

Ten Tips for Raising Children of Character

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It is one of those essential facts of life that raising good children--children of character--demands time and attention. While having children may be "doing what comes naturally," being a good parent is much more complicated. Here are ten tips to help your children build sturdy characters:

1. Put parenting first. This is hard to do in a world with so many competing demands. Good parents consciously plan and devote time to parenting. They make developing their children's character their top priority.
2. Review how you spend the hours and days of your week. Think about the amount of time your children spend with you. Plan how you can weave your children into your social life and knit yourself into their lives.
3. Be a good example. Face it: human beings learn primarily through modeling. In fact, you can't avoid being an example to your children, whether good or bad. Being a good example, then, is probably your most important job.
4. Develop an ear and an eye for what your children are absorbing. Children are like sponges. Much of what they take in has to do with moral values and character. Books, songs, TV, the Internet, and films are continually delivering messages--moral and immoral--to our children. As parents we must control the flow of ideas and images that are influencing our children.
5. Use the language of character. Children cannot develop a moral compass unless people around them use the clear, sharp language of right and wrong.
6. Punish with a loving heart. Today, punishment has a bad reputation. The results are guilt-ridden parents and self-indulgent, out-of-control children. Children need limits. They will ignore these limits on occasion. Reasonable punishment is one of the ways human beings have always learned. Children must understand what punishment is for and know that its source is parental love.
7. Learn to listen to your children. It is easy for us to tune out the talk of our children. One of the greatest things we can do for them is to take them seriously and set aside time to listen.
8. Get deeply involved in your child's school life. School is the main event in the lives of our children. Their experience there is a mixed bag of triumphs and disappointments. How they deal with them will influence the course of their lives. Helping our children become good students is another name for helping them acquire strong character.
9. Make a big deal out of the family meal. One of the most dangerous trends in America is the dying of the family meal. The dinner table is not only a place of sustenance and family business but also a place for the teaching and passing on of our values. Manners and rules are subtly absorbed over the table. Family mealtime should communicate and sustain ideals that children will draw on throughout their lives.

10. Do not reduce character education to words alone. We gain virtue through practice. Parents should help children by promoting moral action through self-discipline, good work habits, kind and considerate behavior to others, and community service. The bottom line in character development is behavior--their behavior.

As parents, we want our children to be the architects of their own character crafting, while we accept the responsibility to be architects of the environment—physical and moral. We need to create an environment in which our children can develop habits of honesty, generosity, and a sense of justice. For most of us, the greatest opportunity we personally have to deepen our own character is through the daily blood, sweat and tears of struggling to be good parents.