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Creating Bright and Cheerful Homes

"Creating a loving home in which our children's characters, hearts and minds can be nurtured and developed is a battle worth fighting." A new article in the series on married love.

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My wife and I are both teachers and as parents of seven children, we are constantly asked questions about

how we raise our children – “How do you discipline them?”, “How do you cope with difficult teenagers?” and so on.

Raising children right is difficult these days. However creating a loving home in which our children’s characters, hearts and minds can be nurtured and developed is a battle worth fighting. Moreover it can be great fun!

There is no more powerful way of creating such a home than developing a culture of unconditional love. Pope Francis in a General Audience in February 2015 reminds us that, *“A child is loved because he is one’s child: not because he is beautiful, or because he is like this or like that; no, because he is a child! Not because he thinks as I do, or embodies my dreams. A child is a child: a life generated by us but intended for him, for his good, for the*

good of the family, of society, of mankind as a whole.”

As a father I want all my children to achieve well academically but more than that I want them to be successful as people and to be well formed in their Christian faith. Later, when they become adults, their lives will be filled with those who will constantly judge them on their successes. At least in the home our children should be loved unconditionally for who they are, just as God loves them.

The home is not simply a place for feeding our children, keeping a roof over their heads and trying to ensure they don't end up in jail! Rather it's a place where values first make their appearance and where the whole person is developed – body and soul. A place of laughter, warm memories – a break from the pressures of the world and where we can point our

children to new horizons and a reality beyond the four walls.

For this reason parents should avoid any kind of negativism along the lines of, “Modern culture is terrible and I don’t allow any TV in the home or let my children use mobile phones.” The issue, in such cases, is not technology but how we use or misuse it. Our focus should be on the good and how to filter out the bad. Setting controls and limits is an important part of our job as parents but we gain little by shutting down access. Ultimately parental controls should lead our children to develop self-control but this is much harder if we turn our home into a boot camp!

In our own home we have a few hard and fast rules to help develop a sense of family culture – for example, no calls or internet use after a certain time, no technology at the dinner table and no use of uncivil or

disrespectful language; but if we have sometimes 'gone to war' over these issues we have tried to pick the right fights. Loving discipline doesn't mean starting World War Three over the issue of the colour of a pair of jeans.

Ultimately it's about our attitude as adults. With the raging hormones and fluctuating moods of teenagers, for example, it's important that we remain a steady, calm force. There has to come a point where no matter how much paint our 5-year-old has tipped over the new carpet it can be dealt with and forgotten. Forgiveness must be central in our homes. None of us can develop humanly or spiritually if the past is thrown at us every time we get something wrong.

So if focusing on the good should be our goal in creating a genuinely happy home, here are a few ideas

that my wife and I have found useful over the years.

a) Praise your children a lot. Praise tells us what we are doing is right and encourages us to do it again – crucial if good habits and virtues are to be fostered. Praise must never be insincere, but it should always be given for small victories: 'John, well done for putting some of your pocket money into the collection', is a favourite of mine as such praise encourages generosity and develops a sense of financial prudence!

b) Children love those who have the time not only to teach them, but to have fun with them. Fun need not be expensive. It's about the odd surprise, having a midnight feast in holiday time, water fights, making silly videos or simply playing charades. When our children were very little we used to tickle them. It's important we never stop!

c) I always know when the friend of one of my daughters has visited our home by the dirty footprints and fingerprints left behind on the floors and walls. Making our homes bright and cheerful means having them open to other children. Indeed engaging our children's friends in conversation, or any other visitor to the home, by taking an interest in them provides a wonderful example to our own children of how to develop their friendships later on.

d) Make daily quiet times a part of your family routine. These times offer the opportunity to bond more deeply, but don't have to be silent. They are often most powerful when they are filled with our prayers to God, through the family rosary for example, but quiet times can also be a wonderful opportunity to instill a love for reading, or going for a walk, having a family get together – all relaxing pastimes that can extend to

adult life and which give everyone in the family a great sense of mental and physical well-being.

e) One way of helping children to develop in virtue is to find as many opportunities as possible to get them to serve others. We have an elderly friend who our children visit regularly and for a period of time my teenage children accompanied me to a soup kitchen where they had to engage with the homeless and vulnerable. We have assigned a day of the week to each of our children and on their day they are encouraged to lead the family prayers, help make dinner and carry out other responsibilities. Helping children to see the needs around them and to cheerfully serve others is an important part of their formation.

f) Make time to be with your children by just 'being there.' Encouraging conversation, especially at meal

times, or ‘odd moments’ with children can be the best way of developing our friendship with them. St Josemaria, in one of his interviews with journalists in the 1960s says, *“I always advise parents to try to be friends with their children. The parental authority which the rearing of children requires can be perfectly harmonised with friendship, which means putting themselves, in some way, on the same level as their children. Children — even those who seem intractable and unresponsive — always want this closeness, this fraternity, with their parents.”*

One of the best conversations I ever had with one of my sons was in the car on the way to a football match. After having been on a mini retreat my son suddenly asked me about the nature of vocations. Interestingly this conversation followed after a rather prolonged period of silence when we were simply sitting there driving

along. The conversation which followed was a deep and hopefully meaningful one, talking about the meaning of love and sacrifice; and in a sense this is what our relationship with God is all about – about living lives of prayer, quiet moments when God can reveal himself most intimately to us.

Finally let's not forget about the love that should exist between spouses. My wife and I are the first to admit that we have failed many times in our role as parents but we also recognise that by being united to one another, each new day offers a chance to begin again. Raising a family is a great sporting adventure, and we should be prepared for the setbacks, but with God's help and a sense of humour our homes can always become the nurturing environments they were intended to be.

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