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Existing frameworks for dialogue and mutual understanding across generations: family, community, educational institutions and workplace

Good Morning, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I am here as a representative of the International Federation for Family Development (IFFD), which was founded in Orlando (USA) in 1998, as a successor of the International Family Foundation (Fondation Internationale De La Famille), founded in Rome in 1978. IFFD has the consultative status with ECOSOC (Special by now, waiting for the General, as it has been unanimously recommended by the ECOSOC NGO Committee). We are active in family enrichment in more than 60 countries around the world, and have celebrated up to now 18 International Congresses including participants of the five continents.

I will concentrate my intervention on three of the proposed questions:

1. Role of the family in promoting dialogue and understanding
2. Impact of parenting on youth development
3. Role of educational institutions in promoting dialogue and mutual understanding

with special incidence on the relationships among parents and adolescents. I will continue saying *adolescents* as far as *teenagers* are now insufficient to cover the complexities of the period between youth and adulthood. The critical phase between adolescence and maturity is now, in many countries, especially in those most developed, much longer and much more complicated than in previous times.

This intervention is in line with the goals of the International Year of Youth(IYY), that we are celebrating under the title *Dialogue and mutual understanding*, especially in what refers to *promote the ideals of peace, respect for human rights and freedoms, and solidarity*. These ideals are universal values, that is to say, fundamental human rights. In that sense, the family is the *place* for the human rights, something we will mention after.

We will also keep in mind the World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY), as long as it concerns a *healthy lifestyle, especially during transitional periods, such as youth to adulthood*.

There is a widespread agreement on the matter that *the family unit continues to be the primary and best structure for developing healthy, correct, natural and loving relationships across generations*. Consequently, in the transitional phase from childhood to adulthood, the interac-

tion within the family structure is particularly important. When young people are growing up, they generally take over the cultural norms and values of their parents and grandparents, and project them onto the outside world. Therefore, the family atmosphere is of particular importance in the socialization process of the young people, affecting the well being of the entire society.

The family is also the place where Human Rights are taught and transmitted.

Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights”.

Who is not capable of seeing that this statement is especially true in families where children, siblings, grandchildren... are born and remain free and equal in dignity and rights just because they are human beings and they live in a community characterized by love and respect? What child is not considered as custodian and holder of fundamental rights since the very moment his or her conception is known by their parents, mother and father? What brother or sister does not see his brothers and sisters as equals, equally loved by their parents?

In particular, in the family, fundamental human values of life, marriage, freedom of religion and education are lived the best friendly way possible, —“*user-friendly*” we could say in terms of current technology—.

In this environment of love, dignity and joy (we refer to ordinary families, not to not-structured families) the human being learns to recognize, enjoy and be able to transmit through his or her own family, the human rights.

The United Nations on the occasion of the declaration of 1994 as International Year of the Family, in a very important document that in my opinion has not been sufficiently developed yet, announced the programme for the mentioned International Year of the Family, and under the slogan “Families as agents for the protection of human values, cultural identity and historical continuity,” recognized that “families are important vehicles for the preservation and transmission of cultural values.” It also proclaimed that “families offer valuable influence for crime and delinquency prevention” and, in conclusion, that “family keeps on being a primary source and conduit for the transmission of values, culture and information, particularly to children and young people”.

After these important statements, the UN document also recognized, although without having had excessive practical consequences so far, that “family should therefore be supported and encouraged to fulfill these important tasks for the benefit of all society”.

However, it is also clear that there is a conviction, no less generalized, regarding the sometimes extreme difficulties experienced in the communication between parents and adolescents, which frequently is not just difficult, but non-existent. Rather than “*dialogue and mutual un-*

derstanding across generations”, it would be more appropriate, in these cases to talk about an “*intergenerational void between parents and teenagers*”.

In this speech, I will analyze and suggest possible solutions to this grave problem. Personally, I believe that, first and foremost, it is vital that adults – particularly parents, but also educators, teachers, politicians, police men and women, etc – have a clear understanding of what adolescence is, and what it means. Secondly, we will look at active and passive communication techniques for adolescents. And lastly, I will make some recommendations, in response to the request by the organizers of this conference “*to provide policy recommendations*” given that “*an emphasis will be placed on policy actions, whether at the local, national, regional or international levels*”.

Child rearing challenges in adolescence

The initial surprise

Normally, adolescence starts abruptly – at least for the parents. Their previously polite, obedient and well-behaved child suddenly adopts a clearly *rebellious* attitude.

This is the beginning of a long process which will last at least several years, or, in some cases, a whole lifetime: affective immaturity can even give rise to certain legal causes for marriage annulment, or continued professional and/or emotional instability, including problems with drugs, gambling, alcohol, etc.

Some basic concepts

Adolescence is a completely normal and necessary period of time:

Whereas infancy is a period of organization,

adolescence is a period of disorganization,

and adulthood a period of reorganization.

We have to be prepared: **it’s going to happen whether we like it or not!**

It’s even been said, quite graphically, that a teenager who doesn’t *act* like a schizophrenic, *is* a schizophrenic.

So, what is adolescence exactly?

Adolescence is a period which is characterized by **instability** – particularly emotional – and **constant conflict**, primarily between the teenager and him or herself, but also with the envi-

ronment that they have been surrounded by until then. The conflict may particularly be with the parents, but can also extend to school, religious and political beliefs, etc. Up until this point, the young person has been subject to the influences of parents and educators without questioning them too much. However, as man is a rational and free being, he must adopt the convictions and attitudes which will shape his life in his own way. This is the origin of the apparent *rebellion* which characterizes this whole period.

The task faced by the adolescent is not an easy one. **They make their loved ones and the people around them suffer, but they also have a very hard time themselves.** Furthermore, today's society is even more complex, more changeable, more insecure, more confused, more manipulative... But it's also freer and more informed, it provides more opportunities, and we are more aware of injustices.

At this point, it's not even a question of "generational conflict", but rather "parallel worlds":

The *young person's* world, with its corresponding values, vocabulary, nocturnal schedules, fashions, motorbikes, piercings, etc.

And, on the other hand, the *adult* world with its social conventions, vocabulary, values, songs, music, cars, etc.

Adolescents don't know what they want; they only know what they think they *don't* want.

Lack of sense of reality: Another typical characteristic of the adolescent is the lack of realism. **They have no sense of time, for example.** They feel that everything they need or want is *really urgent*. However, they keep putting off dealing with things that they don't feel like doing; for example, they think they've got all the time in the world to study a subject that doesn't interest them, even if the exam is right around the corner.

In short, adolescence is a period of *crisis*. However, a "crisis" doesn't necessarily have to be negative. Its definition, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is:

"A turning point in the progress of anything; also, a state of affairs in which a decisive change for better or worse is imminent".

The rules of the game

1. As we saw earlier, **we need to be prepared:** this is something that is going to happen whether we like it or not.
2. The most important thing is to **stay calm.**
3. It's also possible that this period **lasts quite a lot longer than we expected or imagined.**

4. We have to establish **some ground rules that should be few, but firm**. Here, the principle “*non multa, sed multum*”, which also applies to knowledge, is relevant. Basically, it means that it’s quality not quantity that counts. Or, in other words, we should try to achieve a lot with only a few rules. Obviously, it’s important to avoid arbitrariness. Teenagers are very sensitive to injustice, not to mention incoherence. “Don’t shout”, says the parent to the teenager, invariably shouting themselves; “Don’t be lazy”, while the parents themselves are wasting time; “You need to study”, as the parents sit around watching television; etc.

5. Respect their privacy. We must be demanding of adolescents, whilst respecting their privacy at all times. It goes without saying that we should never go through their drawers, or read their diary, etc. Parents need to learn to control their own curiosity.

6. Respect their freedom. The aim of education is to achieve freedom. Everything we do for our children is covered by one of these three stages: **GIVE THEM LIFE, TEACH THEM HOW TO LIVE, and LET THEM LIVE THEIR OWN LIFE.**

7. It’s important to remember that, despite appearances, **adolescents do progress** and we need to try not to be overly affected by apparent setbacks. The education and progress of the personality develop in a *spiral* which means that even if the teenager is at the bottom of a loop, they are still progressing.

8. We have to be **optimists**; in fact, parents and educators have to be blind optimists, but we shouldn’t forget that, “*in this field, good intentions and love itself aren’t enough. Parents and educators need to acquire certain knowledge and skills (or “savoir faire”)*”. [1].

General principles which can help us to get through this stage include:

Accepting that adolescents are the way they are, with all their good and bad points. All parents, particularly mothers, get carried away imagining their child’s future: they imagine a profession, an “ideal” boyfriend or girlfriend, etc. However, these images of are frequently contradicted by reality; we have to accept this reality and adapt ourselves to it.

We have to accept our children the way they are and appreciate them despite any “defects” they may have. The following **errors** are very common:

- **Wanting our children to achieve more than we did**
- **Wanting our children to achieve what we couldn’t**
- **Wanting our children to be the same as us**

Respecting their freedom:

In this respect, there are **two extremes: excessive permissiveness and authoritarianism.**

Excessive permissiveness stems from the concept that children are good by nature, and we should let them follow all their desires, instincts and leanings, and that it is society, with all its rules, that makes them bad. This is exactly what ROUSSEAU said, but by doing so we effectively produce *good savages*.

The other extreme is **authoritarianism**. Giving orders for the sake of it, without giving reasons or explanations... “Because I’m your father”, “Because I say so”, etc.

The first option, permissiveness, destroys responsibility; the second, authoritarianism, destroys freedom.

These days, there is another, very negative, factor which exacerbates the innate difficulties of adolescence. This is the “**ideologies**”, or their remains, which corrupt the sense of freedom. We don’t have time to go into detail on this point right now, so we’ll just make a note of it.

Typical reactions include: “A normal process, with few results.”

What are the most common reactions from parents faced with the *offensives* of their adolescent children? GINOTT, quoted by Ana María Navarro [2], describes them as:

“First of all, severe; if this fails, they turn friendly; when that doesn’t work, they try to reason; and then, feeling ridiculous, they try correction; and, finally, end up going back to threats and punishment.”

In other words, the cycle is:

Severe

Friendly

Reasoning

Corrective

Threatening

Punishing

Friendly

And so on...

As you can see, this is a perfect example of a vicious circle, completely frustrating and, above all, totally useless, if not counterproductive.

What we do... And what we should do

Are parents also schizophrenic? We've talked about the schizophrenia of adolescents, but we mustn't forget that parents can also be schizophrenic. We sometimes see parents who are *completely authoritarian* regarding things like studying (and particularly school results), profession, clothing, the choice of boyfriend or girlfriend, etc, yet are *completely permissive or guiltily ignorant* when it comes to reading matter, excursions, travel, study trips abroad, going out at night, alcohol, cannabis, etc.

Are we realists? Parents also have to be *realists*. When a child isn't as smart, or as hard-working, or as good as the parents hoped or dreamed, it's time to be realistic and adjust the goals that have been set so that the child can achieve them. This is especially important when it comes to matters such as **love** ("I wish he or she had fallen in love with X or Y") and **professional career**: University, professional training, etc. This is particularly important in the case of parents who shine professionally. They need to be **humble**, and learn to love and accept their child just the way they are, above all, never showing their disappointment, humiliating their child, giving up on them or ignoring them.

Overprotection is a very common – and very dangerous – defect. Overprotection, in the short term, avoids problems with the child or adolescent; however, in the medium and, above all, long term, this can create problems that will be very difficult to resolve later on: shyness, withdrawal, complexes, selfishness, inability to relate to people of the opposite sex, or, at the opposite extreme, rebellion, bad manners, verbal and physical violence and even, in some cases, leaving home.

Use your sense of humor

Teenagers are extremely sensitive to ridicule and they detect it immediately. For this reason, it's important to see the funny side of the matter in hand, as long as it's the right moment. The following – real – conversation between mother and daughter illustrates this:

“– I want you to accept me for who I am.

– So who are you then, darling? If you don't know, how am I supposed to?

The “Don't” method of child rearing

Many parents base their method of child rearing on the adverb “**Don't**”: Don't do this, don't do that, don't get earrings, don't get a piercing, don't have long hair, don't be late, etc. On this matter, Miralbell says:

“How effective can an child rearing method based on “Don’t” and “No” be for adolescents when **their heart is begging them for “Yes’s”**? What a bitter contrast for many teenagers to hear only “Don’t” and “No” at home when in other, often more undesirable, places people are stimulating their hopes and dreams, their desire to deliver and their minor vanities!” [3].

Educational aims: “Educate for freedom”

What is the objective of the education we give our children? Frequently – particularly these days – it is the parents who, either consciously or unconsciously, decide the future that they and their children will fight to achieve: the *social and economic position*, the *prestige*, the *money*, and it is all too common that genuine transcendental human values – happiness, responsibility, emotional well-being, generosity, etc – are forgotten. What we are actually doing is confusing *personality* – which is an attribute of our ‘being’ – with *money*, *fame* or *prestige* – which are attributes of what we have or what we do. And our children see this perfectly.

Some important issues:

I’m sure you will all agree that adolescence is a very broad subject matter, so we are going to focus on a few points of particular relevance:

“Everyone else does it”:

We all know that this is one of the teenager’s favorite arguments. It has different variations:

- a) “*Everyone else has one.*”
- b) “*Everyone else wears them.*”
- c) “*Everyone else is allowed to.*”
- d) “*You’re so old-fashioned. You’re completely out of touch.*”
- e) “*But Sally’s mum let’s her.*” (Always using the friend with the strictest, most old-fashioned parents as an example.)

What can we do when faced with this atomic argument?

The fact that everyone does something can only be a justification for good or neutral behavior, never for bad.

It is very likely that Sally’s mother is listening to the exact same argument, but this time it’s you who’s the parent being used as an example. Watch out for teenage conspiracies – they’re masters in this area!

It's important that from an early age children see that their parents don't do "what everyone else does" if those things are immoral or hurtful.

It helps our children a lot if we spend time with other families who don't do "what everyone else does," but instead do the same things as our own family; for example, attend church services, go on healthy excursions, see fun films, etc. In short, *instead of complaining about our environment, we need to create our own healthy environments.*

School performance.

It's normal for adolescents to experience a decline in their performance at school: they are "invaded by idleness"; they are experiencing physical and physiological changes; their interests and goals are changing; and they are suffering excessive sentimentalism and fantasization, amongst other things. In other words, they're not just being lazy!

Faced with this decline, as parents, we have to help our children increase their motivation and commitment to study, encouraging curiosity and helping our children see that studying will help them to satisfy it. Parents should encourage their children to read from an early age and read along with them to explain what's happening when necessary. Above all, we have to **value the effort more than the result.**

If a child makes an effort, but gets bad results, the parents will have to help him or her improve their way of working, ensuring an appropriate environment for effective studying and offering them extra classes, if needed. However, it's important not to overwhelm them, and to surround them with the atmosphere of *sympathetic kindness* that we've been talking about.

In the same way, just because a child gets good results, it doesn't mean we can let our guard down. Some children get very good grades without making an effort and we should try to expand their fields of interest, but without stressing them out by pushing them to the limit. We don't want to run the risk of *burnout*.

Furthermore, as parents, we have to examine our own **motivations**:

Do we mainly work to make money?

Do we value work that makes more money over work that does something useful for others?

Do we habitually complain about our work: that it's dull, that we have too much, that we're not appreciated, etc?

Our attitudes and motivations have a big influence on our teenagers, who are our most ruthless critics.

In any case, a decline in school performance is normally a temporary situation. The habits and values acquired in the pre-adolescent period are of vital importance and will shine through sooner rather than later.

The study environment at home is very important: be careful to avoid distractions from television, radio, shouting, etc.

It's also essential to have close collaboration with our children's teachers and educators, especially as it is becoming increasingly common to find teachers and parents on opposite sides of the fence.

Our children's friends.

This is another very important area which can be divided into two groups:

A) **Unsuitable friends:** First of all, it's important to carefully judge if the friend is suitable or not, always focusing on the child himself, not on his parents. We mustn't get carried away by our own prejudices, or our own self-respect. If we're sure that the friend isn't suitable, it's best not to attack the issue head on; it's more effective to use a circular maneuver, for example:

Ask your child some careful questions to help them start to question for themselves whether or not their friend is a good person.

Always using this same indirect method, help them start to see the negative side of the friend's behavior.

As an *atomic bomb*, some people suggest inviting the friend to stay for a few days – either over the weekend or in the holidays. They are likely to quickly start to show their true colors and your child will see for themselves – or with the help of their brothers and sisters, particularly if they are also adolescents – what that person is really like.

B) **Suitable friends:** In the case of suitable friends, we should encourage our children to invite them over to our house and vice versa, allow them to attend educational, cultural and sporting events together, and make an effort to get to

know their parents and become friends with them. However, we should never directly show our interest in encouraging the friendship, as it could lead to the child breaking it off just to avoid doing what his parents want him to do.

The big secret: Parental Love

Parental love which remains constant through all kinds of situations, big and small, leads to friendship with our children.

Being friends with our children means spending time with them. Some people claim that this should be “quality–time” because they don’t have “quantity–time”. Whilst they may have a point, I believe that it’s enough just to have “time–time”. And as time flies, each stage in our children’s development goes by so quickly that it would be a shame to waste it.

Some Specific Policy Recommendations

Policies regarding adolescents have to respond to the main problems that affect them, going beyond the family sphere and into the social environment.

These problems include: drugs; alcohol; gambling; school failure; irresponsible sexual behavior; a lack of professional skills which allow the teenager to earn an honest living; a lack of appreciation of what we have when we have too much (a common problem in well–off societies); etc.

It’s no good to have a policy that is solely negative, repressive or punitive. Or, at least, it’s not enough. We need to have clearly positive policies that will serve to motivate our teenagers. Positive policies could include:

A sports policy which encourages and rewards sporting efforts and achievements. Sports men and women can easily become *idols* for young people and it’s natural that they want to imitate them. A classic example is Rafael Nadal, a country–man of mine, who is currently the top tennis player worldwide, and who is able to overcome the many physical problems that affect him thanks to his effort and willpower.

A policy that encourages associations for young people – and the family in general – which organize excursions, competitions, clubs where young people can get together with the discreet supervision of adults, etc.

Ad hoc cultural policies, including, for example, one which promotes theater plays performed by and/or organized by young people; literary, poetry or music competitions; newspapers or magazines aimed at and edited by young people; etc.

Education policies aimed specifically at young people, offering them professional and/or university–level education and training.

Basic sex education policies which emphasize the potential negative consequences of irresponsible sexual behavior, respecting human dignity, the right to life and the legitimate rights of the parents, who are the primary and principal educators.

In general, policies which encourage and reward genuine values of freedom, effort, loyalty, patriotism (in its positive sense), solidarity, offering icons of merit and ability without discrimination based on gender, race, social or economic position, religion or culture.

Young people are, by nature, optimists, and so should we be.

Thank you very much.

[1] John Paul II: *Address to the III International Family Congress*, Rome, 30 October 1978.

[2] *Algunas cuestiones entre los padres y los adolescentes*, University of Navarre, OF-83, Pamplona, 1977, p. 3.

[3] *¿Entiendes a tu hijo adolescente?*, Fert, Barcelona, 1982, p. 63.