



This talk was given at the Faith and families conference in London Colney, October 2008

Catholic formation at home and school: Parents as Protectors and Educators

By Antonia Tully



I want to start by saying that I think the title of this talk is excellent. I say this, because I can take not any credit for it. The credit goes to the conference organisers – who were probably in despair that I would come up with anything myself. However, when I read this title I saw straight away that here are some fundamental themes we've all got to address for the sake of the faith and the family – to safeguard our future. Each part of this title needs consideration and I'll do my best to address them.

I'll start by looking at parents as protectors and educators. This is critical and something that is being constantly eroded.

If I were to cover all the areas where the status parenthood is under threat, I'd be talking all day. So I'm just going to mention a few –and to explore what happens when parents are so severely undermined and what we can do to help restore parents to their proper rank.

We need to remind ourselves that as parents we are indeed the protectors and educators of our children. This is our God-given right – nobody else on this planet is going to protect and educate our children as well as we are. Nobody else knows our children as well as we do and, most importantly, nobody else loves them in the way that we do.

To start at the beginning of parenthood. I think in the early days of parenting it's relatively easy for parents to see themselves as protectors and educators. They can see that to protect a baby involves feeding it, keeping it clean and warm and so on. As for being educators, parents can see relatively easily that they have a role as educators - it's up to them to teach small children some manners and basic social behaviour – even if for no other reason than that it gets extremely embarrassing if yours is the only child incapable of saying please and thank you. But as children get older, particularly as they become more independent and spend more time away from their home and their parents (if they haven't already done so as babies), it gets less easy for parents to see themselves as the primary educators of their children. Once a child is at school, or a nursery, parents can and do lose track of exactly what their role is in the upbringing of their children.

Yet if you asked most parents, "Who's bringing up your children?", they'd say straight away, "We are of course". They'd say, "Look, we're the ones providing the home, the meals, the toys etc." This is true – but, as we know, bringing up children is more than providing for their material needs. What parents do not see, what they are failing to



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recognise is that their position is being systematically undermined by society in general and government policies in particular. And, really, who can blame them?

I think it's important that we understand the problems we are facing, in order to develop ideas about how we can address them. So I give you an example that came to my attention

recently. A mother emailed me to ask me what I thought about a proposed "Nurture Room" at her children's Catholic primary school. The Nurture Room it seems is a place where the children will be supported in their learning – where they learn to become responsible, reflective and respectful learners. The room will be used for listening games, social skills and relaxation. The Nurture Room at this school has been set up as part of the SEAL project – Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning.

Where does SEAL come from? The department for children, schools and families – the government. It is a "resource to help primary schools develop children's social, emotional and behavioural skills." Launched in August 2007, this relatively new scheme is promoted as part of PSHE and links in with the Healthy Schools initiative – which has a distinctively unhealthy aspect to it.

My first negative response to the idea of a Nurture Room in a school was that nurturing should take place in the home, and that formal education should take place in the school. Of course social, emotional and behavioural skills are important for children – but what are parents for if not to educate in these areas? What are Catholic parents for unless to teach their children these skills and infuse them with their Catholic faith? At the root of my distrust of a nurture room and the SEAL programme is that the government and the school are taking over the parents' role.

Whereas children from fractured backgrounds, who have specific problems, would undoubtedly benefit from help with these skills, the DFCSF makes it clear that this programme is not necessarily for schools "where behaviour and attendance are poor" and it will also be relevant to schools "without significant behaviour problems". In other words this is pitched at all schools and all children.

Parents as educators? What is being left for them to educate their children in?

Then of course comes the whole, more blatant, area of sex education. This has been taken out of parents hands almost lock, stock and barrel. The very area of education the Church is absolutely clear should be the responsibility of parents has been taken away from them.

Parents as protectors. If you asked most parents where do you think is the safest place for your children to be? They'd say at home and in school – they'd say "I know where my children are and there are adults present" Danger for parents equals streets and knife



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crime – they don't see that a child or teenager up in her or her bedroom glued to the internet is in any sort of danger.

Just how misplaced this is can be seen in this: according to a study by EU Kids Online, British children are at greater risk from online predators than those elsewhere in Europe because parents keep them cooped up indoors. The report warns that parents who keep their children indoors to avoid risks in the outside world are inadvertently placing them in greater danger by increasing the time they spend online.

Parents see themselves as protectors – but it's an illusion – a false protection.

Every family has to be constantly vigilant about keeping their homes safe. You need to do more than shut the front door to keep you home safe. Once you've got the internet, TV, magazines etc in your home – unless they are monitored, they can all be a source of danger. Your child isn't going to come downstairs from a bedroom stuffed with these things dripping with blood – but what's in their heads?

The streets are not the only dangerous places.

And then there's school. Professionally I look after an SPUC campaign called "Safe at School". This campaign aims to raise awareness about what is going on in schools and to support and advise parents who have concerns.

Let's be clear that there isn't one safe school in this country, because every school is a target of government policy.

Referring to the illusion of safety and protection - How safe is anyone's child at a school where there is an onsite sexual health clinic dispensing the morning-after pill and making abortion referrals?

The more reading and research I do on this, the more I see that there's hardly an area of school life which isn't infected with an anti-life sexual agenda. Government policy is like a sticky web that has strands in every corner of education. There isn't time here to cover everything that parents need to be vigilant about. I have a leaflet and some background material.

The point I want to make here is that as parents are systematically undermined, as parents are getting no messages from the government, from the media, from schools or indeed from their churches they end up stuck at the first stage of parenting which I mentioned earlier. They think "I'm protecting my child because I know where my child is and there is adult supervision in place." But children and teenagers are not babies – the playpen mentality does hold any more. To be a real educator and a protector demands more, and parents either don't see it or are somehow unwilling or unable to move beyond the first stage. Why?



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What I think we are facing is a massive crisis of confidence in parents. Parents don't know how to be parents. We can look at the signs of the times - how is parenting discussed in the media? Nearly every article I read about bringing up children is confused – there's yards and yards about the problems of over-managed children, lots of talk about getting children to have a proper childhood again. A best selling book is “The

Dangerous Book for Boys” – parents love it. What a confused world when a book teaching children morse code and how to build a tree house is seen a daring and dangerous, but internet games are the safe option. Then there's the whole “helicopter parents” syndrome, so frequently discussed in the Sunday papers. Again this is an illusion of protecting your children. What children need is moral and spiritual equipment to deal with the world – not a parent hovering around them.

Effectively parents have had their moral authority so undermined that they look to other means to assert their position.

To illustrate this I want to talk briefly about an initiative that my husband has got going at our daughter's school. This is a 1,000 strong girls Catholic comprehensive in South London. Paul is a governor there and saw an opening to start a course for parents. What he devised was a series of talks for parents of year 7 girls, which we called “11 Onwards”. We chose a selection of topics relevant to parents of near-teenage girls. So we found excellent speakers on the media, food, fashion, work and family relations. The evenings are in two halves – the first is a secular talk, the second half is looking at the spiritual counterpart – so for example the talk on the media was followed by a short talk on prayer, the one on food by a talk on the eucharist. The idea being to help parents to make the connection between life and faith.

We averaged about 20 parents at each meeting – not huge, but if you get into the numbers game you'll never do anything. But these were 20 perfectly ordinary south London parents. And these parents were riveted. We were getting them to think about what it means to be a parent – what it means to be a Catholic parent. One mother of four in particular sticks out – she came to every single meeting and as I chatted to her each time, I could see that she was feeling slightly overwhelmed by her children and that somehow there was more to family life than she was achieving at the moment. She said to me “My kids hate me coming to these talks. I make them all sit down at the meal table together. I won't let them use MSN etc ” What she was getting from these talks was the confidence to be a parent.

A major theme of every talk was the moral authority of the parents. As one of the speakers said, “We shouldn't be afraid to say to our children ‘I'm the parent and you're the child’” Who's bringing up who? Who's in charge here?

This brings me back to the point I made earlier about what parents would say to the question “Who's bringing up your children?” As I have suggested already some parents, perhaps very many, equate upbringing with providing for material needs. And listening



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to parents, you can see that providing material things has become a basis of parental authority. Indeed it's very easy to see how material goods can drive a family – everything is directed towards having rather than being. Parents' ability to give their children things has become their position of power in the family. They have fallen back on this because there is very little else to promote or support the moral authority of parents

– the authority parents have because they are parents.

Every parent gets bombarded by their children – I want this, I want that. It's not easy to stand firm at times. There's the balance to strike. We say to our children, "It's not that you don't have anything, but you don't have everything". One of the kindest things we can do for our children is to teach them how to wait for things – from an early age. By making children waiting and teaching them to exercise self-control in a variety of situations – you'll find you've been teaching your children a fundamental part of human sexuality since they were toddlers – but you just haven't given it the name sex ed.

So what is true protection of our children? How can we truly be the primary educators of our children? Well this brings me to the first part of the title of this talk - Catholic formation in the home and the school. And my suggestion is that if you get the home bit right, the school may not be quite as bad it might be.

We need to get things right in the home. We've got to work at it to be families – we've got to work at it to be Catholic families. Lots of questions we can ask ourselves – are we a family of prayer? – do we pray together? What have we got in place in our homes to nurture our Catholic faith? We may have a picture of Our Lady, but we also need a firm grip on the on/off button on the telly. How much time do husband and wife spend talking to each other about their children – what each one needs, what issues need to be tackled with each child. Very recently one of the children asked me "Do you and Dad ever talk about us?" and was amazed when I said "Yes". When she then asked me, "What do you say about me?" I gave her the only answer a 9 year-old needs to hear, "Mind your own business!" Her upbringing is our concern, not hers.

Catholic parents have got a job to do. God has entrusted these children to us – what sort of a job are we doing? This is all about being, rather than having.

Another point worth mentioning – do we as parents give enough time to our own spiritual life? We don't want to fall into the trap of seeing our Catholic faith only in terms of our children. I go to Mass because it's good for the children, it's good for the children to go to confession – I like to see the children saying their prayers. Hang on – that's not going to last if we're not practising our faith fully. This was another important message in the 11 Onwards course – lead by parental example.

We know all too well what's going on in our Catholic schools and if we don't we should make it our business to find out. Suffice to say here, we have to be constantly vigilant. I want to be positive about schools – we've had a great boost to our moral in "Fit for



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Mission? – Schools”. We can help raise the spiritual temperature of schools through our well-formed children, through our contact with other parents, by supporting those things we feel we can support as well as by protesting about the negative things.

We face tough challenges ahead with government moves to make SRE compulsory at primary schools. Bodies which Catholic parents might have expected to support them in keeping Catholic schools safe from anti-life practices, are clearly failing. The Catholic Education Service “welcomes” the government agency Connexions into Catholic schools. Connexions has an overt pro-abortion agenda and promotes the secret provision of contraception and the morning-after pill to young people.

We are the protectors of our children and in turn, we should continually place ourselves under the loving protection of our Blessed Mother in heaven. Our lady Queen of the family – pray for us.