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## PERSPECTIVE

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**F**riendship ordinarily happens among those who are equals. In unequal relationships—those in which one has more power and recognition than the other—enjoying friendship is a struggle. How does an employer become friends with an employee? Or a bishop with a priest under his supervision? How does a professor become the friend of a student?

How do I become a friend to my children?

Parents love their children, teach them, discipline and encourage them, and financially support them well into young adulthood. After twenty-one years of that, not many kids still want to spend much time with their parents, let alone be their friends. My children have been subjected to my discipline, my help, my suggestions, money, values, teaching, food preferences, language, and accent. In spite of the difficulties, however, the gift of friendship between myself and my son and daughters is one of the supreme rewards that parenting has offered me.

I know of families who truly love each other, families in which parents have acted responsibly and children are respectful—even appreciative—of their parents. They are not, however, friends with each other. Either some essential ingredients of friendship are missing from these families, or else some sort of roadblocks to friendship exist. They sacrificially love one another, they share a common faith—but they do not enjoy each other as friends. In the room together, they charge the air with a

subtle tension, the result of which is usually withdrawal or aggression, both of them triggered by fear. Either manifestation of fear spoils (at least temporarily) any friendship that might have been.

How can we remove roadblocks to friendship or supply what lacks so that friendship can thrive—friendship with children, with fellow workers, employees, bosses? First of all,

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friendship building in unequal relationships depends upon cultivating the art of looking forward to the time when equality displaces inequality. This means that I relate to my son or daughter, for instance, in the light of what they are becoming. One plants an acorn knowing how big an oak will grow. You don't plant a redwood sapling in the planter beneath your kitchen window. Teachers relate to their students from the perspective of what they the latter will learn and may become, rather than in terms of what they don't know right now.

Discipline, teaching, and non-equal provision are the given realities in the early stages of a family's life together. Discipline, teaching, and

even provision will be altered and sometimes reversed later on in the life cycle of every family. Children may need to teach their dad how to use a computer, help with the entrance fee for a parent entering a retirement home, or even "discipline" aged parents. Sooner than we expect the reality changes and discipline, teaching, and provision are evened out toward equality.

This is the way God designed all relationships, and this is why it makes good sense to work toward friendship with all people in your life. The bishop's assistant will someday be a bishop his or her own right. Your son or daughter will one day know as much as you, and more and will probably have more money, too.

### Paternal Cuddling

Second, we can remove roadblocks to friendship between unequals by using a family model to examine ways of building friendships. Here are five ways that friendship building can happen in a family.

- **Start early.** Here's a good reason for dads to get up at night to change diapers and cuddle with the newborn family member. Mothers who nurse their babies have this friendship touch; fathers need it just as much. From the beginning, enjoy caring for your babies and show the delight and the enjoyment you have in knowing them.

- **Take time to be a friend.** There is no quality time without quantity time. Friendship happens when you track a person through the thousands of small changes and experiences that need noticing. There is no instant knowing; all knowing is grad-

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ual, incremental, and time consuming—a journey of a thousand single steps. Friends give each other the gift of time. I don't mean a nervous strategy of carefully structured get-togethers. I'm talking about the simple gift of hanging out with someone and consequently being there at a right moment. In most friendships the best conversations happen by surprise and at odd moments.

If we are with someone just because it seems good and right, then the important formal friendship times like birthdays, school plays, and graduations will naturally take care of themselves. ("Of course my dad will be at my game; he wouldn't think of missing when our team plays.") Friendship building in the early stages takes a massive amount of time so that later on, when distances intervene and the together times are shortened, you and your friends have a deep well of shared moments and shared ideas already stored and ready to drink.

• **Respect each other.** Children are rightly taught to respect their parents. Equally important, parents respect their children by honoring and treasuring their integrity and personhood. At an infant's baptism we recognize that the worth of the baby is affirmed by God's intervention into the privacy of a family. We release that infant child into the hands of the pastor or priest and hear the Christian name given to our child.

Then we receive the child back into our hands and our care with this new recognition: Our child does not really belong to us, for the child has his or her own worth blessed by God, and the name signifies that dignity. We are only stewards of this tiny life in our arms, and we have recognized God's blessing and the seal of God's promise for the future. The baptism or prayer of dedication of a child recognizes the oak a child is to become, and the child's parents now begin to relate to the child in the light of that grand promised direction.

Respect means that our kids are encouraged to have their own thoughts and secrets. It means that they deserve an honest relationship with us and that we don't ask questions unless we have an honest question to ask.

I know of nothing more harmful to parent-youth relationships, for example, than the question, "Son, when did you come home last night?" If a parent knows the answer, then why the rhetorical question? If the goal of any question asked of children is to entrap them or to prove some point, then the questioning amounts to temptation—and that is the surest way I know to destroy friendship—because true friends respect the integrity of each other. They do not tempt each other. Respect is another word for honor and is the opposite of every form of exploitation, including sexual abuse or any form of verbal or physical abuse. Adults who abuse their children will never have the friendship of their adult son or daughter. They instead inherit the whirlwind of God's judgment and the proper repudiation of society, which will rightly seek in the most serious instances to put such parents in jail.

• **Make ground rules.** We do not harm our friendships with those who are temporarily under our supervision if the discipline we administer is fair, makes sense, and has limits. The limitation of all discipline is that no ruler or parent has total wisdom or knowledge at any given moment. Every leader makes judgement calls on the basis of present knowledge, and every decision, therefore, is at its best imperfect. When I as a parent acknowledge this limit myself, it will not be as necessary for others to remind me of it. Because of the the limits of all discipline and rule making, there is built into the discipline process a humane and mellowing influence that keeps discipline tolerable for all sides. As every team needs rules in order to play the game, so every family needs guidelines that enable its members to find their best stride; that is the teaching goal of good discipline.

In all discipline, forgiveness within a family becomes the most powerful force for good health in the lives of each member. The forgiving moment becomes the most unforgettable friendship building moment. It is the forgiving moment that enables people to discover the grace of Jesus Christ, the greatest friend.

• **Fun creates human friendship** Whether it was the adventurous family fishing trip or the mundane Saturday house cleaning, being friends within our family made it fun. One Saturday we swept and scrubbed the house to musical comedies on the tape recorder. Mom made peanut.