

LEISURE AND FREE TIME (1)

In many countries today, the educational system gives children ever greater free time. Consequently many parents are quite aware of the importance of such periods for their children's education. Sometimes, however, their main concern is that children "are wasting their time" when not in class. Therefore families often seek extracurricular activities for their children. It is not unusual for these activities to have a certain academic bent, for example studying languages or learning to play a musical instrument, thus complementing their children's studies.

Value of free time

Free time possesses certain educational possibilities of its own. As John Paul II stressed, it is important "to develop and use to advantage the free time of the young and direct their energies."¹ During those daily times when academic duties for all practical purposes come to an end, young people see themselves as the masters of their own destiny. Now they can do what they *really* want to: spend time with family or friends, pursue hobbies, rest and have fun in the way they enjoy best. The decisions they make are seen as their own, setting a hierarchy of personal interests: what I would like to do, which task I should take up now and which can be left for later.... There children learn to know themselves better, and discover new responsibilities and how to administer them.

Ultimately this helps young people to exercise their freedom in a more conscious way. That is why parents and educators need to value the free time of those under their care. All education is education for freedom, and free time is, by definition, a time for freedom, a time for freely enjoyed activities, beauty and dialogue: a time for all those things that are not "necessary" but without which it is impossible to live.

This educational potential can be spoiled when parents either remain unconcerned about their children's leisure time (as long as school duties are fulfilled), or see it only as an opportunity to "extend" the children's academic formation. In the first case, it is easy for children to let themselves be dragged along by comfort or laziness, and to rest in a way that demands little effort (for example, watching TV or playing videogames). In the second, the specific educational value of free time is lost, because it becomes basically a continuation of school time, organized almost exclusively by the parents' initiative.

Unfortunately this can end up giving children an image of life as divided up strictly between obligations and entertainment. It is therefore advisable for parents to consider frequently how the different activities of the week contribute to their children's harmonious development, with a balance between rest and formation.

A tight schedule means that children will do many things, but perhaps won't learn to manage their time well. If children are to develop virtues, parents need to allow them to experiment with their own freedom. If they are not allowed to choose their favourite activities, or are barred in practice from playing or spending time with friends, there is a risk that—as they grow older—they will not learn how to enjoy free time in a healthy way. Then it could easily happen that they get carried away by whatever a consumerist society offers them.

¹ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, 22 November 1981, no. 76.

To teach children how to use their free time in a free and responsible way, parents need to know their children well. It is important to offer them leisure activities that match their interests and abilities, and provide genuine rest and enjoyment. When children are still quite young (which is the best time to form them in this aspect of their lives), they are more open to what their parents suggest. If they find satisfaction in what their parents offer, they will become all the more able to discover by themselves the best ways to use their free time well.

Evidently, this requires imagination on the parent's part, as well as a spirit of sacrifice. For example, it is advisable to limit activities that use up an inordinate amount of time or lead young people to isolate themselves (as happens when they spend hours in front of the TV or on the Internet). It is better to encourage activities that foster friendship and are spontaneously attractive (such as sports, outings, games with other children, etc.).

Growing by playing

But of all the activities available in their free time, one above all is valued by young people (and not only by them): spending time playing. This is only natural, since playing is spontaneously linked to happiness, to being in a place where time does not weigh heavily, to experiencing wonder and the unexpected. It is when playing that people often reveal their most genuine identity; they become completely involved, often even more so than in many forms of work.

Playing is, above all, a test for what life will be: it is a way of learning to utilize all our energy, a test of the limits of our abilities and of what we can accomplish. Animals also play, but much less so than human beings, precisely because their learning stabilizes quickly. People play throughout their entire lives, because we can always grow more as persons, regardless of age.

By playing, a person develops and matures. Children learn to interpret their knowledge, to test their strengths in competition and to integrate the different aspects of their personality. Playing offers a continuous challenge. It involves setting up rules, which have to be freely submitted to in order to play well. Goals are set, and experience is gained in lessening the importance of defeats. All play involves an ethical component of responsibility, and therefore helps us to be moral beings. That is why the normal thing is to play with others, to play "in society."

This social dimension of play is so deeply rooted that, even when children play alone, they tend to construct fantastic scenes and other characters with whom they can communicate and interact. In playing, children learn to know themselves and to know others; they experience the joy of being and having fun with others; they assimilate and learn the roles of grown-ups.

People learn to play mainly within the family. Living involves playing, competing; but living also means cooperating, helping, learning to get along with others. It is hard to imagine how both aspects—competing and coexisting—could be harmonized outside the institution of the family. Play is one of the basic tests for learning to socialize. Ultimately, the great pedagogical value of play resides in linking affections to actions. That is why few things unite parents and children as strongly as playing together. As Saint Josemaría used to say, parents need to be friends with their children. "You get down on all fours if need be with the young ones, and you play with a toy train or soldier . . . That is my big advice."²

As children get older, the parents' interest in their leisure activities will take on new

² Saint Josemaría, notes from his oral preaching.

forms. For example, they might encourage them to bring friends over, or go with them to their sporting events. Parents will thus be able to get to know their children's friends and their families better, without giving the wrong impression of wanting to control their children or distrusting them.

They can also seek to create, with other parents' help, sites for their children's free time that provide healthy entertainment and help further their integral development. Saint Josemaría right from the start encouraged initiatives of this type, where children have the opportunity to play in a formative environment that also helps them to discover their dignity as children of God and to show concern for others. There young people can learn that there is a time for everything and each thing has its own time, and that it is possible to seek sanctity at any age, also when they are still young, and leave a mark on the people around them.

Taking up an expression of Paul VI that was particularly cherished by John Paul II, we could say that youth clubs are places where children learn to become "experts in humanity."³ Therefore it would be a serious mistake to define their value only in terms of the young people's academic or sporting achievements.

Playing and life

In Greek, education (*paideia*) and play (*paidiá*) are terms arising from the same semantic root. For in learning to play, young people acquire at the same time a very useful attitude towards life. Although it might seem paradoxical, it is not only children who have a need to play. We might even say that the older people become, the more they need to play. We all have met people who are disconcerted by old age. They discover that they no longer have the strength they used to, and feel incapable of facing life's challenges. Yet we can also find this attitude in many young people who have become prematurely old, who seem to lack the necessary flexibility to face new situations.

On the other hand, we have probably met older people who retain a youthful spirit: the capacity to dream, to start again, and to face each new day as an "opening day." And this is despite the fact that they often face serious physical limitations. Such people teach us that, as we grow older, it becomes ever more important to face life with a certain sense of playfulness.

A person who knows how to play well learns to relativize the outcome, the success or failure, and to discover the value of play as such. That person experiences the satisfaction of trying new approaches to win out, and avoids the mediocrity of seeking results while spoiling the enjoyment. Such an attitude can be applied to the "serious" things in life, to ordinary tasks, to new situations that, if approached in another way, could lead to discouragement or to a feeling of helplessness.

Work and play have their own proper times, but the attitude with which each is taken on does not need to be different. It is the same person who works and who plays. Human works are ephemeral, and therefore should not be taken with excessive seriousness. Their highest value, as Saint Josemaría taught, lies in the fact that God awaits us there. Life only has full meaning when we do things out of love for him—and even along with him. The seriousness of life resides in the fact that we cannot play with the grace God offers us, with the opportunities he gives us. Although, in a certain sense, God does indeed play with us through his grace. "He can and does write perfectly, even with the leg of a table,"⁴ Saint Josemaría

³ John Paul II, *Address to the participants in the VI Symposium of the Council of Episcopal Conferences of Europe*, 11 October 1985, no. 13.

⁴ Saint Josemaría *Friends of God*, no. 117.

used to say.

Only our relationship with God can give stability, strength and meaning to life and to all human works. We need to undertake all our activities with the confidence and sporting spirit with which children play with their Father. Then things will get done “sooner, more and better.” We will learn to overcome apparent defeats, since there is always a new adventure awaiting us. Sacred Scripture presents divine Wisdom as *forming all things . . . playing before him at all times; playing in the world: and my delights were to be with the children of men.*⁵ God, who “plays” by creating us, teaches us to live with joy and confidence, trusting that we will receive—perhaps unexpectedly—the gift we yearn for, since *we know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose.*⁶

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⁵ *Prov* 8:30-31.

⁶ *Rom* 8:28