

PRIMARY

1. The Years of Innocence

78. It can be said that a child is in the stage described in John Paul II's words as 'the years of innocence' from about five years of age until puberty – the beginning of which can be set at the first signs of changes in the boy or girl's body (the visible effect of an increased production of sexual hormones). This period of tranquility and serenity must never be disturbed by unnecessary information about sex. During those years, before any physical sexual development is evident, it is normal for the child's interests to turn to other aspects of life. The rudimentary instinctive sexuality of very small children has disappeared. Boys and girls of this age are not particularly interested in sexual problems, and they prefer to associate with children of their own sex. So as not to disturb this important natural phase of growth, parents will recognize that prudent formation in chaste love during this period should be indirect, in preparation for puberty, when direct information will be necessary.

79. During this age of development, children are normally at ease with their body and its functions. They accept the need for modesty in dress and behavior. Although they are aware of the physical differences between the two sexes, the growing child generally shows little interest in genital functions. The discovery of the wonders of creation which accompanies this phase and the experiences in this regard at home and in school should also be oriented toward the age of catechesis and preparations for the sacraments which takes place within the ecclesial community

80. Nonetheless, this period of childhood is not without its own significance in terms of psycho-sexual development. A growing boy or girl is learning from adult example and family experience what it means to be a woman or a man. Certainly, expressions of natural tenderness and sensitivity should not be discouraged among boys, nor should girls be excluded from vigorous physical activities. On the other hand, in some societies subjected to ideological pressures, parents should also protect themselves from exaggerated opposition to what is defined as a 'stereotyping of roles'. The real differences between the two sexes should not be ignored or minimized, and in a healthy family environment children will learn that it is natural for a certain difference to exist between the usual family and domestic roles of men and women.

81. During this stage, girls will generally be developing a material interest in babies, motherhood and home making. By constantly taking the motherhood of the most holy Virgin Mary as a model, they should be encouraged to value their femininity.

82. In this period, a boy is at a relatively tranquil stage of development. This is often the easiest time for him to set up a good relationship with his father. At this time, he should learn that, although it must be considered as a divine gift, his masculinity is not a sign of superiority with regard to women, but a call from god to take on certain roles and responsibilities. Boys should be discouraged from becoming overly aggressive or too concerned about physical prowess as proof of their virility.

83. Nonetheless, in the context of moral and sexual information, various problems can arise in this stage of childhood. In some societies today, there are planned and determined attempts to impose premature sex information on children. But, at this stage of development, children are not still capable of fully understanding the value of the affective dimension of sexuality. They cannot understand and control sexual imagery within the proper context of moral principles and for this reason, they cannot integrate premature sexual information with moral responsibility. Such information tends to shatter their emotional and educational development and to disturb the natural serenity of this period of life. Parents should be politely but firmly exclude any attempts to violate children's innocence because such attempts compromise the spiritual, moral and emotional development of growing persons who have a right to their innocence.

84. A further problem arises when children receive premature sex information from the mass media or from their peers who have been led astray or received premature sex education. In this case, parents will have to begin to give carefully limited sexual information, usually to correct immoral and erroneous information or to control obscene language.

85. Sexual violence with regard to children is not infrequent. Parents must protect their children, first by teaching them a form of modesty and reserve with regard to strangers, as well as by, giving suitable sexual information, but without going into details and particulars that might upset or frighten them.

86. As in the first years of life also during childhood, parents should encourage a spirit of collaboration, obedience, generosity and self-denial in their children, as well as a capacity for self-reflection and sublimation. In fact, a characteristic of this period of development is an attraction toward intellectual activities. Using the intellect makes it possible to acquire the strength and ability to control the surrounding situation and, before long, to control bodily instincts, so as to transform them into intellectual and rational activities.

An undisciplined or spoiled child is inclined toward a certain immaturity and moral weakness in future years because chastity is difficult to maintain. If a person develops selfish or disordered habits and cannot behave with proper concern and respect for the others, parent should present objective standard of what is right and wrong thereby creating a sure moral framework for life.