

HOME

a place to love or
a place to leave



A Guide for Parents

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HOME:

a Place to Love or
a Place to Leave?

A Guide for Parents

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INTRODUCTION

Tale of Two Families

Ted and Marge, a happily married couple for 20 years, both lost their mothers in the past year. Both suffered the sadness and discomforts of disposing of the old family homes and settling estates, but there the similarity between their two families ends.

In Marge's family, the sisters and brothers met and shared their mutual loss. Their mother, the focal point of the family, was dead, and they wanted to reassure one another that the family would continue to enjoy the warmth and love she generated during her lifetime.

This was a family reared in the tradition that if one suffered, so did they all. When the time came to divide family heirlooms, each generously and sincerely insisted that the other person have them. Before the final settlement of the estate, two sisters instructed the administrator to shift secretly a portion of their own inheritance to a brother who hadn't fared so well as they. Thus continued Marge's family, a family reared in love.

But when Ted's mother died and the funeral formalities were over, the feuds and bitternesses of a lifetime erupted. The family, reared on pride and jealousies, fell apart when both parents were gone. Petty bickering over possessions gave rise to 40-year-old resentments and spites. Instead of enjoying memories, they desecrated what little they had shared in love and sadness.

When the estate was finally settled, to the satisfaction of none, so much had been said irrevocably that the family was split forever. The cousins would never enjoy one another or their aunts or uncles because of their parents' unwillingness to forget and forgive. Thus a family died.

Two Ways of Love

What created the differences in the two families? Ted and Marge are not isolated examples, but quite typical of the two ways of family love. Since there are so many young Teds and Marges today hoping to avoid the pitfalls of Ted's family or to carry on the love of Marge's family, some insight into the daily family life is necessary. I hope to dwell on some of the practices and attitudes that seem prevalent in both unhappy and happy homes to enable parents to choose those which will make their home a happy place.

After all, that is basically what we parents hope to achieve. We want to create an atmosphere of Christian love in our homes, a love that will draw us and the children to one another for a lifetime and eternity. We want, in short, our home to be a place to love, not a place to leave.

After working with teen-agers for a number of years, I've come to notice that there is a great difference in their attitudes in leaving home for college, service, or marriage. Some feel greatly torn by having to leave their loved ones for even a short time, while others look forward to the separation as an escape. To them, home is a place to be endured only until they can find a reason to leave.

We hear so much about the problems and delinquencies of broken homes that it is easy to conclude that an unpleasant home atmosphere indicates a strained or broken marriage. But this isn't always true. In most of the homes I'm discussing the marriage bond is strong and there is a prevailing atmosphere of faith. The parents are trying to raise their children to take their proper places in the Church and society.

But just a few harmful attitudes and actions, so vital in destroying a truly happy family harmony, can go their devious ways unnoticed. Unnoticed, that

is, until some open hostility erupts between children or between children and their parents. While this isn't exactly a broken family, it can be a considerably cracked one in time.

No one needs any credentials to become parents. It seems easy until we are actually father and mother and then the cold facts hit us that we are responsible for the faith and well-being of a family. We have taken little instruction to avoid the pitfalls and we're apt to apply the same methods used in our childhood. Often we pass on our parents' well-intentioned errors. Small wonder, then, that we make mistakes, that we discover undesirable traits in our kids, and that after all our hard work and anxiety, we still see some failures.

Family Report Card

How often do we actually sit down and evaluate our efforts and results in creating a happy family? What we need is a family report card where every other month we parents take an evening to grade ourselves on the attitudes and atmosphere we are nurturing. For example, have we shown less favoritism in the last six weeks? Have our kids shown an improvement in a willingness to share? Have our family prayers shown a warmth and joy or have they become automatic?

To encourage such an evaluation and to discuss the various aspects more clearly, I've divided family life into the areas below:

Prayer and the Family
Peace and Serenity in the Home
Harmony and Love in the Family
Family Loyalty
Sharing Family Problems and Joys
Preparing for a Happy Adult Life

PRAYER AND THE FAMILY

Let's Be Spontaneous

To me, one of the most cherished dividends of Vatican II is the new spirit of family worship it fosters. In some pre-Council Catholic homes, prayer was not spontaneous, but automatic, not joyful, but stern, and not loving, but fearful. Recent statements from priests indicate that such prayers easily become meaningless formulas for children and that spontaneous prayers to fit situations throughout the day are preferable to prescribed prayers at prescribed times.

Our ancestors would probably fear for our souls if they heard our four-year-old daughter pray during lunch, "Please, God, make Pat eat his bread crusts so he can have some dessert, too." But we are pleased at both the spontaneity of her prayer and her obvious concern for her little brother's welfare. I can't help but think that God is pleased, too.

It is rather presumptuous to expect children to understand some of the terminology in our popular prayers. For example, how many really understand, much less feel, phrases like, "hallowed be Thy name," "as we forgive those who trespass against us," "blessed is the fruit of Thy womb, Jesus"?

Christ as Center

If Christ is the center of our family, we must make Him an integral part of every activity, not just a Being to be talked to in rote in the morning, before meals, at night, and in church. We must talk to Him in our family language, slang and all, or else He is distant.

Because many of us have been schooled in the formula-type devotion so long, any spontaneity seems

a little sacrilegious. We have to work to overcome this reluctance and to foster a minute-by-minute life in Christ in our kids so that they will be natural with Him and loving toward one another.

For example, if two children are arguing, the old parental threat that God won't like it puts a fearful light on their relation to God and each other. But if the parent uses the positive approach that when children care about one another, it is Christ acting within them, the kids understand that. They know that there is something good within them, that they have a capacity for love, and to associate it with God and love is only natural.

So the answer to an argument could be, "Your Christ isn't showing today," or "Perhaps your love is taking a little vacation."

Saved by a Bible Story!

Simple biblical stories and songs can be used endlessly in paving the way for harmony in the home. I doubt if I could exist long as a parent without that wonderful weapon of literature. When a child runs into a bully, I distract him from his hurts with, "Did I ever tell you about David and Goliath?" Sometimes the stories suffer a little in accuracy but the message compensates for it because it is pertinent.

As children get older, they resent stories with obvious morals, but they are hopefully more mature in accepting disappointments and curbing resentments. If a child has been reared with the custom of turning toward God in simple matters—like the boy who said after breaking the vase, "Oh, oh, better tell God and then Mom"—he will turn to Him later when doubts and temptations meet him head on. And with little of the embarrassment common to teen-agers who grow up without a natural relationship to Christ.

What I'm saying is that no family incident, joy, or problem is too insignificant to relate it to God. It is the myriad of daily happenings that make up the whole of family life and if they are treated with love, they create love. Throughout the rather simple, and, I suppose, mundane family practices which follow, I hope to point out how God can be brought into the family all the time, not just on Sunday morning.

PEACE AND SERENITY IN THE HOME

Panic Versus Peace

"Nothing in our home is ever below the panic pitch," said a 15-year-old boy to me. "If my mother wants to borrow a nickel, she shouts it out in an emergency voice. And all of us shout back. It's a madhouse."

Why is it that some homes operate in a general atmosphere of peace and relaxation while others have a climate of chaos? This isn't to say there aren't hectic and disruptive hours in every family, but parents must answer honestly whether such times are normal or just occasional.

Children need silence at times, just as adults do. Eventually, children in a family where routine turmoil is the norm become loud and offensive themselves out of example. We teachers notice that these are the ones who find silence and harmony uncomfortable. They need their transistor radios on whenever they're faced with the frightening possibility of being alone with their thoughts.

Thinking . . . Alone

A seminary priest said in a speech to mothers, "If you teach anything, teach your children to think—alone. Teach them the joy of being at peace with

themselves without the aid of television and friends constantly. We have too many young men coming here who can't face the silence and contemplation which is so close to God. They are too old to learn it at 18."

Parents set the atmosphere of the home. To them, the bickering may mean little if they themselves were reared with it, but to the child it can be unpleasant enough to cause real tensions and emotional reactions, much less to say, little opportunity for meditation.

Some of the areas parents should explore to evaluate the atmosphere in their own homes are these:

Shouting

1. Is shouting necessary?

Some families maintain beautiful discipline with soft but firm orders. Others shout. The problem with shouting is that it teaches the children that that is the way to handle discipline, thereby eliminating the probability of eventual self-discipline. Also, as the kids get older or their offenses greater, the shouting has to increase proportionately in order for it to be effective. So it's a louder and louder cycle.

Psychologically, no one likes to be shouted at. It reduces one to the toddler level. How many parents have heard kids ask justifiably, "Why do you have to shout?"

This question is applicable to school, the army, and almost any situation where there is a definite authority. And the authority, be it teacher, sergeant, or parent might well remember this saying, "He who establishes his argument by noise and demands shows that his reason is weak."

Shouting from room to room between family members can disrupt any family serenity if it becomes habitual. If a child is on the patio, for example, and

the mother is in a bedroom, the conversation might go like this:

"Harry, run over to Foss's and get Ginny."

"What?"

"Run over to Foss's and get Ginny."

"Get who?" Harry obviously can't hear his mother well, but he makes no effort to come closer.

"Get Ginny."

"Why?"

"Because it's time for her nap."

"What?"

And so on. It wouldn't take a person of composure long to lose it if this were a way of family life. And yet it is in many families. I took my cue from a friend who has five children. She doesn't call messages to them. She calls them to her and then gives them the message. It works beautifully. The young ones have to take a few more steps, but the serenity in the home is worth it.

Quarreling

2. Is the quarreling between children necessary or habitual?

All kids fight, but the question here again must be, "Are the squabbles foreign to or nurtured by the prevailing home atmosphere?" If children are permitted to argue and fight continually, this antagonism will become a rule and their relationship with brothers and sisters may be set for life.

What is the difference in bickering as a rule and as an exception? If a child comes into a room and deliberately starts a squabble by hitting or teasing just to get something started, it is usually a sign of a normally antagonistic family behavior. If, however, a child reacts to a single provoked act and serenity returns when that act is settled, bickering is probably not the rule but an interruption.

The joy of forgiveness gives a purpose to children's quarrels. Once the wrong has been righted by the child or by the parent, it is important to see that the bickering stop. A small child doesn't like unpleasantness and he can be taught that by saying he's sorry, he will please both God and the family. But it is important that this be taught while the children are young because as they grow older, forgiveness and love become harder to exhibit.

I know one mother who, when her children were small, would say in settling a quarrel, "Now, go into your room a minute and tell Jesus about it." It was a simple act, but it brought the presence of God into even the tiniest part of the kids' lives. Now, as her children are getting older, she interrupts a quarrel by saying, "Why don't you go into your rooms and think about it?" The implication is to say a prayer, and because her children have been reared in that tradition it comes naturally.

Most important, our children observe us to see how we settle our unpleasantnesses. If we hold grudges, harp on old sensitivities, and fly into emotional tirades, we can expect no other from them.

Noise

3. *Does blaring television and radio noise disrupt harmony?*

When the director of a television show or movie wants to indicate turmoil or tension, he increases the volume of background music or noise. This is no accident. The more noise there is around a home, the more tension. They go hand in hand.

What mother hasn't experienced a bout of temporary insanity when she's trying to accomplish something amid a loud television, a crying child, and a ringing phone? Some families live with background radio and soon grow to shout above it as a matter of

habit. Rules must be set and held to firmly by the parents on the constancy and volume of the radio, stereo, and television, especially with teen-agers. They need to learn to spend time with themselves without noise. Of prime importance, though, the parents should assess their own habit of turning on the radio with the coffee in the morning and off with the porch light at night.

If the family is already on its way to an atmosphere of turmoil and noise, they can make a special family effort to eliminate it and add a prayer to this effect to the grace before meals. This will keep the goal in front of them.

HARMONY AND LOVE IN THE FAMILY

Recently on a television spot coverage program, a five-year-old girl refused the owner's invitation to ride a pet pony, although her eyes were shiny with anticipation. "It would make my little brother feel bad, because he didn't get to ride," she said innocently.

There is a Christ-like quality in a family where concern for the other takes precedence over selfishness. It is a four-year-old saying to a hostess, "Jimmy can have mine," a 15-year-old saying to her sister, "Wear my new dress," a mother saying, "I really don't want any dessert," or a father saying, "I would rather go to the zoo than go fishing."

J. K. Jerome put the whole idea simply, "The love of the young for the young, that is the beginning of life." It is up to us to nurture that love so that it becomes a part of a child's future life.

Some children grow up loving one another while others grow up tolerating or disliking one another. Some children accept and forgive one another's faults and others ridicule one another for differences. Some children enjoy seeing their brothers punished while

others suffer when it happens to their brothers. What makes the difference?

Favoritism

1. Is favoritism showing?

It is an old Irish and other ethnic group trait that girls are accepted into the family while boys are welcomed. This feeling evidences itself in families where the girls are reared to care for their brothers' needs and whims. If this concern were reciprocal, it would create a beautiful relationship. But it rarely is.

If a family fosters a preferential relationship, whether it be favoring boys or girls or the eldest or the youngest, it creates resentments on the parts of the other children. Any kind of favoritism destroys the possibility of real family togetherness. Children react instinctively to it, no matter how much a parent or relative tries to hide it.

The "favorite grandchild" practice can be a real problem. When it becomes noticeable, it is up to the parents to insist that the grandparents treat all the kids equally or not at all. In one family, the grandparents became so indulgent with the eldest grandchild that the rest of the children in the family came to refer to them as "Bobby's grandma and grandpa" and to the other set of grandparents as "our grandma and grandpa."

Overcompetition

2. Are parents encouraging overcompetition between brothers and sisters?

Children are not equal. Some are smart, some coordinated, some pretty. These traits we see and evaluate. But their brothers may be more forgiving or more persevering or more sympathetic, and we fail to evaluate these alongside the more noticeable characteristics.

I was sitting in the doctor's waiting room one day when a mother came in with two daughters, one of exquisite beauty and the other very plain. Patient after patient in the room commented on or smiled at the pretty one and ignored the plain child. Finally, I winked at her and she came over and asked in the guileless voice of the three-year-old, "Why do you like *me*?" At age three, she knew who was important in her family.

It is extremely unfair for parents to set up rigid standards for children of varying abilities and to harp upon their failure to measure up. When a parent keeps pointing with pride that "Jimmy can read well," and "We never have any trouble with Jimmy," and so on, without mentioning the other kids' talents they will grow to resent Jimmy. And an irony here is that often Jimmy dislikes this attention because of the resentments it engenders among his brothers and sisters.

All standards are relative. One family may take pride in a student who just passes while another family insists that their children make the honor roll. A parent must take the effort to discover the capabilities of his children and pray hard that he can encourage them to fulfill them.

Teen-agers particularly resent undue competition in the family. How many times a teacher hears, "Oh, I'm not as good as my brother," in sport, grades, popularity, etc. Why should a child apologize for what God has given him if he is doing his best?

A friend told me this incident. When a woman complimented her small daughter on her dimples, the four-year-old said, "Did you see my sister's pretty eyes?" It's a lovely example because when children want to share their compliments, it is their love showing.

Ridicule

3. *Is ridicule permitted?*

Ridicule is the lowest form of criticism and the family that permits one child to ridicule another for preferring books to sports or prayers to television is encouraging resentments.

As a teacher I've had many parents say, "I don't know where Eric gets his *strange* ideas. Nobody in our family ever wanted to act (or paint or study or pray or???)". By that very statement, the parent is designating the child an outsider because his interests don't fit into the family mold.

Priests have blamed lack of vocations partially on ridicule. Often a young woman or man is afraid of family ridicule as well as neighborhood derision and unless he has strong encouragement from someone he respects, he hesitates to announce his desire.

Ridicule is a form of family pride—but a negative form. We're often tempted to ridicule our kids out of an attitude or action which doesn't conform to the image we would like of our family. For example, if a teen-ager becomes involved in interracial activities, the parents may be embarrassed by his interest, as Christian as it might be, and attempt to ridicule him out of it.

I know one mother of several grown children who still uses the ridicule method to direct her children. When her 25-year-old objected to doing something she wanted him to do, she confided to me, "I'll embarrass him into it." What she didn't realize was that if she was successful, it was at the expense of his respect for her.

By ridiculing others for their attitudes, we're locking our kids into our own molds and it takes a strong child to break out. He will break it, however, whenever he is mature if his conscience tells him to. So the parent who ridicules his child for foreign at-

itudes merely puts off the day when the child becomes a total person.

Children learn tolerance young and if they find their parents ridiculing neighbors for eating garlic or for saving money or for having slanted eyes, they will grow up with the same attitudes. In these ecumenical days, we are being taught to open our minds and hearts to embrace others of different color, ideology, or customs. If we love all men in spite of their differences from us, so will our children.

Frustration

4. Are parents taking out their frustrations on the children?

I think this is one of the most dangerous, yet most overlooked, parental faults prevalent today. Everyone wants a scapegoat and a child is the most defenseless one around, especially since he is apt to be guilty so many times.

We had an aging relative here as house guest once. He absentmindedly left his cane lying where he last used it. Whenever he wanted it, he blamed the kids for carrying it off. At first they politely denied taking it, but eventually they grew to resent the charge and him. They realized that they were being blamed for his forgetfulness.

I have found myself guilty on occasion of taking out my frustrations on my children and, even worse, I know that I'm doing it. Sometimes when I intend to spend a morning at the typewriter to meet a deadline, I'll receive two or three telephone or doorbell interruptions, taking perhaps an hour of my time. When I finally get back to work and one of the kids interrupts me for just a moment or so, I'm tempted to vent my irritation on him.

When parents become annoyed with each other, they are apt to take out their bad moods on the

children. Other tempting times are when the parents are fatigued, dieting, ill, or going through some kind of stress.

This is an ideal time to teach the children the efficacy of forgiveness and prayer. I heard a mother say once, "I'm sorry I scolded you, Debbie. I'm tired and I'll say a prayer that I won't do it again." This makes the parent so human and lovable in the child's eyes that he's apt to protest the apology.

Since no parent is superhuman, how does he handle his frustrations without affecting the kids? There's very little activity of such importance that the mother or father can't stop and relax. It may mean that the floor won't get scrubbed right then or that the meeting will have to go on without him, but if a parent finds that his activities are constantly infringing upon a relaxed loving family atmosphere, he will have to choose which is more important.

Then again, he might try laying his frustrations on heavenly shoulders, too.

Unpleasantness

5. Are children being taught to handle unpleasantness?

As in all other traits, parents are the best example. Life is made up of unpleasantness and the kids need some real guidance in handling such things as hurts, major disappointments, and impatience with others.

I remember once reading that children have a right to get mad. How often we parents forget that. While we take out our various disappointments by substituting some pleasure or scapegoat, we often ignore our kids' needs to relieve their disappointments. But we help them to cope with daily frustrations by reason and prayer, not emotional outbursts and pouting.

When 12-year-old Mary works for days on a beautiful biology scrapbook only to have the baby

color all over it, do we expect her not to react? When 17-year-old John has been promised the car and made plans with the group, do we expect him to relinquish it without disappointment if we need it? If six-year-old Henry comes down with the mumps the day of his long-anticipated fishing trip, can we expect him to shrug his shoulders and smile? Many parents do expect these things of their children, disappointments they themselves would find hard to swallow.

Impatient parents make impatient children. If a mother yanks a zipper out of the child's hands to zip his jacket faster, this child is likely to become impatient with the baby and slam the door on his fingers.

If parents go into sullen cold war silences rather than maturely discussing their disagreements, this is how they are teaching their kids to deal with future unpleasantness. I know of one family where there is always one member "not speaking" to another and elaborate means have to be taken to get messages across. It is a way of life with them and extremely unpleasant to be around. Besides that, it's the antithesis of Christian behavior.

It is beautiful to be around a family where each member is aware of and patient with the others' faults. Maybe the whole family is waiting for the slow eater to finish so they can say grace and be off to television, but the considerate family will bring up a discussion or story to relieve the pressure on the child. An impatient family will urge him to finish, thus creating more impatience on the part of all. It is a minor irritation at most, but it's the minor irritations which can add up to total family disharmony.

Emotions

6. Are parents controlling their own emotions?

I have seen parents fly into their own instant rage because of their child's rage without considering the

ludicrousness of their actions. Children justifiably resent being scolded for a type of behavior they see in their parents. It's unfair for a mother or father to use sarcasm, brute strength, or rage against a child and punish him for showing the same reactions. If the actions are wrong for the child, they are wrong for the parent.

Meting out instant judgment can be dangerous, particularly if a parent is apt to make unreasonable statements in anger. Equally unfair is an inconsistency in a parent's disposition—the offense is punished one day and overlooked the next. Consistency and fairness are two aspects of good discipline which the child cherishes above all.

Sometimes we fail to take the time to investigate the causes of misbehavior and as a result, we punish too soon. I did this when I heard my four-year-old call her grandfather by his first name, Frank. She had overheard her grandmother do so and I thought she was trying to be smart.

After scolding her sharply, I sent her to her room for a while. Later that evening, she sidled up to me cautiously and asked, "Is Frank a naughty word?" After a few questions, I discovered that she didn't realize Frank was a name and, in fact, thought it was an endearment like Honey. I apologized.

FAMILY LOYALTY

"All of our neighbors know everything about me," said a ninth grader. "My mom tells them my grades, my girls, my problems—even my sox size."

One of the paradoxes in today's family is that we parents want our children to behave like adults but we often deny them courtesies we extend to adults.

We speak of the kids in the third person in front of them as if they didn't exist. We embarrass them by candid remarks about some fault or appearance which is very personal to them.

To the adolescent, particularly, lack of family loyalty is unforgivable. To him, it isn't fair play because he's been taught from toddlerhood to respect certain family confidences like Uncle Rob's drinking and Cousin Myrtle's contrariness. Yet, often he finds the same respect denied him.

Confidences

1. Are children's confidences kept confidential?

It seems like too obvious a question to ask but it is necessary. One of our most treasured gifts from God is a child who confides. It takes years of patient parenthood to build up the confidence of a child and only one incident to destroy it. It may be a simple matter of a five-year-old confessing to some undetected three-month-old fib or it may be a teen-ager confessing some religious doubts, but whatever it is, it's confidential—between the child and his parents.

A few years ago, a 16-year-old girl in my CCD class disclosed confidentially to her mother that she was interested in becoming a nun, but was uncertain about it as her vocation. Instead of quietly counselling and encouraging her, the mother in her elation broke the confidence and told several relatives and friends. Within a few weeks, these relatives began discussing it openly with the girl and scared her into denying any interest whatsoever.

She never spoke to her mother about it or anything else of major consequence again. Was it worth the few moments of enjoyment for the mother?

It has always been a pleasure for me to see some of the close confidences developed between adolescents and their parents. It's particularly noticeable in my

CCD classes when personal subjects arise, to separate the girls into those who confide in their parents and those who are appalled at the idea.

Problems

2. Are family problems family problems?

Or are they laid open for the whole community to view? If John is having grade trouble, it should be of concern to the whole family because they are a unit operating on Christ's love for them and their love for each other. But it is not of concern to the neighbors and relatives unless they can help.

If the budget can't stretch enough a given month to cover expenses, a mother strains her loyalty to both the father and the family by announcing it to others. If there's been a family argument, it should stay within the confines of the family home. Any woman who has ever sat in a beauty shop is aware of the great number of family confidences carelessly thrown about. Resentments flourish when family problems come back via a third party and family harmony suffers.

In addition, there's little to be gained by broadcasting problems. A wit once said, "Remember, whenever you're tempted to tell your problems to others, half of them don't care and the other half are glad you are finally getting what's coming to you." There's a bit of un-Christian truth in that.

Individuals

3. Is loyalty to individual family members observed?

I know a situation where the mother constantly discusses others' habits and problems with her grown children. She judges their child-rearing techniques, their spending habits, and the like. She started setting this habit when the kids were little, encourag-

ing them to disclose their childish, and later, teen-age conversations.

The result is that none of the children now trust her enough to give her more than the most basic information because they realize any other will be passed on to the rest of the family.

Discussing one child with another can be damaging to family love. Who wants to have his motives and actions judged by his brothers and sisters who are not aware of all the facts? We expect more from a family than that and if we don't get loyalty, we don't return it.

There's a difference in disclosing a confidence to discredit someone or to help him. If I know, for example, that my sister is in need of assistance, I may feel free to disclose her confidence if I feel someone might help her. But if I disclose the same just for idle gossip, it is uncharitable and a strain on family loyalty.

Trust

4. *Do parents build up a trust in themselves?*

Often we dwell on the opposite side of the coin. How many times have we asked our kids, "Don't you want us to trust you?" Yet we may be relatively unconcerned about creating their trust in us.

I overheard a group of teen-agers discussing trust in the high school cafeteria one day. Their conversation went like this: "When my dad says I can have the car, it means, 'Maybe you can, if nothing important like my running out of cigarettes comes along and I need it.'"

There was general laughter and another said, "When I'm supposed to pick up my mom, it means I'm to be there on the dot, not a minute late. But when she's promised to pick me up, it means I can trust her to be at least 30 minutes late."

A third boy chimed in, closing the conversation with, "My parents don't trust me and I don't trust them, but we keep telling each other we do."

If a child discovers he can believe his parents at age five, he's going to trust them at 15 and 50. But if childhood has planted a distrust in him, he will never quite bring himself to trust them totally.

SHARING FAMILY PROBLEMS AND JOYS

As one finger creates a sore hand, so does a concern affect the entire family. Nothing builds up a cohesiveness so much as a genuine care and responsibility for each member of the family.

Indeed it sometimes seems as if God deliberately sends a problem to cement a family together. How many families have forgotten their petty cares when one member becomes ill, for example? Or when the head of the family is laid off or in any other kind of crisis?

A family works as a unit and as such should share family cares as well as joys. Treating children and parents as individuals is a must, but they should be ready to sacrifice their own rights if it is for the good of the whole family.

Problems

1. *Are family problems aired and shared?*

Often children are unaware of sacrifices the parents make to insure such extras as parochial education and piano lessons. Many parents refuse to permit their kids to think about finances because of their fears as kids during the Depression.

But children don't have to be afraid of poverty by being informed of family expenses, especially

adolescents. I know a teacher who assigned his seniors the task of discovering the minimum they could live on if they married immediately after high school. The kids were astonished at the cost of rent and food because they had given their own family expenses little thought.

Then the teacher had them search the possible job market to discover what their probable salaries would be. The discrepancy between the need and the salary was wide. But the most startling result was that students became aware for the first time of the struggle their own parents were having budgeting. And they became more tolerant in their demands.

Children can be very sacrificing if given the opportunity and, in a way, it is a shame to deny them the experience. Some friends of mine had kids who kept begging for a family boat. Finally, the father set the budget on the table and asked them to start cutting. They eliminated all restaurant dinners, movies, and trips until they got the boat.

Even more vital is the sharing of family problems like insufficient money for necessities, illnesses, a wayward child, etc. Here is where prayer can be the chief instrument for bringing the family together in a mutual petition for help. Daily Mass, family rosaries, and sharing in prayers cement family faith and support in God, besides helping families solve problems.

Responsibility

2. Are children exhibiting a responsibility to one another?

To a degree, this responsibility has to be taught. Because of a fear of causing tension between children, we seem to be getting away from making them responsible. But it is the only way that we will teach them an eventual responsibility toward all men.

If a seven-year-old is given the task of looking after a four-year-old on a busy avenue, he will retain some of the same care 10 years later when he sees her heading for some unhealthy relationship or activity.

Enjoyments

3. *Is the family sharing some mutual enjoyments?*

In these days of television and meetings we seem content to allow each person to go his own way and rarely notice lack of family enjoyment until vacations or trips come along. Most of us recall family games, story hours, and the like from our own childhood with a great deal of relish, yet we do little to carry these on in our own families.

Surely, family liturgical observances should play an important role in our mutuality. So should spontaneous enjoyments like picnics, games, and walks. Family discussion of subjects outside the realm of family problems and gripes should be encouraged. It is simple to pick out students who are permitted to discuss subjects like politics, space, and such with their parents and others. Where can a child get an adult viewpoint and an example of adult reasoning as quickly as in the family?

Little traditions in families are great for cementing them together. I know of one family where the parents encourage original prayers for grace before the dinner meal and the children strive to outdo one another in creating interesting homilies when their turns evolve. Some are so unusual that the mother is writing them down. The practice gives each child his chance at glory and makes grace something to anticipate.

PREPARING FOR A HAPPY ADULT LIFE

Unhappy Homes Breed Unhappy Marriages

A recent study points out that kids from happy homes demand even happier marriages and kids from unhappy homes settle for unhappier marriage prospects. This sobering conclusion points out the urgency in our nourishing a close and warm family unit which centers around a Christ-like love for one another.

If the child has experienced love in his own childhood home, he is apt to find it in his married home. Unfortunately, family discord is passed on like family love. If every time a parent is tempted to indulge his own emotions, he will stop to realize that he is passing on his action as a legacy to his children, he may reconsider the necessity of that act.

Closeness Is No Accident

One of the fondest of parental hopes is that children will remain close together after they have settled in their own homes. Still, how many families really do so? This closeness doesn't come with distance but with preparation. If the children competed and bickered their way through childhood, it's unlikely that they will rush to one another after their marriages.

Childhood encompasses about 18 years; yet some parents succeed in those few years in building up division between their children to last over 50 years. Family discord erupts eventually in such situations as caring for elderly parents, duty visits home, and resentments over inheritances. In a family where genuine care for one another has been the focal point, these are not disagreeable duties, but acts of love.

SCORING HITS AND MISSES

These six areas complete my points for evaluating a family's progress in love. What can parents who are sincerely interested in fostering a spirit of Christ among their children do with these points? They can sit together when they aren't rushed and evaluate their own actions as parents and the results of those actions as they see them in the family.

After the first evaluation, if they choose just one area at a time and try to abolish those problems and encourage absent attitudes in the ensuing month, it will be a realistic goal. Certainly, God will help if He is asked. I urge parents not to undertake a complete reform in one swoop. These problems took a long time building and must wear away gradually, with much effort, a little prayer, and a bit of anguish.

Then periodically, the parents should re-evaluate their family love, utilizing all of the above areas. As children change in age, so do family problems and attitudes. It is wise to check up on family progress every six weeks or so or it's easy to lose sight of the goal. As children get older, they can be brought in on the checkup. In one family where this is done, the kids jokingly call it "Mom and Dad's report card" but they fully realize that they are part of it, too.

In closing, let me remind parents there are discouragements and failures in the best of parents. Often we look too hard to find problems. More often it is easy to ignore the elusive danger signals. But the only families who are in real difficulty are those who feel they are free of family problems.

How often have we said, "It goes back to childhood"? Family love is a tradition, increasing from generation to generation.

It is a love based not on what the children can do or whom they resemble but on who they are. It is as

simple as that. All persons, including parents, are loved for what they are, not what they might grow to be. They are loved in spite of their bad tempers or bad grades. They are loved if they are mentally retarded or ugly. They are loved because they are unique and the family would be incomplete without them. Most of all, they are loved because they are children of God.

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