

On the Feast of the Holy Family I usually try to preach on the family, so this year I want to share my thoughts on a book I read in October, The Collapse of Parenting, by Leonard Sax (I preached about it at daily mass at the time). Sax is a medical doctor and also has a doctorate in psychology. In the book he is synthesizing years of practice in the field and hundreds of scientific studies about healthy parenting.

Sax isn't explicitly coming from a faith perspective, but I thought about his book in connection with the Gospel today because of Joseph's role. Joseph does hard things to keep his family safe. He realizes that his family is threatened by Herod. Admittedly, this discernment isn't difficult in his case because an angel from heaven tells him (If only that could happen to us)! But even though the message is clear for Joseph, the consequences are really hard: exile and an uncertain future in an alien land. But Joseph gets up and goes, nonetheless.

I mention the Holy Family's challenging situation, and Joseph's difficult decisions, because, although you may not have to go into exile

to protect your family, it's still hard to be a parent today. So much gets thrown at you by the world and society. I think many parents these days believe deep down that they're not doing a very good job. In fact, they feel they are losing their influence on their children to the wider society and culture. What's going wrong?

Here I want to come back to Sax's book. The basic thesis of The Collapse of Parenting is that over the past 30+ years there has been a unique, historic transfer of authority in children's lives from their parents to their peers, that is, their friends and classmates. For all of history it has been children's parents who have formed them, been their basic support and guides in how to become a mature and virtuous person -- taught them right from wrong and what the world is like.

In 21<sup>st</sup> century America that is no longer the case for most children. Instead, once they approach adolescence, they are taught these things by the boys and girls of their same age. They are taught how to think and act, what is good and evil, more by their friends and

their larger circle of peers, than by their parents. This began before the coming of the smart phone and social media, but those technologies have greatly accelerated and deepened this change.

What have been the results? First, parents, at least subconsciously, have tried to retain their connection with their kids by becoming their peers, their friends. This is what's behind our society's parents wanting to be liked by their children. This never entered the minds of most parents in the past. They wanted to be loved by their kids, certainly, but liked? That didn't even make sense as a question.

Another consequence of this transfer of authority to children's peer groups has been the huge increase in anxiety among kids. Sax notes that in the last 30 years there has been a 400% increase in serious anxiety cases among American children. There are many causes for this, but a big part of the reason for the anxiety is this dependence upon one's peers for affirmation and support. A parent is expected to love a child unconditionally whatever the child's mistakes, sins, or

failures. Of course, in the real world this doesn't always happen. But that is the expectation, and often the reality.

Among a child's peers, however, love, acceptance, support, especially as they grow older, is anything but unconditional. One awkward tweet, one rejected invitation, can bring about social isolation and rejection by one's peers. The very people the child turns to, and needs, for support -- are unreliable. They can turn on you at any moment -- and maybe the child doesn't even know why. Is it any wonder anxiety has skyrocketed?

What's a parent supposed to do? Here I come back to today's Gospel, and Joseph's behavior during the Flight into Egypt. The job of parents is, not to be their children's friends, but to keep them safe so they can grow up to be self-assured, confident adults. This means the parents must be leaders and make the decisions for the child necessary for that to happen. Sax speaks of the need for parents tell their children what to do, rather than negotiate with them. He doesn't mean parents

are to be tyrants. Some decisions are open to kids' choices. And as children get older, which decisions are theirs to make changes. But many decisions aren't for kids to make – what to eat for dinner, what school they go to, whether to go to church, screen time, phone use, how late they stay out, whose houses they can go to, etc. But a warning - if you try to do this the biggest obstacle will probably not even be your kids, but the parents of your kids' peers. They will question why you're rocking the boat – and challenging their own consciences by how you parent your kids. If you are a parent or future parent read the book. Seriously.

You may be thinking, “What do you know about parenting, Father?” But reading this book made me think about what Sax's information also means for me in terms of being a spiritual Father as your Pastor. I'm preaching to myself. I face the same temptations and challenges of wanting to be your friend, rather than your spiritual Father. Pastors these days have their own authority crisis. It's fun to be

liked and not preach anything about the faith and teachings of Christ that you don't want to hear or know. Who want to be the hard guy who holds the line?

But the point is that it's parents' moral responsibility to keep our children safe from physical, emotional, spiritual harm – and that won't make us our children's friend – which is OK. God the Father didn't want Joseph to be Jesus' friend. He wanted Joseph to fulfill his role as parent and decisionmaker to keep the Holy Family safe.

We parents need to do our job and hit that sweet spot Sax describes - being strict but loving, marking boundaries, teaching truths, while at the same time being loving and having fun with our kids. Moms and Dads, reclaim your authority as parents. Check out Sax's book. But also ask for the intercession of St. Joseph so as to be able to make the decisions your children need you to make for them -- for their own safety and their eventual happiness in this life and the next.