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Educating in Friendship

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Raising children well is not simply a matter of transmitting specific knowledge or skills; rather it requires, above all, helping the child to grow as a person, to develop all of

his or her potential, which is a gift received from God.

Of course, one also needs to instruct, to communicate content, but without losing sight of the fact that the goal far surpasses the teaching of certain manual or intellectual abilities. It requires bringing into play the freedom of the person being formed and, together with it, his or her responsibility.

Hence, in the upbringing of children, it is very important to set goals, suitable objectives that, in accordance with each one's age, can be grasped as something that makes sense and that gives meaning and value to what the child is asked to do.

Educating through friendship

At the same time, parents need to keep in mind that, especially in the first stages of development, education has a strong component of

affectivity. The will and the intellect do not develop apart from the sentiments and emotions.

Furthermore, affective equilibrium is necessary for the intellect and the will to develop properly. Were that not the case, it could easily happen that alterations appear in the learning process, and later on, personality disorders could arise.

But how does one achieve this equilibrium in a child's emotional framework, and afterwards in an adolescent and young adult? Here we face perhaps one of the hardest pedagogical questions because, among other reasons, it is a practical matter that depends on each family's situation. In any case, a preliminary reply can be offered: it is vital to create trust.

The Apostle recommends: *Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.*^[1] By rebuking

them too harshly, children could easily become fearful and lacking in daring, afraid to assume responsibility.

Creating trust has a lot to do with friendship, which makes the educational task truly fruitful. Parents must try to become true friends of their children. That is what St. Josemaria insisted upon time and again. “Imposing things by force, in an authoritarian manner, is not the right way to teach. The ideal attitude of parents lies more in becoming their children’s friends—friends who will be willing to share their anxieties, who will listen to their problems, who will help them in an effective and agreeable way.”[2]

At first glance it is not easy to understand what it means for parents “to become their children’s friends.” Friendship is possible between people on the same level,

between equals, and this equality contrasts with the natural asymmetry of the parent-child relationship.

Children receive much more from their parents than they in turn could ever give back. They can never repay what they owe their parents. Parents usually don't think they are "sacrificing themselves" for their children, although in fact they are. They don't view as a privation what they offer their children as a gift, and take little notice of their own needs—or rather they consider the children's needs as their own. They would give their life for their children, and in fact they are usually doing just that without noticing it. It is very difficult to find greater self-giving in interpersonal relationships.

Nevertheless it is also true that children enrich their parents. Parents receive something very

important from their children: first of all, the affection that only they can give them, since each person is unique. And then the opportunity to get out of themselves, to “expropriate” themselves in their self-giving to another—husband to wife, wife to husband, and both to their children—and thus to grow as persons.

As the Second Vatican Council teaches: “man, the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself.”[3] To give and receive love is the only thing that can fill a human life with content and “weight”: *amor meus, pondus meum*, says St. Augustine.[4] And love is more alive in the person capable of going through hardship *for* the person loved than in one who is only capable of having a good time *with* the other person.

Love always entails sacrifice, and it is not surprising that creating a climate of trust and friendship with children should also require it. A family atmosphere has to be worked at: it is not a given. This does not imply that it is an arduous task, or that it requires special abilities. But it means being attentive to small details, knowing how to show with deeds the love found in one's heart.

A family environment arises first of all from the affection the spouses have and show for one another. It could be said that that the affection the children receive is the superabundance of what their parents show one another. Children live off this environment, even though perhaps they perceive it without being fully aware of it.

It stands to reason that this harmony between the parents becomes even more important when it is a question

of actions that directly affect the children. As far as their upbringing is concerned, it is crucial that the parents are in agreement. For example, a decision taken by one of the two has to be backed up by the other. Should it be contradicted, one is raising children badly.

Parents also have to teach one another, and learn how to raise children well. It is very difficult for a father or a mother who is not well formed to be a good educator. They have to grow personally, by taking great care of their marriage relationship and improving their own virtues. Theirs has to be a joint effort for the good of their children.

Educating for friendship

Trust fosters friendship. And friendship, in turn, creates a warm and trusting environment, one that is safe and serene. It generates a climate that not only makes good

communication between the spouses possible, but also facilitates their interaction with the children and of the children among themselves.

In this regard, conflicts between the spouses are quite different from those that arise between siblings. It often happens, and this is only normal, that children quarrel with one another. All of us, in one way or another, are in competition for resources, especially when these are limited. Every small child wants to hold his mother's hand, or sit in front seat of the car, or be his father's favorite, or the first to unpack the new toy. But these quarrels can also turn out to be formative, and help parents teach their children how to get along with others. They are an opportunity to teach a child to want the good of others, to forgive, to know how to give in, or to refuse to budge when necessary. The relationship between brothers and

sisters, when well focused, reinforces the growth in virtues, and forges a friendship that will last a lifetime.

But the friendship between the spouses also needs reinforcing. Arguments that arise between husband and wife are often due to a lack of communication. The causes can be quite varied: different ways of seeing things, letting routine slip into daily life, allowing outbursts of bad temper, etc. Whatever the cause, the thread of dialogue has been lost. One then needs to own up to one's faults, to apologize and to forgive. "If I were to give advice to parents, I would tell them, above all, let your children see that you are trying to live in accordance with your faith. Don't let yourselves be deceived: they see everything, from the earliest years, and they judge everything. Let them see that God is not only on your lips, but also in your deeds; that you are trying to be loyal and sincere, and

that you love each other and you really love them too.”[5]

What children want is not that their parents be especially intelligent or polished, or to always give the best possible advice. Nor is their main concern that their parents give them lots of toys, or let them enjoy wonderful holidays.

What they really want is to see that their parents love and respect one another and that they love and respect them, the children. They look to their parents for “a proof of the value and meaning of life, shown through the life of a specific person, and confirmed in the different situations and circumstances that occur over a period of time.”[6]

As St. Josemaria said, the family is certainly the *most important business* and the most rewarding one for parents, if they put the care and love required into it. This care requires a

constant effort to grow in virtue, and uninterrupted vigilance. However, the difficulty lies in actually achieving this. How can I give a valid witness to the meaning of life? How can I be coherent in my behavior at all times? In sum, how can I raise my children *for* friendship or, putting it another way, for love and happiness?

As mentioned above, the very love that spouses show for one another and for their children provides, at least in part, an answer to these questions. In addition, two aspects of formation are especially significant with a view to the children's personal growth and ability to relate to others, and thus to their eventual happiness. Although quite distinct, each is very relevant in its own way.

The first aspect, at times not sufficiently valued, is play. Teaching children to play often involves sacrifice and the investment of time,

a scarce commodity that we all try to hoard, among other reasons, in order to rest.

Nevertheless, one of the greatest gifts that a child can receive from parents is their time. It is a sign of being close by, a very specific way of loving.

Thus play already contributes to building up an environment of trust that develops the friendship between parents and children. Moreover, play instills fundamental attitudes that are the basis of the virtues needed to face many situations in life.

The second aspect involves the growth of the child's personality. The way of being of the father and mother, in their diversity, tempers the character and identity of the son or daughter. If the parents are present and intervene in a positive way in raising their children—smiling, asking questions, correcting without discouraging—they show, as

if by osmosis, a model of how a person should act, of how to behave and face up to situations in life.

If parents themselves struggle to grow, to listen, to be cheerful and friendly, they offer their children a graphic response to the question of how to lead a happy life, within the limitations of our earthly existence.

This influence penetrates to the deepest core of the child's being, and its importance and implications are only appreciated with the passage of time. In the models that a father and mother offer, children discover what it means to be man or woman in the context of a true home. They discover that happiness and joy are possible thanks to mutual love, and that love is a noble reality, compatible with sacrifice.

Thus, in a natural and spontaneous way, the family environment provides the child with the firm

foundation needed throughout life, despite the deviations that might prevail in society. The family is the privileged place to experience the greatness of being human.

All this highlights the importance of the parents' self-sacrificing love. On the one hand, they have experienced the joy of perpetuating themselves in a child. On the other, they witness the growth of a person who, little by little, ceases being a part of themselves to become his or her true self.

Parents also mature as parents in the measure that they view with joy their children's growth and their becoming less dependent on them. While the vital bond with their children will always remain, there comes about the slow and natural emergence of a new, unpublished biography, which in one way or another might not correspond to the

expectations they had in mind, even before the child was born.

The raising of children, their growing up and maturing, until they attain independence, will be more easily accomplished if the couple also fosters an environment of friendship with God. When the family sees itself as a *domestic church*,^[7] a child assimilates with naturalness a few brief practices of piety, and “learns to place God first and foremost in his affections. He learns to see God as his Father and Mary as his Mother and he learns to pray following his parents’ example.”^[8]

J.M. Barrio and J.M. Martin

Footnotes:

^[1] *Col* 3:21.

^[2] *Christ is Passing By*, 27.

[3] Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, 24.

[4] *Confessions*, XIII, 10.

[5] *Christ is Passing By*, 28.

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] Cf. 1 Cor 16:19.

[8] *Conversations with Msgr. Escriva de Balaguer*, 103.