

Four Essential Duties in Parenting

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What are our main responsibilities in parenting our children? For some parents, their ultimate goal as educators is their children's *autonomy*. Others speak of wanting *self-fulfillment* for their children. For other parents, the aim is to insure their child's *happiness*. Many Christian parents would prefer to say they want *salvation* for their children. How shall we reach these results? The question presupposes that the ultimate outcome will not come by chance. We need a plan of action. What are the essentials of such a plan?¹

According to an ancient Talmudic tradition, parents “owe” the following to their children: to teach them the Torah; to ensure that they learn a trade; to get them married; and to teach them to swim.²

Let us examine from a Christian perspective the principles that lie behind these fundamental duties.

Transmitting God's Revelation to Children

The first duty of believing parents according to the Bible is to transmit God's Word to their children: “These commandments . . . impress . . . on your children” (Deuteronomy 6:6, 7). This teaching from the writings of Moses means that parents are expected to equip their children with the best spiritual and moral reference, to transmit a love for divine revelation. Knowing the Bible will enable our children to find their landmarks in life.

It is important that the ultimate moral and spiritual reference for the children not be the parents themselves. The originality of biblical parenting rests in the fact that it refers to an authority that lies beyond the parents. This idea is revolutionary compared to other educational models. All human educators, even the prophets, are not omniscient. They are fallible. They make mistakes. This is why parents must refer to God and to a law that is above all human beings, including the parents.

Having the same book, the Bible, for the education of parents and children has important implications for parenting. It is well known that children learn through imitation. They do what they see others doing. They need consistent examples. A child who wishes to obtain permission to do something is tempted to go from one of the parents to the other to get what he wants. If the parents do not agree with each other, their dissension produces confusion in the child's mind. A clear, consistent message from both parents is needed to build a strong character in the child. While they may not

¹ These reflections are inspired by Pauline Bebe (first woman rabbi in France), *Peut-on faire le bonheur de ses enfants [May we ensure our children's happiness]?* Paris: Éditions de l'Atelier, 2003, pp. 65–80.

² According to Kiddushin 29a, “A father is obligated to do the following for his son: to circumcise him, to redeem him if he is a first born, to teach him Torah, to find him a wife, and to teach him a trade. Others say: teaching him how to swim as well” (cited in Isaacs, 2009, p. 1).

reach perfect harmony, it is important that the parents be united on fundamental points. To reach agreement, negotiation will sometimes be necessary between the parents. Omnipotence on the part of one parent or the other will be renounced when both of them refer to the common set of ethical values in Scripture. Only in this direction does stability for both children and parents lie.

To head in one direction as parents, though, even to have a common focus and be consistent, is not enough by itself; this direction must be an ethical one. The Bible teaches the importance of good behavior, of doing constructive deeds that fit the formula: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). The teaching of ethics starts with renunciation of selfishness. I must love myself, but at the same time I must love and respect others. In this fundamental ethical teaching of the Bible, repeated by Jesus in Matthew 22:39, the interdictions—the things we are to refrain from doing—are just as important as the duties—the things we are obliged to do. Freedom and spontaneity have their place, but within a framework which guarantees respect for others. The Bible acknowledges the reality of personal desire. It does not forbid it; but it places it within the framework of laws to regulate it, in this case “the love of neighbor.” Rabbinic philosopher Abraham Heschel once said: “The aim of God’s law is to be the grammar of life.” To stay with his metaphor we may say that the rules of writing must be given by the parents, but the child will have to write his own book—his own life.

The fact that the Bible offers the same teaching for children and for the parents presents an ongoing challenge for parents as educators. They must be submitted to the same laws as their children and must continue their learning for their whole lives. Despite the necessary distance between child and parent, a partnership nevertheless exists between them because of this same foundation. The children learn from their parents, but the parents also learn with, even from, their children as both construct their lives on this common base.³

Teaching Children About Work

In classical Judaism, the parents’ second obligation to their children is to help them to learn a trade, i.e., to make a living and fulfill their calling in life. The Talmud says that “Anyone who does not teach his son a skill or profession may be regarded as if he is teaching him to rob” (Tal Kid 29a).

In the Bible, God’s first instructional act toward the human beings whom He had just created was to assign them responsibility and teach them how to work and take care of their living space, the Garden of Eden. “The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it” (Genesis 2:15). This text establishes the importance of work as a part of adult life long before the Fall. The first human pair, even within the Garden of Eden, had to work. After the Fall, work took on negative connotations. Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden without possibility of return. They now were forced to work to survive, not simply to fulfill their creativity.

On one hand, work implies self-realization, vocation, and creativity. On the other, it implies independence, freedom, and autonomy. It affords opportunity to deal with the world in which we live

³ In Judaism, the completion of this basic learning is marked by a particular rite, the *bar-mitzvah*, i.e. the religious coming of age, during which the parents symbolically transmit to their child the spiritual and ethical responsibility of his/her own life. Traditionally, the father pronounced a public blessing to show that the child was now taking independence into his/her hands and that he/she was from now on responsible before God in keeping the commandments.

using our own talents and skills, without dependence on our parents. Work also means playing a useful role in society, a social link that is very important to a growing young person's integration within the community. Parenting includes this task of helping our children find their place as contributing members of the group—to find their “position” in both meanings of the word: in space and in society.

Teaching children to work is to prepare them for the independence a profession brings. It also means to help them learn a proper relationship with work, such as the importance of moderation and setting limits to personal desire, which may constantly lack satisfaction (1 Timothy 6:8). To teach a trade also means to teach the limitations to be placed upon work. Scripture presents the Sabbath—the sanctification of time, the periodic and regular cessation of the whirl of life. The Sabbath is a necessity; work would otherwise enslave us. Oscar Wilde has said: “In this world, there are only two tragedies: one is not to obtain what we wish, and the other is to obtain it.” To educate about work also means to show our children that the unquenchable thirst for money, power, glory, etc.—the continual dissatisfaction with what one has acquired—is a curse. Most important is what we *are*, not what we *have*.

The sanctification of the Sabbath is very important because it affords time to worship the Creator, rather than worshipping our own works. It lifts our eyes from our tasks to heaven, to behold the infinite space of divine creation. Children have an innate sense of wonder—the bird's melody, the rising sun, a small wild flower, the feeling of the wind on one's face—everything is for them a cause for wonder. When we become adults, we somehow lose this capacity to admire creation; everything becomes commonplace. The weekly rest of the *shabbath* sets a limitation to work and allows us to keep a child's sense of wonder.

A well-known pediatrician wrote this about children: “As soon as their gaze becomes able to go beyond their immediate environment, show them the sea, the mountains and their immensity, show them the night and the starry sky, give them a glimpse of the infinite.”⁴

Prayer, as an acknowledgment or thanksgiving for the divine blessings, allows us also not to consider anything as matter of fact. These words of thanks before action—a meal, a journey, sleep—are as so many moments of awareness which place a distance between desire and its fulfillment. These moments of inspiration are particularly important in a world in which everything goes too fast, in which the agendas—both of children and parents—are overcrowded, and in which, often, no time is left for personal reflection.

A rabbinical story tells that King Solomon requested a jeweler to make a magical ring to comfort him when he would be depressed and to make him wiser when he would be too merry. The jeweler made the ring with this inscription: “It will soon be gone.”

⁴ Docteur Maurice Bebe, *Votre enfant m'intéresse ! Manuel de pédiatrie à l'usage des parents qui doutent* [I am interested in your child: A manual of pediatrics for doubting parents]. Paris: Sand, 1991, p. 131.

Preparing Children to become Autonomous

The parents' third duty, according to the Jewish tradition (Kid 30b), is to help their children find a spouse. It implies teaching them that "it is not good for the man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18) and that, some day, they must "leave father and mother" (Genesis 2:24). The idea is to prepare the children to be independent from their parents.

A successful education is one which allows the children to do without their parents. The parents' duty is to ensure that their children may leave them once they have become adults. Too often, well-meaning parents turn their children into "permanent children in care." The psychiatrists' couches are filled with 40-50 year-old "adolescents" unable to break the link tying them to their parents (manifested by a sickly, affective dependency or by endless fights and blaming). Learning to break with one's parents is necessary if children are to become responsible, free and autonomous adults some day.

If this initiation has been well done, the children will be led to seek a remedy to their existential loneliness outside their family, whether they marry or remain single. They will be able to distinguish between filial love and an amorous relationship and to understand respect for their parents outside of a relationship of dependency. In this tension between dependency and self-sufficiency, the children also learn that their freedom is limited by others' needs and that, for the sake of their own happiness, they must learn to interact with others through negotiation and respect.

In the fifth commandment "Honor your father and your mother" (Exodus 20:12), the Hebrew word *kabed* ("honor") means to give weight. It does not necessarily mean to agree or to obey but to respect. If a parent gives wrong orders, the child is not required to accept them, nor to follow them. He is required to take them into account, to evaluate them and to respect his/her parent accordingly.

Preparing Children to Face the Difficulties of Life

According to a much-debated textual variant, the parents' last duty is to teach their child how to swim (Talmud *Kiddushin* 29a). It is necessary to place this strange precept in the context of its own time. While the Talmudic law was being developed, travel often took place aboard ships. The sea was a symbol of danger. It was therefore useful to know how to swim in order to face the potential danger of storms.

This example served to point out that it is necessary for parents to teach their children the skills to survive. God has given us life as a most precious value: "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live" (Deuteronomy 30:19).

Today, we understand how important it is to protect children and to prepare them to protect themselves. They must know how to extricate themselves from danger as far as possible, to solve their problems by themselves, to face adverse and difficult circumstances. The children must learn resilience and how to survive in an ever more difficult and dangerous world. While knowing how to literally swim is important, children must learn to swim against the currents of life. Children must appreciate life—their own and that of others. They must be able to swim not only to save their own

life, but to be able to save others' lives should the need arise. The Talmud reads: "He who saves a life is as one who saves the whole world" (cf. Babylonian Talmud *Sanhedrin* 37a).

Some Conclusions

Parenting is a very serious responsibility (cf. 1 Timothy 5:8). However, we cannot give what we do not have. To succeed at making our children happy, eternally happy, we must first of all know this kind of happiness personally. Children, of course, may not necessarily take on their parents' values. The parents may teach their children the rules and way of life that lead to true happiness, but they cannot ensure that the children will secure them in place. There is no insurance for happiness. Parenting is a building⁵ task which may be done on strong or brittle foundations (Matthew 7:24–27).

What may we draw from ancient wisdom as vital elements for the education of our children? Four great duties of ancient Jewish tradition were to teach children:

- To love God's Word.
- To be useful.
- To be able to survive without their parents.
- To face the reality of life.

A successful education is not the result of chance, but is a wise project with clear outcomes and directions. Children must:

- Learn from God's Word how to live (now and in eternity).
- Prepare and equip themselves to earn a living.
- Learn about emotions and feelings and build such characters as will be able to make wise personal and social choices in life and to help others do the same.
- Develop resilience mentally and physically so as to survive and to save other lives.

To educate our children on these strong values, we parents must first of all have assumed these values ourselves. The text of Deuteronomy 6:4-9 as well as Matthew 28:19-20 request us to listen to God first and then internalize His teachings before we try to transmit them to our children. While each generation of parents must face the huge privileges and responsibilities of parenting, with the help of God and His directions we may fully enjoy the task of discipling our children.

References

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⁵ The Hebrew tradition makes a play on words by changing a vowel between *banaim*, "children", and *bonhaim*, "builders." The parents lay the foundations, but their children are the builders. The Hebrew word *av* ("father") also means "principle." The parents give their children a vital framework—basic principles—on which their children are called to build their lives throughout life.

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