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Dr Mark Dooley



MORAL MATTERS

How a baby is a real lesson in life and love

IT all happened in a single day. Our youngest child, who will turn three at the weekend, got his first haircut. We loved his long curls, but we also knew he was beginning to resemble the lead singer from Status Quo.

Later that day, while climbing out of his cot, he managed to wedge his knee between the bars.

In that moment of panic, we decided the bars had to go. That night, he slept for the very first time in a bed.

It was as if, in one day, our little baby became a boy. After nine years of constant use, our cot suddenly became redundant. Our son had taken a giant leap forward, and so had we.

Sadness is mixed with joy. We lament his no longer being a baby and yet we are elated that this little being is maturing so beautifully. For this was a child who started life as no child should.

Shortly after his birth, he returned to hospital for what should have been a routine procedure to remove a hernia. The operation was complicated, resulting in him being cut open a second time. It was a traumatic start which still causes us distress.

Three years on, however, and we have a sweet child who only gets upset when he fails to please. That is why, since moving to his 'new bed', he has not once attempted to hop out. For him, being good is top priority.

My three boys are so distinct in so many ways. What makes them different are natural or genetic traits which parents cannot change. Yet, it is also true that no child is born into a 'state of nature'.

From the moment of birth, we are surrounded by the 'chains of custom'. We do not choose our names, our language or history. They are the gifts of culture, transmitted to us by our parents.

If parents make or break their children, it is because we are not just biological organisms. We are people shaped and formed by the cultural influences which surround us.

Anyone can care for a child's physical needs, but caring for their soul requires nothing less than everything.

My decade as a father has taught me that providing children with their basic necessities is only one part of parenthood. The hardest part is tending to their personalities, thus ensuring they grow up as responsible and likeable adults.

Hard though it is, what parent can afford to neglect their child's moral development? Sadly, many do. I was

recently standing at a supermarket checkout when I witnessed a young mother roaring at her baby son.

This was not a parent's natural frustration, but a disturbing display of cruelty.

Using language too foul to print, she warned the child what would happen if he did not conform.

No child can flourish in such conditions. In the absence of love, what destiny awaits that poor infant? His innocent eyes, so heavy with tears, seemed devoid of hope.

Like all parents, I have made plenty of mistakes. There are certain things I wish I had done differently, things I wish I had not said in the heat of the moment. Still, I have tried hard to learn from those mistakes.

If our three-year-old desires to be good, it is because I have discovered the best way to shape personality is to lead by example.

I now know a parent's every word and gesture has direct consequences in the life of their children. It is we who sow the seeds of their future happiness or otherwise.

HIS first haircut and first night in his new bed was followed by his first bout of gardening with me. I have bonded with all my boys over the lawnmower. Side by side, we have walked up and down the lawn armed with our toys.

As I watched him becoming one with the soil, I recalled that awful day in Crumlin Hospital when our world collapsed.

I recalled the nurse carrying him out of his second surgery, laying him gently in his mother's arms and the two of them sobbing inconsolably. I remember thinking that, even though he had just come into our lives, we could not possibly survive without him.

First things are also last things. His baby curls are gone forever. He will never again sleep in a cot, and the excitement of discovering the garden will soon fade.

It doesn't matter, for these changes are proof he is on track. They are small milestones on life's way, hurdles we all must clear as we journey onwards. For us, however, they are nothing short of little miracles.

Despite his shocking start, we have a child who never ceases to smile and who has shown us all what it means to love. I suppose we can take some credit for this but only some.

In the end, he has taught me that the chains of custom are forged from love, and, where they don't exist, a state of nature is the only alternative on offer.

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