these from the kids when they're small. So if she doesn't get them from her husband either, then she doesn't get them at all.
- To wives: Don't undercut your husband. Do all you can to lead your children to respect their father and his authority. He simply cannot lead as a father without his children's abiding respect.
- Don't underestimate your children. Have high ambitions for their swift, step-by-step growth into maturity.
- Don't treat teenagers like large children. Think of them, and treat them, as near-adults. Pull them up, fine-tune their consciences, and welcome them to adult reality.
- Don't ever tell your teens that the high-school years are the best part of their lives. This isn't true. Adolescence, in fact, is one of life's toughest times: coping with blunders and glandular upheavals, surfing up and down learning curves. Tell your kids, and above all show them, that every stage of life is interesting, challenging.
- Don't let your kids weasel out of commitments. Don't let them take back their word on a whim.
- Don't ask children if they'd "like" to do something that you expect them to do anyway. Simply tell them firmly and positively of the plan.
- When you're correcting your kids and they ask "Why?"--don't argue with them. If they're looking for an explanation, give it once only. If they persist with "Why?" then they're looking for an argument, not an explanation. Close off the matter.
- Don't let your kids dress in such a way as to bring shame to the family. Nobody has a right to do this.
- Don't miss small opportunities to talk with your kids. Listen politely and respectfully. You can talk with them while driving, doing dishes and other chores together, walking and biking, and working on hobbies you share, tucking them into bed.
- Don't shout at your kids all the time. It's a waste of breath. If one of your kids needs a talking to, take him or her out for a walk or a drink--and say what you have to say in a calm, serious way. Don't forget to listen.
- Don't get trapped into blazing arguments, especially with your teens, and most especially if you have a temper.

- Don't forget to praise your children, and be specific about it.
- Come down to your children's level, but don't stay there. Kids are kids, and you have to come down to their level to take them by the hand. But your long-term goal is to bring them up to your own level--to lead them, patiently over time, to think and act like mature grown-ups. So live like a grown-up. Enjoy being an adult on top of life, and let them see what this means.

If they see you enjoy living as a confident, productive adult, they'll have a life to look forward to.