



Church

MARCH 2008

CHAT

The Family

The Catholic Church puts emphasis on the importance of family life. A happy and stable family provides the kind of atmosphere in which a child learns to relate to others – to care, to share, to love, to forgive.

*The family is ...
the domestic Church.
In it parents should,
by their word and example,
be the first teacher
of the faith to
their children.*

VATICAN COUNCIL II
CONSTITUTION ON THE CHURCH, #11

You probably already know from your own life experience that the family is where a child first learns that he or she is loved and accepted. This learning begins the moment the newborn baby is placed in his or her mother's arms. For the infant who is loved, there is an immediate feeling of comfort, warmth, security, and acceptance. This forms the basis of the child's image of self.

So parents are their children's first and most important teachers. In this role they are never off duty. Everything they do and say in some way influences their children.

As children, and especially as adolescents and young adults, we become keenly aware of how our parents speak to others, how they treat others, how

they cope with disagreements, and how they tolerate and forgive others. As very young children, we likely saw our parents as nearly perfect, but as we grow we become more and more aware of the fact that our parents are human – and therefore, *not* perfect.

Whether we are speaking of a parent's love for his or her child or a child's love for his or her parent, *real love* exists when we tolerate, forgive, understand, and accept another *despite the imperfections*. This is what is meant by **unconditional love**. The best parents love us under any and all conditions. This certainly does *not* mean that they must tolerate or accept our improper *actions*. (Responsible and loving parents will always set limits and guidelines that keep us safe and teach us right from wrong.) Unconditional love means that we are loved simply for *who* we are – not what we *do*.

Jesus loved others unconditionally. He did not care if people were rich or poor, male or female, healthy or ill, upright or sinful. Jesus looked past all the external qualities and right into people's hearts. He sometimes challenged them to change their behaviour – "Go your way, and from now on do not sin again" (John 8:11) – but he never withheld his love. In many ways, Jesus modeled the perfect parent.

Work on Acceptance

Today's families come in all shapes and sizes. Many of us come from two-parent families and many of us live

primarily with one parent. Most of today's families keep a busy schedule. Young people are involved in more activities than ever outside of school. Both parents work outside the home in an increasing number of families. The financial challenges facing today's families are sometimes overwhelming.

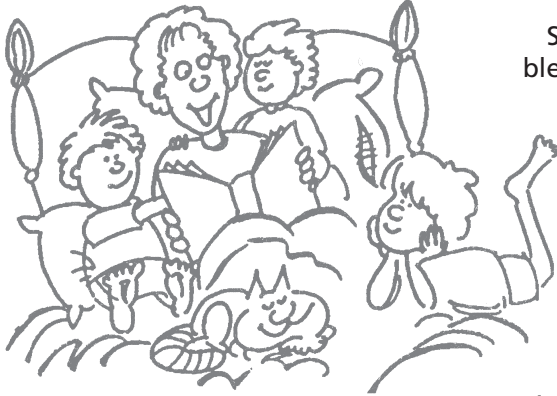
It is human nature to wish we had a better family situation. We might wish our parents earned better incomes like the parents of our friends. We might wish Dad worked less and was home more or that we came from what we think of as a normal two-parent family. Other families may seem like they have more fun, have more money, argue less, go on better vacations, and so on.

Acceptance does *not* mean that we cannot question or challenge family members when we believe that something is wrong. Questioning and challenging are important parts of growing up. Perhaps the most difficult aspect of acceptance is knowing when to *challenge* and when to *let go*.

Sometimes we gain better acceptance of our family with the help of a trusted friend, teacher, counselor, or member of the clergy. This is especially true if our family situation is unusually difficult or stressful. We may need help with sorting out our feelings and finding healthy ways to cope with things (and people) we may not be able to change. Help from outside our families can also shine new light on the really positive qualities about our families, too!

Making Time for Moments That Matter

The hectic pace of today's society cries out for time to be quiet with God. But with homework, meetings, after-school jobs, and athletic activities, how do we work in quiet moments for prayer and moments that matter with the people in our family?

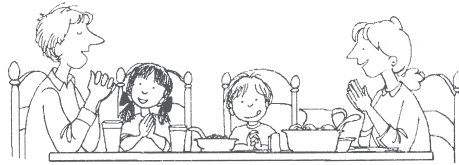


A widowed mother of four finds her moment at bedtime. She sets a quiet mood by piling the children into her own bed for reading time.

This is followed by a decade of the rosary prayed together, with emphasis on the mystery. After adding personal prayers, it's off to their beds for a good-night kiss from Mom. As simple as this little routine sounds, it reassures the children that they are loved by both God and Mom. Parents cannot leave their children with any greater gift.

For many families, especially those with teens, dinner is sometimes the only together time. As young people, we can help to make dinnertime into moments that matter.

First, we can do our best – and encourage everyone in the family to do their best – to be available at dinner time as many days of the week as possible. Try to make Sundays a must. Sundays are also great days to



include grandparents and other members of the extended family. Some families bring out the nice dishes on Sunday, a simple symbol of the sacredness of the Lord's Day.

Slow down the daily mealtime blessing by lighting a candle that remains at the center of the table.

Light the baptismal candles of family members on the anniversary dates of their baptisms.

Always ask for special intentions during prayer time. This is a great way to find out what is pressing on the minds of others.

Finally, make sure that dinnertime is free of eternal distractions. Turn off the television and any loud music. Let the answering machine take care of the phone. Concentrate on conversation. Listen. Ask questions. Let others know you care.

Moments that matter can also be made during more difficult circumstances. A divorced father who sees his two sons only on weekends chose Sunday morning for his moments. They attend Mass together and then extend the celebration with a big breakfast. Sometimes they go out for pancakes or ice cream. Sometimes they have fun doing all the cooking at home. As they eat, this particular father always tries to include some discussion of the morning's gospel. Again, this father is communicating to his sons the message that they are loved.

Let your parents know what moments matter to you in your family's life together. Your parents may not know how much Friday night movies or Sunday afternoon football means to you. Make *time* for moments that

matter. Let your parents know that *you* regard these times as important. Help encourage the members of your family to appreciate and be present for special family traditions. It might help to invite girlfriends and boyfriends to become part of the family togetherness and to experience the goodness of just being together.

Pray Always



Perhaps one of the most important ways we can affect the quality of our family life is through prayer – prayer together and prayer alone. Make sure to ask God for help with the daily challenges that come with being a member of your family. Families are complex, and so often their problems are, too. We need the gifts of the Holy Spirit to help us become happy, productive, life-giving members of our families. Each and every day, make time to pray!