

A few years ago, my niece Michelle sat on the couch crying. She had just received word that good friends had been in a serious auto accident, hit head-on by a drunk driver. Her 3-year old son, Tyler, climbed into her lap, put his arm around her saying, "It'll be ok, mom, I'm here."

As our children grow, our hopeful prayer is they will be people of compassion, responding to others' needs.

What is our role as catechists (as parish leaders, as parents) in that? Especially in today's world, when they (we) seem to be surrounded by tragedies, is this a particular learning time? Is it calling us to a deeper formation of conscience that we are one Body in which we all have a responsibility of nurturing?

A teacher was showing children pictures of the earth from space. "Oh! We draw the lines."
"What do you mean?" asked the teacher.

"Look at the pictures. No lines. Look at the globe and our maps. Lines. We draw the lines. We're really one; nothing is dividing us up, separating us."

How do we form our consciences?

In many ways. In this short article, let us look at just one. Many researchers agree that the first moral feeling is empathy (e.g. William Damon, *The Moral Child*. NY: Free Press, 1988). The ability to feel another's suffering, need – or happiness -- is the foundation of virtue. Daniel Maguire, in his book, *The Moral Choice* (HarperCollins, 1979), likewise points out that moral judgments are affective, emotional judgments. They're basically not only from our head, but from our gut.

In reality, we have feelings because we have convictions. We have convictions because of the experiences we've had. So, the implications for catechesis (for parenting) are: what kinds of experiences do we need so that our moral, caring, compassionate sensibilities will grow?

Some things catechists (parents) can do:

- Affirm the generosity and loving actions that you see children/youth already doing. As a family was shopping for a Thanksgiving basket for the needy, the dad picked a box of generic oatmeal. His 8-year old immediately returned it to the shelf. His dad asked, "What's wrong with that?" "We bought Sugar Frosted Flakes for us. The hungry kids out there like Sugar Frosted Flakes better than generic oatmeal," he replied.

He needs to be affirmed for his sensitivity (even though it's going to cost more – but that's not the question, is it?).

- Model caring, concern and kindness. Call families to whom you minister when there is an illness or challenge in their lives.

- Stress/live community. We never teach isolated individuals; we teach them as part of a community. Encourage cooperative learning, group work, discussions so they know one another, etc.
- Tell the stories. Let them know the lives of our heroes/heroines. Invite parishioners to tell their stories of witness and service.
- Use the technique of role-playing often so they have “experiences of walking in the shoes of others.
- Frequently use open-ended stories (applying our beliefs and teachings to real life), always asking, “what would you do?”
- Don’t just talk about the needs or make things to send to others (placemats for the nursing home); go to the nursing home, the soup kitchen. Be with the people who need us. It’s the experience that forms our consciences.
- Study and live the Works of Mercy. Often we misunderstand “mercy;” it includes many things, such as care, making someone else’s problem your concern, and readiness to help those in need.
- Connect children (and their families) with the service/outreach events of the parish.
- Use contemporary resources:
 - Current events. Talk on a feeling/empathy level. (Don’t stay limited to America; what is happening elsewhere?)
 - The Random Act of Kindness movement (www.actsofkindness.org)
 - Children’s literature
- Always work with the parents. We minister to the whole family, not just the children/youth. Affirm them for all they’re doing. Continually give ideas of ways to live their faith in the world.

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