

Pros Don't Raise Cons

Proactive Parenting versus Reactive Parenting

It was supposed to be a happy day. Well, maybe not happy—it was Ash Wednesday, after all—but it wasn't supposed to start out like it did.

We rushed out the door to get our kids to Mass and school. Our youngest daughter was about four years old at the time, and to call her a girly-girl would be an understatement. She's our sassiest child, to be sure. Once, during her elementary-school years, when we asked her if she'd want to consider becoming a nun, her response was, "Can nuns wear high heels?"

We're still holding out hope that if anyone ever establishes an order called Our Lady of the Stiletto, our daughter will reopen her discernment.

On this particular morning, we were just hoping to make it through Mass peacefully. With three kids in tow, we found Mass was always one part hostage negotiation and three parts redirection. Longer Masses like the one on

Ash Wednesday posed a particular challenge in that every additional prayer only served to stretch the already-thin patience even further.

The distribution of ashes began in the usual way. The priest, deacon, and lay ministers with the ashes took their positions, and lines of parishioners formed down each aisle. Our family rose—pious as hell (how's that for an oxymoron?)—and slowly proceeded forth like the sinners we are. Our eldest two daughters received their ashes. Next up was our youngest girl—our sequin-loving, bedazzled-desiring, glitter-bomb diva. As the deacon extended his hand to mark her with the charred outward sign of Catholic penitence, our daughter quickly dodged his soot-covered thumb like she was competing in the World Dodgeball Championship. When he tried again to apply the ashes, our daughter became almost ninja-like in her reflexes.

We were both embarrassed and growing in frustration. And then, when we thought it could not get more humiliating, it happened. Our little angel—the apple of our eye—turned into a holy terror for all the parish to see. In a reaction that can only be described as quasi-liturgical self-defense, she swept her arm up, making contact with the bowl of ashes in the deacon's hand and sending it flying. The bowl soared easily twelve feet in the air before crashing down on the altar steps and discharging a cloud of dust that covered a quarter of the sanctuary.

We stood in shocked disbelief, still waiting to receive the sinner's mark that we both obviously deserved for raising such a seemingly unholy child. Like any good deacon, ours had a mustache, and said 'stache was now peppered with

the ash of burnt palm fronds. We scanned the church for a rock to crawl beneath, but to no avail. There we stood, surrounded by fellow sinners bearing the mark, but the Harts . . . we had taken “not quite holy” to stunning new heights.



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Of course, we'd love to say that was the only public display of shame we have suffered as parents, but that would be a straight lie.

There was the time our daughter, when asked by our pastor if she had listened to the homily, responded with a quick, “Which homily, Father? My dad always says you give three every Sunday.” Luckily for us, that pastor was transferred to a new parish not long after, and we could stop hiding from him.

Then there was the time our youngest child, our son, was playing with a small car he smuggled into Mass. It fell on the ground, and he disappeared to retrieve it, or so we thought. Moments later, the car was racing toward the sanctuary. It was a pull-back-and-release-to-fly-forward type of car . . . and fly forward it did. Not only did it almost take out one of the altar servers but it also offered us the unique embarrassment of having to walk up in front of the entire congregation to retrieve it.

Then there was the parent-teacher conference where we learned that our daughter was correcting the religion teacher whenever she made a mistake telling a Bible story. (For the record, Melanie is proud to say that fault lies squarely with Mark.)

And then there was the time, when asked, “Do your parents have any hobbies?” our daughter promptly responded, “Does sitting on the couch, holding hands, and drinking wine count as a hobby?”

The list goes on. You get the idea.

Baby Steps (in the Wrong Direction?)

What a beautiful mess we are, huh? A work in progress, if you will.

During some months and seasons, we do a good job maintaining quality family time and regular prayer together, and other times, we are a spiritual train wreck. Of course, our deepest desire and hope for our kids is that they will not only love and live out their Catholic faith but, ultimately, make it to heaven. It's likely yours, too.

We learned early on with our children that intentions weren't enough. Actions follow beliefs. If we believe in God and in the importance of the faith, then it's not enough to say we are Catholic; we have to live it.

Yes, our daughter caused an ash explosion, but at least we made it to Mass—and on Ash Wednesday, which isn't even a holy day of obligation! Sure, our child unintentionally insulted our pastor's lengthy and digressive homilies, but at least she was listening (if not to him, to her father)! While our son's toy car interrupted the liturgy and embarrassed

us all, at least it allowed the other—far better—parents in the pews that day to exit feeling affirmed and more confident about their own child-rearing! Yes, our child disrespectfully corrected her teacher's flawed biblical recounts and miniheresies, but at least she had learned the stories well enough to notice the errors. She believed that her classmates deserved the correct version of sacred writ. And, yes, our daughter made us sound like full-blown alcoholics with her wine comment, but at least she got to see her parents cuddling up and enjoying time together.



Actions follow beliefs.



We can obviously improve when it comes to our children's Mass behavior, their interpersonal communication skills (or lack thereof), and our ongoing witness to them, but none of these embarrassing moments would have occurred if we weren't proactively trying to introduce them to the faith at church, at home, and at school.

Think of it this way. If you are sitting in a car, is it easier to turn the wheels if the car is moving or parked? The answer is when the car is in motion, of course. When you sit in a parked car on a driveway, it can be really tough to turn the wheels. When the car is moving, though—even in the wrong direction—it's a lot easier. You may be barreling down a road in the way opposite of your deepest hopes

and intentions, but at least you're moving and not stagnant! That's why no matter how successful you have or haven't been with your parenting, especially in regard to handing on the faith, there is always hope.

Right about now, some of you may be feeling really good about yourselves because your children are so well behaved, and God bless you for it! Well done. Others of you might be feeling better because your parenting doesn't seem so bad in comparison. And then, a few of you may be identifying with us, saying, "We can relate." Lastly, those souls praying for or currently awaiting children are wondering what the secret is to never having these situations arise.

The Million-Dollar Answer

"Wait until your father gets home!" was a frequently uttered threat in Mark's childhood. It could be translated to mean, "You've got about another two hours of freedom before you meet your Maker."

Now that we are parents, we recognize that when Mark's mother made this sort of comment, she was likely feeling overwhelmed and was *reacting* to specific situations. Reacting without thinking is understandable. Who among us hasn't flipped out on our kids occasionally? We admit that we don't always step back to gather our composure and remember that we love our kids before responding in stressful situations. We are certainly guilty of this, but we're constantly trying to practice *proactive* instead of *reactive* parenting.

Consider these classic scenarios that often give rise to a reaction in a parent:

- Your child's room is a mess with clothes all over the floor.
- Your child dings the car for the first time or gets their first speeding ticket.
- Your child doesn't study and fails a test.
- Your child misses curfew.
- Your child stares at their screen rather than making eye contact and listening to you.
- Your child deliberately disobeys when you ask them to stop doing x or y.
- Your child rolls their eyes when you are correcting them.
- Your child lies to you about something, and you catch them in the lie.
- Your child talks back to you with disrespect.

These common moments of preadolescent or adolescent life often stir a reaction in parents, no matter how patient they are. It's normal. It's human. Reactions, however, rarely yield the results we desire. Rather than defusing the situation, reacting tends to pour kerosene on the fire. Now the child in question feels not only ashamed but also attacked.



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So, what is the secret to raising “good” kids, or getting kids to like Mass, or developing kids who want to stay in the Catholic faith? What’s the million-dollar answer?

The secret is that there is no secret. There is no easy, one-size-fits-all, magic-bullet answer to the question. *It’s all about being proactive and taking each situation one at a time.* To extend the million-dollar question, it’s as if God is placing a challenge before you as a parent.

Let’s say that getting your children to heaven is going to cost you one million dollars and that, just for argument’s sake, you actually had the million dollars. God would say to you, “It’s going to cost you the million dollars, but I don’t want you to write me a check. I want you to pay it out one dollar at a time, multiple times a day.” Put simply, every moment we as parents choose patience or breathe peace rather than reacting in annoyance or anger, we are paying out one dollar.

If we have the ears of heaven, we can almost hear the money transfer one bill at a time. Your child’s room is always a mess, and instead of yelling, you calmly sit down with them (preferably not in the pigsty they call a room), explain why it’s important to take care of their belongings, and discuss both expectations and consequences moving forward. Right there is one dollar toward the million.

The key in these moments is to remember that whatever the situation . . . it’s not about you. You have been given these children—these adolescents—to direct and form and guide. Don’t take any situation personally, even if your kids lean toward language or behavior you find disrespectful or thoughtless.



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Often as parents, if our child disobeys, breaks the rules, or goes against our will, we take it personally. The thing is, though, that it's not personal. They're kids. When they're emotional or lazy or sassy, you might want to react, but that won't change their behavior and it won't teach them anything. They're not doing anything *to* you. They merely did something wrong. They broke a rule; they pushed a boundary. Where parents go wrong is to focus more than on their personal feelings of annoyance or disrespect than on the child's development.

If your child walks in late for curfew or brings in their first speeding ticket, rather than flying into a rage regarding their irresponsibility or the unnecessary worry they've caused, call them out for it (calmly) and ask them to wait in another room to talk about their consequence. Before you decide on the consequence, say a prayer of thanksgiving that they are okay. Then pray a Hail Mary to calm your heart before discussing the consequence. Once you have set and communicated the punishment—the phone or keys taken, for instance—engage in a stern yet loving conversation that reaffirms your great love for them and desire for their

ultimate safety. You'll also need to talk about what happens when trust is broken. You can almost hear a twenty-dollar bill getting transferred from your account on that one.

When a child talks back, it can be infuriating. Practically speaking, however, we need to ask ourselves, "Why are they talking back?" and "If I lose my temper and raise my voice, is it really going to help the situation or just make it worse?" Perhaps when we ask a normal question, they quickly get defensive. How can we parent them in a way that focuses on and reveals why they are getting defensive, rather than devolving into an argument of he said/she said? Where is that defensiveness coming from? Is it, perhaps, the reaction we model as parents? Did Mom or Dad come across in an accusatory or attacking way? Did we get too emotionally involved, and now they are simply mirroring what they witnessed in us?

The most important thing we can do in parenting—above everything else—is to respect our children. It is the foundation for everything. Simply put, if we don't respect our children, they will not respect us. "Do as I say, not as I do" is not only an antiquated and philosophically poor approach; it's also hypocritical and often outright scarring.

This is what St. Paul was speaking about when he told parents to love each other and their kids and not to provoke one another to anger (see Ephesians 6:1–4, Colossians 3:18–21, and 1 Thessalonians 2:10–12). Surely he knew that parents love their children, but he also knew that in our humanity there are times that it *does not come across to them that we do*.