

Homily for the Feast of the Holy Family

St. Joseph's Neier

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Central Idea: Raising children is a curious blend of affection, challenge and fun, under the guidance of the Spirit of God.

*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly,
as in all wisdom you teach and admonish one another,
singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs
with gratitude in your hearts to God.*

Whenever I have a couple come in for marriage preparation, I am always very honest with them. I tell them the obvious: I am not married. I find it ironic that the one person in the Christian community who outwardly avoids the Sacrament of Marriage is also the one person who prepares couples for the Sacrament. With that being the case, I am cautious about the advice I give them.

I am also very cautious about giving parents advice on raising their children. Although I have a bit more experienced in this area, having taught for 30 years and having read extensively about child psychology and behavior and what works and what doesn't, I am still a bit cautious about dispensing recommendations in this area, since, surprise, surprise, I don't actually have any children of my own.

With that said, let me tell you how to raise your kids! ;)

You could call this homily: A lot I learned about raising children I learned from lab rats!

It is a disturbing fact, but lab rats have a similar brain structure to human beings. That is why scientists study them, since we really don't like doing the things we do to lab rats to actual human children. What they have discovered is fascinating.

You have all of these baby rats with a momma rat. You take a baby rat out of the cage and it gets, understandably, stressed. This stress causes a chemical reaction, called the HPA reaction in the lab rat. HPA stands for hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal and it explains how stress causes a cascade of chemicals to flow through our system. The stress reaction is the same in human beings. This was a good thing when we were being chased by lions in pre-historic times. This is not so good today. Too much stress causes all sorts of ailments like heart disease, obesity and deep set psychological problems. The baby rat being stressed is bad, very, very bad.

When the baby rat is put back into the cage, momma comes to the rescue, usually. Instead of TLC, she gives them a little LG. LG stands for licking and grooming. The

mother rat comes over and licks the baby. This LG has a calming effect on the baby rat and actually reverses the chemical reaction in the baby. In other words the LG helps calm the HPA. In time, the baby rat is back to its normal happy rat state. What is fascinating is that it doesn't even have to be the biological mother who is doing the LG, any caring rat can do it. It takes a village to calm a rat.

The thrust of all this rat talk, I hope, is clear: Too much stress in the life of your child is not only a bad thing, it is a destructive thing, with long term physical, psychological and even neurological consequences. Although I do not advise actually licking your children, that's a bit strange, but you are called to nurture and console them. Your affection, your warmth, your love is not just a nice thing to do, it is a necessary thing to do in order to raise a healthy, balanced child. . .to a point.

This is where it gets *really* interesting.

We know that too much smothering, too much LG if you will, can eventually get in the way of a child becoming a full adult. Eventually, a child has become independent; has to become their own person. The purpose of parenting is to make yourself obsolete. Eventually, a child needs to learn a painful lesson, a difficult lesson, a vital lesson, a lesson that, I believe will pay incredible dividends in their futures. The child needs to learn how to do tough things, how to stick with difficult tasks and most of all, the child needs to learn how to "resist the marshmallow."

This study was done with humans, not lab rats. They took children and they sat them at a desk and put a single marshmallow on the desk. The researchers told them that they would be back in 20 minutes and if they didn't eat the marshmallow, they would receive a second marshmallow which then they could eat both of them at the same time. Some kids gobbled the treat immediately. Some were a tad more inventive. They devised ways to ignore the sweet during the 20 minutes: some looked away, some sang to themselves, one little boy took a nap. In other words, they resisted temporary gratification for future goals. They then followed these kids for the next 20 or 30 years or so. The ones who resisted the marshmallow, believe it or not, were more successful in their lives than their weak willed companions. The message is clear when we delay gratification, we can find more success.

Here is another obvious yet crucial fact: learning is hard. As a teacher, I try to make it fun and exhilarating and interesting, but there will always be a daunting, tiring, and sometimes even frustrating part of it. But, and this is key, we need neither fear nor avoid this frustration! For this is when you really learn, that is when you really get it; that is when you really take it into your soul. You have to do something hard, something, I might add, with the real possibility of failure. That is not only how one learns, but how one builds character. And it is essential in order to succeed in this world. That is why sports are so important in the lives of our children.

So we see that raising a child is a precarious balance of LG, affection and care, and challenge, allowing a child to attempt something hard, struggle with it and even possibly fail. Good luck with that folks!

But in conclusion I would offer two additional things that will help: one, it helps to have a strong religious component in your family life. Prayer is something that can both soothe and challenge. Prayer helps us deal with stress and also steadies us to face the difficult things in life. And two, have fun and laughter. I often say that laughter is like an air bag of protection from the inevitable bumps and bruises of life. Families without fun, are not families, they are prisons. This Christmas, as you might have guessed was a bit painful for myself and my family. What we did is took some time to remember my brother Tom with stories. We laughed and we cried. There was no LG, no licking, but the TLC helped us cope with our HPA.

On this feast of the Holy Family, we discover that there is no task more difficult than creating a holy family, and yet there is no task more vital and important. Good lick, I mean, good luck!