

Parenting into the 21st century

By David Gibson
NC News Service

A child who is 5 years old today will turn 21 in the year 2001.

If that child's parents are like many others, they know that during the next 16 years they will be doing what parents always have done — loving and nurturing a unique human person. Undoubtedly they also suspect that the challenges they encounter will be uniquely colored by our times.

On the plus side, the parents may sense that helping to prepare a child for adulthood in the 21st century could prove fascinating, offering them the opportunity to learn new things right along with their child.

But the parents also know that during the next 16 years their child must learn how to make decisions based on values — even when their peer group doesn't support them much. And the child must beat a path around the drug culture, which was not such a problem in the parents' youth.

I could cite many reasons why parents feel the challenges they face are new and different today:

•The so-called "age of mobility" can exact a price from parents. Living far from most relatives means there may be moments — emergencies and minor emergencies — when you don't know where to turn for advice or assistance.

•Living in an age of psychology is another factor. Parents may feel that in light of the new science of psychology, more is required to-

day in terms of relating to each child. Where, they may ask, can people learn more about being a good parent?

•The so-called "age of information" causes many parents to ask what it means to be a late-20th-century guide for children. Parents may ask: What kind of education do children need in the computer age?

•Finally, many parents realize how much rests on their shoulders when it comes to communicating values to children — helping children learn to serve others, to respect life's dignity in all people, to view sexuality responsibly, to love God.

In light of similar considerations, a Baptist educator, Margaret M. Sawin, wrote in a book titled "Parish Religious Education" (Paulist): "If families are to be oases of strength and security, they need support from the wider community. This is generally not forthcoming in today's society, particularly in suburbia."

Even so, not all parents rank parenthood among their most bewildering tasks. In a parish renewal group recently, a father of two teen-agers told how much at peace he felt about his parenting role. He said he couldn't identify with the apprehensions voiced by some other parents in the group — that his real questions were in other areas.

His attitude was different from that of another father in my parish who once referred to child rearing as a "crap shoot." It was a telling comment.

Parents in every past age must have felt that they faced new questions not faced by their own parents before them.

"Parenting is changing in form and function all the time," wrote Mary Jane Saia and Judith M. Boyle, two New Jersey educators, in a chapter they contributed to a 1983 adult education resource titled "Christian Adulthood" (U.S. Catholic Conference). "In truth, there has never been a prolonged period of stability in parenthood," the two educators wrote.

Perhaps there never were any definitive models for parents to emulate, they added. Nonetheless, "parenting in the '80s is often fraught with tension." In a simpler society, "parenting may have seemed less conflicted, less tumultuous."

(Gibson is editor of Faith Today.)

FOOD...

...for thought

Recently a worried mother approached Sister of St. Joseph Dolores Clerico, concerned about her teen-ager's preoccupation with bicycling. He spent so much time racing and training for races, the mother reported, that he had no other social life.

"Is this normal?" she asked.

That question is typical of concerns parents bring to family ministers, Sister Clerico said. She is the assistant director of the Family Life Office in the Diocese of Camden, N.J., and has worked in family ministry full time for more than five years.

Parents today need a lot of "reassuring that what they're going through is normal," Sister Clerico said. Many parents don't fully "trust their ability" or "they feel that what they're doing isn't good enough."

She explained that an important goal of family ministry is to set up a process to help families and parents "to share their strengths and limitations with others" who share similar experiences and values.

Sister Clerico added that the Camden diocese consistently gets calls from parishes for help in serving parents. In response to those calls, the diocese has developed some programs.

"There's a great need to support new parents," Sister Clerico commented. Many mothers are older now and are

accustomed to the independence and intellectual stimulation of working. If they're home full time, many miss that stimulation.

In one parish she knows of, a group was started at the initiative of two new mothers. In other parishes staff persons organize the groups.

Sister Clerico explained that the main function of the groups is support — allowing new parents to share what they're going through and to receive information on parenting.

The diocese makes available film strips and packaged programs for new parent groups to use, such as "Family," Father John Powell's three-week video series (Argus Communications, Allen, Texas).

—Another program the diocese sponsors is the Systematic Training for Effective Parenting program authored by Don Dinkmeyer and Gary McKay (American Guidance Service, Circle Pines, Minn.). This nine-week educational series also known as STEP includes lectures, discussions and activities, Sister Clerico said.

STEP aims at building up skills for parents and at finding ways for parents to "relate more effectively with their children," she added. The diocese makes available trained volunteers to direct the program.

...for discussion

1. Do you think parents today encounter problems and challenges not encountered by parents 40 years ago? What are some of those problems, in your view?

2. If you were asked to help form a support group of parents to exchange views on modern parenthood, what question would you most like to bring before the group at its first meeting?

3. What are some of the obstacles to communication within the family that you have encountered? What can be done about those obstacles?

4. Based on conversations you have had with friends, what are some factors that cause stress for parents in your community? Are there ways for parents to support each other when it comes to dealing with those factors?

SECOND HELPINGS

"Marriage and Family Living" is a monthly magazine aimed at providing practical information for parents and individuals interested in maintaining or improving family relationships. In an article in the April 1985 issue about how to deal with conflict, family counselor Agnes Albany notes that "withdrawal, evasion and flight" are the routine ways many people avoid facing difficulties in relationships. She suggests that, for family members, following Christ "lies not in protecting from but rather facing the day-to-day issues of life without evading them or repressing them." She adds that this doesn't mean "submission or making peace at any price. It does not embrace angry rebuttal or blame of others. It is struggling in an honest exchange to find the way through a maze of troubled and troubling relationships." (Marriage and Family Living, Box 9148, St. Meinrad, Ind. 47577. Single issue, \$1.50.)

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Daughters too were cherished, loved, protected. "A daughter is a treasure that keeps her father wakeful, and worry over her drives away rest; lest she pass her prime unmarried, or when she is married, lest she be disliked" (Sirach 42:9).

Again, this concern was evidence of a deep love. Recall the desperate plea Jairus made to Jesus: "My little daughter is critically ill. Please come and lay your hands on her that she may get well and live" (Mark 5:23).

Mutually accepted order, discipline, respect and love, peace, security — these were meant to mark family life in Old Testament times.

(Father Castelot teaches at St. John's Seminary, Plymouth, Mich.)

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