Catholic UPDATE

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BRINGING UP A MORAL CHILD

Guiding Faith and Behavior

God's law is written on our hearts and on the hearts of our children. We must both seek it for ourselves and help our children discover it there.

By Jeanne Hunt

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It's happened gradually, yet the effect is dramatic. Our culture's moral decline has infiltrated every aspect of life. A marriage counselor tells her clients that premarital sex is acceptable. "After all, we try on shoes before we buy them," she rationalizes. Many young people believe an action isn't wrong unless they get caught. Their parents also struggle to make moral choices. The news is full of stories of killing, greed, and lies that reveal the moral decay that touches each of our lives.

A CAUSE FOR CONCERN?

A young boy had seen a cashier being unkind to an elderly patron. His mother pointed out that such behavior was wrong. The boy asked his mother how he would know when something was wrong. Her answer: "Just do what's appropriate." "What does *appropriate* mean?" he asked. The mother looked at him without giving an answer. It seemed she didn't know how to explain what makes an action right or wrong.

Should we be concerned? Yes! We must commit ourselves to the moral formation of the next generation.

As I speak in parishes, sharing practical tips for raising moral children, I meet concerned parents who worry that their children have little or no idea what makes a behavior wrong or right. While young people don't want to get caught for wrongdoing, they're confused about which actions are wrong. It's a cause for great concern if the lessons needed to learn right and wrong aren't being taught. There's much more to living a moral life than not getting caught.

THE GOD CONNECTION

A sign of hope in these troubled times is that there's renewed interest in connecting with God. Many parents realize and others suspect that building a relationship with God will enhance their child's understanding of what's good and right. Meeting the loving and merciful God fosters new understanding of compassion, service, and selflessness that are at the core of Christian values.

This God connection will help both adults and children understand the reasons for doing what's right and avoiding evil. Without that connection, some people will see little reason to choose the moral right. However, when we listen to God's voice, we become aware of what's good and what's bad. We find the meaning of doing "what is appropriate" in the gospel.

THE CONFLICT

Living morally has lost favor in the secular world. Too often, those who defend the moral good are ridiculed as prudish and out of touch. The world teaches that if an action pleases us and harms no one, it's acceptable. This message is proclaimed every day in the media, political arena, and workplace.

It's no wonder our children are confused. It's the task of every parent, grandparent, teacher, and civil authority to return to the work of forming moral children. What we have lost, we must recover. What we have forgotten, we must relearn.

DO WHAT YOU TEACH

Getting morality lessons across to children requires more than a good lecture. In fact, talking *at* our children usually has the opposite effect: they tune us out. The best way to teach morality is very simple: *we cannot preach a moral lesson, we must live it.*

Children learn right and wrong first by observation and then by practicing the moral choice under the care of someone willing to lead them to what's good and right. Parents must lead lives of moral integrity and explain to their children the reasons for their choices. Everything our children witness is forming them. What we do will either lead them to know what is right and good or teach them that it's perfectly fine to make immoral choices.

GENTLE GUIDANCE AND CORRECTION

When children begin to "get" the concept of making good moral choices, they need to be affirmed. Before the age of eight or nine, it's difficult for them to see what makes something right. Providing a gentle word of encouragement every time a child shares a toy, tells the truth, or stays in the yard helps to connect the dots.

That same gentleness makes all the difference when a child fails to do the right thing. Explaining why a choice is immoral and sharing its consequences lifts little souls from their self-centered worlds into a bigger world in which what they do or say can hurt others.

I believe one of the underlying reasons our children are drifting in a sea of moral apathy and confusion is that no

one has taken the time to help them see the impact their actions have on those around them. It will take a steadfast commitment to do this parental work. It's so much easier to ignore behaviors (wrong or right) than deal with them.

IT'S ALL ABOUT *ME*

Children begin their lives believing they're the center of the universe. Tending to their needs and wants is the pleasure of everyone around them. It must seem to them that they're given food, love, and attention because it's "all about me." Gradually, parents begin to wean the child from this attitude and help them realize that others have needs as well.

When we teach children to serve others and act compassionately, we're teaching them that what they want or need shouldn't come at another's expense. As children develop a sense that they're not in this world alone, they begin to comprehend the gospel challenge to love others as we love ourselves. Children rarely make that giant leap from self-centered existence to others-centered lives without a guiding hand.

FOCUS ON COMPASSION

As our children grow and become more social, it's time to focus the lens of compassion. We teach this message best when we point out people, events, and circumstances where compassion is called for. All too often, we and our children are self-absorbed and don't notice another crying out for help.

In a world where so many are focused on themselves, we need to intentionally exercise compassion as we point the way to a holy life for our children. Every day, we encounter others who are struggling, hurting, and in need of our care. Capture these opportunities by encouraging your children to visit a homebound neighbor, give books to a child who has none, or let a hungry younger sibling have the last cookie. The lens of compassion allows children to view their moral choices through the eyes of God. Turning the hearts and minds of children to an awareness of others' needs is a slow but necessary part of their moral development.

EXPECT GOODNESS

We tend to get what we expect. Believing we can live honorable and moral lives is at the heart of discipleship. God strengthens and provides for us. When we hold the moral

FENCES

Boundaries provide security and teach children acceptable limits. They act as fences around the circle of children's lives.

- **Family meetings.** Have monthly or quarterly gatherings to create and review family rules. Use this time to affirm and correct family members.
- **Family rules.** Establish agreed-upon fences such as curfews, privileges, mealtimes, sports participation, outside activities.
- **Off-limits people and places.** Look carefully at friends and social activities and determine those that are off-limits. Give clear messages about why these could cause harm.
- **Time management.** Create weekly schedules and daily expectations, e.g., homework completion, cell phone use, family meals, Mass attendance.
- **Prayer and family spirituality.** Expect children to respect and participate in their Catholic faith by attending Mass and celebrating the sacraments.
- **Academic expectations.** Require a certain level of performance and effort. This fence will differ with each child, however, when a child falls below his or her ability, consequences should follow.
- **Outside activities.** Agree on limits for the amount of time and energy devoted to sports and other outside activities. This fence helps children lead balanced lives.

DOORS

Guard the doors of family life—both physical and virtual—to ensure protection against immoral influences. Here are a few hotspots of entrance and exit:

The entrances of our homes welcome friends, relatives, and strangers who need love and care. Prohibit entrance to those who have a negative influence. Invite people who enhance our moral lives by their example.

Sounds are portals of mind-changing words, music, and thoughts. Apply filters of morality to make sure music and conversations are in-line with the values of God's kingdom.

Electronic devices can open doors to amazing and edifying places that reinforce the good we seek. Be vigilant to block entrance from negative and immoral Web sites, videos, movies, and games that preach evil, immorality, and fear.

Service increases our awareness of the needs of the poor, hungry, grieving, sick, and ignorant. In serving others, we discover discipleship and the ways of mercy.

DIG DEEPER

Look: **How were you taught right from wrong as a child? Who served as a model of moral living for you?**

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Judge: **How well or poorly are you modeling moral living for the young people in your life?**

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Act: **What "fences" or "doors" can you add or strengthen in your life? the life of your family?**

bar high, our children will rise to our expectations. We lower or drop that bar altogether when we excuse our children's and our own immoral behavior.

When we expect our children to care for others and do the right thing, they come to believe that's the norm. Keeping God's law becomes not just an option, but something right, desirable, and even comfortable for us. We must choose not to lower our standards to those of our culture.

KEEPING OUR WORD

Teaching moral behavior requires that we tell the truth and exhibit the importance of keeping our word. When children witness adults lying or cheating, they believe these actions are acceptable. False promises abound. We should be mindful that our words must be true and trustworthy.

Accountability begins with a desire to keep and honor words. When we seek and expect accountability, we're teaching moral values that are very basic to living honestly. While this may seem rudimentary, too many young ones have no idea that what people say must be truthful.

All of us need to guard against stretching the truth. Our secular culture doesn't see words as binding and has put aside the very basic rule that trust is built on honesty. We accept that false promises are the norm: advertisements, political speeches, miracle cures, etc.

By keeping our word, we teach integrity. The parent-child relationship is the first place children experience this. Our children need to know that there's one place they can always get an honest answer. There's one place they can turn when they're on shaky moral ground. Teachers, mentors, and coaches also need to be people of integrity and honesty. Raising moral children requires consistent adherence to truth.

Pope **Francis** says: "When families bring children into the world, train them in faith and sound values, and teach them to contribute to society, they become a blessing in our world."

–January **16,** 2015

Teaching and modeling moral living requires constant vigilance. God's law is written on our hearts and on the hearts of our children. We must both seek it for ourselves and help our children discover it there. We pray for the grace to invite God to lead us. In the end, we will see that we're simply God's instruments. We offer our children what we've received from our loving and merciful God who protects and guides those he loves. Our words and actions must be God's own.

***Jeanne Hunt** is a nationally recognized catechetical leader and author. Her latest book is* Raising a Moral Child—How Faith Shapes Behavior *(Paulist Press).*

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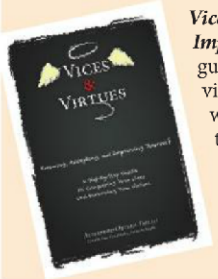

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