

Raising Children By Example

Practice What you Teach and Preach

Famous child psychiatrist Fritz Redl used to say to groups of parents: "Get out your paper and pencils. I am going to tell you the three most important things you will ever need to know about raising children." The parents would wait breathlessly for his words of wisdom. Then he would say, "Example, example, example." Similarly, Eda LeShan, a family counselor and author about parenting, has often said: "The only way to raise a decent human being is by being one." These two observers are correct: what children become probably has most of all to do with the example set by those who raise them.

"Monkey see, monkey do."

"Do as I say, not as I do."

These sayings describe two ways of teaching: by example and by preaching. Young children usually learn by the "monkey see, monkey do" method.

In case you doubt the importance of teaching by example, think about your own childhood. How were you most influenced to become the person you now are—for better or for worse? Was it mostly what you learned in school? Was it mostly your grade-school and high-school and adult friends? Was it mostly movies or television? Chances are that the person you have become was influenced mostly by the example set by your parents and other people who were close to you when you were young.

Parents as Role Models

Young children do not have prior knowledge or skills, and so they eagerly look for someone to imitate. That "someone" is usually one or both of their parents. Parents are a child's first teachers and role models. Usually children are more affected by what their parents do than by what their parents say. They learn how to behave by seeing how their mothers and fathers behave and following their example. For this reason, you need to be aware of the "lessons" you may unintentionally be teaching your children. Children often learn without a parent's realizing it. For example, it's not unusual for a mother to overhear her four-year-old child scolding a younger sister or brother or a doll in the same sharp tones that she herself uses when scolding the children. Such unintentional influences are just as powerful as those we carefully plan.

Social skills. Social skills and attitudes are often best taught by example. A child will learn good manners more easily when "please" and "thank you" are part of daily life. The learning is gradual and occurs more naturally at home. As children take part in social activities with a parent, they begin to notice how the parent reacts to other people and new situations. A child's own self-confidence in meeting people often depends on the parent's example.

Respect for others. Children learn more than social skills and table manners from their parents. They also learn how to value other people and institutions. Parents who regularly put down other people are teaching their child that other people are unimportant. Be aware that the way you treat your child sets an example for how your child should treat others. If you want your child to respect the rights and feelings of others, then you must begin by respecting your child's rights and feelings.

Do it yourself. Consistency between teaching and example is very important. If you try to teach your child one thing but then behave in a different or opposite way yourself, your child will become confused and frustrated as to what to do and whom to believe. One man reportedly shouted at his children constantly: "Say 'please,' say 'thank you.'" Yet he was never heard to say "please" or "thank you" to his children. More likely he would shout across the yard, "Go wash your hands for lunch" or "Get me the hammer" (with no "please" and no "thank you"). Or suppose a five-year old is caught hitting another five-year-old. His parent tells him that he must not hit people—and then gives him a spanking as punishment. The parent's action is inconsistent with the message and the child doesn't know whether to believe the words or the actions.

The home atmosphere. Children not only unconsciously imitate the behavior of their parents, but they also absorb the general atmosphere of the home. A child reared in a home filled with love, affection, and cooperation can more easily show love to others. This doesn't mean that you have to avoid conflicts, but the way you handle conflicts is important. Parents who cope with problems by blaming others should not be too surprised to hear their child say, "Sally did it, not me." If, on the other hand, a parent makes a real effort to tackle a problem, the child will be less likely to give up at the first sign of trouble.

Accentuate the positive. Perhaps instead of focusing attention on punishments and rewards, what threats will work, and whether to spank or not, we might better find some quiet time and place and try to define what qualities we would like our children to have when they grow up. Then remember what one mother said: "If I try to live by my values, my kids will follow my lead."

Explain things. Preach what you practice. That is, don't just do it, say it. Modeling is more effective when we talk about what we are doing and why. If we take soup to a sick friend or if we work on a community project, our children are more likely to pay attention to what we are doing and to copy those efforts if we share our motivations. Children often have no idea why we do what we do. Explaining that we think it's important to be helpful and that's why we're bringing the soup or that we share the responsibility for making our community a better place to live and that's why we go to meetings, helps our children understand our reasoning and relate our activities to their own behavior.

Also **talk about the ways you cope.** Children need to see how people deal with the kind of situations and dilemmas in life that they face. A father going out to clean the garage might say, "Oh, this place is such a mess, I don't know where to begin (mirroring the child's typical feelings about her own room, if this is an issue). "I guess I'll just start in one corner and see how far I get in an hour." The adult demonstrates a way of coping with feelings and shows how to take on a task step by step.

Influence of Television

Another powerful model for children resides in your home—the TV set. Many of the values and behaviors depicted on TV are not what parents want for their children: materialism (children see 20,000 commercials a year), promiscuity (children can now see up to 40 sexual encounters a week, according to one study), and the flagrant use of alcohol (on crime shows, someone takes a drink on the average of four times an hour).

The National Institute for Mental Health has concluded that there is now overwhelming evidence of a causal link between children watching TV violence and engaging in violent acts. Research consistently shows that children are affected by aggressive TV models who relate to others either through verbal put-downs or physical violence. Preschool children who watch violent Saturday morning TV programs are more apt to be violent than those who don't.

In a 10-year study, Dr. Leonard Eron found that the single best predictor of how aggressive a young man would be at age 19 was the amount of violent television he had watched at age eight. Research also shows that children who watch programs like Mr. Rogers are less aggressive, more cooperative, and more imaginative than kids who frequently watch action, cartoon, and game shows.

What to do about TV. The research suggests two courses of action for parents on the subject of kids' TV viewing: 1) limit children's exposure to negative models (people you wouldn't want children to imitate) by closely monitoring their viewing; and 2) help children evaluate the examples they see on TV by discussing the actions of the various characters. Children are more apt to be aware of our values and less likely to be influenced by TV models if we talk about the behavior we see and its positive and negative consequences.

Parents Aren't Perfect

None of the above comments assume that any of us are capable of perfection or anything close to it. We all lose our tempers, say things we're sorry for, are not always as kind as we would like to be, maybe even cheat a little here or there. It is reassuring that it is the general trend in our behavior that influences our children, not the isolated instances of bad (or good) behavior. We are human; so are our children. Perfection can be expected of neither. What is important is to admit our mistakes, say we're sorry, and demonstrate how we try to make amends for our failures.

Consider this statement by Chicago News columnist Sydney J. Harris: "When parents talk about discipline, they mean a rigid set of rules to prevent their children from misbehaving. But the only discipline worthy of the name lies in providing a solid framework of ideals—not for the child to live up to, but for the parents to live within. You can beat children until they are black and you are blue, but it cannot make them any better than the examples they see around them every day."

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