



## Driving them Mad

### ***There are so many ways for fathers to get it wrong***

I suspect I really annoy my children! But then I'm still on L-plates. One day I'll learn how to parent, but for now I'm just trying hard.

There's not a lot in the Bible on how to parent teenagers. Principles, yes, but little of the detail. Which is helpful because we can rest assured on the principles and then use personal intuition and spiritually directed creativity to carry out the task.

Though there's not much in Scripture, it's paper warfare on the subject in bookstores. Probably there's more been written on parenting in recent decades than the world's bookshelves have room to contain them. There's a healthy debate and review of these taking place on the pages of *The Briefing*.

Paul's word to fathers has always intrigued me: "*Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.*" (Col. 3:21). The NIV word "embitter" means to stir up, the same word used by Paul when he commended the Corinthians for their generosity and enthusiasm — saying that their example "stirred up" others to action (2 Cor. 9:2). The word can be used for stirring up for good or for evil — the context of the verse making clear the meaning.

There's a parallel verse that also catches my attention: "*Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord*" (Eph. 6:4). This word "exasperate" means to provoke to anger. The same form of this word is used as a noun in Ephesians 4:26 in the sense of "an angry mood". There is little difference between the two words Paul uses (Colossians/Ephesians), whether we're embittering or exasperating — we're still getting our parenting wrong!

Exasperation comes easily in my home. There are some things I seem to be good at. Progress in holiness ... 3/10; exasperating children ... 9/10!

Exasperation comes when I fail to take into consideration age distinction. I need to change my parenting method according to age (theirs, not mine). To state the obvious: somewhere in the pre-teens corporal punishment ceases; somewhere in the teen years direction and correction must give way to advice and counsel. My children, thankfully, aren't to become replicas of myself and my wife, and I need to allow for individual differences and degrees of independence during the teen years. I don't continue to parent in the same way or I will really annoy my children!

Exasperation comes when I don't listen to my children without interrupting and correcting. Conversations are delicate episodes with teens. Often they just don't exist (especially when forced or expected, say, at mealtimes) but then they will often erupt at most unexpected moments or late at night. I must be able to seize these moments even though the body clock of my children has switched into nocturnal mode (whereas mine is closing down) and listen and share without impatience and with a generous heart. Not everything has to be corrected. Not every issue has to be challenged and sorted out on the spot. Some issues can wait for another day.

Exasperation comes when I live with hypocrisy in my life. When my children see my inconsistency between what I profess to be with others and what I'm like at home in front of the TV, or at meal times.

This is an acute test for pastors, we are so giving, forgiving and generous with our high-maintenance people in the parish, yet so short and tight with our family.

Children notice that we drop everything to answer the phone and engage in long and helpful conversations with a parishioner and yet are offended because we are uninterested and selfish when it comes to conversations within the family. Sometimes, as pastors we behave as if our life is the most important in the family, and when our role takes priority. Children are offended when we treat a parish caller with more courtesy than we treat their mother.

Exasperation comes when I don't take time off to spend with my teen children. The kinder nativity play is easy to attend (especially for the first child, then less so with the others). We take notice of the first day at school, the school musical, netball, aerobics — events which are all noticed and commended. But later, the test is, will I still be available for them. It can be harder to celebrate and to share in their older, more subtle, less obvious achievements and special moments. Still able to praise the older teen, have a day out with them. Enjoy driving lessons with them; take them out for coffee, to a film, the footy.

Neglect hurts, and children are exasperated when they see attention given to all the cute things of childhood, and yet scant attention to events and issues that are even more important to teenagers; issues admittedly that are harder for us to understand, at least initially.

Exasperation comes when I fail to appreciate the goal — to see my children as productive, capable and mature adults. I want to visualise my children as able (through practice) to make lots of good decisions without reference to me anymore. Able and willing to take the consequences of decisions and work through them. Risk-taking is part of life's training — calculated risk-taking, like the mother bird encouraging her young to leap out of the nest in order to learn to fly. Overprotection and constant referral to my value system and self made parameters is exasperating.

So, what's my advice on parenting?

What's the best method? There's no definitive answer. But I do have a final word. Enjoy your children and love them. John Newton, the great preacher and hymn-writer of the evangelical awakening in Britain said of his father: *"I know that my father loved me — but he did not seem to wish me to see it."* How sad!

I'm not a good father, I make lots of mistakes, but I love being a father and I enjoy my children's company — always. I'm never too tired or distracted to see them or to listen to them or to speak with them. I love to share in their life and their life's achievements. It is well documented that fathers spend, on average, 20 minutes a week (aside from collective mealtimes) in direct contact with their sons! One wonders how these surveys reach conclusions, because I read of another that says: fathers spend an average of 37 seconds a day with their children!

Let's err on the side of caution and take the 20 minutes a week survey — why the distance between ourselves and our children? Don't we like them anymore? Is our work more important?

On our retirement day, when speeches are made I'm sure I won't be saying: "My one regret is that I didn't spend more time at the office." What do you think it might be?

Enjoy being with your children, their conversation, their friends, their achievements and delight in their future.

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