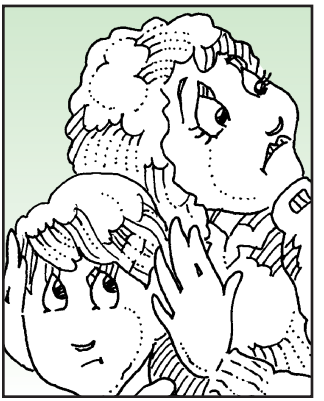
Teach Children Basic Values

THE PARENT INSTITUTE®

Ideas to Help Children Do Better in School

Think about the kind of values you want your child to develop. Responsibility? Commitment to family? Kindness? Honesty? Respect for authority? Your answers probably reflect the basic values that are most important to you.



When we talk about our basic values, we are talking about the attitudes, beliefs, qualities or traits that we value most highly. Our values are the things we think are most important.

Your children are learning basic values all the time, but they may not be the ones that you intend or the ones that are best for them. As parents, we need to think about the values we want our children to have.

Educators today are concerned that too many children grow up without good basic values. They don't know the difference between right and wrong—and children often don't care how their actions affect others. They make life harder for themselves and everyone else. And, children without basic values cannot succeed in school.

Teaching your child values is one of the most important things you'll ever do, and children learn values best when parents make a conscious effort to teach them. This booklet is filled with ways to make the job easier.

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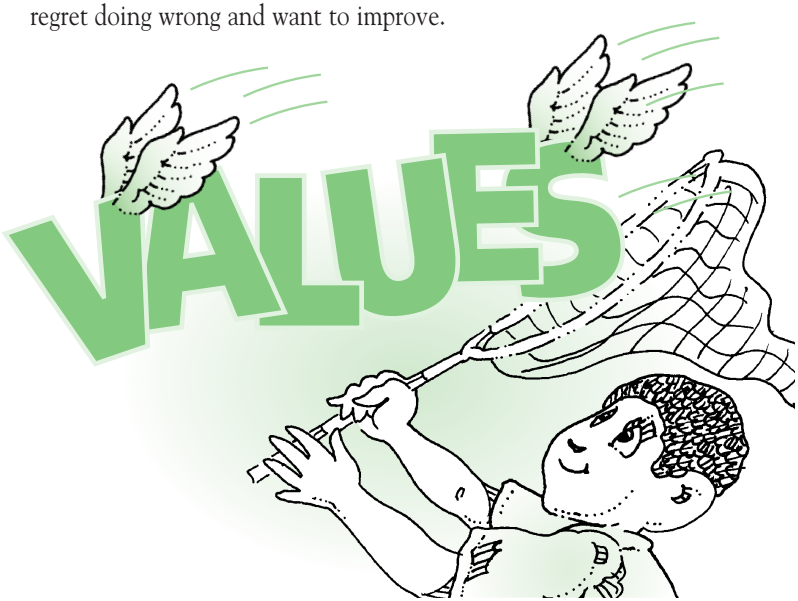
**Every child is unique, so we often use the singular pronoun. But to be fair, we alternate using "he" and "she" throughout this booklet.*

Why Is Teaching Children Basic Values So Important?

Values may be the most important thing for parents to teach children. A child's values shape his attitude toward everything, including family, school and friends.

Good values also help protect children from parents' greatest fears, such as peer pressure and drugs. Of course all children, even those with the strongest values, make mistakes. But children with basic good values are more likely to regret doing wrong and want to improve.



Experts say values are more "caught than taught." This means children pick up values more from what parents *do* than from what they *say*. So parents need to concentrate on teaching good values through words *and* actions.

Children learn most of their values from parents. If children learn good basic values at home, then they can better judge what they see elsewhere.

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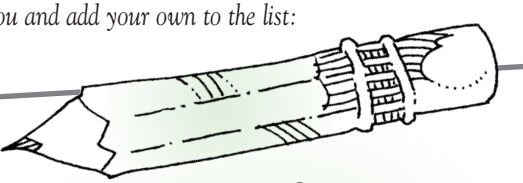
Decide What You Value Most

Teaching values is one of the most exciting responsibilities you have as a parent. That's because *you* get to choose which values to teach, and this affects what kind of person your child will become. Here are some personal qualities many parents value highly. *Think about which ones mean the most to you and add your own to the list:*



- Honesty
- Patience
- Helpfulness
- Friendliness
- Kindness
- Courtesy
- Responsibility
- Compassion
- Tolerance
- Thriftiness
- Trustworthiness
- Reverence
- Courage
- Fairness
- Perseverance
- Cheerfulness
- Loyalty
- Obedience
- Respect
- _____
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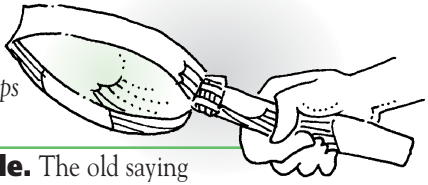
Six Steps Toward Teaching Values

No matter which values you decide to focus on, these tips will help:



1. Be a good example. The old saying "Do as I say, not as I do" doesn't work with kids. They notice what parents do—and imitate it.

For example, if you say you value honesty, but call in sick when you're healthy, your child won't believe you value honesty. She also won't learn what it means to be honest.

Kids especially remember the times when parents stick to their values in tough situations—when parents admit mistakes, express unpopular opinions or enforce important rules (even when their kids complain).

2. Spend time together. The more time you spend with your child, the more opportunities you'll have to teach values. Explain your values to your child and ask about his. Don't avoid difficult topics, such as drugs and sex. Mention how values affect you every day. Say things like, "I never miss dinner because family time is my priority." Or, "Practicing the piano every day shows commitment."

Spending time together also strengthens your relationship. This helps your child become more comfortable discussing moral issues with you.

3. Use the example of others. Point out people whose values you respect, such as relatives, friends, famous people or fictional characters. Tell your child what you admire about them. You might even display their portraits or post memorable things they've said. Give some examples of poor role models, too.

Children also learn values through reading and listening to stories. Look for books about ethical people. Your librarian can help you find some. And tell stories that teach moral lessons.

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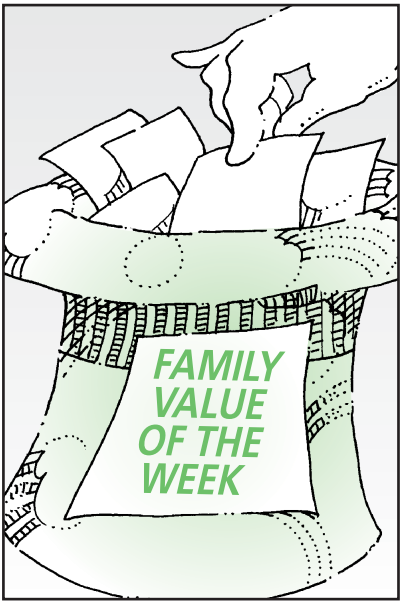
Six Steps Toward Teaching Values *(continued)*



4. Practice. Children learn through repetition. They need regular opportunities to practice the values they're learning. Ask your child "what if" questions, such as "What if someone at a party offered you alcohol?"

You can also act out situations that require using values. Teach your child to consider possible consequences before taking action.

Here's another idea: Pick a "value of the week." As a family, talk about what the value means and how you might show it. Then use the value throughout the week and notice how others use it. Share your experiences with each other.

5. Restrict TV. Television affects the way children behave, so it's important to monitor the shows your child watches. When possible, watch programs together. Talk about the values, attitudes and behaviors portrayed. It's also a good idea to limit how much television your child watches. Anything over ten hours a week is *too much*.

6. Give praise when it's deserved. Praise helps children learn values in two ways. First, it shows kids which behaviors to repeat. It says, "You're doing the right thing! Keep it up!"

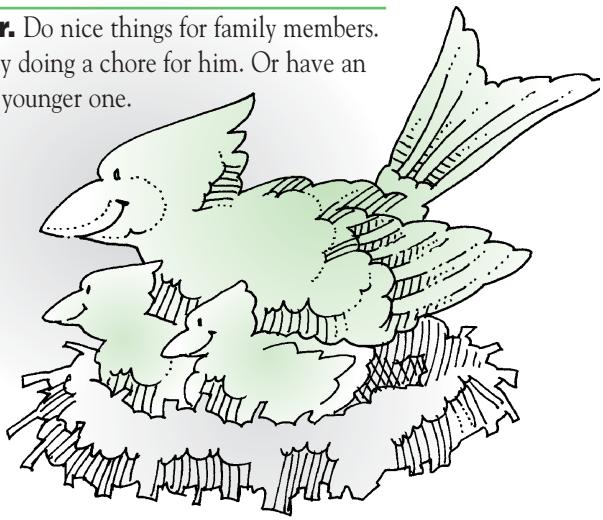
Second, genuine praise makes kids feel good about themselves. And children with self-respect want to make good decisions based on their values.

When complimenting your child, be specific. Say, "You showed courage today. You stood up for your friend when other kids made fun of her."

Encourage Compassion

Compassionate people care about other people. They understand how others feel and want to help them. They are sensitive, kind and thoughtful. *Here are some ways to teach compassion:*

- **Show your child unconditional love.** Studies show that children who feel loved are more friendly, generous and affectionate.
- **Teach empathy.** Have your child imagine how others feel. For example, "Bryan is new at school. How do you think he feels?"
- **Consider consequences.** Encourage your child to think about the possible results of her actions. Say, "How could doing this affect you and others?"
- **Help each other.** Do nice things for family members. Surprise your child by doing a chore for him. Or have an older child read to a younger one.
- **Help others.** Think of ways to help people, animals and the environment. Do errands for an elderly neighbor, talk about how to treat animals kindly, pick-up trash, etc.



- **Be charitable.** Keep a "donation box" in your child's room. Let her fill it with clothes, toys and even money that she's willing to give away.

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Focus on Fairness

"No fair!" You've probably heard your child say this many times. Fairness is important to kids, so you'll have plenty of opportunities to teach about it. *These suggestions will help:*

- **Talk about equality.** Explain that fair doesn't always mean equal. For example, an older child may have more freedom. A younger one may have fewer responsibilities.
- **Compromise.** Look for times when you and your child can meet each other halfway. But don't compromise when it comes to enforcing rules.
- **Be fair.** Make household rules and chores as fair as possible. Expect family members to take turns and listen to each other with open minds.
- **Be patient.** It takes time to learn fairness. If your child is being unfair, ask, "Are you being fair?" His behavior may improve quickly.
- **Ask your child's opinion.** Next time she thinks something is unfair, say, "What do you think would make things fair?" Use any ideas that are worthwhile.

Honor Honesty

Society works best when people are honest. Being able to trust and depend on each other is essential. When people do dishonest things, such as lie, cheat or steal, everyone suffers. *These ideas will help you teach honesty:*

- **Tell the story of the boy who cried "wolf."** He wanted to get attention, so he lied repeatedly about seeing a wolf. But when a wolf really came, no one believed the boy.
- **Discuss honesty.** Talk about actions that show honesty, such as returning the wrong change, apologizing for a mistake, or keeping a promise. Also think of ways to correct dishonesty, such as returning a stolen item or admitting a lie. Ask your child how it feels to tell the truth or to be told a lie.
- **Expect the truth.** Tell your child that you always want him to be honest with you, even if he's afraid you'll get mad. Explain that you'll love him no matter what, and you'll be proud of him for telling the truth.
- **Don't tempt.** If you know your child came home late, for example, don't ask, "Were you on time?" She may be tempted to lie. Simply confront her with what she has done.
- **Reward honesty.** Praise your child when he tells the truth. Remind him that honesty leads to trust and new privileges. If your child admits doing something that deserves punishment, note that the punishment is lighter because he told the truth.
- **Don't call your child a liar.** Children often live up to the labels we give them, even the negative ones. If your child seems to be lying, say something like, "I'd really like to believe you, but it's hard to believe that you are telling the truth."

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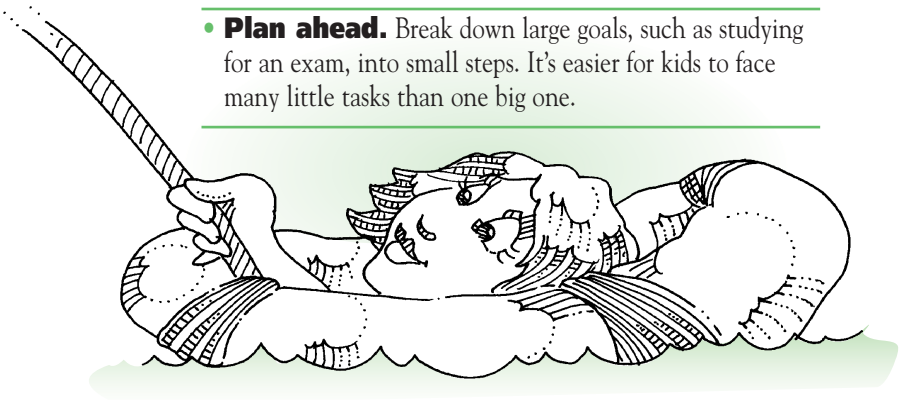
Promote Perseverance

Being successful in life takes perseverance—the willingness to work hard and resist quitting. In fact, success can feel *best* when it has required struggle. *Here are some ways to encourage perseverance:*

- **Plan ahead.** Break down large goals, such as studying for an exam, into small steps. It's easier for kids to face many little tasks than one big one.

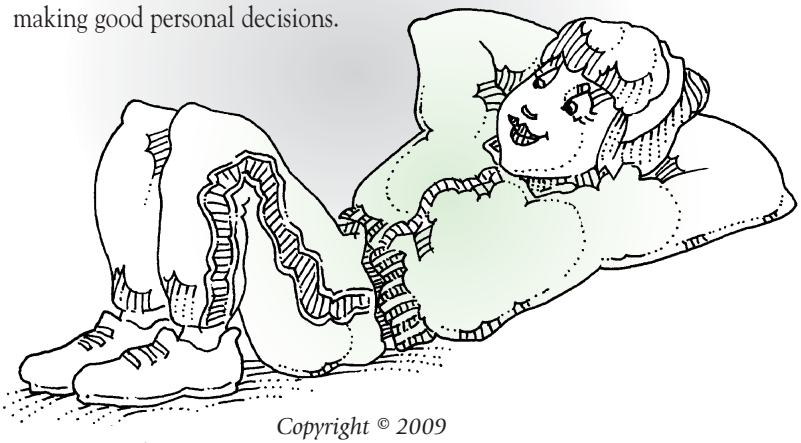


- **Avoid rescuing.** Give your child a chance to handle minor problems himself. Don't always solve problems for him. Let him learn he can succeed on his own by persevering.
- **Negotiate a commitment.** If your child wants to try something new, such as ballet, agree on a minimum trial period.
- **Be encouraging.** Tell your child things like, "I believe in you" and "Everyone makes mistakes." Suggest that she think positive thoughts like, "I can do this!"
- **List pros and cons.** Before your child gives up, have him list reasons to quit and reasons to keep trying. He may decide to persevere.
- **Reward effort.** When your child sticks with something difficult—even if she doesn't succeed—tell her you're proud.

Expect Respect

Educators say respect is one of the most important values for parents to teach. It helps kids learn from adults, get along with others, and take care of responsibilities. *Help children build respect for:*

- **Parents.** The best way to earn your child's respect is to be respectful. Remember that your child must respect you in order to respect your values.
- **Rules.** Children respect rules that are fair and consistently enforced. Explain the rules and why you've made them. Then enforce them *without fail*.
- **Education.** Choose a time and place for your child to do homework every day. Show interest in his assignments and get involved with the school yourself.
- **Other people.** Teach your child good manners. Expect her to be polite, punctual, attentive and respectful in other ways.
- **Belongings.** Expect your child to organize and care for his things. If he loses or carelessly damages something, have him replace it.
- **Themselves.** Teach your child to respect herself by exercising, eating healthily and making good personal decisions.



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Require Responsibility

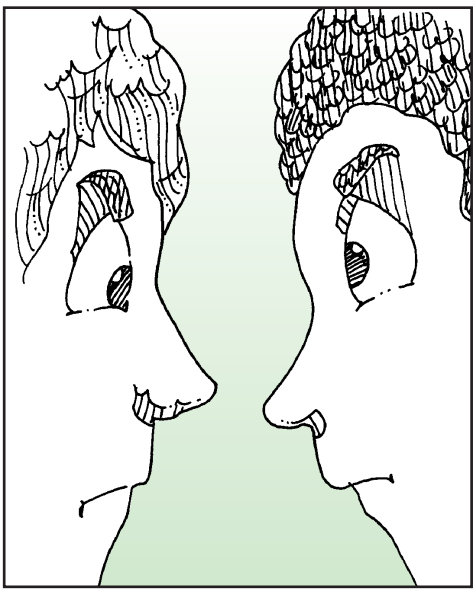
Children learn to value responsibility when they're given responsibility. They discover quickly that being responsible is the right thing to do for everyone's sake. *Use these ideas to build your child's sense of responsibility:*

- **Assign chores.** Everyone in the family should be expected to pitch in. Don't pay children for basic chores, but compliment their hard work.
- **Give choices.** Let your child make some decisions on how to carry out his responsibility, such as when and where to do his homework. This shows that you trust his judgment.
- **Use consequences.** Hold your child responsible for the results of her actions. If she spends her allowance too quickly, for example, don't give her a loan.
- **Discuss irresponsibility.** Talk about what happens when things don't get done. What if the plants don't get watered? What if the dishes don't get washed?
- **Link responsibility to freedom.** Explain to your child that the more responsible he is, the more freedom he will have.

Teach Tolerance

Being tolerant means respecting and learning from all kinds of people, including those who look, behave, or think in different ways. It *does not* mean allowing ourselves or anyone else to be mistreated. *Here are some tips for encouraging tolerance:*

- **Expose your child to diversity.** Spend time with people of different ages, abilities, ethnic backgrounds, etc. Notice how your lives are different and alike.
- **Point out intolerance.** Respond to it with statements like, "Please don't talk that way around me or my children" or, "That kind of joke offends me."
- **Learn about other cultures.** Eat at an ethnic restaurant or research another culture at the library. Try some of the interesting traditions you read about.
- **Teach conflict resolution.** Tell your child that it's okay to disagree, as long as she does so respectfully. Practice resolving conflicts together.
- **Help your child think.** If he's being intolerant, ask, "Do you need to put down others to make yourself feel important?" Or, "Do you think people have the right to be themselves?"



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Teaching Values Takes Time

Children develop most skills in stages. The ability to behave morally is no different. As children grow older, they understand and use values in new ways. *Here's a general description of how this happens:*

- **Babies** learn more about values than you might expect. As you cuddle and care for your baby, you teach her about compassion, trust, and responsibility. This experience has positive lifelong effects.

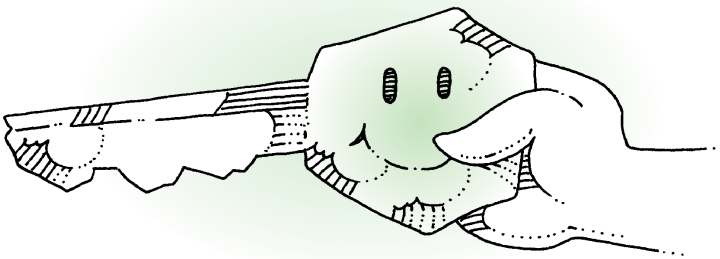
- **Toddlers** don't fully understand why things are right or wrong, but simple rules remind them how to behave. This is a good time to teach about others' feelings: "You hugged Grandma. That made her happy!"

- **Preschoolers** understand more about the effects of their actions. They enjoy learning about values through activities and discussions. Don't be too upset by "lies" at this age. Preschoolers are still learning the difference between fantasy and reality.

- **Elementary schoolers** have a clear sense of right and wrong. They also depend on their parents for moral guidance. Talk with your child about the values you believe in.

- **Middle and high schoolers** are interested in developing their own values. Continue to teach your values, but expose your child to other positive role models, too. Look for natural times to talk about values, such as when ethical issues are addressed in the news or on TV.

Children need strong values to guide them through life. The values you teach your children can provide the keys to a happy, successful future.



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