

Leisure and Free Time (3)

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It's not always easy for parents and adolescent children to come to an agreement on certain issues. It's an old story, but perhaps a more frequent and acute problem nowadays, given the rapid changes in present-day society. Sometimes the

problem can center on the use of free time on weekends and in the evening.

Parents' attitude

Parents are rightly concerned about how their children spend their time in entertainment in the evening. Many parents find it difficult to maintain peace and discipline in the home when discussing this issue. Conversations about times for going out on weekends can often degenerate into a battle, and it is far from easy to come up with convincing reasons to persuade young people to return home at a reasonable hour. As a result, the parents' authority may be weakened. Given this situation, some parents try to increase their control over their children, but they soon realize that this is not the solution. Controlling is not educating.

On reaching adolescence children may strongly demand an amount of freedom that at times they aren't yet ready to manage in a mature way. This doesn't mean depriving them of the measure of autonomy that corresponds to them. Rather it is a question of something much more difficult: teaching them to manage their freedom responsibly and to learn to account for what they do. Only then will they acquire the broadening of vision that will enable them to aspire to higher goals than mere entertainment *at all costs*. Hence educating their children for freedom means that parents sometimes have to establish limits for them and firmly impede their going beyond these. Young people learn to live in society and to be truly free when they are taught the meaning of these rules, and parents clearly explain to them that there are matters, which are really duties, that are *non-negotiable*.

It's not surprising that conflicts about obeying should arise at an age when children's character and will are being formed in a special way, and their personality is becoming firm. St. Josemaria told a Portuguese father who mentioned a difficulty of this kind he was having with one of his children: "Let's be sincere. Anyone, ladies included, who didn't give their parents a hard time, raise their hand. Who dares to? So it's only natural that your children should make you suffer a bit too." [1] The important thing is to help children understand that the rights they so often claim, in many cases justly, should be preceded and accompanied by the fulfilment of the corresponding duties.

Dialoguing for understanding, dialoguing for teaching

Teaching children to use their free time properly in worthwhile

entertainment requires dedicating time and attention to them, speaking with them one-to-one. An open and sincere dialogue that is affectionate and intelligent is the path for discovering the truth about oneself. We could even say that the human person is “constituted” through dialogue. As a result, the family is the place *par excellence* where we learn to relate to others and to understand ourselves. There we experience what it means to love and to be loved, in an atmosphere that engenders trust. And trust in turn is the atmosphere in which a person learns to love, to be free, to respect the freedom of others and to value positively the obligations each one has towards the other. Without trust freedom grows in a stunted way.

This serene atmosphere allows parents to speak frankly with their children about the way they use their free time, always keeping a tone of

genuine interest and avoiding confrontations or uncomfortable situations in front of the whole family. They should avoid giving “sermons,” which end up being ineffective, or “interrogating” them in a way that ends up being unpleasant. What they need to do is to sow “criteria of judgment, determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life”[2] that will enable them to lead a truly human and Christian life.

Opportunities will not be lacking to reinforce good behavior in their children. And little by little parent should get to know the environments in which their children spend their time and what their friends are like.

When parents have gained the trust of their children from infancy, dialogue with them comes about naturally. The family environment invites it, even when agreement is

lacking about certain matters. It is opportune to recall St. Josemaria's words: dedicating time to one's family is "the best investment." For example, taking advantage of meal times to get to know one another better, and spending "quality" time with the family, made up of moments of special intimacy, which help to create harmony among family members. Time spent with the children when they are toddlers facilitates in-depth conversations during their adolescent years.

Undoubtedly it is better to be two years ahead of time in resolving problems than to be one day late. If parents have educated their children in virtues from an early age, and if children have experienced their parents' closeness, it becomes easier to help them with the challenges of adolescence. Nevertheless there are many parents who think that they haven't "arrived on time." Whatever

the cause, they may find it hard to create a constructive dialogue or to get their children to accept certain norms. And if parents become discouraged as a result? That is the moment to recall that the work of being parents doesn't have a "use-by date" and to be convinced that no word, affectionate gesture or effort aimed at raising their children well is ever in vain. Everyone in the family, both parents and children, need second and third chances, and often even more. Patience is a right and a duty of each member of the family. We need to be patient with the defects of the others and they need to be patient with ours.

However, to create in the family a culture inspired by faith, dialogue alone does not suffice. It is also important to dedicate time to family life, planning events that can be done together on weekends or during the holidays.

At times this might involve playing sports with the children, or organizing outings or celebrations with other families. Or it could mean getting them involved in cultural, sporting, artistic or volunteering activities organized by centers of formation, such as youth clubs. It is not a question of handing them something on a platter, but of fostering the youngsters' initiative, bearing in mind their own preferences. St. Josemaria urged us to put great effort into this area that is so important for society today: "There is a pressing need to re-Christianize popular celebrations and customs. There is a pressing need to avoid public amusements being faced with the dilemma: either 'soppy' or pagan." [3]

Keeping them short of money

Young people today often like to stroll through a shopping center and

buy an item of clothing that strikes their fancy, or have a meal at a fast-food restaurant and go to a movie. Leisure offerings are currently under the sway of the logic of consumerism. Should this approach to entertainment become habitual, it could easily foster habits that are individualistic, passive, little given to participating and showing solidarity with others. Fostering these forms of entertainment and rest restricts personal freedom and dehumanizes people through “degrading manifestations and the vulgar manipulation of sexuality so common in today’s world.”[4] In the end, this way of acting goes against the very essence of leisure, which should be a time of liberation and personal enrichment.

So it is very advisable not to give children a lot of economic means, thus teaching them the value of money and the need to earn it on

their own. St. Josemaria was brought up by his parents in a deeply Christian way; they respected his freedom and taught him to use it wisely. He once remarked: “They never imposed their will on me. They kept me short of money, very short, but left me free.”[5] Today it is relatively easy for young people to work, at least during their holidays. It is good to encourage them to do so, not just to earn money for their amusements, but also to be able to contribute to the needs of the family or to help the needy.

We should never forget that young people harbor in their heart strong ideals they are capable of getting enthused about. Young people will do anything for their friends and often they have not had the opportunity to discover that Jesus is the Great Friend. St. John Paul II said at the closure of the Fifteenth World Youth Day: “He loves each one of us in a

unique and personal way in our practical daily lives: in our families, among our friends, at study and work, in rest and relaxation.” And he went on to say that our society, so taken up with consumerism and hedonism, has urgent need of the witness of people who are available and sacrifice themselves for others. “Our society desperately needs this sign, and young people need it even more so, tempted as they often are by the illusion of an easy and comfortable life, by drugs and pleasure-seeking, only to find themselves in a spiral of despair, meaninglessness and violence.”[6]

Teaching children how to use their leisure and free time presents a real challenge to parents. It is a demanding task, but like all tasks done for love, it is marvelously worthwhile. At times it can seem to some parents that the situation is beyond them. It's good to remember

then that all the effort expended in the upbringing of children not only redounds to the good of their own children, but also pleases God. Raising their children as well as possible forms part of the task that our Lord has entrusted to parents, and no one can replace them in it. Benedict XVI said that in the family parents, through sharing in the common priesthood of the baptized, can exercise “the priestly role of being leaders and guides when they bring their children up in a Christian way.”[7] It is always worthwhile confronting this task with courage and an optimism filled with hope.

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[1] St. Josemaria, Get-together in Enxomil (Oporto), 31 October 1972.

[2] Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*, 8 December 1975, no. 19

[3] *The Way*, no. 975.

[4] Benedict XVI, *Address during a meeting with the bishops of the United States*.

[5] St. Josemaria, *In Dialogue with the Lord*, p. 70.

[6] Saint John Paul II, *Homily at the Closing Mass of World Youth Day*, 20 August 2000.

[7] Benedict XVI, *General audience*, 18 February 2009.