

TEN COMMANDMENTS FOR PARENTS: A COMPENDIUM OF
SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVING THE HOME-SCHOOL CONNECTION

In all my years in education, it seems that, everywhere I go there is the same set of problems that both parents and teachers and administrators are having with young people. I figured that there must be some basic blueprint that, if followed, would help to alleviate many of those problems and make for a better-and easier- completion of those school years.

Having come up with ten suggestions, it was clearly a no-brainer (as the kids would say) to call them the “10 Commandments”. Of course, parents certainly do not need any more impositions on their time or energies, but, as the sage says, “work smarter, not harder”, and these are offered to make children’s and parent’s experience of the school years more productive and perhaps less nerve-wracking.

So here, without further fanfare, are the “10 Commandments for Parents”.

1. Thou shalt remember that school is thy child’s business.

For however many years our children are in school, we need to teach them that school, the place where they spend most of their day time, is important.

We Americans have worked very hard to fill up our children’s every waking moment with activities. As a result, we have drudges-children who have Day-Timers, beepers, cell phones- and very little FREE time.

Let's face it; our children have a whole lifetime to be very busy. There has to be some time in their lives for other, more important things, like quality time with the family, time for meals-actually sitting down for a family meal. Activities, especially sports, have crowded out church attendance, family vacations, time to read, do homework, just going out to play. Parents have turned into chauffeurs carting children from one organized activity to another. No wonder that, by the time they are in school, they are mentally and physically exhausted, and "doing time" in school until the next activity.

2. Thou shalt be partners with the teacher.

No teacher wishes to parent a student. Since parents are the primary educators of their children, teachers are secondary, but ancillary to the parent's role. The strength of the Catholic school has been and continues to be the shared role of teachers and parents. Only when parent and teacher are in agreement, share values, and back each other up can education be effective.

We all know that children know how to play parents and teachers off each other. "My Dad or Mom says" can be directly opposed to "My teacher says" when a child wishes to get his/her own way. When there is disagreement between teachers and parents, this ought to be settled as soon as possible so that the child sees that there is both agreement and support on both sides.

3. Thou shalt talk positively about thine own school experience.

One of the perquisites of parenthood is reliving and relating our own school days for the benefit of our children. Often we may delight in telling how we skipped school, cheated on an exam, or got into some scrape that landed us in the principal's office. While this may allow the child to see that the parent was no angel, it also sends the message to a child that this behavior is alright, because the child's parent got away with it or did it and turned out OK in spite of, or even because of misbehavior.

Is this the message we wish to send our children? When we think back to our school days, perhaps the worst thing that youngsters did then was sneak a cigarette, or a beer or skip school to go to a ball game. What kinds of things can youngsters get into today? If we must retell the past, then we need to make sure that we include the consequences, or the lesson we learned. Parents who grew up in the free-wheeling '60's and '70's already have a lot of explaining to do; better not to make the situation even worse.

4. Thou shalt be interested in thy child's schooling.

Beyond getting the message across to children about the importance of school is parents' sincere interest in their child's education. No matter what else we give our children, it will be their education that endures.

Parents will, sometimes in passing, ask their children "What did you learn in school today?". Now, there seems to be something inserted into the child

psyche that impels the child to answer, “Nothing”. This is a universal phenomenon, guaranteed to elicit a blank stare from the parent: what else is there to ask about? As a teacher, I often had parents call to complain that, although they were paying a great deal in tuition, their child was reporting that he or she was learning “nothing”. Yes, I would reply: for six hours every day, I stand in front of the class staring at them saying nothing, and for six hours every day, they simply sit and stare at me and say nothing. “Tell you what,” I’d say, “If you promise to believe only half of what she tells you about me, I’ll believe only half of what she says about you.”

Homework is a great way to really find out what your child is learning, since it should be independent practice of what he or she learned that day. When our children ask us to help with the homework, we should be touched: they presume that their parents KNOW SOMETHING!! A lot of stuff comes out when we do sit down, show an interest, and just let them tell us what’s going on.

5. Thou shalt honor the mission of the Catholic school.

When is the last time you really reflected on why you send your children to a Catholic school? Is it the excellence in academics, the order and discipline, the caring atmosphere? Yes, it’s all that and more: the mission of the Catholic school is, in a nutshell, to get your kid into heaven, not into Harvard.

Catholic schools are successful only because of the shared values held between the school and the home. When the mission of the Catholic school is not honored, the school may cease to be Catholic, and what makes it work is removed.

Further, parents need to model the mission by making sure that it is extended into the home. To refuse to take our children to church or to follow religious observances is to confuse our children. While they may be taught to “keep holy the Sabbath” in school, the contradictory practice of parents will vitiate the whole message of the school. The first and most important role models we can give our children is ourselves.

6. Thou shalt see that thy child gets enough sleep.

I get into a lot of schools and I see a lot of youngsters who are just plain tired. Their natural bent, especially, among adolescents, is to want to stay up late at night and then we force them to come to school very early in the morning. There has been much study on the role of circadian rhythms in the lives of children and adolescents. Young children’s natural rhythms cause them to be at their best early in the morning, necessitating their having to be in bed early in the evening. Adolescents, on the other hand, are moved to be at their best later in the morning. One would think that school leaders would adjust the starting times of school to meet these natural needs.

Although it may take some time before school hours are adjusted, parents can lay down the law about bedtimes. Children can't learn when they are dead tired, and what kind of childhood are we providing when they travel around all day dragging their poor, tired bodies from class to class?

7. Thou shalt know about thy child's friends and what they are into.

When the shootings happened all around the country a few years back, people pointed the first fingers of accusation at the parents of the young people who had perpetrated these violent crimes. "Why didn't you know what your kids were doing?" "Didn't you know who your kid was hanging around with?"

I don't believe that parents are always responsible for what their children do; after all, kids have free will, too, and the most responsible parents sometimes witness the most surprising acts by their children. But parents always agree that the persons whom their kids hang around with do matter.

One way to do this is to make your house the place where everyone gathers; that way, not only do you know where the children are, but you know what they are doing. Another way, is to do what I call "full body listening". That means being full attentive to our children, especially when they talk about their friends. Make it a point to get to know their parents and try to plan some activities where your child's friends and their parents are present.

8. Thou shalt allow thy child to learn by suffering consequences.

We all know what it's like: the child has had two weeks of vacation at Christmas. When queried about homework, the child has indicated that he or she has none-until the night before school starts again. Then, at the very last minute, the child reports that a project is due the next day and that you have to take him to the store. As you calmly reply that you will not venture out into that dark night, and that the project will not be done at that late hour, the child wails, "But my teacher will KILL ME!"

At this point, the parent is tempted to call the teacher, as did many parents when I was a teacher. "Don't blame my child," they say, "Blame me. I didn't take her to the store." Now, this is where I would reply that it was not the parent who was at fault here, but the child. Parents have this innate desire to protect their children, to keep them from having to be responsible, or from having to suffer consequences. But the lessons of life are, in the long run, more permanent than the lessons in school. Children should learn from their mistakes, their child-like carelessness, forgetfulness, and omissions; often it is these more painful lessons that will make the most lasting impression.

I think that raising a child is like teaching a child how to swim: there you are in the water with your hand under the kid's stomach. Now, you have a dilemma: if you take your hand away from the kid's stomach too soon, the child will never learn how to swim. If you keep your hand under the kid's

stomach too long, the kid will never learn how to swim. In our adult wisdom, we can discern what consequences to shield our children from; anything that brings physical or mental harm is to be avoided. But the little knocks can help us to raise responsible adults, and not victims; we have enough of those already.

9. Thou shalt celebrate thy child's small successes.

I remember standing out in front of a school at dismissal as a young boy ran out waving a paper and shouting to his mother, "Mom, I got a 98!" The air seemed to go out of him when his mother replied, "Why didn't you get 100?"

We need to believe that our children really do want to make us proud. That's why God created refrigerators-not so much to keep food cold as to be united with magnets. That's where we proudly display those drawings, cards and test papers for all the world to see. Praise is to children as rain and sunshine are to plants and trees; they help them to grow.

At the next school open house, watch your son or daughter take you by the hand to view a paper or a project that is on display. Beam proudly, but be sure that you give judicious praise; it will go a long way. None of us can grant to another self-esteem; it has to come from within. But a little praise goes a long way toward communicating to our children our approval and love, and it certainly encourages them to behave in the way that is encouraged. Basically,

we need to believe in the potential of our children. Since parents are and ought to be the successful adults in their lives, our approval will show them the way to be just like us.

10. Thou shalt be thy child's parent.

Along the way, children will have many friends, buddies, chums, classmates, pals. They will, however, have only one set of parents. In spite of all that parents give their children, the greatest gift they can give is the gift of their parenthood. Whatever else our children need or want, it is parents that are and should be the most important people in their lives.

When I hear the parent of a child or teenager refer to him or herself as the child's "friend", I cringe. There will come a time when parent and child can be friends, but that will be in adulthood. Children need lines, clear lines that are boundaries for their behavior. When we try to be friends, those lines are blurred and we leave our children without clear guides for their behavior and attitudes.

Parents are the ones that make the important decisions, such as where the child attends school, where the family attends church, where the family spends money, where God is in the context of their unique family life, what the family spends time on and when and how the family gathers on a regular basis. The parent is the one who has the right to say, "No" as much as "I love

you” and to relinquish that parenthood only to the child and only when that child is a mature, responsible adult.

I think this is the most important commandment of all. Children are and ought to be the focus of parents’ lives; otherwise, why have them? I hope that these commandments help parents to survive their children’s formative years, those years that I, the teacher, also have a hand in forming that child into a wonderful adult.