

Teaching Positive Character

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Parents are their child's first and most important teachers. This is never truer or more important than when it comes to teaching positive character development. Parents today are focused on providing their children with quality educational opportunities and enrichment activities (sports, arts, music) to help them become educated, well-rounded individuals. It is equally important for parents to value and emphasize positive character development in their children. The qualities of positive character, including respect, trustworthiness, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship, should not be taken for granted. The children we raise today will determine the kind of world we will live in tomorrow.

Character is developed over time; the process begins at birth and develops slowly throughout the entire life span. It is the product of environment, experiences, reactions to circumstances, and willingness to learn. Parents must deliberately teach positive character traits in ways appropriate to the developmental stage of the child. Here are six simple, but vital steps to get parents started:

- 1. Establish clearly defined character goals for your children.** Be clear about what you value and what you want to teach your children to value. Ask yourself questions about your children's positive character development: how do you want your children to treat others? How do you want them to behave in society? What values do you want them to embrace?
- 2. Live your life consistent with your values and your goals for your children.** "Do as I say not as I do" does not work. Children learn best from role modeling. Your actions must be consistent with your words. Articulate your values into actions, and demonstrate positive character traits for your children to emulate.
- 3. Treat your children with dignity and respect.** Demonstrate every day that you respect and value your children, and expect them to treat you with respect as well. Nurture their self-worth by letting them know that who they are and what they do matters. Allow them the right to make mistakes, and apologize when you make mistakes. A child can only treat others with respect and compassion if they feel valued themselves.
- 4. Use everyday teachable moments.** Talk with your children. Look for opportunities in everyday life to model or point out powerful examples of both positive and negative character traits. Use books, TV, movies, and current events to begin conversations about positive and negative character development. Take advantage of the opportunities that arise.
- 5. Actively engage children in demonstrating positive character.** Help children discover opportunities where they can perform acts of kindness, become volunteers, and reach out to people in need. Reinforce this altruistic behavior through your own actions and activities.
- 6. Provide positive feedback.** Make a point of noticing and acknowledging when your children demonstrate positive character traits. Your words of recognition, a hug, and a smile are the rewards your children need to instill them with an inner sense of genuine caring and compassion.

If you would like a fact sheet on "Developmental Stages of Moral Character", please contact Cornell Cooperative Extension at 372-1622 or email at schenectady@cornell.edu.

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