

HELPING YOUR CHILD DEVELOP GOOD CHARACTER TRAITS



Ways Parents Can Help Their Children
Do Better in School



One of a Series of Booklets for Parents

THE • DISCIPLINE • SERIES

You Can Shape and Mold Your Child's Character

Smart and good are not the same thing. Very bright people can use their intellect to do the wrong thing. Developing the "good" in children is developing their character. Students with good character traits usually get along with others and do well in school. And they're more likely to become good citizens.

"Developing" is the key word here because no one is born with a set of fully-formed character traits. Good character must be taught and nurtured.

Schools can do a lot to shape a child's character. But character traits are developed primarily by parents at home.

As a parent, you can identify the traits you think are desirable, then work to foster those traits in your child. This booklet is filled with activities and ideas to help you develop the traits you think are most important for your child.



Tip: Don't expect to put all the ideas in this booklet into practice right away. The best way to make changes is one step at a time. Focus on one or two ideas—and don't forget to celebrate progress!



Every child is unique, so we often use the singular pronoun. We'll alternate using "he/him" and "she/her" throughout this booklet.

Which Traits Do You Want Your Child to Develop?

When people talk about desirable character traits, they often mention:

- Honesty
- Patience
- Helpfulness
- Friendliness
- Kindness
- Courtesy
- Compassion
- Tolerance
- Trustworthiness
- Reverence
- Courage
- Fairness
- Perseverance
- Cheerfulness
- Loyalty
- Obedience
- Respect
- Responsibility

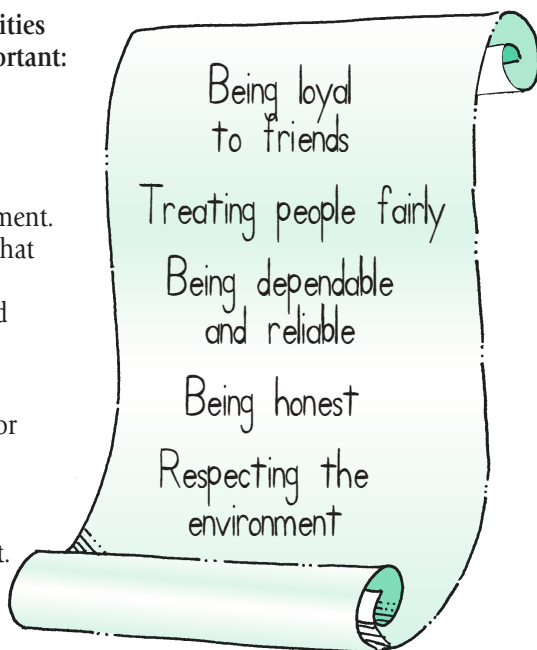
You may have noticed some of these good traits already developing in your child. You may also think of others that are very important.

The good news is that *you* can foster the character traits you would like your child to develop. Here's how:

1. Make a list of the qualities you feel are most important:

Being loyal to friends.
Treating people fairly.
Being dependable and reliable. Being honest.
Respecting the environment.
You'll probably notice that your list includes traits you've already discussed with your child.

2. Pick just one specific characteristic or behavior to start with—perhaps the one most important to you—and concentrate on that first.



Instill Good Character Traits In Your Child

Regardless of which traits you've decided to work on, these steps will help you instill them in your child:

1. Be a Good Example

Children are great imitators. They are much more likely to do as you *do*, than do as you *say*. Make sure your actions aren't contradicting your words.

- Do you say you value *honesty*, but call in sick for work when you're not?
- Do you demand *respect*, but fail to give it to your child? ("You're so lazy! I don't think you'll ever clean that room of yours!")
- Do you expect your child to be *fair*, but then always demand that you get what you want? ("I don't care whose turn it is, I want you to do the dishes—now!")
- Do you want your child to be more *responsible*, but often duck responsibility and blame others when things go wrong?



2. Talk About Your Values

Try to take advantage of what schools call "teachable moments." If you choose to spend time with your child, rather than work overtime, say, "I believe family time is more important than overtime." If you give money to support a cause you believe in, tell your child why you're doing it.

Be sure to ask your child about his values. What does he think is most important? Right and wrong? How does he feel about drugs, sex, cheating and other issues of concern to you?

3. Look for Role Models

Help your child identify heroes and famous people who have the character traits you want her to have. Read about them. Your librarian can help you find good books on the character traits you choose.

Tell your child about relatives who led a cause, didn't quit until they succeeded, or showed some other important quality.

Point out characters in books and TV shows who have positive character traits as well as those who show negative ones.



4. Help Your Child Practice Good Character Traits

People with good character don't even think about making "the right choice." They do the right thing automatically—out of habit. To develop those good habits, your child needs regular opportunities to practice being helpful and honest, patient, fair—or whatever traits are desirable to you.

Ask your child what she might do to help others, to be more respectful, more self-disciplined, to abide by the rules, etc.

5. Reinforce the Good Behavior You See

Children, like adults, live up to a standard because they believe doing so will lead to a desirable result. Your praise and recognition mean more than nearly anything else.

To encourage your child in the good behavior you want, help her make a chart to track progress on the character traits she wants to develop. Talk about her accomplishments. Let her overhear you praising her behavior to others.

Your ultimate goal is to instill in your child a desire to do something because she knows it's the right thing to do—not simply because she wants to avoid punishment or get a reward. Your praise, recognition and encouragement can mean a lot.

Honesty

Simply stated, honesty is telling the truth. Honest people don't mislead or deceive others for their own benefit. They don't betray a trust, cheat or steal. They keep their commitments and promises. Feelings of confidence and self-respect come from uncompromising honesty.



To promote honesty:

- **Make lying unnecessary.** Stay calm when your child tells you the truth, even when you don't like what you hear.
- **Don't try to "catch" your child in a lie** or force explanations for mistakes. You don't need to ask, "Who broke the vase?" when your child was the only one in the room. Instead ask, "How did the vase break?" and talk about how your child can repair or replace it.
- **Be quick to praise a child who has been honest.** Tell him how much you appreciate his honesty. If you have to punish, note that the punishment is lighter because he told the truth.
- **Never call your child a liar.** If you suspect your child isn't telling the truth, say something like, "I'd really like to believe you, but it's hard for me to believe you're telling the truth." And then wait. Give your child a chance to straighten things out. It may take some time, but kids usually come clean.
- **Ask your child what he's afraid of** if he insists on denying his obvious guilt. What does he think will happen if he tells the truth? He will likely be relieved to learn that the consequences aren't nearly as horrible as he imagined.
- **Reward your child's honesty** with your trust. Show your faith in him by expanding his privileges.

- **Tell the story about the young shepherd** who cried “Wolf.” He was bored and wanted attention. He had fun tricking the villagers and seeing them run to the hills to help. But when the wolf really did come, no one believed him.
- **Ask your child if someone** has ever lied to her. How did that make her feel? Did she trust the person any less after the incident?
- **Discuss a time when you were lied to.** Share how it affected you and your relationship with the other person.
- **Consider:** “What could a person do if she was dishonest and felt bad about it afterwards?” For example, return extra change that was mistakenly given.
- **Teach your child to be honest with herself.** Ask your child if she really means things like, “I don’t care,” “I really need it,” “I can’t,” “I’ll do it later,” “I had to,” “I didn’t mean to” and “It’s not my fault.” Talk about how some lies can be dangerous (“It’s only beer—sure I can drive,” “I’ll just do it once,” “I can stop any time,” “I can handle it.”).
- **Give an “Honesty Under Pressure” (H.U.P.) award** to get kids thinking about honesty all week. During dinner or a family meeting, ask, “Who faced a situation this week where it was really hard to be honest?” The person with the most challenging incident gets to keep the family’s H.U.P. certificate for the week.



Compassion

Compassionate people care about other people. They are kind, sensitive and thoughtful. Compassionate people know how to put themselves in others' shoes and feel what others feel.

To build compassion:

- **Give unconditional love to your child.** Children who feel loved tend to be more friendly, generous and affectionate.
- **Show that you care about people.** When you go out of your way to help someone, explain what you are doing and why.
- **Don't be cynical.** Don't say things like, "Nice guys finish last" or "It's a dog-eat-dog world." Being cynical teaches children to expect the worst from people.
- **Ask your child to talk about** a time when he was nice to someone, or someone was nice to him. How did it feel?
- **Start a family tradition of doing nice things** for each other, without taking credit. Put a nice note in a lunch bag. Make someone's bed. Put an apple in a briefcase with a note signed, "Your Secret Friend."
- **Teach empathy.** When someone teases or bullies another child, ask, "How would you have felt if you were that child?"
- **Make volunteering a family habit.** People feel compassion most when they help others. Take part in a clean-up day or help a neighbor. Ask your child how he might be helpful to someone.
- **Practice acts of kindness.** Let your child see you offer to carry groceries for someone. Let a person in a hurry get ahead of you in line. Help your child find his own ways to be kind.



Fairness

Fairness is treating each other impartially and not playing favorites. Fairness is keeping an open mind and listening to others—trying to understand what they are saying and feeling—before coming to a conclusion. Fairness is justice and equality for all.

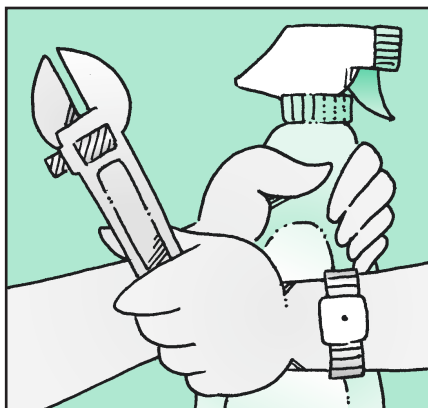
Perhaps the most important thing you can do to teach fairness is to use the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” If you teach your child the Golden Rule—and follow it yourself—you will teach your child all she needs to know about fairness.

To encourage fairness:

- **Teach the art of compromise** (when two people agree that they will both give up a little of what they want so each can have at least some of what they want). Expect your child to listen without interrupting.

Have each one give a viewpoint without “putting down” the other. Brainstorm possible solutions and decide on one acceptable to both parties.

- **Make yours an equal opportunity household.** Exchange chores with your mate from time to time. Make sure you don’t have “boy jobs” and “girl jobs.”
- **When your child is being unfair,** hold off on scolding her. First try asking, “Are you being fair?” This may be just enough to remind her to apply the rule of fairness to what she is doing. It gives her a chance to choose to be fair. Then you can compliment her on making the right choice.
- **Let your child tell you why she thinks something is unfair.** Ask, “If you had a magic wand, how would you change things to make everything fair?” Act on any ideas you think are worthwhile.





Tolerance

Tolerance is having an accepting attitude toward people whose ideas, race, religion, traditions, cultures and practices are different from your own. Tolerance allows us to live together safely in a diverse world. It allows us to respect, accept and even enjoy people's differences.

To build tolerance:

- **Point out intolerance when you see it** and respond with a statement such as, "That kind of joke offends me."
- **Learn more about other cultures.** Try eating in restaurants that serve food from other cultures. Discuss how everyday life in another culture is different and similar to your own.
- **Ask questions when your child shows intolerance** to get him to think about his judgments. For example, "Do you need to put down other people to make yourself feel important?"
- **Talk with your child about how you show tolerance** for people whose beliefs are different from your own. Point out how some of your own beliefs may seem strange to others.

Perseverance

"Life is like riding a bicycle. You don't fall off unless you stop pedaling."

—Claude Pepper

Perseverance means pursuing a course of action, sticking with it, giving it your best—in spite of any difficulties. People who persevere don't quit or give up easily. Consequently, they are the most likely to succeed.

To build perseverance:

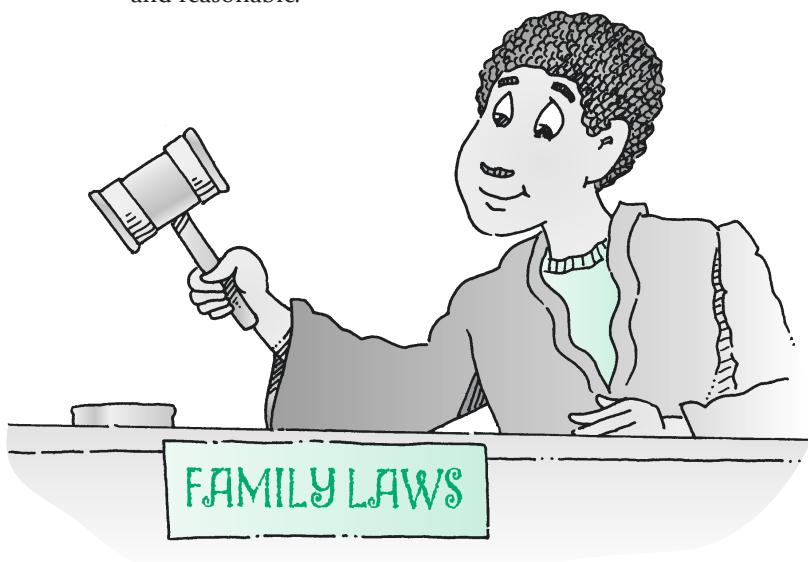
- **Don't be too quick to rescue** or take over when your child struggles with homework or a difficult task or problem. Let her learn she can succeed on her own by persevering.
- **Introduce your child to "Plan-Do-Finish."** This process reminds children that the next step after *planning* is *doing*, and the third step is *finishing*. Dishes aren't done until they're put away. The report isn't complete until it has been neatly copied. Choose jobs your child usually does around the house. Help her write down the "Plan," "Do" and "Finish" steps needed to complete the job.
- **Expect commitment.** Before you consent to any dance, music, tennis or other activities for your child, have her agree beforehand on a minimum amount of time she will stick with the new activity. Then make her live up to the deal.
- **Break large jobs into small, achievable tasks.** Your child can become overwhelmed when facing a big task. But when she can experience some success and accomplishment, she will be more motivated to tackle the next step and keep going.
- **Make a list of pros and cons.** Before your child gives up on an activity, sit down together. On the left side of a sheet of paper, have her list why she doesn't want to continue. On the right side, list why she might want to try. She might discover that the positives outweigh the negatives and decide to go for it.



Obedience

Society places a high value on obedience in children because no human system—family, school, business, community or nation—can run effectively without rules and law abiding citizens.

Of course, “blind” or unthinking obedience is not the goal. Children should use their heads, exercise common sense and make sure that what they are being asked to do is moral, legal and reasonable.



To promote obedience:

- **Set up simple family “laws.”** Children who must follow rules at home find it a lot easier to comply with rules when they’re away from home. Involve your child in making the family rules. Talk about reasons for the rules. Write the rules down. Don’t make more rules than you’re willing, or able, to enforce.
- **Talk with your child about what happens** when people don’t follow the rules or laws. What could happen if you put your arm out of the school bus window? If you run a stop light? What happens when two people talk at the same time? Could you play a game without rules?

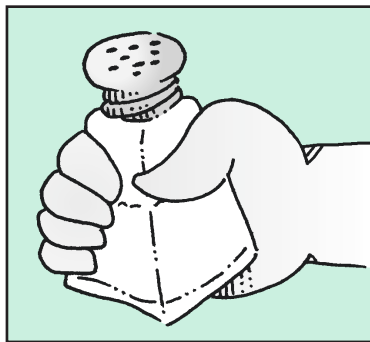
- **Encourage your child to serve in a leadership role** that requires him to participate in making and enforcing rules—a crossing guard or student council member, for example.
- **Encourage your child to play team sports**, enter into school debates or participate in other activities that require following rules and working together to succeed.
- **Make sure you set a good example** for your child. Don't run red lights in your car, and then expect your child to wait until the light is green to walk across the street. Don't make illegal copies of software or movies and then get upset when your child "borrows" candy from the store. The obedience example you set has more influence on your child than anything you can ever say.

Courtesy

Being courteous—caring for others' feelings, saying "please," "excuse me," "thank you" and "you're welcome"—is the way people show respect to others every day. Such respect isn't just something "nice." It is the basis for preserving a society that honors people and protects their rights.

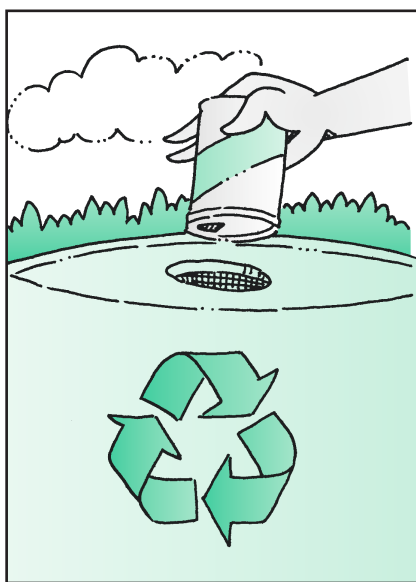
Here are some ways you can teach courtesy at home:

- Say "please" and "thank you."
- Don't barge in on others in the bathroom, or when the bedroom door is closed. Knock first.
- Don't snoop into another's personal belongings.
- Ask, don't demand. Say, "Would you ... ?" "May I ... ?"
- Avoid being noisy when someone else is on the phone.
- Be ready and on time for appointments and activities.
- Don't interrupt, or contradict, when another is speaking.
- Say, "I'm sorry," when you are wrong.
- Introduce friends and adults properly.
- Say, "Please pass (the salt and pepper, etc.)."



More Ways to Help Your Child Form Good Character Traits:

- **Spend time with your child.** Abigail Van Buren, known as “Dear Abby,” said, “If you want your children to turn out well, spend twice as much time with them, and half as much money.”
- **Become an “askable” parent.** Don’t act shocked or surprised by any of your child’s questions. Be willing to talk about whatever your child wants to talk about. Few topics should be off limits.
- **Talk with your child about ethical decisions.** Ask your child to think about what might happen if she chooses one course of action over another. What might happen to her and others? Talk about the choices she might face. For example: Would she cheat on a test? Why or why not? What would she do if the drug store clerk gave her more change than was due and she realized it when she got home? Would she lie to help a friend? What could she do instead?

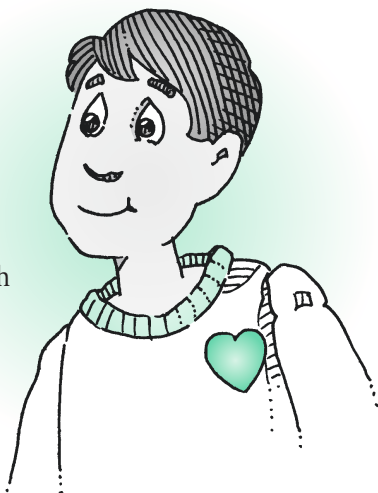


- **Counter the negative influence of TV.** If you doubt the impact TV can have on behavior, ask yourself why advertisers spend billions each year on TV advertising. They advertise because it affects viewers’ behavior—it gets them to buy advertised products! TV programs also affect behavior.

Limit the number of hours your child watches TV. Monitor what she watches and watch with her. Talk about the values, attitudes and behaviors portrayed. Which are good, bad, improper or superficial? What would happen if they did that in real life?

You *Can* Help Shape Your Child's Character!

- 1. Be a good example.**
Model the traits you want your child to develop.
- 2. Talk about your values.**
Share what you think is important and why.
- 3. Use other people as examples.**
Help your child learn from others with admirable values.
- 4. Help your child practice good character traits.**
Repeating until it becomes "habit" is a great way to learn.
- 5. Reinforce good traits when your child displays them.**
Well-deserved praise and recognition encourages everyone!



Helping Your Child Develop Good Character Traits is one of eight titles in "The Discipline Series" of booklets for parents published by The Parent Institute®,

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Writer: Luann Fulbright. Editor: Erika Beasley. Staff Editors: Rebecca Miyares & Alison McLean.

Translations Editor: Victoria Gaviola. Business Manager: Cynthia Lees.

Production Manager: Sara Amon. Customer Service Manager: Peggy Costello.

Distribution Manager: Marc Sasseville.

Graphic Design & Illustrations: Joe Mignella, Maher & Mignella, Cherry Hill, NJ.