

Apostolos Paulos School  
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It is an honor and a privilege to speak to you, again, about how to raise up our children to be successful in life, close to God and the Church.

If we want to learn how to face the challenges we must understand how God is working in our children and in us, through the challenges. First we must understand the path, our role as parents, and then we must struggle to walk that path. If we don't know what God calls us to do as parents, it is easy to lose our way.

How do we raise our children? What is our role?

Sister Magdalen, of Essex, writes in her book, *Children in the Church today*,

'Our goal as parents is not to transmit faith; that is the work of divine grace, and our task is to foster the work of grace.' (as Sister Magdalen wrote in *Children in the Church Today*.)

It is much like growing a plant. We cannot grow a tomato plant, but what we can do is make sure the plant has plenty of sunlight, food, and water, and then allow time for the plant to grow.

As parents, we do not make our kids into adults. They naturally will become adults. Our role is to provide the best environment for our child to thrive, to learn what is true and good, and then allow the child to grow.

Our role is to stay close and connected to our children as they walk through life, during the easy times and through the challenges. The closer we are connected to our children, the more they will adopt our morals, our values, and our faith as their own.

*"For generally the children acquire the character of their parents, are formed in the mold of their parents' temperament, love the same things their parents love, talk in the same fashion, and work for the same ends." St. John Chrysostom*

We stay connected with our kids by being involved in their lives. We need to spend time with them, be involved in their school, their sports and have time together as a family. We need to pay attention to our children when they are behaving well, so they feel close to us. It does not take a lot of time, just paying attention.

And we must learn how to connect with our children when they misbehave, when they are struggling. As I mentioned last time, it is through the challenges that God invites us to grow, to grow closer to Him, and to grow as human beings. To grow in patience, kindness, and love.

This is hard for parents to understand and impossible for our children to understand.

Do our children ever thank us for disciplining them?

Imagine, if one evening, you tell your child (Let's say he is 10 years old) it is time to go to bed. He complains and argues, "I don't want to go to bed. I want to stay up."

Of course, you say, it is time to go to bed, and you take him by the hand and lead him upstairs to bed.

Imagine, if your child looks at you and says, "Thank you mom, for forcing me to go to bed. I know I am not old enough to do this on my own. But you are helping me learn how to do the right thing even when I don't want to. You are helping me to become the type of adult who can control his desires and follow God. Thank you very much."

Would a child ever say that? No.

But is it true? Yes. Children do not have the self-control or discipline to do the right thing when there are so many things to do that are more fun. They would rather play or use the tablet than clean their rooms or do their homework or go to bed. That is because they are children and have not learned to control their impulses and desires. And it is our job to help them develop self-control and discipline. We want to teach them how to do that.

Because to be successful and happy as an adult, we must learn to control our impulses and desires and follow Christ. We cannot just say or yell whatever we want to our spouse. That is a sin and destructive. We need to learn how to control our selves. We cannot just act out on our impulses, but we are called to follow Christ and the path of righteousness no matter what we are feelings.

“If anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.” Matthew 16:24

When we choose to resist temptations and follow Christ we have a full life of intimacy with God and others. To have a good marriage, we must learn how to love our spouse even though we are tempted to judge or criticize our spouse when we see the faults. But Christ calls us to forgive and love, which leads to deep joy and happiness.

We want to raise up children who know, in their hearts, that the path of resisting temptations, controlling our impulses and desires, and following Christ, doing the right thing, is the path of success. And we teach that to them at bedtime, when they don't want to go to bed, but they must. When they don't want to clean their rooms, or do their homework, but they must. This is the arena where we struggle to acquire the values and virtues of the Kingdom of God, and it happens in the struggles and challenges of daily life.

But why doesn't our 10 year old say thank you to us when we force him to go to bed?

Because he is a child. He is 10, and he cannot understand. He cannot see beyond his own immediate desires to understand that in the long-term, controlling his desires is better. He cannot understand how it is best to do the hard thing in the short term to succeed in the long term.

But we are not 10 years old. We are adults. And we are Christians. And we need to understand that following Christ is the path of full life. God does not tell us that we need to give up having a fun life to follow Him. He reveals to us that if we want to have a full life, come close to Him, follow Him and we will be successful in the most important ways.

Matthew 6:33 “Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and these things shall be added to you.”

We will have peace, happiness, joy. When we acquire the holy spirit, when our hearts are filled with the Holy Spirit, we experience a deep joy and peace that is beyond understanding.

Galatians 5:22 “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness.”

This is what makes our homes peaceful and this is the environment we want to create in our homes for our children to grow, naturally, into successful, faithful adults.

I want to share one specific parent skill that we can learn that can help us stay connected to our children even when we have to discipline them, or be strict with them, or force them to do things they don't want to do, like go to Church, or get up for school, or clean their rooms, take a shower, or do their homework.

**Principle #2 Separate feelings from behaviors. Listen to the feelings and set limits to the behaviors.**

This week, Alexios (8 years old) wanted to wear the same sweat pants for the 5<sup>th</sup> day in a row on Friday. They were dirty. His mother told him he could not wear those same pants again. He became very upset at her and refused to listen. He cried and said he did not want to wear the new pants. His mother insisted. He continued to fight and cry. And we had to eat breakfast and get to school.

When our children do not listen to us, or argue with us, or don't do what we ask,

One temptation is to ignore their feelings and their struggle and force them to do something.

We can say, “I don't care what you feel, you have to wear these pants. Or we have to go to Church, or you must clean your room, or go to school, or do your homework.

We can give them a reason why we are forcing them. Your pants are dirty and you can't wear the same pair 5 days in a row.

Or, you must take a shower because you are filthy.

The other temptation is to give in to our children. “Fine, you can wear the pants, but this is the last time.”

Or we might beg them, give them a reward if they listen to us, or just start yelling at them until they do what we say.

But what is best for our kids? Well, our second principle is separating feelings from behaviors.

In most cases, our children just don’t want to do what they need to do. It’s hard to wear pants that you don’t want.

This is or struggle in life. It is hard to do what is good and right. It is easier to do what we want.

That is the spiritual struggle of turning our whole heart to God...and it is difficult to give up our own will and follow Christ. In life, it is hard to resist temptations and do what is right.

We can’t take away the struggle, and if we give in to our children’s desires, or try to make our children’s lives easy, we will make them weak. They will not learn how to control their impulses and desires. What kind of husband will Alexios be if he never learns to control his desires, or is used to getting what he wants all the time.

However, we don’t want to ignore their struggle, either, because then we communicate to them that we don’t care about their struggle.

In order to connect with our children in these struggles, we need to separate their feelings from their behaviors because:

Feelings and behaviors need a different response from us as parents.

We need to listen to their feelings and set limits to their behaviors.

We need to allow their feelings, but not allow their behaviors.

It is ok that he really does not want to listen, but he must change his pants.

They can’t control their feelings, but they need to learn to control their behaviors.

We can't force our children to feel a certain way, but we must force them to behave.

We can't force him to be happy about it, but we can force him to wear them.

Children feel respected, understood, and cared for when we listen to their feelings, and they feel disrespected when we ignore or try to control their feelings.

Children feel loved and safe when we set limits to their behaviors, and they feel unsafe and out of control when we don't set limits.

Yet, when parents listen to their children's behaviors, and take their side, they tend to be lenient, and allow for misbehaviors. And often when we are strict with their behaviors, we can ignore their feelings.

But our kids need us to listen to their feelings and be strict with their behaviors.

So, when our kids don't want to do what we ask, we can:

Listen to the feelings, and keep the limits firm. We can say things like:

"I know, you don't want to wear these pants. But these are the pants you are wearing.

"Yes, it's hard to have to change pants. Put these on now.

"I know, it would be nice to wear the same pants every day, but you cannot. We are leaving for school in 5 minutes.

Whether it is time to do homework, instead of play, or time to go to bed when they want to stay up, or get dressed when they don't want to, or go to Church when they don't want to, we can listen to their feelings, and be strict about their behaviors.

In this way, we respect that our children are learning. They are learning how to make good decisions, do what is right, resist temptations, and follow God's commandments. They are learning, or acquiring patience, gentleness, kindness, self-control, and love. This is what childhood is for.

IT is very hard for us, as parents, not to get frustrated or upset at Alexios for disrupting the morning, or making it hard. We need to be patient. Strict and patient.

In this way, we can connect with our children even when we are the ones forcing them to do something.

Now, Alexi never agreed to wear the pants. I stepped in and said, I know you don't want to wear those pants. You can put them on, or I will put them on.

I don't expect him to understand. I don't expect him to agree, and I don't expect him to thank me, until he has his own children. But as parents, we need to teach our children to listen to us, and we need to learn how to connect with them and respect them as they are learning.

Amen.

Now, parents might disagree. Maybe one parent says, let him wear his old pants, and the other parent says, no. How do we handle parents disagreeing on where to be strict.

First, it is good for both parents to listen to feelings and set limits to behaviors. IF you are a strict parent, learn how to listen to feelings. If you are a lenient parent, learn how to be a little more strict.

There are certain rules, I suggest, that we must follow in order to raise up kids who are not damaged by parents fighting with each other.

1. Both parents should be involved. Kids need a father and mother. I know in some cultures, it is only the mother that is involved. This is a mistake. Research shows that kids do better when fathers are involved in caring for children. If your father was not involved, you can learn how to do something different and be involved. It might be easier to have just one parent doing everything, but it is not best for the child.
2. It is good that fathers and mothers have different opinions. Kids do great when they have two parents who do things differently. They learn different things. One parent might take more risks and the other be more cautious. One might be more intense, and the other more relaxed. One parent might negotiate and compromise more and the other one be more strict with rules.
3. Do not impose your will on your spouse. Allow for some of this natural difference.
4. Take the time, make some time, to discuss the larger issues where you disagree. We are all busy, but taking time at night when kids are asleep to

learn how to talk with each other about the differences. This is good for everyone.

5. Don't try to convince your spouse, just share your opinion.
6. Focus more on listening to your spouse than changing your spouse's mind.
7. When you are stuck and you disagree, go talk to someone. Go to a spiritual father, a priest or someone you both respect, even a therapist.
8. Never fight in front of the children
9. Never attack each other when you are discussing things.
10. Learn to love each other even if the parent is doing something the wrong way. It is better for the children to see love than to be parented the 'right' way.
11. Keep talking and keep being patient with each other and keep the most important things first, letting go of the smaller things. How we treat each other is the most important thing. Stay connected to the Church. Learn what it means to live as a follower of Christ. After these things, there is much room for discussion.

#### Questions and Discussion:

What is the most difficult challenge you face as a parent?

What is God calling us to learn in this struggle? (as parents, and for our children)

How can we listen to the feelings and keep the limits firm.