



# Fact Sheet

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## Rearing Moral Children

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How do our children learn right from wrong? How do we teach them to be the kind of people who enhance rather than diminish the quality of life in our society? How do we pass on to them a sense of morality, values, and social responsibility?

### Characteristics of Moral People

Of all the parts of parenting, no part is as important as raising children with good values. As parents, we may hope our children are good athletes, achieve in school, are artistically talented, or good looking, but nothing is as important as their moral behavior. If our children are not good, honest, self-disciplined, kind, hard-working people, then their humanity is diminished. But what does it mean to say our children are "good" people?

The following characteristics help promote moral development:

- honest and trustworthy
- faithful and loyal
- hard-working, responsible, and self-disciplined
- kind, with concern for their fellow human beings
- independent, able to resist the pressure of the crowd
- generous, giving, and selfless
- loving, empathetic, sensitive, and tolerant
- friendly, helpful, cheerful, and gentle
- concerned for justice, and respectful of legitimate authority, rules, and laws
- respectful of themselves and the rights of others
- respectful of life, property, nature, elders, and parents
- courteous, polite, having good manners
- fair in work and play

- merciful and forgiving, understanding the futility of holding a grudge
- service oriented, willing to contribute to family, friends, community, country, religious organizations, and school
- courageous
- peaceful, calm, and serene

### Morality is Respect

Parents need to respect children and require respect in return. Discipline must be respectful and model the restraint, gentleness, and fairness we expect of our children. As children get older, we need to ask for and consider their opinions when setting rules and consequences.

Children develop morality slowly, and in stages. These stages have their foundation in a secure attachment and basic trust, beginning in the preschool years and continuing to develop even in the adult years. These stages are the ones of right and wrong that we carry around in our heads as children, teens, and adults. Each stage has its own theory and idea of what is good and right and different reasons why people should be good. Each stage brings a person closer to mature moral development.

### Respect Kids and Require Respect in Return

Treating kids with respect means treating them like persons, being fair with them, relating to them at their level, and making some allowances for the immaturity of their developmental stage. It means giving kids the feeling that you're trying to consider their point of view.

Since morality is a two-way street, we can require respect in return from our children. We can insist on courtesy and expect consideration. We can require in firm, unmistakable ways, the

special respect that is due us as parents and caretakers and the simple respect that is due every human being.

## Teach by Example

One of the surest ways to help our children turn their moral reasoning into positive moral behavior is to teach by example. Teaching kids respect by respecting them is certainly one way to teach by example. But teaching by example goes beyond how we treat our children. It has to do with how we treat others as adults, how we treat and talk about others outside the family. It has to do with how we lead our lives. Think back to how your own parents influenced your moral development by the examples they set. We teach respect for all persons by the examples we set. Nothing else is more indelibly etched in our childrens' minds.

## Teach by Telling

Even though it is extremely important to teach by example, it is not enough. Children are surrounded by bad examples. They need our words as well as our actions. They need to see us leading good lives, but they also need to know why we do it. For our example to have maximum impact, they need to know the values and beliefs that lie behind it.

Children's books can be helpful in illustrating values. Moving stories that are told through television shows or movies can also open the conversation with children about morality. Worship, study, and celebration of your religious faith together as a family also can promote moral development.

## Help Children Learn to Think

It is not enough to set a good example and tell children what we think, important as those things are. We also have to teach them to think for themselves. One father describes how his parents did that: "Whenever I did something wrong, my parents didn't just demand that I stop my behavior. Instead, they almost always asked, 'How would you feel if someone did that to you?' That gave me a chance to reflect on whatever I did and how I'd like to have it done to me."

There are two very important moral lessons here. First, take the time to think. Second, put yourself in the other person's shoes. Neither of those things comes naturally to children. We can help their moral development by giving them constant encouragement to stop and think and to take the viewpoint of others into consideration. Children who think about and dis-

cuss moral issues make better headway through the stages of moral reasoning than children who don't.

## Help Children Take on Real Responsibilities

Have your children complete chores and jobs around the house, take responsibility for their own homework, or take care of a younger sister or brother, an ill family member, or animals. Volunteering, service projects, and giving to a charity provide an opportunity to give of self through responsible action.

## Balance Independence and Control

Children need limits with independence, roots, and wings. Finding the balance can be tricky. Too much parental control can lead children to rebel and make poor choices just to get some freedom. Too much freedom leads to children feeling overwhelmed—having too much power before they are ready for it. With an overabundance of freedom, children may get the idea that parents don't really care what they do or what kind of person they become.

## Love Children and Help Them Develop a Positive Self-Concept

Parental love helps a child take in parental values and rules. Parents who spend quality and quantity time with their children as well as love them abundantly have children who have higher levels of moral development.

## Foster Moral Development and a Happier Family

Helping children grow morally and making good families are really the same thing. When you're doing one, you'll be doing the other.

A close family gives children people to identify with, examples to learn from, values and traditions to uphold, and a support system to turn to in times of need. When children feel connected to the family, they've got a rudder that helps them hold to a course of responsible conduct in the face of pressure from peers.

## Reference

*Raising Good Children*, by Thomas Lickona, Bantam Books, 1983.