Educating in Modesty (2)

"Parents need to communicate the value of the human body, and how to treat it with respect, avoiding anything that could contribute to viewing it as merely an object of pleasure or curiosity." A new article in the series on the family.

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The period between approximately seven and twelve years of age, when adolescence begins to dawn, is usually a peaceful time for both

parents and children, especially if children have been raised well up to that point. They are now able to look after themselves, but still rely a lot on their parents and usually are very open with them about everything. They have a real desire to learn and to resolve questions. And if parents use the right words, they can understand things very well.

This relative tranquility should not serve as an excuse to grow lax in the task of education, thinking perhaps that everything will work out well by itself. On the contrary, this should be the period when children get a firm hold on the ideas and standards that will shape their future lives. Indeed, this is the moment to explain everything to them, even giving them explanations in advance of realities they will encounter later on.

The peaceful years

These are the years in which to explain to children not only *how* to be modest, but also *why*. They will understand, for example, that clothing not only covers the body but protects the person; it signals how we want to show ourselves to others, and is a sign of the respect that we ask for and give to others.

At the same time, children need to learn to keep watch over their own intimacy, so that it is revealed only in an appropriate degree and to the appropriate people. Prudence—which is the virtue in play here—is acquired through a right intention, experience and good advice, and parents have a lot to do with this learning process. Young children yearn for a trusting relationship with their parents; they look for their interest and guidance so as to feel more secure during this incipient development of their personality. By affirming or correcting children's

behavior, according to the situation, parents help them learn how to entrust themselves to others, and when and why they should do so.

The risk at this age is that young people's desire to learn can turn into an indiscriminate curiosity, at times lacking all discretion, and into an eagerness to experience new things, also in their own body. Hence it is important for parents to pay attention to all the questions their children might ask them, without trying to evade them or leave them for an unspecified "later." They should answer them in a way that is appropriate for their age and ability to understand. For example, this is the right time to teach them the meaning of human love. "Don't lie to them. I've killed all the storks. Tell them that God has made use of you to bring them into the world, that they are the fruit of your love, of your self-giving, of your sacrifice. To

do this, you have to become friends of your children, making it easy for them to speak trustingly and to open up about their concerns.”[1] Parents need to communicate the value of the human body, and how to treat it with respect, avoiding anything that could contribute to viewing it as merely an object of pleasure or curiosity or some sort of game.

It is also good to anticipate events, explaining the bodily and psychological changes that will be happening to them in adolescence, so they will know how to accept them with naturalness when the moment arrives. “There is no reason why children should associate sex with something sinful, or find out about something that is in itself noble and holy in a vulgar conversation with a friend.”[2] The focus here should always be on the positive values involved. While not failing to mention the dangers from a

permissive environment (which children in any case can usually perceive even when quite young), parents should try to speak of this area as an opportunity for physical and spiritual growth, encouraging children to struggle to react positively in the face of negative stimuli. Modesty provides an effective defense and help to safeguard purity of heart.

The difficult years

The years marking the beginning of adolescence, and adolescence itself, are the most difficult ones for parents in this area. First, because children at this age are more protective of their privacy. At times they also adopt an argumentative attitude, with no apparent motive other than that of being contrary. This can cause parents to become somewhat disconcerted, as they intuit—rightly—that there are now

aspects in their children's lives that they prefer to share with their friends, rather than with their parents. Their changes in mood can also be disconcerting; at times they may refuse to let anyone enter their world, while other times they demand attention in a way that may be disproportionate. It is important to detect when the latter is the case and to try to listen carefully to them then, since one never knows when the next opportunity may arise.

The desire for independence and privacy in young people at this age is not only a natural part of growing up; it is also a new opportunity to foster the development of their personality. Adolescents have a special need to defend their own intimacy, and to learn when it is appropriate to reveal it to others or to remain reserved. The help that parents can offer them in this area depends, in great measure, on

knowing how to win their trust, and knowing how to wait. The best approach is to be available and to show an interest in their concerns, and to be ready to take advantage of those times (which always come sooner or later) when their children seek them out or when circumstances require a conversation.

Trust needs to be won, and can't be demanded. Still less can it be replaced by spying on children, reading their notebooks or diaries, listening to their conversations with friends, or entering into a social media "friendship" with them by using a false identity. Although some parents may think they are doing these things for the good of their children, to meddle in this way in the private affairs of one's children is the best way to destroy mutual trust, and under normal conditions it is objectively unjust.

Another common feature of adolescence is the tendency to look at oneself frequently, from every point of view, including physically. Hence the first aspect of modesty that parents should help them with is found in this area. This is important for girls as well as for boys, although with different nuances in each case. Among girls, the tendency is to compare themselves with some standard of beauty they admire, and to want to see themselves as attractive to the opposite sex. Among boys, the dominant desire is rather to be seen as physically mature and athletic in comparison to their companions, although the desire to be admired by girls is not lacking. A great part of this youthful narcissism takes place without anyone witnessing it. But if one observes them closely it is easy to detect some symptoms of this attitude, as for example when adolescents cannot resist looking at themselves in a

mirror or even a window on the street; or especially among girls, in the almost obsessive questioning about how they look in the clothes they are wearing.

Viewing these things as just a “passing stage” and therefore keeping quiet would be a mistake. Of course it is a stage they need to pass through, but this is precisely why they need to be taught how to act here. Adolescence is the age for awakening great ideals, which need to be fostered. Young people usually find it easy to understand that this self-absorption will end up making it difficult for them to see the needs of others. And thus they can come to appreciate that modesty with oneself (caring for one’s body, but without going to excess; avoiding unhealthy curiosity, etc.), is a prerequisite for attaining the generous heart they want to have.

Modesty and fashion

Adolescence also presents new opportunities to teach young people how to live modesty with others, especially in their personal interactions, conversations and way of dressing. Owing to various factors and in a more aggressive way in some places, the environment tends to foster an excessive casualness in dress and relaxation of manners. Nevertheless, it is good to keep in mind that in most cases the fact that a son or daughter begins to follow these customs is not the result of a specific decision on their part. Adolescents, while demanding a high degree of personal independence, also tend to “follow the crowd.” Being different from their friends makes them feel strange. It is not unusual to find that a boy doesn’t really like the “careful carelessness” now so fashionable, nor that a girl doesn’t really feel comfortable in

immodest outfits. But the fear of being rejected by their peers makes them want to dress like them.

The solution is not to isolate children from their peers; they need their friends, also in order to mature. What parents need to do instead is to teach them to be willing to go against the prevailing current. And they need to know how to do so effectively. If a son or daughter takes refuge in the excuse that all their friends go around like this, parents first should explain to them the importance of valuing their own personality, and try to help their children to develop good friendships. Secondly, parents should make an effort to get to know the parents of their children's friends, so as to reach a common agreement about this and other matters.

In any case, they shouldn't give in here. Any way of dressing that is

contrary to modesty or a minimum of good taste should not be allowed in the home. Parents need to make this clear right from the start, and when necessary, speak to their children calmly but firmly, giving them reasons for this way of acting. If during childhood it is best for the father to explain these things to his sons, and the mother to her daughters, when adolescence arrives it can often be opportune for the other parent to weigh in as well. For example, if an adolescent daughter doesn't understand why she shouldn't use an outfit that reveals too much, her father can perhaps make clear what she has not yet realized: that this way of dressing attracts the eyes of the boys, but by no means does it attract their respect or admiration.

As in other matters, the father and mother can speak to their children in a prudent manner about the lessons

that they themselves learned as adolescents, and also what they were really looking for in the person with whom they hoped to share their life. These conversations might at first seem to have little effect, but in the long run they make an impact, and young people end up being grateful.

The parents' task of teaching the importance of modesty to their children should also include, to the extent possible, the environment where they spend their time. An important point here is the choice of sites for family vacations. In many countries, the environment at beach resorts makes it imprudent to spend time there. Even when measures are taken to avoid scenes that are less than edifying, the general atmosphere can be so careless that it is difficult to maintain a minimum of decorum. Similarly, when signing a child up for a recreational activity or camp, it would be absurd not to find

out first what measures the organizers plan to take to keep the human tone high.

Another area to keep in mind is the places where adolescent children go to have fun with their friends, especially since peer pressure is stronger during this period of their lives. It is important for parents to be familiar with the places where their children spend most of their time, and to try to provide healthy alternatives, in agreement with other parents.

A third place to pay attention to lies closer at hand: the bedroom of their son or daughter. Naturally, children want to put up some decorations that they find attractive, but this independence has to have some limits, marked above all by the dignity and propriety of what they put there.

In these and in other matters, it is normal that parents at times encounter resistance from their children, because of the natural tendency of adolescents to want to affirm their independence from their parents and from adults in general, as well as because of their lack of experience. It is neither possible nor desirable to control everything they do, and often an act of disobedience will be an opportunity for them to learn a lesson, to discover a warning sign and learn how to react to it.

When a problem arises, parents shouldn't lose their serenity. Perhaps they themselves sometimes had to learn lessons in this way when they were the same age. The task of education always requires a great deal of patience, especially in areas like this one, in which the standards one wishes to transmit to children can seem exaggerated at first to young people. The moment will come

when they will understand these rules better and take them on as their own, as long as parents are diligent in insisting on these points, with affection, good humor and trust.

J. De la Vega

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[1] St. Josemaría, notes from his preaching, cited in the book by José Luis Soria, *Maestro de buen humor*, ed. Rialp, Madrid, p. 99.

[2] St. Josemaría*Conversations*, no. 100.

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