THE AGE OF INNOCENCE AND INTIMACY

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A father’s role in developing a sense of intimacy in his sons and daughters takes different forms depending upon the age of the children and the educational environment. The father’s role in instilling a sense of a man’s intimacy increases as the age of innocence approaches puberty. Up until this time, a father’s place is very important but much of the intimacy comes from the relationship with the mother. The mother’s nurturing affection and attention allow the child to grow within secure warmth of their mother’s love. The child’s innocence is protected by the virtues, which the family practices.

BOUNDARIES

Fathers and mothers establish and define boundaries to would protect the child and help the child to understand the importance of those boundaries. Some of the boundaries have to do with protection against strangers. Others have to do with the area and times that children can play or restrictions concerning leaving the property or going into some one’s home without permission. There would be rules about behavior in another’s home and what TV programs, movies or activities would be permissible for the child. This would be true not only in someone else’s home but of course, in one’s own. There is a constant movement of modesty to protect the age of innocence.

There would be rules about dress and speech that the child would be exposed to. Simple things like, “do not come out of the bedroom without a robe or without your clothes on.” Or “close the door when you go into the bath room” are natural reminders to children about intimacy and modesty.

Fathers teach their children also about modesty of speech in helping them understand what things are appropriate to say in public or in front of others and what are not. Every parent, at least once, has had the little darling blurt out something that was said in private that was never intended for others to hear. “Aunt Louise, dad said you were struggling with your diet. Don’t you like being fat?”

One of the most practical ways to help children protect intimacy is to guard what we ourselves say. If the intimacy of others is to be protected then it should not be talked about in front of the children. Growing up in an Italian household my parents never ever said anything revealing about any of the relatives. We never heard anything about points of intimacy. However, they would often switch from English to Italian and we all knew that it was something that we were not meant to hear. We sometimes wondered if the reason that they did not teach us Italian in the home was not really so that we would assimilate more easily but rather so that they could talk in front of us without our having a clue what was being said. Whatever the truth, the lesson was effective: there are things that are not appropriate for children to hear. I am not suggesting that parents learn a second language but rather that parents must be aware of what they say in front of children and guard their intimacy and modesty.

This would include the types of things about the children themselves that parents would discuss in front of others. Discretion is always a part of setting these boundaries in the early years and children become aware of whether or not boundaries exist to protect their intimacy. Thus when children themselves tend to reveal too much of themselves the parents need to talk to them privately about discretion and considering how much of themselves they reveal to others. These social boundaries help to establish the physical boundaries later on.
VIGILANCE IN THE CLASSROOM

With this in mind it is important that fathers take an active role in what kinds of things are discussed in the classroom. Discussions should have to do with public or academic issues and the more personal issues should not be brought up in class. For example, a particular school system instructed its teachers to get the children to “share a traumatic moment from their family life.” It went on to suggest the teachers get plenty of Kleenex ready. A father went down to the school when he heard this and pulled his child out of class and demanded that the practice be discontinued. What he taught his child was a very important lesson: i.e., that kind of information is very intimate and personal and is nobody else’s business outside of this family.

This happens to be a problem in American culture. We tend to encourage children to share intimate things in settings that are not appropriate. It confuses the child and creates problems. For example, a little girl who would share such a private matter might be applauded by the teacher for sharing this story with the class. The other children are simply children and may ridicule the child or not know what to do with it and carry the story about to others.

More importantly though, the little girl gets the feeling that the other children have a right to this information and the social boundary becomes obscure. Little “Bobby” sits and listens to these stories and over the years the obscurity increases until Bobby likes the girl who is now fifteen. He presses her for physical intimacy and he feels obligated because it seems he has a right to that knowledge as well since he has shared so much until now.

The failure to respect social boundaries is more common a problem then one might at first think. Even in areas of friendship between members of the opposite sex there has to be vigilance. All too often a friendship arises with a member of the opposite sex who seems very understanding. Time is spent. Discussions become more private and revealing. Social intimacy grows until someone or something is compromised. It is a consideration for adults and for young adults but the boundaries must begin in childhood and it is important that the father helps set them.

INTIMATE THINGS IN INTIMATE SETTINGS

The simple rule is, “intimate things belong in an intimate setting.” The family is the most intimate setting and therefore the more intimate the issue the more it belongs to the family. The more public, the more it can be discussed in a public forum. This rule wisely covers the discretion of “sex ed.” programs and what is appropriate for schools and families.

Throughout the age of innocence the role of the father is irreplaceable as parents work to provide a safe environment that respects the dignity of each child and protects their intimacy through the virtues and values that they instill within the home.