

March 2010

“DID YOU KNOW . . .”

That it is possible for parents to give too much to their children? I know, where was this article at Christmas, right? Well, it's true at any time of the year, not just the holidays when parents want to make it a special time for the children. The reality is that many parents feel obligated, for a number of reasons, to do everything for their children and to give them everything possible. It could be a misplaced attempt to compensate for the parent's own meager upbringing, a lack of understanding of child development, an attempt to show love and devotion to the child, or it may simply be a parent who is too tired and gives in just to have some peace and quiet. Regardless of the reason, there really is such a thing as too much--too much food at one time, too many new clothes that can't possibly be worn, too many times when the child gets his way against all reason.

So how do parents find balance in a world that places such tremendous importance on material possessions and worldly cares, rather than on the “higher things,” such as spirituality, compassion and charity? First, let's start where it impacts families the most—stress. If you as a parent are feeling stressed because your child is asking for, or worse, insisting on, having the latest clothes, shoes, or technology, just stop for a minute and consider the impact on the family. In today's economy, many parents are struggling to provide the basics, let alone jeans that cost \$100+ per pair or the latest cell phone. As a parent, you are your child's first teacher and role model. Do you really want to support the notion that the only way to be happy is to have things, or to go one better than those around you? That is not the way of Christ, whom we are called to model for our children. If your child were to make a case before Christ for those jeans or that cell phone, would He say “yes” without hesitation, time and again, and not teach higher values instead? I suspect we all know the answer to that one. He asked his own followers to leave behind their possessions and follow Him, so I think it's safe to say He would not think that having the right clothes is a matter of life and death, as it is to our children.

That is not to say that He would want to see children go without, either, and this is where parents need to become creative. If a child really wants something, you can agree to revisit the topic in a week or two and not make a decision right away. We all know that children's attention spans can be alarmingly short (just ask them what their chores are for this week and see how much they remember), so in a couple of weeks, the burning desire could be for something else. If, at the next discussion, the desire is still as strong and the child is old enough, review finances with the child in a general way, such as saying, “We have a budget for this family and we only have ____ dollars per month for extras. If we spend most of that on you, that means other family members won't get what they want or need, so how can we find a compromise?” Or, you can agree that if the child gets the desired item, there will be no similar expenditures until everyone else in the family has had his or her choice, too, which in large families, can mean waiting quite a while.

Another option is to have the child meet you halfway and work for half of the money, providing that the child is old enough to do that. It could mean extra chores around the house that you might pay someone to do or you do not have time to do, such as raking leaves, mowing the lawn, etc. or it may involve the child doing chores for a neighbor or babysitting or a number of other options that you create together. As long as the child is the appropriate age and it is a safe project, it's an ideal way to teach a child values. We all can remember the first car we bought or the first major item we purchased on our own. Maybe I am shallow, but I remember taking a lot more pride in something I worked for than something that was handed to me. One summer many,

many years ago, I wanted my own little television for my room. I worked in the corn fields for an entire summer to earn the money to buy a brand new TV, and then my mother was so proud of my hard work that she paid for half of the TV and let me keep the other half of my money. I can't tell you how much care I took of that little TV, because I had *earned* it through a lot of sweat and hard work.

If there is no way that you can afford to even share the cost, and your child is not able to earn the money, all is not lost. As painful as it might be for the child, it is still a teaching moment. It is an opportunity to teach a child how to behave with dignity and self-confidence despite not having everything the child wants. The jeans will fade and be thrown away and the cell phone will eventually be discarded for a newer model, but personal qualities such as self-confidence and even humility will stay with a child forever. And if you doubt that, let me share a little personal story. I was a child who always had eyes for the biggest and the best and begged for what I wanted shamelessly. I did not always get what I wanted but my mother sacrificed a great deal to give me as much as she could. So, it fell to God to allow me the blessing of walking through some very difficult times, as an adult, to learn the skill of holding your head up despite your current circumstances; of truly experiencing that when you have nothing left, that is when you fully understand that God is all you need. Believe me, I am far from perfect and hope that I never have to go through those trials again, but I thank God for them and for the person He made me to be through those trials. There is nothing like a healthy dose of hard times to bring you into a true relationship with God, and that is a gift beyond measure. I only wish I had learned it sooner.

For those parents who feel they must put the child first in every situation, at all times, regardless of the reason or the expense, hear this and hear it well. *Of course* you are expected to provide for your children and do so with love and devotion, but **YOU ARE IMPORTANT, TOO!** Please do not feel guilty about doing something for yourselves, such as shaving a day or two off of the family vacation so that you can get a weekend away to renew your own relationship. Have friends babysit once in a while so the two of you can go out to dinner. For those parents who are single, share babysitting duties so that you can get a night out with friends and renew your own spirit and enthusiasm. Healthy, happy people make for healthy, happy parents, so engage in a little self care now and then and don't feel guilty. You sacrifice a great deal for your children, so remember to take care of yourself, too. As you do this, you are also modeling the same behaviors for your own children as they grow up to be healthy parents with a balanced life.

If you would like to explore this topic a little further, log onto www.authentichappiness.com. It is the website for Dr. Martin Seligman, father of the fairly recent movement called positive psychology. Dr. Seligman's work is all about studying the positive emotions and building on them to create a healthier, happier world. You can register at the site for free and take a number of free assessments or surveys to see what your strengths are, how positive is your outlook on life, or a number of other interesting things. The Brief Strengths Test is a very short survey that will give you your top five strengths. The longer, VIA-IS survey, is called Values in Action Inventory and it ranks all of 24, scientifically proven positive character traits. Now there's a great discussion topic for parents. How about taking some time to focus on each of those strengths and how to cause them to flourish in your own children? If families spent more time working on kindness, creativity, curiosity and other such traits, maybe, just maybe, there would be less concern about those worldly things with which we all struggle. Remember the scripture in Proverbs 22:6 "Train up a child in the way that he should go and when he is old, he will not depart from it."

Care for your children but find a balance. Let your children have opportunities to build character strengths and have positive values firmly ingrained in their lives. Their spirits can still soar, even in hard times, if parents show the way to find happiness where you are, instead of where you think you have to be. And while you're at it, remember to show children that parents have also earned some perks as well. It shows them that you are to be respected and valued more than those disposable things that they want. This is all part of the joys and challenges of parenthood, but remember that you can do it! In fact, you can do all things through Christ, who strengthens you.

May He bless you with the guidance, strength and inspiration to make the best decisions for you and your child!

Debora Jones