Parents, by nature, are placed in the position of being their children’s first teachers. From the first moments after birth, a newborn begins to observe and absorb all the parents say and do. Upon receiving their new infant into their arms, both father and mother generally experience an array of emotions culminating in the awesome realization that, for at least the next eighteen years, they will be responsible for another human being. Around age two a milestone is reached. The toddler learns to say, “No!” Now the parents embark on a more tedious type of training: the area of right and wrong, the development of conscience. This process requires time and attention but is at the very core of what distinguishes humans from animals. Today, we are living in a culture pervaded by moral relativism and broadcast throughout by the media. Parents who willingly embrace the responsibility for teaching their children what is objectively good, true, and beautiful will equip them to deal with the challenges of our technological age.

The parents of a toddler in the throes of a temper tantrum realize the task ahead is daunting but also grasp the gravity of their parental role in shaping the future of this little person. St. Francis DeSales encourages parents with his belief that, “Raising a family does not consist in building a splendid residence and storing up vast worldly possessions but in training children well in the fear of God and in virtue.” (1) Although a myriad of daily tasks claim their attention, the parents’ most vital task should be laying firm moral, spiritual, and human foundations for their children. Pope John Paul II said, “The first and fundamental structure for ‘human ecology’ is the family in which man receives his first formative ideas about truth and goodness, and learns what it means to love and to be loved, and thus what it actually means to be a person.” (2)

As the primary teachers of their children, parents have the opportunity to help them develop the capacity to live life fully, which is rooted in the ability to make good choices. Our society encourages parents to involve their children in a variety of activities, such as music and dance lessons, athletics, and other hobbies. While all these serve to enrich children’s lives, parents must consider what the Catechism of the Catholic Church states, “The family is the community in which, from childhood, one can learn moral values, begin to honor God and make good use of freedom. Family life is an initiation into life in society.” (3)
One area where parental guidance is particularly important today is in the exposure of children to the burgeoning area of mass media. The three television networks of the 1950’s have been replaced by thirty times that number, resulting in an almost mind-boggling array of programming at all hours of the day. Meanwhile, megaplexes offer ten to fifteen movies weekly and popular magazines address every age group and interest imaginable. In the midst of this culture of overabundance, it is crucial that parents be willing to invest time and energy into analyzing what is available and to direct their children appropriately. If parents eliminate what is not of value for their children and conscientiously guide them through childhood and adolescence, these children, upon becoming mature young adults, should be capable of making prudent choices. Parents are encouraged to take seriously the injunction of the Holy See that the family be viewed as, “A community of love and solidarity, which is uniquely suited to teach and transmit cultural, ethical, social, spiritual, and religious values, essential for the development and well-being of its own members and of society.” (4)

Television, movies, and magazines can all be vehicles through which children broaden their horizons in the areas of history, science, and music, but they can just as readily introduce them to violence, sexual immorality, disrespect for authority, and other undesirable elements. In assuming responsibility for monitoring their children’s reading and viewing habits, parents should consider watching what their children watch, reading what their children read, assessing the messages imparted and evaluating their propriety. When parents become involved with their children’s selections, values are transmitted through the ensuing dialogue about a particular program, book, or movie. Parents must realize the high value and influence their judgments have on their children. St. Francis DeSales, commenting on friendship, states, “With the exchange of friendship many other exchanges imperceptibly pass and slip from one heart to another by mutual infusion and reciprocal sharing in affection, inclinations and impressions. This especially occurs when we have a high esteem of the one we love.” (5) This concept, learning from one you hold in high esteem, applies not only to friendship but also to the way children absorb values from their parents. This process should include discussing the messages of the various programs. As children observe their parents’ prudent choices of entertainment, they will, likewise, be led to make good choices.

Along with monitoring and moderating their children’s engagement with mass media, parents can give their children a great gift by teaching them to appreciate all the wonderful entertainment alternatives that amused generations of people prior to the mid-twentieth century. Family trips to museums, the theatre, a concert, a zoo, or an aquarium can be fun and educational recreation. Trips to the library can expand children’s reading horizons beyond mass-marketed book series and popular magazines and into the world of classic literature, spanning centuries and opening windows into other cultures, times, and places. Encounters with the natural world, through outdoor activities such as hiking, biking, and other athletic activities, engage both body and soul: improving fitness while instilling an appreciation for and a sense of wonder at the immensity of creation.

The Catholic Church advises parents that, “The home is the natural environment for initiating a human being into solidarity and communal responsibilities. Parents should teach children to avoid the compromising and degrading influences which threaten human societies.” (6) When parents shape the lives of their children upon a solid foundation of morals and values, they help to lay a strong foundation for the future of society. Parents, when contemplating the legacy they wish to leave behind, should consider
that having raised children who live moral and virtuous lives will be a far more valuable testament than any wealth or position they have achieved here in their time on earth.


5. de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, p. 182

6. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Section 2224

---

[click here for a printable (.pdf) version of this paper]

---

*Click here to go back to the "Salesian Spirit" Essay Contest list!*