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parents?



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DONALD F. MILLER, C.S.S.R.

Delinquent children are very often the result of delinquent parents. Here are ten ways that parents, even of good will, can fail in bringing up their children.

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ARE YOU DELINQUENT PARENTS?

DONALD F. MILLER, C.S.S.R.

I do not think the question in the title of this pamphlet is being asked often enough today. The talk is mostly about delinquent children, and what is to be done about them. Perhaps it is time that more attention be focused on the delinquencies of *parents*.

It is not quite true to say that every delinquent teen-ager who gets into serious trouble is a proof that the parents of that teen-ager were seriously delinquent in their duties. It happens, sometimes, that children with the best of training, whose parents did as good a job as parents can do, turn out to be problems, and a source of great heartache to their mother and father.

But such cases, in which parents "have done everything that parents can do", and

the child still becomes a problem and a trouble-maker, are exceptions. In the majority of cases of teen-age delinquents, the most important cause may be found in the deficiencies and delinquencies of the parents.

This is not to say that delinquent parents become such by reason of bad will. Most parents want to be good parents. They want their children to turn out well. They are deeply grieved by the misconduct of their children. Many of them say tearfully, when a child has gone astray, "Why should this happen to us? We thought we were doing everything we possibly could for this child. What an ingrate he turned out to be."

Actually, in many cases, these parents were not doing everything they could do for their child. There was something lacking in the teaching and training they gave. They were too busy or too careless to give thought to all the elements that must enter into the upbringing of a child.

Often when delinquency has shown up in a child, it is too late to remind the par-

ents of something that was lacking in the exercise of their parenthood, because the years have already passed in which that "something" would have made a vast difference in the character of the child.

Here, then, we propose to outline some of the things that parents may be inclined to overlook in the task of bringing up their children. Any one of these things overlooked can make the difference between a good, docile, well-behaved teen-ager, and one who is a problem to parents, school authorities, companions, and even possibly the police. Even when a child does not become a serious problem, the lack of any of these things on the part of its parents will have some bad effects on its character and its life.

As each of the ten deficiencies we have chosen to discuss is described, we ask parents of children of any age to ask themselves this question: Am I lacking this, in the exercise of my parental authority over my children?



I. Lack of a right concept of authority

Too many parents have failed to grasp the truth that their authority over their children is a delegated authority. It is a delegation from God. By the fact of their becoming parents, they are appointed by God to exercise authority over their child as a representative of God and for the ends that God wants to see fulfilled in every child.

God directly creates the immortal soul of every child who comes into the world, and unites that soul to the body the parents have prepared. God wants the child thus brought into being to attain to perfect happiness with Him in heaven, and to lead a good, useful, peaceful life on earth. He places on the parents the responsibility of directing the child toward these two goals.

To accomplish this, the parents must teach a child what is God's will for him; they must correct and punish his mistakes; they must instill in the child habits that will insure his advancement toward a good life on earth and a happy eternity.

Parents have the wrong concept of authority if they either have no goals in mind toward which they wish to lead their child, or if they have the wrong goals. In the first case, they let the child grow up without teaching, training, direction of any kind. In the second case, they look upon a child as merely a servant of themselves, trying to force him to do what they like, whether it is for the good of the child, or according to God's will or not.

II. Lack of manifest love

It is the plan of God that the authority of parents over their children be exercised in an atmosphere of *manifest* love. This word "manifest" is important. It means a love that the children can recognize at all times, even when they are being punished. It is a love that expresses itself in hundreds of little ways, all centering around the deep interest of the parents in the work, the play, the prayers, the total welfare of their children. It is the basis on which the children build up an unshakable confidence in their parents.

This manifest love is lacking in many parents. They take for granted that their children will love them because they have brought them into the world, fed them, clothed them, housed them, sent them to school. They forget that children are apt to take these essentials for granted also. If this is all they get from their parents, no strong bond of affection will be engendered in their own hearts; and without affection there will be little trust.

Thus parents who constantly let their tempers fly against their children; who let them think that they are in the way, or a burden, or a bore; who neglect to show any interest in their sorrows, their joys, their work; who spend as little time with them as possible — these are parents who are lacking in manifest love. These are parents who often naively wonder why their children are hard to handle when they reach their teens.

The fact is that the impressionable minds of the children were never given clear evidence of the interest and love of their parents. They needed love — manifest love, and they got only indifference

or nagging or blame for what they did wrong with never a word of praise for what they did right. As soon as possible they began to look for love and esteem from others than their parents.

III. Lack of principles

Love is a dangerous thing if it is not guided by principles. Parents can love their children in the wrong way. They can make so-called love the reason for giving the children everything they want, letting them do anything they wish to do, sparing them from hard work, holding them to no principles and no rules.

Such things are not expressions of true love, nor are they necessary to convince children of their parents' love. To love truly means to seek the happiness of the one beloved, both in heaven and on earth. In the case of parents who love their children, this means training the latter to adhere to the principles and to use the means on which their happiness will depend.

Therefore parents who lack deep personal convictions about the ten command-

ments of God and the precepts of God's Church, are lacking the most elementary principles that must enter into the upbringing of a child. Parents who fail to correct or, if necessary, to punish a child for breaking one of God's commandments, are failing in one of the primary duties of love.

So, also, parents who have no definite convictions about religion, who possess nothing firm and solid in the way of religious truth to offer their children, are lacking in what is absolutely essential to raise their children properly. This will be explained at greater length below.

Equally lacking in principle are parents who say that they will leave it to their children to choose their own religion when they come of age. This is just as absurd as it would be to say that they will let their children learn how to eat and dress and care for their bodies when they come of age. The undeveloped child is placed in the care of parents that it may be developed and directed by them, in religious matters as well as in other things.

IV. Lack of example

It is possible for parents to have right principles in their minds, but, in the presence and to the knowledge of their children, to fail to set the example of those principles directing their own lives. Such lack of good example is a powerful force for hurting the right development of a child.

The immature minds of children do not readily grasp the force of abstract principles, even though these are often presented to them in words. But they are affected by the force of example, most especially the example of their parents, who are the ones to whom they instinctively look for guidance.

Thus parents may be firmly convinced that the Catholic Church represents the only true religion, and may try to teach their children the same conviction. But if they carelessly miss Mass on Sunday, if they seldom receive the sacraments, if they criticize openly and often priests and Sisters, they need not be surprised if their

children grow up with little attachment to the Church.

Parents may set rigorous standards of conduct for their children, according to the ten commandments of God and the moral teachings of Christ, but if they do not follow the standards in their own conduct, their children will almost surely acquire the same bad habits that they have.

Thus, frequently quarrelling parents will usually have quarrelling children. Profane parents will have profane children. Lying parents will have lying children. Gossiping, scandal-spreading parents will have children who are uncharitable in speech. Only special graces of God can save children from falling into the evils seen in the bad example of their parents.

V. Lack of Time

This lack is implicit in many of the other deficiencies of parents being outlined here. But it deserves special mention. That is because too many parents have failed to realize this important truth:

It takes time to be a good parent, and that means time spent *with* the children.

Many things in the set-up of society today conspire against parents giving enough time to their children.

Fathers work for a living outside their homes and away from their children. They still have their evenings, their week ends, their vacations to do with what they please. Too many find all sorts of activities with which to fill these leisure hours, with the result that they have little time to spend with their children.

Mothers often unnecessarily take jobs outside their homes, solely for the sake of income for luxuries and better material living. In consequence, they are too tired and worn out to spend very much time with their children.

Even with ample leisure time, parents can get themselves into a round of amusements and parties that leave their children to baby-sitters a major share of the time.

It still remains true that one of the most basic signs of love that parents can give

their children is to spend time with them — as much time as possible. There is no substitute for companionship, in the matter of love, and only through companionship can parents prove their interest in a child's work, play, prayers and aspirations.

VI. Lack of understanding

Perhaps one of the most common mistakes that parents make is to think that all their children may be dealt with in exactly the same way, and at all times and at any age. This mistake is due to the fact that many parents have never faced the fact that each child born into the world has its own temperament and personality, and that parental authority must be exercised differently according to the different stages in the development of a child.

Take the different temperaments to be found in different children. One child in a family may have domineering traits. These traits cannot be smothered or destroyed by parents; they can, however, be channelled into the right direction and tempered by lessons in humility. Another

child may have introspective and melancholic traits, with tendencies to avoid the company of others and to be easily hurt and aggrieved. Such a child needs encouragement and self-confidence and special signs of his parents' love. A third child may be of the type that loves company, loves to play, loves to forget duty and responsibility. Such a child needs firmness on the part of parents, and frequent corrections lest he never learn to buckle down to the serious things of life.

Take differences in age. Some parents never stop looking upon their children as babies, as if there were no development of their minds and personalities. So, when sons or daughters are 12 or 13 or 14, they are still commanding, correcting and punishing them as if they had never advanced beyond the age of seven. As children grow older, the parents should treat them with greater respect, with greater willingness to explain the reasons for their commands and wishes, with greater understanding of their individuality.



All children have a right to some increase both in freedom and responsibility, as they advance in age.

VII. Lack of cooperation between mother and father

Ordinarily, i.e., excluding cases in which God in His Providence takes away one parent by death, it requires the cooperation of both a mother and father rightly to raise a child. When that cooperation is lacking, there will be something warped or one-sided in the character of a child.

Such cooperation is surely lacking when the father and mother are living at odds with each other. If they rarely speak pleasantly to each other, or speak only to quarrel and nag at each other, their children will certainly be confused, neglected and unhappy.

But even when the parents are getting along well together, if one of them leaves all the training and directing of the children to the other, the development of the children will be stunted in some way. Usually it is the father who may neglect to do

his share in the raising of his children, leaving everything that pertains to that to the mother. The result can easily be a spoiled child, or a rebellious child, or a child who in his teens will want to get away from home as soon as possible.

VIII. Lack of unselfishness

By this we mean parents' lack of willingness to recognize that they cannot possess their children forever; that each of their children will be given some kind of a calling by God that will eventually take them away from their mother and father. Selfish parents want to hold on to their children, and will cleverly and persistently prevent them from desiring or following a vocation of their own.

Thus some parents build up a fear of marriage in the minds of their sons and daughters, hoping that this will prevent them from ever leaving home. Others so bitterly run down and calumniate boy friends or girl friends of their older teenagers that the latter feel that it would be a terrible blow to their parents if they ever

thought of getting married. Sometimes this results in their remaining single, when marriage is obviously their vocation.

Equally delinquent are those parents who misuse their authority to prevent sons or daughters from following a vocation to the priesthood or the religious life. Their selfishness prevents them from giving their children to God, who owns them even more than the parents, and who obviously wants them for His service.

Parents can be good parents only if they remember throughout the training-years of their children that the time will come when they must give them up to their own calling and their own tasks in life. The parents' job is to train them *well* for whatever calling will be theirs; not in any way to try to hold them close to themselves forever.

IX. Lack of resistance to pagan trends

In a general sense, we define pagans today as people who have no real religion, no belief in life after death, no solid moral principles or convictions. There are many

such pagans in America, and many of them are parents. Such parents are usually popular with their children and with the children of Christian parents, because they let their children do just about anything they please to do.

Such parents raise no objections to — and sometimes even promote — steady and intimate company-keeping between 11, 12 and 13 year old youngsters. They are little concerned about where their children go for recreation, with whom they spend their time, how long they are away from home.

The example of children who are granted such wide liberty by their parents becomes a sort of ideal for the children of Christian parents. The ancient argument: "Others are permitted to do this, why can't I?" is hurled at their parents, and some of them are too weak to resist the pleas.

These weak ones are delinquent parents, and run a good chance of having delinquent children. They can avoid this catastrophe only if they are strong enough not

to follow the example of the many unprincipled parents around them, and if they take the time and interest and effort to convince their growing children why they too must be different from children who are left without guidance and supervision by their parents.

X. Lack of religion

This sums up all that has been said before. If parents have no solid religious convictions of their own, it is certain that some of the other deficiencies outlined here will be evident in their way of raising their children.

It is only from religion that parents can get a true answer to questions like these: Toward what goals shall we direct our children? What kind of men and women do we want them to be? What principles of law and virtue must we constantly try to incorporate in their characters?

It is only from religion that parents can draw the adequate motives to be instilled into their children, and the necessary spir-

itual means to be used by them, through which they will be able to live up to ideals of conduct that will make them good men and women, and insure the salvation of their souls in the end.

Without religion, a religion of which they themselves are deeply convinced, parents are working in the dark, in raising their children. It is in this darkness that delinquency is spawned.

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