

# Mother Mary Can't Take Away My X-box

by Andrea Steele

The day before yesterday, my 13-year-old son came home from school and told me that he and his friend stuck up for a kid in one of his classes who was being picked on by a bully. I could tell by the way he made certain to tell me this as soon as he walked in the door that he really felt proud of his actions. Of course, I told him that I was very proud of him, and gave him one of the last high fives that will probably ever be reciprocated by him, being that he is getting close to that age where it would be an embarrassment to him.

I cannot be one hundred percent certain exactly what motivated my son to make the choice that he did, but I do know what did not. My husband and I are secular humanists, so we have not exposed any of our children to the concept that there is a supernatural being observing our every action or inaction, and ready to punish or reward us at will. I know that my son did not help that other kid at school because he wanted Yahweh to look upon him favorably. Humans have an ethical nature, with or without religious motivations. Many a religious folk do not understand why a person without faith would act morally without any notion that there is some ultimate justice in the universe—either positive or negative. A question that is frequently asked of atheists is: “If you do not believe in god, then on what do you base your morals?” My answer is always a resounding, “Common sense!” My kids do not have a back up deterrent of the threat of spending eternity in a scorching lake of fire. Nor do they have the additional motivation to make good choices because of a promised paradise after death. They are too busy living life NOW, and heeding the consequences of reality to have to be continually concerned with their death as well. I find that morbid and mentally abusive. They are kids! They are just beginning their lives!

As atheist parents, we emphasize consequence of action *in this life*. Period. That is all that there is for us. The universe is but a series of chains of events. So what else

is there? We learn through experience what keeps things in harmony. This experience may be by the individual, or through observing someone else's experience. Most parents have the understanding that we lead by example. It is no different for atheist parents. If we want our kids to make ethical choices, it helps if they are observing that behavior in us. I have told our children many times to never be a bully, and to champion the underdog. The reason? I have told them that those who get picked on are the kind of people who end up going Columbine. It is not a scare tactic. It is reality! My son may have prevented a school shooting!

*If we want our kids to make ethical choices, it helps if they are observing that behavior in us.*

We always try to do cool things together as a family as often as we can. Among those activities are trips to art museums, the aquarium, the Museum of Science and Industry, natural history museums, Dinosaur World, EPCOT, snorkeling, and camping. Last year we took a short cruise to Cozumel, Mexico and visited Mayan ruins. Because the kids missed a few days of school for this, we arranged with their teachers to have them write reports on what they learned about the Mayans on the trip. This gave them an added incentive to absorb what our tour guide was teaching us. We didn't feel the least bit bad about having them miss school, because the experience was something that will stay with them forever. Such events spark our children's minds, and they discover things about their natural surroundings, and different cultures. The more they are exposed to, the more that critical thinking can flourish. These activities often open up dialogue between us and the kids that would not normally come up in conversation in day to day experiences. Getting out there and discovering things together not only fosters critical thinking and dialogue, but it also makes memories. Our children may be parents someday, and I hope that we inspire them to be as interactive with their kids as we are with them.

One of the biggest concerns facing the atheist community is the lack of social support from those of like mind. This is especially so when it comes to families. While our

## ...Can't Take Away My X-Box—

---

children may not be able to get together with other non-theists, we can do what we can to encourage their involvement in other extracurricular activities that foster camaraderie. This makes our children stronger in their social lives, and they will be less likely to long for the acceptance that a church youth group would offer. We have plenty of youths here in Tampa who are dutifully touting their church's wares. When our children get invited to church, our answer is always no. This will never change for us. It may seem closed-minded, and it may seem like we are denying our kids experience. Let me assure you, I have the first hand- experience of once being an overzealous Southern Baptist teenager, and we have our reasons.

If you have never grown up in a religious environment, then you may not understand just how incessant some church youth groups can be in the way of recruiting—especially here in the South. Church outings are planned, and the kids are emphatically encouraged to invite people who are not “saved.” Imagine your daughter going on a church youth group trip to Walt Disney World. (Of course you'll have to imagine this is a church that hasn't boycotted Disney because of Gay Days—among other things.) The day is full of frolicking at the “Happiest Place on Earth”, and nothing religious even goes on all day long. Until.....exhausted from a long day of walking in the Florida sun and standing in long lines, your daughter gets on the bus ready to relax on the air conditioned chartered bus for the hour and a half long drive back to the church where you will pick her up. She talks to her friend sitting next to her, when the youth pastor comes up to her friend and requests an introduction to your daughter. Then begins the “witnessing.” Probably knowing that your daughter is too tired at this point to object, they begin talking about how Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice for the world by dying on the cross for her, and playing on your daughter's emotions with no reprieve. Children have no reason to think that an adult would be lying to them, and church leaders can be very charismatic and confident in what they are saying. It is simply too easy for kids to become swayed by such tactics. When our kids become adults and are stronger in their understanding of human behavior, culture and *marketing*, they can decide whether or not they want to attend church. For now, they can find out about different beliefs on the internet or books if they show an interest in the subject.

When it comes to other family members, every single

one of them knows where we stand on religion. Fortunately neither my husband nor I have any fundamentalists in our family. It makes it much easier when you do not have others trying to undermine you by attempting to convert your children behind your back. I feel for those who are going through this, because I know how relentless fundies can be. Family ties can be a sensitive subject. Many religions teach

*When our kids become adults and are stronger in their understanding of human behavior, culture and marketing, they can decide whether or not they want to attend church.*

people to break all ties with people who do not believe in the same thing that they do. Some of us may think that it wouldn't be a bad idea if the fundies did just that. (I hear Antarctica is nice this time of year.) As we pride ourselves on reason, we know that is not realistic. We cannot isolate ourselves from our fami-

lies, so we have to decide for ourselves whether or not it is worth our energy to address an issue of a holiday, family gathering, mealtime prayer, or confront grandma about how she keeps telling the kids that she cries every night for their souls. We have factor what we are willing to put up with, and what we must put our foot down.

The love that we have for our children is not measurable in word or deed, but we give them words of wisdom when we can, and we do everything possible to make them feel secure, valued and respected as independent thinking individuals. We teach them to doubt, question, analyze, and assess everything; which sometimes I fear will lead to cynicism; but we also show them compassion, charity, honesty, and humility; which I hope they will emulate and make choices that will consequently enrich their lives and the lives of others.

---

*Andrea Lynn Steele is a 35 year-old mother of two girls (ages 10 and 15) and a boy (age 13). She and her husband of 16 years have been together since high school. Andrea and her family live in a suburb of Tampa, Florida. She is one of the three original co-founders of the Center for Inquiry—Florida, and has done some local activism in the past through this outlet. She is a past coordinator of the Secular Family Network, a program of the Council for Secular Humanism. The primary focus of her activism dealt with freethinking families. Currently, she works full time as a subcontracting telecommunications drafter for AT&T in Orlando, Florida, which requires her to commute 180 miles round trip. She is also attending college, and will graduate in October with an Associate in business. From there she plans on earning a Bachelor degree in psychology, with a hope to go onto graduate school and specialize in the psychology of religion. Comments can be e-mailed to her at [angesteele@yahoo.com](mailto:angesteele@yahoo.com)*