

RAISING A MORAL CHILD

8 TIPS FOR RAISING A MORAL CHILD

Raising a moral child means teaching your child to live by the Golden Rule. Before your child can “treat others like you want others to treat you,” he has to learn how to empathize, to be able to think through an action before doing it and to judge how the consequences of his action will affect himself and others. Therein lies the basis of a moral person.

1. Raise Kids Who Care

Parents are the child’s first morality teachers. Numerous studies conclude that attachment-parented infants are more likely to become moral children and adults. The one quality that distinguishes these children from kids raised in a detached parenting style is sensitivity. We view sensitivity as the root virtue of a moral child. Plant it in your child and watch it sprout other virtues, such as self-control, compassion, and honesty. Here’s how to grow a sensitive child.

When a child spends the early years with a sensitive caregiver, this infant develops an inner sense of rightness, a sense of well-being. In short, he feels good. Being on the receiving end of this responsive style of caring plants in the infant trust and eventually sensitivity. The moral child makes these virtues part of himself. They are not something a moral child has, they are what the moral child is; sensitive and trusting. He has learned it is good to help and hold a person in need. He has a capacity to care, the ability to feel how another person feels. He will be able to consider how his actions will affect another person.

This inner code of behavior becomes deeply rooted in connected children. As a result, they develop a healthy sense of guilt, feeling appropriately wrong when they act wrong. To a connected kid, a lie is a breach of trust. When he slips, his well-being is disturbed, so he strives to preserve and restore this sense of moral balance. A connected child can truly do the right things for others because others have done the right things for him.

The Unconnected Kid

The child who grows up with insensitivity becomes insensitive. He has no frame of reference on how to act. Without an inner guidance system, his values are subject to change according to his whims. One difference between kids who care and kids who don’t is their ability to feel remorse, to be bothered by how their actions affect others. Criminologists have noticed the most significant trait shared by unconnected kids and psychopathic adults is

their inability to feel remorse and empathy, and thus take responsibility for their behavior.

A group of five-year-olds are playing and one of the children falls, scrapes her knee and starts crying. The connected child will offer a reassuring “I’m sorry you’re hurt” and show a desire to comfort. The unconnected child may say “cry baby.”

2. Make a Moral Connection

The connected toddler begins her moral development with the two fundamental qualities of sensitivity and trust. These “starter virtues” make it easier for parents to teach a toddler and preschooler the do’s and don’ts of life. A morally-connected parent appropriately points out to the child what’s right, what’s wrong, and what’s expected. The moral child trusts that whatever the parent says is gospel. If Dad says hitting is wrong, it’s wrong. If Mom says comforting a hurting child is right, it’s right. The parents are the trusted moral authorities.

The first six years is a window of opportunity when a child unquestionably accepts the virtues modeled by parents. Consider what happens when the child receives even one “morality lesson” each day in the early years. For example, Ashley hurts her finger. “Let’s help her feel better.” Your son takes his friend’s ball. “Chris feels sad because you took his favorite ball.” Or “How would you feel if Chris took your ball?”

Initially a child believes behaviors are right or wrong because you tell her so, or she considers the consequences. By five years of age your child begins to internalize your values: what’s right for you becomes right for her. Your values, virtuous or not, become part of your child.

Between seven and ten the child enters the age of moral reasoning. Now the moral child begins to act right because it is the right thing to do. By seven years of age, most children have developed their concept of “what’s normal.” If sensitivity, caring, politeness and empathy have been standard operating procedure in the child’s home, those are his norms, and he operates according to them. What his parents take seriously, the child takes seriously. Up to this point, he believes his parents to be infallible, so he enters middle childhood with their values as part of himself.

Along come children with other “norms,” who grew up in insensitive, perhaps violent homes, with a distant parent-child relationship. Here is where the morally-connected child shines. Because his moral code is part of himself, the alternative values feel strange to him. They upset his sense of well-being.

He becomes morally selective, taking those values which contribute to his well-being and discarding those that don't.

Not so for the Morally Ungrounded Child

He is the product of a home where virtues are not discussed or taught and enters middle childhood like a ship without a rudder or anchor. He drifts in a sea of moral uncertainty, prey to whatever influences come along. Because he has no reference system to use as a standard, he adopts others' values or he shifts values according to what's most convenient for solving the problem of the moment. This child drifts into moral relativism: very few things are right or wrong, black or white, but most solutions are shades of gray, and the child takes the path of least resistance or the one that is most popular. This child is at risk because he lacks connection with morally-grounded parents.

3. Model Morals

A model is an example to be imitated, for better or worse. In the early years children are totally dependent on their caregivers to show the world to them. Your standards automatically become theirs, because they soak up whatever surrounds them. They make no independent judgments as to the rightness or wrongness of actions. Even if you do something you've taught them is wrong, such as hit someone, they assume you are right in what you did and the person you hit deserved it. If they see and hear it from their parents, it's right, and they store this behavior in their impressionable minds as something worth imitating.

After six or seven years of age the moral child begins to make judgments about which models are worth emulating and incorporating into his personality and which ones need to be discarded as threatening to his self. This means parents must saturate their children with healthy models in the preschool years, when children are most impressionable, so they can be discerning about models that come along later.

Healthy modeling does not imply perfect parenting, based not on what is right and wrong, but on what is convenient and expedient. Your child will pick up the way of life that she sees you living daily at home. You will inspire your child to follow your example, be it a valuable or a valueless model.

Besides providing healthy models at home, screen outside influences that might leave unhealthy models in your child's mind. These include substitute caregivers, neighbors, preschool teachers, older kids, and television. Once upon a time persons of significance in a child's life came primarily from within the extended family, but in today's mobile society a child is likely to

have a wider variety of models. Use these to your advantage and saturate your child's environment with persons of significance who provide healthy examples so that there is little room left for unhealthy messages.

4. Minimize Bad Impressions

We emphasize models as one of the prime influences on a child's behavior. Parents need to realize that negative behaviors viewed on TV (for example, anger and violence) are easier for a child to copy than positive behaviors (say, kindness). A few examples are all that is necessary to make a lasting impression. Positive behaviors are more difficult to imitate because they require maturity and self-control. These examples need to be repeated often to sink in. Parents should not be lulled into a false sense of security because their child has seen only "a few" violent movies. Nevertheless, you can't control everything that goes into your child's mind. To counteract the negative influences that slip in, saturate your child's mind with examples of positive behavior. Also, beware of what we term "instant replay." A child's developing mind is like a giant video library. He stores all he sees for later retrieval. If the child repeatedly witnesses graphic scenes of violence, this topic gets lots of shelf space in the library of his mind. So, years later when presented with similar circumstances, for example, a rivalry over a girlfriend, the teen or adult instantly replays a similar scene from his video library: He shoots the person who stole his girlfriend. We wonder if the criminals that go berserk (translation: "temporarily insane") and commit a hideous crime are, by reflex, replaying what they were subconsciously programmed to do.

5. Teach Your Child to Think Morally

Take advantage of teachable moments, ordinary events of family life that offer opportunities to talk your moral child through the process of moral reasoning. One day I saw two eight-year-old neighborhood kids perched on a hillside ready to toss water balloons on cars passing by below. I nabbed them before their mischief began and began this dialogue with one of the boys: "Jason, what do you think might happen when the water balloon hits the car?" I asked. "It would splat all over the car," Jason responded. "Imagine if you were the driver, what do you think the driver might feel?" I said. "I dunno," Jason mumbled. "Do you think it might scare him?" I persisted. "Yes, I guess so," admitted Jason. "He might be so startled that the car goes out of control, he drives up on a sidewalk, and a little child goes splat. Isn't that possible?" I offered. "I guess so," he admitted. "You would feel pretty bad if that happened, wouldn't you?" I went on. "Yes, I sure would," Jason agreed.

You can discuss people on TV in the same way. You notice your ten-year-old watching a questionable TV program. Sit next to her and in a nonthreatening

and nonjudgmental way inquire, “Do you think what those people are doing is right?” Encourage discussions about current events, controversial sports figures, newspaper headlines, and social issues. **Raise your children to express their opinions.** Encourage lively family debates. Respect their viewpoints even if you don’t agree. Studies show that children who come from families who encourage such open discussion are more likely to think morally mature. A California study of a thousand college students looked at the relationship between the student’s level of moral reasoning and how they were parented. Students who scored high on moral reasoning came from families that encouraged open discussion of controversial topics. Other studies have shown that highly-permissive parents who did not expect obedience from their children and gave inappropriate praise produced “me-firsters,” children whose only thought was to satisfy themselves. And the other extreme, over-controlling parents produced conformist teenagers who couldn’t think for themselves. In these studies, families who gave their children a voice in decisions produced teenagers who were able to reason morally. Getting children to preach to themselves becomes the most lasting morality lesson.

Let your moral child hear you think through the rightness or wrongness of an action. You and your child are at a store and the cashier gives you too much change back. You notice the error and share it with your child: “Oh, the cashier gave us too much money back.” And then you offer a moral commentary as if thinking out loud: “This extra money does not belong to us. It would not be right to keep it. The cashier may be suspended or lose her job for this mistake. I would feel bad if I kept the money...” Your child justifies, “But Dad, everybody does it.” You reply, “Does that make it right? What do you believe is the right thing to do? How do you think you would feel if you kept money that didn’t belong to you?” Then add, “I feel good doing the right thing and returning the money.”

6. Know Your Moral Child

Know how your child is thinking morally at each stage of development. When situations occur that require a moral decision, involve your moral child in them. One day our ten-year-old Erin and I were driving by a beggar. Erin said, “Dad, can we stop and give him some money?” Taking her cue, I stopped the car for a teachable opportunity. Testing where she was at morally I suggested, “Maybe he should get a job.” Erin answered, “Maybe he can’t find one.” That told me where she was. We stopped at a nearby store and bought some food for the needy person.

Morals are important to a child because they govern the choices they make. If a child is self-centered, materialistic and lacks empathy, she will often

think of her own convenience first and take the path of least resistance. If empathy is ingrained in her, she will make choices that make her a better person to be with and society more caring.

7. Know Your Child's Friends

Parents, know the values of your child's friends because some of these will rub off onto your child. One day we witnessed a case of childhood blackmail. Nine-year-old Matthew was playing with eight-year-old Billy who tried to blackmail Matthew into doing something. He told Matt that he would not invite him to his birthday party if he didn't do it. Matthew, a very sensitive and principled child, was visibly bothered. We used this opportunity to talk to both children. We impressed on Billy that this is not how children should treat each other. We also asked Matt how he felt being on the receiving end of the blackmail. By learning what it felt like to be treated like this, Matt's principles were reinforced. You can always get positive mileage out of negative situations. Real life provides real lessons.

In our zeal to convince our children of the wisdom of moral living, there is a bit of missionary in all of us. Yet the older children get the more they seem to tune out preaching. That's why teachable situations, such as those we mentioned above, leave more lasting lessons than anything you say.

8. Send Your Child off to School Morally Literate

Ground your moral child in your values day in and day out, and continue to reinforce these values as long as you have an influence on your child. You want your moral child to do what's right, not just what's expedient in a given situation. To do this, he must act from inner conviction built up over many years. Values don't stick if they are tacked onto the child at the last minute, like a holiday decoration, or changed like a piece of clothing, according to the fashion of the day.

Once children enter middle childhood (ages six through ten), they are on the receiving end of tremendous peer pressure. If the child does not have her own inner guidance system telling her which choice to make, she will more readily become a victim of peer pressure. Children are searching for principles. If a strong guidance system prevails at home and within children themselves, they are likely to conform to their parents' and their own inner morals. They become leaders among their peers instead of followers, setting their own course, staying on it, and swimming upstream even when the prevailing current is against them.

Teaching your moral child right from wrong must be done with patience and care. Power or fear morality is not likely to stick because it does not become

a willing part of the child's self: "If I catch you stealing again, I'll belt you even harder," yelled a dad who was determined to teach his child right and wrong by the use of fear and force. This child is more likely to spend his energy figuring out how he can avoid getting caught than in moral reasoning about the rightness or wrongness of the act.

One of the goals in raising a moral child is to turn out a moral citizen. The family is a mini society where a child learns how to live with others and to respect authority. Children who operate with inner controls and not out of fear of punishment make morality a part of themselves. They have a balanced view of authority: they respect authority figures but do not accept others' values unquestioningly. If the laws are not serving the interests of the people, they'll be the ones leading the charge to throw out the lawmakers and elect new ones. Raising kids who care is the first step in maintaining a moral society.

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