

Chastity and Human Sexuality Education in The Early Years of Childhood

"It can be said that a child is in the stage described in Pope John Paul II's words as "the years of innocence" from about five years of age until puberty — the beginning of which can be set at the first signs of changes in the boy or girl's body (the visible effect of an increased production of sexual hormones.) This period of tranquility and serenity must never be disturbed by unnecessary information about sex. During those years, before any physical sexual development is evident, it is normal for the child's interests to turn to other aspects of life. The rudimentary instinctive sexuality of very small children has disappeared. Boys and girls of this age are not particularly interested in sexual problems, and they prefer to associate with children of their own sex. So as not to disturb this important natural phase of growth, parents will recognize that prudent formation in chaste love during this period should be indirect, in preparation for puberty, when direct information will be necessary." (*Truth and Meaning*, 78).

What does indirect formation in chaste love look like in the early years of innocence?

Forming the Virtue of Charity

It is important for children to learn from an early age that they are not the center of the universe. They should be formed in the virtue of charity and service to others. Children can learn at this young age to deny themselves in service to others (i.e.: even if a child feels like playing another game, he can be a gift to his mom by doing his chores). This formation in selflessness is essential for understanding the meaning of sexuality and self-gift in a marital relationship later on. "An undisciplined or spoiled child is inclined toward a certain immaturity and moral weakness in future years because chastity is difficult to maintain if a person develops selfish or disordered habits and cannot behave with proper concern and respect for others." (*Truth and Meaning*, 86)

Education in Friendship

Formation in charity will coincide with an education in friendship. As children have more interactions with other children (whether through school, Church, or sports activities), they may be taught the principle that self-gift is the basis for any relationship, not just for family relationships. Children are to be encouraged to socialize with others, to treat their friends with respect, to share with them, to do nice things for them. These are all ways to form the habit of self-gift as the basis of a relationship. Even at this young age children can learn that friends are to be respected, not used.

Teaching Moral Boundaries

It is important to teach moral boundaries in the early years of innocence. By presenting objective standards for what is right and wrong, children receive a sure moral framework for life - a basis for understanding the morality of chastity later on (*Truth and Meaning* 86). At this stage, children should understand the concept of privacy. Privacy of one's "private parts" should be taught gently, and not in a way that makes the child feel their private parts are bad. Children should also learn that personal space boundaries are different depending on someone's relationship (i.e.: my mommy can hug me tight, but a stranger should not come into my personal space). Also, children should be taught appropriate ways to interact with their friends and acquaintances so as to respect to the personal space of others.

"Respect for *privacy* must be considered in close connection with decency and modesty, which spontaneously defends a person who refuses to be considered and treated like an object of pleasure instead of being respected and loved for himself or herself. If children or young people

see that their legitimate privacy is respected, then they will know that they are expected to show the same attitude towards others" (*Truth and Meaning*, 57).

Forming an Understanding of Gender Roles

"At this stage, children are aware of general physical differences between the sexes, but they are not concerned about genital functions. They are, however, undergoing important psycho-sexual development, learning what it means to be a man or a woman" (*Truth and Meaning*, 79).

"A growing boy or girl is learning from adult example and family experience what it means to be a woman or a man. Certainly, expressions of natural tenderness and sensitivity should not be discouraged among boys, nor should girls be excluded from vigorous physical activities. On the other hand, parents should also protect themselves from an exaggerated opposition to what is defined as 'stereotyping of roles'. The real differences between the two sexes should not be ignored or minimized, and in a healthy family environment children will learn that it is natural for a certain difference to exist between the usual family and domestic roles of men and women" (*Truth and Meaning*, 80).

Girls will naturally be developing an interest in babies and homemaking, often manifested by "playing house". They should be encouraged to look to the Blessed Virgin Mary as their model of motherhood, and should be encouraged to value their feminine nature. (*Truth and Meaning*, 81).

For boys at this age, it is often the easiest time for a healthy relationship to develop between father and son. Fathers should be teaching their sons to value their masculinity as "a call from God to take on certain roles and responsibilities," not as "a sign of superiority with regard to women" (*Truth and Meaning*, 82).

Be Cautious With Sexual Information in the Years of Innocence

"In general, the first sexual information to be given to a small child does not deal with genital sexuality, but rather with pregnancy and the birth of a brother or sister. The child's natural curiosity is stimulated, for example, when it sees the signs of pregnancy in its mother and experiences waiting for a baby. Parents can take advantage of this happy experience in order to communicate some simple facts about pregnancy, but always in the deepest context of wonder at the creative work of God, who wants the new life he has given to be cared for in the mother's body, near her heart." (*Truth and Meaning*, 76).

Giving more detailed sexual information at this age is harmful for the child. Before puberty, a child does not have the mental capacity to "understand and control sexual imagery within the proper context of moral principles, and for this reason, cannot integrate premature sexual information with moral responsibility. Such information tends to shatter their emotional and educational development and to disrupt the natural serenity of this period of life. Parents should politely but firmly exclude any attempts to violate children's innocence because such attempts compromise the spiritual, moral, and emotional development of growing persons who have a right to their innocence" (*Truth and Meaning*, 83).

Resources:

* *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality: Guidelines for Education Within the Family* published in 1995 by The Pontifical Council for the Family.

<http://parentsteachchastity.weebly.com>