

Building Your Child's Character: Challenges and Solutions

We live in a time when teaching our children to be virtuous is especially challenging. Youngsters are surrounded by political sound-bites; outlandish promises from advertisers; and television programming and films filled with lying, gratuitous violence and sex as entertainment. As a parent, you might feel weary and overwhelmed as you try to help your children develop virtues such as honesty, respect for themselves and others, humility, courage and a generous rather than greedy heart. You're not alone. The challenge of helping humans develop high moral character has perplexed philosophers, psychologists and theologians for centuries.

Children are born with unique temperaments, needs and gifts. Some find it much easier to share their toys than others. Some feel horrible when they lie, while others seem to delight in deception. Some are timid; others show amazing courage and tenacity. But, no matter where children are born on these continuums, they have the potential to develop good character and become positive contributors to society. In fact, Aristotle, who wrote of such things about 350 B.C.E., believed humans were born to become virtuous, mature adults – to be pillars of virtue for those younger or less developed than we are. And Immanuel Kant, writing some 2,000 years later, added his view that for an act to be truly virtuous, it had to be hard for us to do; it couldn't just come naturally.

What Can Parents Do?

Over the years we've had many parents ask us how to help their children develop positive personal qualities. We've heard questions such as: "My son is so selfish, how can I teach him to be generous?" "My daughter is always so angry and mean to her friends. What can I do to help her see that she should treat others with kindness and respect?" and "How can I get my child to be more honest?"

When it comes to character development, there is no more foolish philosophy than the old saying, "Do as I say, not as I do." Along with Aristotle, we believe your children first need to see virtue in action in order to try out their virtue-wings. Parents, relatives, siblings and childcare providers give children their first glimpses of courage, honesty, generosity, fairness and respect.

It's not enough for your children to see you and other important adults and peers behaving virtuously. They also need encouragement, praise and character feedback.

Encouragement: You can encourage your children with words or simply by showing faith in their positive potential. For the boy who is acting selfish, you might say, "I'm going to stop reminding you to share because I know you can do it on your own." You can also actively notice your children's behavior when they do something positive. For example, when you see your daughter share her toys with another child, you might just say, "Hey, I noticed you let Joannie play with your special toy." You don't even need to follow that comment up with praise, because just the fact that you noticed will have an affect.

A basic behavioral principle is this: Children will repeat actions that get them attention from their parents. What this means is that we need to worry more about catching our children doing something right than doing something wrong.

Character feedback: Most parents, us included, find it natural to give negative character feedback to our children. If a child is easily angered and reactive, we forget that she only sometimes is angry and mean, and so we tend to say things like, "Why do you have to be so mean?"

Unfortunately, when we repeatedly focus on the negative with our children, they may begin believing us. So, the girl who acts angry begins to define herself as “an angry girl.” You can see how important it is to notice when your children behave kindly and to give them a positive character building statement such as, “You’re the kind of girl who knows how to be nice to her friends.”

Dishonesty: Children are often tempted to lie about their misbehavior. This isn’t an easy problem, but one strategy that works is to separate the misbehavior from the truth or lie. In other words, when children are honest about the rules they’ve broken, they can receive “truth bonuses.” Or, if they lie about breaking a rule, then they suffer two separate consequences, one for the misbehavior and one for the lie.

Good works: Character development is enhanced by opportunities to do good in the world. Volunteering to help at food banks, helping coach younger children, giving money to a family-chosen charity – all these efforts instill important habits in your children. But don’t force them to help at the soup kitchen alone. Join them, and have a talk afterwards. Of course it’s hard to find time for such things, hard to interact with people who seem different and tempting to feel judgmental toward people who need help, but the payoffs can be enormous.

Character development begins at home and continues at school. As a parent, consider how you can bring some of your best character-building ideas to your child’s school. You can have a voice in having the school choose character-building reading materials, activities and speakers. Talk to your child’s school counselor, teachers, coaches or principal about how you can contribute to the challenge of character development in all young people.

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