



# Teaching Virtues

## *Education in the Human Virtues as the Basis of Genuine Freedom*

In Harkaway Hills College, we emphasise the development of human virtues as the basis of strength of character. Virtues enable a person to be self-directing in life - to be truly free. A virtue is a readiness in one's character to act in a particular way for a good motive. Simply speaking, it is a good habit and so is acquired by carrying out some good act with some regularity. Over time this regularity builds an enduring strength in one's character. Freedom is not mere freedom from constraints but a capacity to carry noble convictions into action. Too often we can find ourselves limited and inhibited by our own failings, ignorance or unquestioning conformity. The family, where an overriding motivation is the welfare of the other members, is the environment *par excellence* for fostering virtue.

Ultimately, the capacity to truly **love** others and to be happy is a consequence of character with a well-rounded development of virtues.

Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it.

John Paul II *Redemptor Hominis* 10

## Early childhood

In a young child the foundations of virtue are built by example, encouragement and affection, routines, close follow up, and punishments imposed without anger. Parental unity is very important so messages and expectations are clear and consistent. Home timetables and small responsibilities all help to consolidate good behaviours. In particular parents' emotional example is vital: from witnessing what gives joy to their parents, children are motivated to dedicate themselves to others, to work hard, to be sincere etc. If they are able to witness the calmness and patience with which parents put up with difficulties and discomforts, children learn to make light of setbacks, they learn perseverance, and to have an optimistic mindset. Above all, by witnessing the generous love and dedication of their parents towards each other, they receive crucial foundations in the generosity that underpins all true love.

## Later childhood

When a child is older the focus continues on orderly routines and clear parental expectations, but attention to forming the mind becomes more and more important. Children learn better to think for themselves when they are allowed to offer their opinion, when they are empowered make certain decisions, when they have the opportunity to debrief after challenges and learn from their mistakes. If ever necessary, punishments should fix what went wrong, and help a child remedy the consequences of poor actions.

In these years children are able to take far more responsibility for their own character improvement. They respond very well if encouraged to act from motives of charity towards a parent or one of their sisters or brothers. Home atmosphere and family example continue to play a major role, consolidating the habits acquired in earlier years. The value of a positive peer group becomes very noticeable also at this time.

## Teenage Years

In teenage years, a boy or girl develops the adult capacity for independent action based on personal conviction. It is good and natural that teenagers should want more and more freedom and autonomy; it is a prerequisite for a mature personality.

Parents should not be scared when they observe a growing independent spirit in their son or daughter. They should not react with panic and legislate rules as if their teenager were still a child. Nor should they retard the development of their offspring by smothering him with childish pampering. But neither should they look on fondly as their teenager exhibits every sort of silly, superficial behaviour, naively justifying it with words such as "kids will be kids". Habits are becoming established and for all good behaviours there are very good reasons; give the reasons. Pick your battles, but hold to your expectations when it is a matter of physical or moral danger. Explain the challenge and establish clear expectations, but avoid arguments.

Virtues are not fostered impersonally, and character development is not automatic. A teenager will grow in virtue because he or she is encouraged personally to improve himself, to seek higher ideals, and to act from better motives. Parents must be close to each child, talking frequently and confidently to their teenage son and daughter so that they can provide this

affectionate encouragement. The foundations for such a relationship are sown in the friendship and time spent together in childhood years.

Only if such a close relationship exists will the firm, clear guidelines needed in teenage years be trustingly accepted. And only through such a close relationship will the parent have sufficient sensitivity and understanding for their teenager's thoughts and feelings, and sufficient respect for his or her legitimate freedom.