

PRINCIPLES OF Parenting

Raising Good Children: Helping Your Child Become A Moral Adult

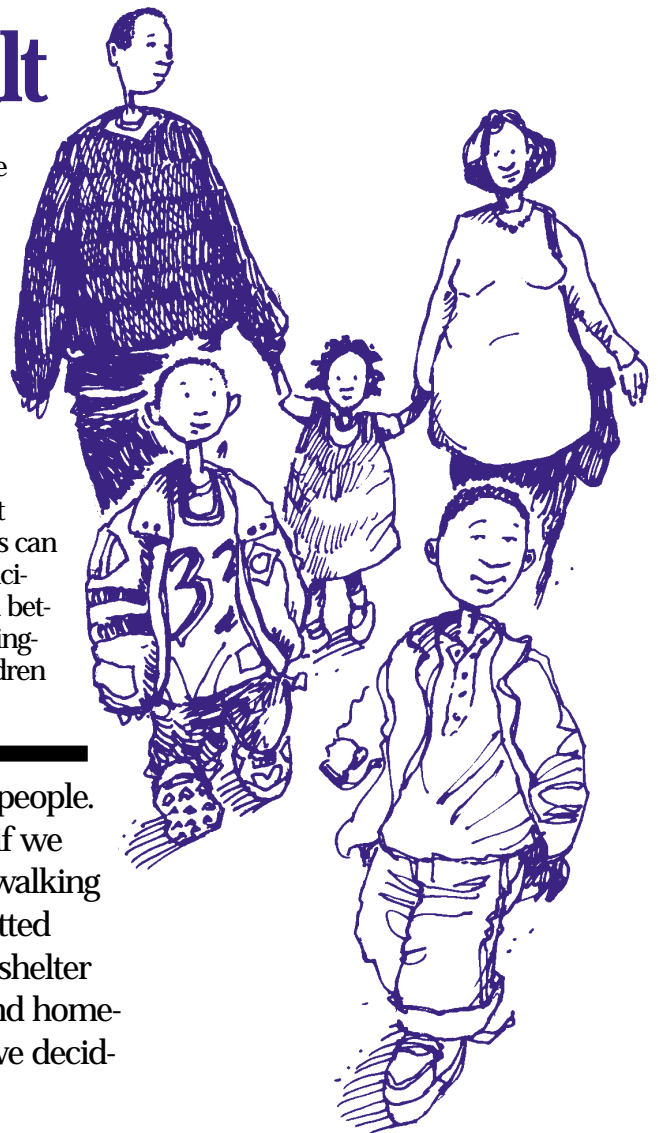
Most parents want their children to be kind and caring. We want our children to respect and help people rather than be cruel. We want our children to have inner standards of goodness that can guide them through difficult choices.

People who show concern for others and who make good choices are often said to be moral. Fortunately there are ways to raise your children so that they are more likely to develop into moral adults.

Be An Example

Your actions send a powerful message to your children about what you think is important. Your willingness to help neighbors can teach your children how to be helpful. Your willingness to participate in church or community efforts to make the community a better place can teach your children how to be involved. Your willingness to apologize when you make mistakes can teach your children how to solve problems and work well with other people.

We have always wondered how to help homeless people. We contribute to charities but we always wondered if we should do more. Early one morning when we were walking along Canal Street on a visit to New Orleans, we spotted three unkempt older men huddled in a doorway for shelter from the rain. It seemed clear that they were poor and homeless. We weren't sure how we could help them but we decid-



ed that we might take them to breakfast. My husband and I approached them and asked if we might take them to a restaurant a few doors away and buy them breakfast. They were very glad for a warm meal and for caring company. As we ate breakfast, they told us about their lives, both the pains and the joys. We felt very blessed by our visit with them. We did not solve all their problems that morning but we did a small thing to make life a little better for three people.

When parents actively seek ways to help other people, their children are likely to learn a powerful lesson. You may choose to share your musical talents with shut-ins. You may visit and talk with people who are lonely. You may offer a ride to a neighbor who has no car. You might volunteer to help at school. We can all find ways to use our talents and resources to make life a little better for others.

There is always a danger that people may be so anxious to help that they become unwise. It is not good to neglect good sense in our efforts to help others. And it is not wise to try to help in ways that do not fit our resources. But our willingness to try to be helpful with others can make a very big difference for children who are learning about how people relate to other people.

Q: What are some ways you can serve and help in your community?

Discipline Children To Help Them Learn

The reason for disciplining children is to help them become strong and caring adults. The best discipline respects children and helps them to learn.

Think for a moment what it must look like to a child to be spanked for hitting his sister. It must be terribly confusing to have someone hit you to teach you not to hit. Spanking children may teach them to be mean.

Showing respect for children's preferences teaches them about sensitivity and consideration. Discipline that sets limits but also helps children find good ways to get their needs met, can help them become moral adults.

One motto that expresses the challenge of parenting is, "My job as a parent is to help my children get what they want in a way that I feel good about." We want to respect children's preferences while still setting limits.

Children are more likely to learn about good behavior when their parents are willing to calmly discuss ideas and rules with them. If parents blame, criticize, and punish their children a lot, the children are likely to become discouraged or angry. If parents do not set limits for their children, the children are likely to become careless about rules.

Children learn best by gentle parental teaching and by parents' wise use of limits and consequences.

You may want to study the publication "Something Better than Punishment," Extension Circular HE-687, as you think about good ways to raise moral children.

My five-year-old wanted to help me wash the dishes. She likes to be involved. But when she helped me with the dishes, she would often break a cup or a plate. So I asked her if she would like to set up her own dishwashing. She was very excited. We would set a bowl of soapy water and a bowl of clean water on the table and she would wash, rinse, and dry her plastic plates and spoons. She really enjoyed having her own work to do. Of course she splashed water on the table and floor, but it was easy enough to wipe up the spills when she finished. And I was able to wash the family dishes without breakage.



The common problems with discipline seem to be of two kinds: sometimes we are too insensitive to children's wishes and other times we are unwilling to set limits. When we do not listen carefully to children's wishes, we teach them by our example to be insensitive. When we are unwilling to set limits, we teach them that they do not need to respect rules. The solution is to help them have the experiences and opportunities that they want but to use our adult wisdom to set limits.

For example, some families have a rule that children will be at home rather than hanging out on the streets. Some families set a standard that their children will not date until 16 years of age. Setting standards is important.

But it is also important to be sensitive to the children. For example, a family may allow friends to come to their home to play rather than have their children hang out on the street. Teens can be allowed to have friend parties in their home rather than go on dates before they are ready.

There are better ways to teach children than through spanking and punishment. Hurting children may teach them that the world is a cruel place. Any discipline that is insensitive to what children need and want does not teach them about sensitivity and consideration. Discipline that sets limits but helps children find good ways to get their needs met can help them become moral adults.

Q: How well are you doing at helping your children get what they want in ways that you think are appropriate? Are you using positive, helpful discipline?

Help Your Children Learn Compassion

The basis for moral behavior is empathy, compassion, or feeling for other people. Moral people do not like to see other people suffer. There are many things we can do to help our children develop their compassion.

We can read or tell stories to children that illustrate compassion. For example, in the children's book *Miss Tizzy*, an older woman draws neighbor children into both fun and service. When Miss Tizzy becomes ill, the children know what to do. They serve her.

You may also know stories from the lives of your ancestors or heroes that illustrate the blessing of compassion. Reading such books or telling such stories can help children become more compassionate. A short list of children's books that can help you teach compassion is provided at

the end of this publication.

We can also give children chances to serve with us. When we visit shut-ins or prepare a meal for someone who is bedridden, we might invite our children to help us. Children should not be forced to participate. But if we tell them about the other person and his or her suffering, and if we show how they can be helpful, many children will choose to help.

When I was invited to deliver some money to a struggling family, I invited my family to help. Each member of the family made gifts or cards or prepared treats. We all worked together to do something for the needy family. The gifts and money were all delivered anonymously. The next week the family wrote a letter of thanks that was published in the local newspaper. Each family member felt very glad to have been a part of the little project.



The way we talk to children when they hurt others can also help children develop compassion. Instead of blaming children who cause the injuries, we might talk to them about the effect of their behavior on other children. "When you push Cedric down he feels very afraid and lonely. We don't want Cedric to feel that way. What can we do to work with Cedric without hurting him or making him feel bad?"

One of the best ways to help

children develop compassion is to get them involved in service. Ideally the service should fit their talents, maturity, and interests. Small children can join you in making and delivering cookies or in singing to lonely neighbors. Older children may be able to help you clean or paint an older neighbor's house. Teenagers may want to join Habitat for Humanity or some other community service effort. As we involve children in service and talk with them about suffering and people's efforts to help, our children are more likely to become moral adults we can be proud of.

Q: What ways can you help you children develop their compassion?

Principles And Feelings

Talk with your children about the feelings and principles that guide your life. Children like to be taught rather than lectured. Good stories can be powerful teachers. Perhaps you had a fifth-grade teacher who was especially caring. Tell the children about her and what you appreciated. Perhaps there is a historic figure whom you have patterned your life after. Share with your children stories and lessons from that person's life.

In our family we all want to learn from each other. Every Sunday as we sit down for a leisurely family dinner, we invite every family member to share his or her best experience of the day. Some family members tell about sharing with a good friend. Some may tell about things they have learned. Some tell

about feelings of peace or love or joy. We like to encourage every family member to notice what they are feeling and to share it with family members.

Songs also teach powerful lessons. We can use the time riding in the car (especially with young children) or playing together to sing fun songs about things that we believe in.

Some families establish a tradition of meeting one evening every week to learn and to share.

Family members can take turns leading the weekly discussion or lesson. Even young children can be taught to share stories about their heroes. It is also useful if parents teach their children to understand other people, their differences and their qualities.

There are some influences that can deaden people's sensitivities. Violent, abusive, or cruel movies or games can damage human sensitivity. Wise parents will limit children's exposure to experiences that are harsh. But they will also teach children about positive, sensitive, and tender experiences. They will listen to children and encourage them to be aware of their feelings. (See "Being Understanding: A Key to Developing Healthy Children," Extension Circular HE-682.) Sometimes the best parental teaching is done by listening. Teaching children to be in tune with their feelings can help them make compassionate decisions and become moral adults.

Sometimes children learn to be afraid of the bad without learning to love the good. Try to understand their feelings of fear and

anxiety. Parents also need to help their children to be optimistic, happy, and hopeful. Notice how much each of your children feels positive and hopeful. Help them to notice the things they are excited about. Help them to deal with the things they worry about. You may want to watch the movie *Polyanna* with them and talk with them about playing the glad game.

Q: What are some ways you will talk with your children about the feelings and principles that guide your life?

Help Children Experience Loving, Caring Relationships

The most important factor in helping children become moral adults may be the experience of loving, caring, helping relationships. Every child needs someone who is crazy about him or her. It might be a parent or some other relative. It might be a teacher. But every person needs to be loved.

I always loved visiting my grandmother's house. She seemed to love having me around. She listened to me tell about my experiences. And she cooked special treats for me. Grandma is one reason I am a happy adult today.

The best pattern is for a child to have many people in his or her life who enjoy, appreciate, en-

courage, and celebrate that child. Of course different children have different preferences for how they want to be loved. (See "Sending Messages of Love," Extension Circular HE-683.) But all children need to feel valued. A wise parent not only finds ways to show love to each child but helps each child have experiences with other adults who are supportive and caring.

Q: Does each of your children have regular experiences with people who care about them?

Imagine that some day when your children are grown you will study their lives and you will see people who are caring and considerate, and who make wise and sensitive decisions. You will know that your efforts to encourage moral development have paid off.

Some children's books to help you teach compassion are:

Miss Tizzy by Libba Moore Gray, published by Simon & Schuster, 1993.

Uncle Willie and the Soup Kitchen by DyAnne DiSalvo-Ryan, published by Morrow Junior Books, 1991.

Amazing Grace by Mary Hoffman, published by Dial Books for Young Readers, 1991.

Little Polar Bear Finds a Friend by Hans deBeer, published by North-South Books, 1990.

Rose Blanche by Roberto Innocenti, published by Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1985.

For further reading about moral development, you might be interested in *Raising Good Children* by Thomas Lickona, published by Bantam, 1994.

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For more information, call your county Extension office. Look in your telephone directory under your county's name to find the number.

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UPS, 20M10, New 5:97, HE-678

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