

The Things We Do for Love, Part One: Play Their Game

In this “The Things We Do for Love” series, I will be discussing ways parents can adapt to strengthen their relationships with their children and pass along family values.

At a recent parent conference, I sat across from a strikingly beautiful mom wearing digital camouflage fatigues and combat boots. Her daughter is one of my 6th graders at the Catholic school where I teach. She’s a polite and quiet girl who loves to draw and always keeps a stack of comic books at hand.

“Look,” her mom told me. “You and I both know she loves anime (Japanese animation). It is her life. And at first, I didn’t understand it. I didn’t want to understand it. I just let her read it or watch it in her room and went about my day.”

After someone warned the mother about some graphic anime out there, she realized she needed to stay on top of her daughter’s consumption of it.

“I needed to know exactly what she was watching and actually engage with her about it,” the mother said.

She talked with her daughter about some of the conflicts the characters are facing. She explained to her the things the child didn’t understand.

And do you know what? The mother actually started liking it.

“I started reading anime on my own,” she told me. “It was like a little book club. I even took her to an anime concert. They have these enormous screens and thousands of people singing together in Japanese. She LOVES this stuff. And I love her. So I love this stuff, too.”

It got me thinking about a recent conversation I had with my son, Collin. He ran into the kitchen to tell me about some level that he beat on his Star Wars video game. He was so excited that he was literally jumping up and down. He could barely even get

the words out. My reply, "Collin, you know I don't care about video games."

It wasn't the first time I'd said it. He'd been begging us for an Xbox for two years before I finally broke down and bought him a used one for his birthday. I only let him play it for two hours a day and (thankfully) he readily surrendered the controller when his time was up. He'd always want to tell me about his feats of victory, but I always shooed him away. They weren't real accomplishments, so I wasn't interested in them.

Since it came into our lives in July, Collin's adventures in Xbox land mattered to him, not me, but after talking to my student's mom, I realized that I was essentially slamming the door on him every time I told him I didn't care. This was a big part of who he was and I was rejecting it. And just as there are dark corners in the realm of Anime, there are violent video games out there that can have devastating consequences. This can apply to anything that kids develop an interest in. Parents need to intervene early on so to prevent their children from being exposed to and succumbing to destructive decisions. One of my favorite spiritual images is the one of the angel guiding the children across the broken bridge. Just as Jesus does that for all of us, parents must do that for their children.

It is up to me to build Collin a path that will lead him to the light (literally, as you will see.) I took the time to get involved in Collin's gaming by being his audience and cheering him on. Sure, it's terribly boring to watch Collin play Minecraft for an hour rather than one of my beloved nature documentaries, but I've learned to appreciate the creativity it takes to build an entire world out of cubes. I was officially hooked when he built a cathedral, from the steeple to the stained glass windows all the way down to the microphone on the pulpit. At one point, he delivered a homily! Collin built that cathedral with his own thumbs and imagination. It was as much a part of him as one of my paintings or essays are to me.

Now, Patrick has fired up our old Wii and the boys all play Wii Sports Resort. Besides being a fun form of friendly competition, it's also a good source of exercise during these winter months of being cooped up in the house. I've joined in with them a few times and, who knows, maybe I'll build the school of my dreams on Minecraft...but first I'll have to figure out the controller. I'm sure Collin will be glad

to help.