

Raising A Character

Fostering Character Development in Teens



James G. Wellborn, Ph.D.

www.DrJamesWellborn.com

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Note To The Reader

I am so happy you found this booklet important enough to possess for yourself. My underlying motivation in providing information like this is for parents to have the resources they need to raise happy, responsible and productive teens.

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Thanks for your interest. Hope you find this helpful.

Jim

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Introduction

Character is as important today as it has ever been. The same things that make American culture the wonder of the world – freedom, wealth, luxury, opportunity, diversity, tolerance, abundance – can tempt teens to be impulsive, aimless, focused on immediate gratification, greedy and entitled. Character is, and always has been, the antidote to these dead end life choices. Character is derived from timeless, universal values. It is the formal identification of what represents your best self. It is based on the underlying principle that there is a right and a wrong, a good and a bad. It is the internal compass to guide decision making and action. In this sense, Character helps kids stay out of trouble. It is a crucial factor in strong social ties and intimate relationships. People base relationships on trust; trust that the others will keep their word and remain constant, i.e., Character. A stable sense of self-worth arises from the comparison of actions against a set of standards for what is good, right or admirable; Character. Resisting the desire for immediate pleasure (and the devastation this will wreak across time) requires a way to be accountable (and hold others accountable) to things that matter in the long run; Character. When you want to run away, when the task seems too hard, when you want to just sit down and quit, something is needed that helps you keep going to reach the other side of suffering and pain; Character. Bouncing from one interest to another, one relationship to another, one immediate gratification to another leads to failure and an emptiness of the soul. So, most importantly, your kid will need an internal guide to a life worth living; Character.

Integrity Checklist. In the broadest sense, Character is represented by the old-fashioned concept of Integrity (i.e., the degree to which one's actions are guided by values and morals). How can you tell if you have a kid with integrity? Here are some of the signs:

- ☐ Principled person
- ☐ Actions guided by a personal set of values
- ☐ Doesn't compromise principles for immediate gain
- ☐ Holds themselves to a high standard
- ☐ Dependable
- ☐ Keeps their word
- ☐ Identifies wrong behavior and describes why it was wrong
- ☐ Rarely needs admonitions or reminders as to what is right or wrong
- ☐ Knows the right way to act and does it even when pressured by others not to
- ☐ Knows how to turn a wrong action into a right one
- ☐ Resists peer pressure to violate personal values

What kid can live up to that? It turns out there are quite a few. Seventy-six percent of teens believe there are absolute values of right and wrong (Pew Research <http://pewresearch.org/millennials/>) and 97 percent think it is important to be a person of good character (Josephson Institute <http://charactercounts.org/programs/reportcard/index.html>). Eighty-nine percent of teens think it is more important to be a person of good character than to be rich, and 84 percent agree that it's not worth it to lie or cheat because it hurts your character (Josephson Institute). Fifty-seven percent of

teens frequently volunteer to help others or perform charity work, and 78 percent say they have never mistreated someone merely because they belonged to a different group (Josephson Institute). The highest-rated priorities for teens are being a good parent (52 percent), having a successful marriage (30 percent), and helping others in need (21 percent) (Pew Research).

But, unfortunately, teenagers are bombarded by messages that morals have no relevance for a sophisticated, modern teen. The media (e.g., social media, music, entertainment, movies, television), and the marketers that drive it, is increasingly value neutral or negative with an if-it-feels-good-do-it emphasis. To become a person of Character, teens require guidance, dedication and encouragement. That's where parents come in. They will need your help identifying a set of guiding principles for living their life (i.e., morals, ethics, values, etc.). They will need your help recognizing when and how to put these morals into action. They will need your help holding to these values when personal desires or the pressure from others to compromise threatens to pull them off track.

This remaining chapters of this booklet will focus on what parents can do to foster the development of Character in their teenager. In Chapter 2, important general parenting techniques for fostering Character development in your kid will be reviewed. Then, the remaining chapters will be devoted to identifying specific strategies that can help foster the development of 7 Character-istics: Compassion, Courage, Generosity Honesty, Honor, Kindness and Responsibility.

The Basics

To become a person of Character, teens require guidance, encouragement and accountability. They need help identifying fundamental values. They will need your help recognizing when and how to put these values into action. They need help holding to these values when personal desires or pressure to compromise threatens to lead them astray. (They need to know what “astray” is.)

What’s a parent to do?

There are some basic parenting strategies that are particularly well suited to helping your kid develop Character. As you will see in later columns, you can use these techniques to focus on a particular Character-istic or all of them as the situation allows or need requires.

Model it. The most powerful influence parents have on their kid’s character development is as a role model for how to think and act. When it comes to teaching your kids about character, it is crucial for you to live your convictions. Your kids will need to see that it is hard to do at times. “Do as I say AND as I do” is important when dealing with teenagers because they have a particular sensitivity to hypocrisy. Since they just recently learned to recognize it, they jump all over it when it shows up, especially in their parents. When your teenager notices a discrepancy between what you tell them and what you do, you lose credibility and they assume what you say must not really be THAT important (otherwise you would do it too).

Modeling also serves as a personal growth opportunity for you. There are many things you (may) have done as a single adult (or during your dark years) that was less than admirable or worthy of emulation by your kids. Maturity, life experience and the innocent face of your kid (or, in the case of your teen, the sullen, scowling face) can lead parents to re-evaluate their own personal values. Take some time and consider the kind of person you want your kids to be. Make sure you are as much of that kind of person as you can possibly manage. It will help your kid (and it will pay off in your own life as well).

Notice it. It is important to draw your kid’s attention to indications of Character in other people. Point it out in life, especially the everyday variety (e.g., someone picking up trash on the sidewalk, someone taking the shopping cart all the way back, someone assisting a stranger, etc.). Few of us have the opportunity or ability to rise to the level of national hero. But we are surrounded by examples of Character in our families, in our communities, by strangers we pass on the street and even by characters in stories. Keep a look out for these signs of Character and comment on it. Talk to your kid about heroes and villains. Provide them with exemplars of integrity and of people deserving of admiration.

Teach it. Give your kid direct moral instruction. Tell them about the kind of person you want them to be. Identify the specific morals and values that are important to use as a guide to decision making. Talk to them about why morals matter. What would the world be like if it were populated by people without Character. Discuss scriptures, religious stories and stories

from your faith and cultural traditions. And don't forget stories about the accomplishments and honorable deeds of family members.

Expect it. Set the bar high for your kids. They should rise to the level of your expectations, which means expectations need to be high enough to require some struggle. Use phrases like "I expect you to be a person who . . ." "When you are an adult, I hope you will be someone who . . ." And, don't forget to make room for falling short of your (and their own) Character expectations. They need to know how to pick themselves up and become a better person for their mistakes. Consider developing both a family motto (e.g., "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.") and a personal one your kid selects or creates for themselves. These will serve as a reminder of core values.

Express it. Talk in terms of morals and Character. Ethical standards are meant to be a guide to the right way to live. There should be talk about good and bad, right and wrong (because there is a right and a wrong). While this can tempt some to become judgmental and self-righteous, holding yourself to your own ethical standards doesn't require the condemnation of others for not adhering to the same standards (though it is VERY tempting because those other people are, after all, not nearly as admirable and worthy as you are). This would be a good time to talk about personal struggles, times in life when you can lose your way and how to stay on (or return to) a life focused on Character.

Encourage it. The most important parenting strategy for promoting Character development in teens is by direct encouragement. Kids know what matters by what you notice. This means watch closely for times they show real Character. Make a point to comment whenever they demonstrate signs of Character. When they do the right thing, make a big deal about it. "It took a lot of guts to be honest with me when you knew how I would react. That is just the kind of person I want you to be. I'm very proud of you. You're still grounded." Catching your kids demonstrating Character (rather than catching them *not* showing character) is a very powerful way to drive your point home in a positive way. "I noticed that you showed real character when you. . ." Quietly remark on small signs of Character. "I just want you to know that I noticed when you helped your brother out. That was very kind of you." Pride and admiration should be used all the time, every chance you get. Make sure they know how much you admire them when they demonstrate Character. "It means a lot to me that you showed such integrity when you. . ." "You know, I think you're a very good person." "I really admire how courageous you were in standing up for what you believed in."

Anticipate it. Character can be fostered in your kid by projecting moral strength into their future. In this way, you will be subtly shaping the adult they are working to become. "You are going to be such an honorable man." "I am really looking forward to you being a woman who . . ." "When you are an adult, what do you think will be the personal Character trait you will be most proud of?" "What do you want your kids to admire most about you?" "By the time you get to be an adult, you will be such a person of strong Character. That'll be really cool."

Showing good Character can also be accomplished by helping your kid anticipate situations in which Character will be needed now. "You know, Anita will probably be feeling pretty

bad. What do you think would help her?” “It is going to be really hard to stand up for yourself. It will take a lot of courage.”

Guilt it. A personal value system serves as a means of accountability to oneself (and your family and community). This begins by the value system parents promote in their kids. If they fulfill the promise of personal values it is a source of justifiable pride. Violating personal values should result in guilt (for not doing what’s right) and shame (for letting other people down). Parents need to help their kids along with this. “You really let me down by not taking care of these chores. Your mother and I work very hard to provide things for you. You need to do your part.” “You know better than that.” “What could possibly make you think it was OK to do that?” “I know I taught you better than that! (my momma’s favorite)” “Oh no you don’t! That is NOT the way we do things in this family.” “You’re a better person than that.” “Shame on you.”

Guilt induction and shaming should be used with caution and careful thought. These are powerful and important parenting techniques. Unfortunately, some parents can badly abuse this technique. Guilt should arise from presenting your kid with the morals they have violated not by making them responsible for things beyond their control or other people’s feelings. “Do you know how many children would love to have your life?” “You shouldn’t argue with me like that. I could have a heart attack.” “You are the reason I have such headaches all the time.” “And to think I almost DIED giving birth to you!” While these may be funny lines when delivered by a movie character they are damaging to use on real kids. When guilt is used to keep a kid in line (rather than as a way to encourage them to examine whether they are living up to their personal value system), it sets up a deeply conflicted emotional struggle. Some kids resolve this struggle by tossing those troublesome moral values rather than following them more closely. Others have trouble being assertive. Still other guilt-ridden kids end up having difficulty feeling real joy.

Repeat it. Once is not enough when it comes to Character. Find every opportunity to work it into the conversation. Using all of the strategies mentioned above, you will be able to work Character issues into every possible situation in a remarkably diverse number of ways. You need to have mentioned Character so often (i.e., at least once every couple of days) and in so many different forms that they are sick of hearing about it by the time they graduate from high school.

On Being Perfect. Before ending this discussion of parental strategies for encouraging Character development in their teens, a few words needs to be said about perfection and perfectionism. Unfortunately, extremely good people can end up having trouble being spontaneous and playful (i.e., boring). They spend so much time trying to figure out the right thing to do and say they end up being all tense and critical. Having Character doesn’t mean you can’t have fun. You can be a highly moral person and still act a bit crazy at times. You can pick at people (for non-Southerners that means use mild put downs in an affectionate way) but still make sure you aren’t insulting, insensitive or hurtful. It is important to make sure your kids know they don’t have to make a tradeoff between being a person with Character and someone who has fun. In fact, while Character and the underlying morals are timeless, HOW you demonstrate Character is not. Some pushing against the “way things have always been” is one source of growth and progress in a community. Teenagers are ideally suited for this task. So

review lapses in Character with your kid to consider whether the way to demonstrate Character is still legitimate and appropriate. You may find yourself making some changes to your own views of what it means to be a person with Character.

Compassion

def. (noun) feeling deep sympathy and concern for the welfare of others

Compassion is a Character-istic valued by every major religion and most spiritual and philosophical traditions. It represents the impulse to tend to others when they are hurting and support them in times of difficulty. Compassion is a crucial component of family functioning, friendships and intimate relationships. With caring and concern for each other as a basic foundation of civil society, an argument can be made that when compassion ceases to be a part of the cultural fabric the fabric of society starts to unravel. Teaching your kid to be compassionate is as important as ever.

Character Check. As a way to begin, review your kid's current level of compassion. Check all that apply.

- ☐ Sensitive to others' feelings and needs
- ☐ Responds supportively to signs of distress or emotional upset in others
- ☐ Thinks of others and their needs
- ☐ Rarely judges others
- ☐ "Tuned in" to the feelings and concerns of the people around them
- ☐ Anticipates the needs of others
- ☐ Patient with others
- ☐ Accepts others limitations and flaws
- ☐ Gets upset when others are upset
- ☐ Concerned when others get their feelings hurt
- ☐ Interested in other's point of view
- ☐ Good at recognizing when people are distressed or emotional
- ☐ Forgiving
- ☐ Understanding (and accepting of) others faults

The more of these Character-istic you checked off the less you need to worry about devoting time to the development of compassion in your kid. (Remember, if it ain't broke don't fix it.) On the other hand, if a lot of these boxes are left unchecked you might want to try some of these suggestions for helping your kid become a more compassionate person.

What's a parent to do?

Model it. It appears as though compassion is not a Character trait kids are born with. That means parenting is particularly important in raising compassionate kids. The most important place to start is to be an example of compassion in both thought and deed. How did you respond to the request for money from that person on the street? What comment did you make behind their back (in the presence of your kid)? What kind of charitable giving do you engage in (and does your kid know about it)? How did you judge that person who screwed up (especially if it

was your own kid)? And, most important of all, what did you say about that idiot driver who just cut you off in traffic? Your teens are watching.

Another source of modeling is in the stories you tell; about yourself, about other people and from literature, religious sources and cultural myths. Find stories of compassion and make them a part of the tales you tell.

Notice it. Point out examples of compassion that occur around you. It comes in many forms. Compassion can be seen in religious or spiritual figures like the Dalai Lama or Mother Theresa. But, more relevant to our daily lives are the people who quietly, and without recognition, live compassionate lives. Look for people who help others in need for little or no compensation. This includes volunteers of all types; people who deliver meals on wheels, people who devote their lives to religious or spiritual communities, Stephen ministers, unpaid tutors, retired business people who share expertise, community organizers, organizations that help disadvantaged people, teachers who stay late to help their students, volunteer firefighters. Make a game of identifying instances of compassionate deeds you've witnessed. The one with the most examples wins.

Teach it. Compassion has to be taught so be prepared to provide direct instruction on how your teen needs to think and act to be a compassionate person. One important component is being able to take another person's *perspective*. If your kid can't see things through another's eyes it is difficult for them to appreciate what that person is going through. Help them learn to walk a mile in their shoes. "It must be really hard to ride the city bus any time you have to go somewhere." "How would you feel if . . ." "It must look really _____ from their side of things."

Compassionate people also have an *understanding* of how bad things can happen to good people. They know about the misfortune, troubles, difficulties and challenges others face. Help your kid begin to appreciate that people can be caught up in circumstance, bad luck, random occurrences and a thoughtless moment that can set off a whole chain of negative events. Not everyone learns and matures and grows morally at the same rate. Understanding comes into play through the ability of your kid to think back on a time when they caused harm, messed up or were less than honorable. It is important to help your kid be aware of how their own foibles and inadequacies affect others. Were they worthy of compassion? "I know it really hurts your feelings. But, remember when you were really mad and ended up saying some things you regretted afterward?"

Another component of compassion is *tolerance*. It is important to accept that others have different beliefs, life experiences and backgrounds that influence why they act as they do. "No one has a corner on truth." "Just because they don't agree with you doesn't mean they are wrong." Help your kid see the importance of differences in others as a means of expanding their awareness and broadening their perspective. It is a source of creativity, change and growth in addition to a necessity for compassion.

Compassion also requires the ability to generate *benevolent interpretations* of others actions and attitudes. They can't always see another's perspective or understand why someone acts as they

do. Being compassionate includes considering possible explanations for someone's behavior or situation in life that assumes they are trying to adapt or make the best of a bad situation. "He must be in a real hurry to risk running us off the road and killing us all in a fiery car crash. Bless his heart." Make a game of generating sincere, genuine explanations for others actions that otherwise would seem selfish, inconsiderate or wrong. (Yes, again with the game strategy. Making a game of things is a very effective way of addressing something without lecturing and making it playful so quit criticizing and show some COMPASSION for the writer.)

Finally, being compassionate does not mean you are blind to the fact that people should be held accountable for their actions. It is important to help your kid find the *balance* between being compassionate while also holding themselves (and others) responsible for their actions. It is not just a matter of excusing other's misbehavior, mistakes or intentional violations of the rights and privileges of others. For most of us, this is a particularly tricky balancing act to pull off. It can seem so obvious that someone is to blame for being poor, lazy, dirty, crude, insulting, insensitive, unemployed, etc. Compassion means considering potential (or actual) explanations for their actions other than because they just aren't trying hard enough.

Expect it. It is important to let your kid know that you expect them to be compassionate in word and deed. When you notice a situation that calls for compassion, give your kid a nudge. Help them see how they could show compassion. When you can anticipate the need for compassion, let your kid know what you will be expecting in that situation. "Now, Terrence, when we get there it will be important for you to be considerate of all they have been through. So, cut them some slack." Compassion is also, in part, about sacrifice. Compassionate thoughts are about setting aside your own perspective (or your frustrated or angry impulses) for that of the other person. Compassionate actions are about doing for others and thereby sacrificing time, comfort or luxuries. Expect your kid to make sacrifices for others in need or in pain. This is both through spontaneous actions as well as serving the community in some way through volunteering for the disadvantaged or needy.

Express it. Use the word compassion a lot. Be sympathetic toward others. A particularly effective, indirect way to express compassion is through hugging and making physical contact with the people around you. There is research that suggests that it is directly related to the presence of compassion. Be a family that hugs (and, yes, dad, that means you and your son). Make (appropriate and gentle) physical contact with others upon greeting or during farewells. Shake hands. Gently place your hand on their forearm or just above the elbow upon greeting someone. (Be particularly cautious about hugging strangers. It can feel very intrusive for some, particularly by people who have suffered from some form of violence in their lives. If you are moved to hug someone you don't know well, be sure to ask permission first.) In addition, quit being so judgmental and critical of others. Don't be negative and pessimistic. Require everyone in the family to provide examples of the beauty and good in the world.

Encourage it. Encouraging your kid to be compassionate is not only about direct instruction (see Teach it above). It is also about weaving compassion into the fabric of the family. Make sure that your family is a place marked by warmth, responsiveness to others feelings,

encouragement, understanding and support. Recognize when your kid demonstrate compassion and let them know how much it means to you.

Compassion is a part of the process of forgiveness when we have been wronged by another. Encourage your kid to work toward forgiveness when they are wronged rather than carrying bitterness and resentment in their hearts. (But, in the service of a balanced approach, make sure your kid doesn't turn their emotional backs on them again until it's clear that person has grown from the experience and won't stab them again.)

How you discipline your kid will also encourage (or discourage) them to be more compassionate. Compassion is more prevalent in families where parents discipline their kids by requiring them to think through consequences and alternatives. This discipline approach emphasizes that other's perspectives are important; both your kid's perspective on why and how they ended up in trouble and viewing things from another perspective (the perspective of Mr. Spoon!). Parents who use harsh, punitive disciplinary practices to discourage rule breaking have kids who are less likely to be compassionate toward others.

A final way to encourage your kid to be compassionate is to help them practice self-compassion (a concept elaborated by Kristin Neff). Prompt them to apply the qualities of compassion to themselves when they make mistakes, don't measure up or fall short of their own (or your) ethical expectations. You may need to help get them started by expression your compassion for them.

Anticipate it. Project moral behavior into their future self. "I really expect you to be a person who helps others who don't have the blessings you do." "People will really be able to benefit from your compassion when you are all grown up." Envision how compassion will be a part of their adult lives.

Guilt it. Be disappointed when your kid doesn't show compassion toward others. As always, use this approach sparingly and without making sweeping statements. That means saying things like "Is this really who you are? I'm kind of disappointed in your lack of compassion for them" rather than "You aren't any better yourself. Who do you think you are?! You disgust me."

Repeat it. You have to keep at this. Making compassion a moral habit in your kid will require lots and lots of practice.

Caveats. Compassion can sometimes be characterized as a sign of weakness or gullibility. Some people believe it sets you up to be hurt or taken advantage of. But, that is only true when compassion is combined with lack of assertiveness or difficulty in setting personal boundaries with other people. This is particularly likely to happen with kids who have a natural tendency to sacrifice their own needs for others. These wonderful kids will need your help learning how to strike that balance.

Interestingly, the kids who are most likely to SAY that compassion is a weakness are the kids who have a natural tendency to focus on their personal wants and needs with little consideration for others. You already know if you have one of these kids by the lack of check marks on the

Character Checklist above. Dig in. This is just the kind of kid that needs the training in compassion discussed in these articles.

Courage

def: (noun) continues to pursue what is right regardless of threat, difficulty, danger, or pain

Courage is one of the more dramatic Character-istics. One form, heroism, is immediately recognized by others. These are the instances of rescue and protection and sacrifice that rise above the normal events of our lives. While heroism is admirable, it is not achievable by most people. The circumstances have to be right and you have to be in the right state of mind. But, everyone is capable of more mundane forms of courage. In fact, it is happening all around you. It comes in three different forms: heroic, professional and quiet.

Heroic Courage. There are spontaneous situations that arise presenting the opportunity to respond courageously by coming to the aid of people in trouble during emergencies, crises, outbreaks of violence, danger to others and natural disasters. Heroic courage arises from spontaneous, unplanned and unpredictable events that require someone to put their life on the line for a principle or to rescue someone. (This is the kinds of courage that, as parents, we prefer other people's kids to demonstrate. Heroes may not survive.)

Professional Courage. A subset of heroic courage is shown by people in careers where heroism is part of the job description. These include firefighters, police officers, soldiers, rescue personnel, medical personnel who can treat people with deadly communicable diseases, employees of organizations that go into dangerous areas of the world, missionaries and undercover intelligence operatives (i.e., spies). At least you know what your kid is getting into if they aspire to these kinds of jobs.

Quiet Courage. Then there are the everyday situations that require courage: facing your fears or shortcomings, speaking up for someone who is being mistreated, acting on your principles in the face of pressure to conform and confronting those who are behaving wrongly. This kind of courage is available to everyone.

A note on thrill seeking. The difference between courage and common thrill seeking is that courage involves taking a risks for a purpose. Thrill seeking is taking risks for an emotional rush. Sometimes hard to tell the difference from the outside; always possible to tell the difference from the inside. Jumping off a cliff into the water at the local rock quarry as a way to test yourself takes courage. Jumping off the cliff because it is scary and fun doesn't is not courage. Thrill seeking is fine as entertainment. Make sure you don't mistakenly give your kid the message that simply taking risks is the same as being courageous.

Courage is a quality that will serve your kid well throughout their lives. It will help them overcome tragedy and catastrophe. It will make it possible for them to look truth (about themselves, about others and about the world) squarely in the face, however hard or painful it may be. It will make it possible for them to stand fast to their personal values. It takes courage to get things done. It takes courage to make a difference in your life and in the world. It takes

courage to be a good friend, intimate partner, parent and citizen. It takes courage to grow emotionally and spiritually. So . . .

Character Check. Take a look at your kid. Courageous kids:

- ☐ Forge ahead despite obstacles
- ☐ Don't give up despite feeling afraid or alone
- ☐ Don't buckle when things get difficult
- ☐ Remain steadfast in the face of potential loss or threat
- ☐ Risk rejection, criticism or aggression to do what's right
- ☐ Confront people who are doing wrong
- ☐ Sacrifice their own welfare for that of others, especially those who are vulnerable
- ☐ Stand their ground
- ☐ Stick to their principles even when pressured to let it go

If you checked off a number of these Character-istics you've got yourself a Courageous kid. Celebrate it. Comment on it. Keep doing what you are doing and leave well enough alone. On the other hand, if these Character-istics don't describe your kid, here are some suggestions to help foster greater Courage in your teenager.

What's a parent to do?

Model it. How do you model courage? Show valor, bravery and heroism every chance you get. (Being a professional hero helps a lot here.) But, non-professional heroes are dependent on circumstance if they are going to do something courageous. If you happen across a burning car with a passenger trapped inside or someone dangling from a precipice, by all means rush in without concern for your own safety to rescue these unfortunates. On the other hand, if you engage in too much of this, 1) you will considerably shorten your life expectancy and 2) you might end up inadvertently sending a message to your kid that they should look for ways to put themselves in harm's way for the sake of others. This can be rather hard on a parent (and something you may end up regretting). There are ways to model courage that don't result in potential threat to life and limb?

Look for quietly courageous things you can do like stepping in when someone is being treated badly, taking a stand for something you believe in, owning up to a mistake, admitting to falling short of your own principles or having the courage to risk something important for a principle. (Be sure to tell your kid, by the way. Otherwise, what's the point, right?)

Courage is also modeled through the stories you tell your kids. All epic tales of derring do or quests require courage and bravery of the main character. They present a moral dilemma that the hero either rises to meet or falls short or both (a lesson for the reader regardless). There are fairy tales and fables. There are stories from your religious tradition. There are [movies](#) and books that portray courage and bravery. Then there are stories of real courage shown by real people. There are stories of family members (maybe even including yourself). There are stories

of historical figures and of ordinary people who come to the attention of the news media. Take some time to gather a few stories of courage. Make the time to recount these tales.

Notice it. What you characterize as courageous is important. Who you consider to be heroic is important. Again, while heroism is the easiest to spot it is the least relevant to helping your kid be courageous in their everyday life. Heroism is rare by definition. Courage is all around you. It is on the news. It is in your house. So keep an eye out for stories about real people doing real quietly courageous things. “You know what I heard on the radio driving home . . .” “I saw this woman actually stand up to a guy who was threatening this little kid today. That took real courage.”

But, especially, notice courage in your kid. You’ll probably have to start with small instances of courage. Standing up to an older sibling. Asking questions of an intimidating teacher. Trying something new despite being worried they may fail or look foolish. Talking in front of a group. Performing at a recital or competition. Taking a risk for something they really want to do like jumping off the high dive. (You have to be careful about this one because they may do drugs or have sex “because they want to” even though they are afraid. Probably not the exemplar to use for quiet courage.)

Then there are more significant examples of teenage courage:

- A shy kid trying to be more social because they are tired of fear keeping them lonely and isolated.
- A physically cautious kid who plays football while feeling dread every day of practice.
- Asking someone out on a date.
- Your kid telling you they are gay despite fearing you won’t accept it (or them).
- Daring to speak your heart to your true love when you don’t know if they feel the same.
- Any time you live your principles (because the only time principles matter is when it costs you to stand by them).
- Continuing to try despite failing.
- Walking down the hallway every day of school when there are kids harassing or bullying them.

Teach it. So how do you teach courage? It requires a couple of different qualities that together lead to courageous actions in kids. First, your kid will need to know the difference between right and wrong. You know, using morals and personal values as a guide to life and actions. “This just isn’t right.” “I really don’t feel comfortable with this.” Teach your kid to recognize when things are unfair, immoral, cruel, wrong, insensitive or dangerous. Teach them to trust their instincts about right and wrong (and how to follow these instincts).

Another quality is a courageous imagination (a parallel to what Zimbardo referred to as heroic imagination in his discussion of heroism). Kids will need your help envisioning themselves as courageous. (See Notice it, Expect it, Encourage it and Anticipate it sections.) This is specific place where story telling can come into play. When your kid identifies with a courageous character in stories (or members of the family), they carry with them a vision of being brave and doing courageous, even heroic, things.

Courageous kids manage and overcome their fears. Courage does not occur except in the presence of fear. But, feeling afraid does not stop courageous kids from acting. It will be important to help your kid learn how to manage fear (not deny it, not tough it out). This is best achieved by encouragement and helping them approach fearful situations step by step. “You walked slowly out rather than running screaming from the room? Excellent!” Mastering fear in one situation will lead to their using the same skill in other fearful situations. Consider doing scary but fun things as a family to help everyone learn how you can be afraid and still have fun. Consider repeating the activity multiple times so that the fear begins to decrease (which gives them an example of how to overcome fear).

Courageous kids feel a personal responsibility to take action. Humans are remarkably good at using excuses to avoid doing things. Your kid will need to learn how to think for themselves (and not shrink from hard choices). Courageous people do not wait for others to tell them what is needed or required. Help your kid see themselves as a person who needs to act to right a wrong or follow their personal moral code. Help them recognize when action is needed in the service of others at risk. “If not you, who? If not now, when?” You can start with a side-along strategy: “Come on, you and I need to do something about this.” Have them practice helping people in need when it isn’t dangerous. That can help build the habit.

Expect it. Be explicit in telling your kids that you expect them to have the courage to do the right thing even when it is difficult; especially when it is difficult. “If that was you, I’d expect you to stand up to them and not back down.” “When you see someone in that situation, you better be in there trying to help.”

Express it. Talk about courage. Bring it up in conversation. Use phrases like: courage of your convictions, things worth standing up for, it’s the right thing to do and, more cautiously, worth dying for.

Encourage it. How you encourage your kid to be courageous is important. Start by nudging them to consider being courageous. “Do you think you should do something about that?” “What can you do about that?” Then, be more direct. “I think you should say something to them about that; even though it is risky.” “If you think it is wrong, you should do something about it regardless of what others may say.” “Don’t let anyone keep you from following your dream.” Or, be very direct. “Get out there and help them out.” “Don’t just stand there.” “Come on, we need to do something about this now.”

Be careful about fostering courage in a quiet, shy kid. Keep in mind that courage is not only something done in a forceful and dramatic way (something that is difficult for cautious kids). It can also be done indirectly and in what you refuse to do. Think of the people who sheltered people destined for the Nazi concentration camps or the Rwandan Hutu who risked their lives to protect their Tutsi neighbors from the genocide. There is a full range of courageous actions that your kid can accommodate to their own personality style or disposition.

Anticipate it. “There will come a time . . .” “I know you will act with courage if ever . . .” “When the time comes, I know you will be a person who . . .” Help them see how courage will be a part of who they are as an adult.

Guilt it. Some Character-istics are best not fostered by guilt induction. Courage is one of those. Talking to a kid about being disappointed because they didn't show compassion or honor or responsibility can motivate them to do better next time. Courage, though, has such a tricky relationship to the perception of weakness and cowardice (see below) that it is better to not use guilt as a way of fostering this Character-istic in your kid. If you do, be very, very gentle with it. "Maybe next time you get the chance you will be ready to help out." "It is really hard to take a big risk like that. I'm glad there are people who can do that when the need arises."

Repeat it. Same as always. Bring it up over and over again.

A word about cowardice. Before ending this discussion of courage, a few words need to be said about cowardice. Many people consider cowardice to be the opposite of courage. And, indeed, it is useful to discourage a lack of courage as well as encourage courageous actions by your kid. Unfortunately, talking about a lack of courage as cowardice can be easily twisted by naïve and impressionable kids. They have a tendency to view courage as "not weak" rather than as overcoming fear to do what's right. They may then start tossing out a number of really important qualities because they are associated with being weak (e.g., gentle, cooperative, thoughtful, prudent). To avoid your kid believing that courage is just about reckless risk taking (without purpose and needlessly dangerous) or being tough and unfeeling, keep courage focused on nobility of purpose (i.e., freedom, justice, opposing tyranny) and in the service of others (i.e., love, protecting the defenseless, rescuing the imperiled, saving the endangered). Like other forms of name calling, it is important to call your kid the names you want them to be (i.e., courageous, brave, heroic) rather than the ones you are afraid they may become (i.e., cowardly, villainous).

Generosity

def. (noun) Liberal in giving and sharing

Generosity is about giving when you don't have to; of yourself and of your possessions. It is sharing; giving *some* of what you have to those who are without, in need or wanting. It can mean giving money for the poor but it can also mean sharing candy with your brother or sister.

Generosity is associated with a range of desirable outcomes. It is inherently positive and promotes positivity around you. Generous people are admired by others. Generosity is associated with mental and physical health. Acts of generosity encourage others to behave in more generous ways and connect people to their larger community. Generosity is at the core of meaningful, lasting relationships in the form of empathy and sacrifice and compromise. It can take you "outside of yourself." It is a source of self-worth and personal value. Generosity is a Character-istic you will want your kid to have.

Character check. Before you go running around hollering at your kid to be more generous, check to see if they:

- ☐ Are a giving person
- ☐ Will give you the shirt off their back
- ☐ Share easily and willingly
- ☐ Give freely of their time and possessions to others
- ☐ Are not selfish with possessions
- ☐ Share, help or comfort others without expecting something in return
- ☐ Notices and gives credit to others for their contributions
- ☐ Enjoy doing for others
- ☐ Do things without thinking of personal gain or advantage

As always, if your kid shows a lot of these behaviors, leave well enough alone (though, make sure you do some Noticing and Encouraging). Otherwise, here are some strategies to encourage your kid to be more generous.

What's a parent to do?

Model it. There are many ways to model generosity for your kid. One form is giving of your self: time, attention, knowledge. Make way for another automobile to enter your crowded lane. Go out of your way to assist someone who is obviously in need. Be patient. Stand and give someone your seat in a crowded public place. (As you can see, many instances of generosity are also about good manners and politeness.) Give in, even when (especially when) you are right.

Then there is generosity in the form of providing others with some of what you have: money or possessions or resources. That can be as small as sharing some of your pizza and as significant

as making a large donation to a charitable organization. Pay for a random person's Christmas lay-a-way plan at one of the stores in your area (do they even have those anymore?). Put money in the parking meter of a stranger's car. Donate. Contribute. Share. Give away.

Finally, find stories, movies or plays that demonstrate generosity. Turn to the scriptures of your faith traditions. Find folk tales about generosity (like [The Man Who Planted Trees](#) or [one of these](#)) and read them, repeatedly, to your kid. Watch movies together like *Pay It Forward*, *The Blind Side*, *Groundhog Day* or that time honored classic *It's a Wonderful Life*.

Notice it. Pay attention to the generous actions of others around you. Make sure you point them out to your kid. Talk about people you met or observed who were charitable and generous. Look for times when your kid shows a generous spirit (and a generous heart and hand). Comment on it to them.

But! Be careful HOW you remark on your kid's generosity. There is this thing called the licensing effect that can lead to the opposite of what you would expect. Research has shown that receiving compliments or admiration for doing good things (including patting themselves on the back) will make some people less likely to follow through with the good behavior in the future ([Khan and Dhar](#)). [One study](#) found that people will donate less if they are complemented on their humanitarian attributes. In [another study](#), people who bought eco-friendly products (and thus felt like they were doing a good thing) were found to be more likely to cheat or steal! (So does this mean we have to let our kids damage the environment to keep them from stealing?)

Try this. When your kid shows a generous spirit, don't describe what they DID as generous ("That was very generous.") because then they can act selfish later because they already did something generous. Instead, comment on the fact that they ARE a generous person ("I'm glad you are such a generous person.") and that generosity is one of their important personal values ("I love that being generous is so important to you" "I'm glad you are committed to sharing what you have and are a giving person. That's very important."). Characterize generosity as a way a person should be. "That was great. It's really important to look for every chance to be generous to other people. That's how to make the world a better place." And, finally, it is important not to over emphasize how special they are for being generous. "Oh Sweetheart! You are the most generous person in the WHOLE WIDE WORLD!" Take it for granted that they are going to be a good person. "I'm glad you are such a generous person. That's the way people are supposed to be."

Teach it. Generosity needs to be taught. There are a number of skills that lead to generosity. Manners are an important form of generosity. Good manners are about being considerate, patient, tolerant and generous. Opening doors for others, giving up your seat to someone older or physically challenged, waiting for everyone to be served before beginning to eat and politeness are all examples of generosity. Require your kid to have good manners. Arrange for formal practice sessions if they don't seem to be getting it.

Generous acts arise out of empathy for the difficulties and struggles of others. This can be for obvious and dramatic difficulties like disabling conditions but it is also for everyday hassles like spilling your drink. Be sure to help your kid recognize that the difficulties others experience are

deserving of empathy. “They must feel bad about not having any. Remember how you felt like that when . . .” When you notice someone struggling, ask your kid what they think that person is feeling.

Generosity is also about giving others credit (and not taking it for yourself). Help your kid recognize the value of emphasizing the contributions of other people in the success of some joint venture. “Jonelle doesn’t get much credit for things. It would probably make her feel good if you really emphasized all that she did; even if people don’t realize all that you did too.”

Generosity is a win-win situation not a zero sum game. In a zero sum game, resources are limited. If one person gets more the other person gets less. If your kid thinks that giving to others will deprive them of what they want (or need) it will be harder for them to have a generous spirit. Help them realize that giving to others brings back many things in return. They may need your help in recognizing how to feel good about being generous. They need guidance in seeing that they can both give and share without unduly depriving themselves.

Kids also need to practice gratitude. Your kid is much more likely to be generous when they recognize the many blessings they enjoy, the generosity of others toward them and the support they receive. And, this isn’t referring to money and possessions (though that counts). When kids can identify the many ways in which they are blessed, generosity flows more easily.

Expect it. Make sure your kid knows that you expect them to be a generous person. When you notice someone being generous, call your kid’s attention to it. Let them know “That’s the kind of person I want you to be.” Tell them that “It is important to be generous to other people.” Have a family charity to which you contribute generously. Have your kid identify a charity toward to which they make regular donations. They should take for granted that generosity is something to require of yourself. It’s not something they get extra credit for; it is just the way they are supposed to be.

Express it. Use words like generous spirit, contribute, giving and share. Say things like “give some of what you have” and “let other people use what you have.”

Encourage it. Give them direct instructions. “Be generous with your time.” Ask leading questions. “What opportunities do you think you’ll have to be generous today?” Have them practice generosity. “Take this \$5 with you and give it to someone who looks like they could use it.” Have your kid pass on generosity that is shown to them (i.e., [pay it forward](#)). “Remember when Mark shared with you? Be sure to look for a chance to do that for someone else.” “I think going over and talking with Mary for a few minutes so she isn’t so left out would be a very generous thing for you to do.”

Try to avoid using *should* (“You should be more generous”) or *ought* (“Why aren’t you more generous?” “You need to be more generous.”) to encourage them. It can make generosity feel like an obligation rather than a gift from the heart. (Though not all pressuring is bad. See Guilt it below). Keep the focus on how important generosity is as a personal quality, a sign of character and the way y’all do things in your family.

Anticipate it. Try to find ways to help them see how generosity will fit into their future. “The fact that you are a generous person is going to serve you well as an adult.” “There are so many benefits that will come from being a generous person when you are grown.” “You will be able to do even more for others when you are an adult.” “I’m sure you will get better at remembering to be generous in the future.”

Guilt it. Guilt is well suited for ungenerous acts or for situations where they overlook the opportunity for generosity (especially since it will be balanced by Noticing it and Encouraging it). Guilt was discouraged in the Courage chapter because of the potential complications of your kid going too far in the other direction. However, if people think they don’t quite live up to their moral standard, they are more likely to be moral in the future—kind of like they are trying to make up for it. (This does not mean that you should keep telling your kid they aren’t quite generous enough just to get them to be more generous. It can work but it adds other, undesirable side effects like shame and feeling inadequate as a person. Is psychology complicated or what?!) In addition, there is a subtle but important difference between guilt (i.e., disappointment in their *behavior*.) and shaming (i.e., disappointed in *them* as a person). Discourage ungenerous acts by letting your kid know you are disappointed in them. “I’m disappointed that you didn’t share that with your brother.” “That’s not the kind of person I want you to be.” “I know you are more generous than that.”

Repeat it. Every opportunity, as with every other aspect of fostering character development in your teenager.

A note about greed. Talking about generosity raises the issue of greed, wanting to get more for yourself than you need or can use (which most often means that others will go without). Kids can become greedy when they focus too much on themselves (i.e., selfishness), don’t have empathy for others in need, when they fear not having enough, take for granted the generosity they receive from others, have a philosophy that “the person who has the most toys wins” (i.e., competitive and materialistic) or are insecure. Kids can sometimes think that the choice is between being generous and actually having nice things. Generosity is not about giving away all your possessions and living the life of an ascetic hermit. It is about giving what you can to others. It is about sharing what you have.

Honesty

def. (noun) sincere, frank, genuine, truthful

In addition to learning how to behave appropriately in different social situations, establish a foundation for future employment, and develop meaningful close relationships, teens also need to create a foundation of universal moral principles to guide decision making throughout their lives. Honesty is one of these fundamental values.

Honest people are sincere, frank, genuine, and truthful. If you are honest, people trust you. They know they can believe what you say. They can take you at your word. This trust brings with it all manner of opportunities and advantages. Honest people are more open with others. What you see is what you get. In short, honesty is one of those necessary characteristics associated with a meaningful and satisfying life.

Here are some of the ways parents can foster the development of honesty as a virtue in their teenage kid. (The focus of this chapter is on promoting honesty rather than dealing with lying. Strategies that address lying can be found, among other places, in my book [*Raising Teens in the 21st Century*](#).)

Character check. Do a quick check to see if your kid needs an honesty tune up by reviewing these characteristics of a kid who values honesty.

- ☐ Admits mistakes
- ☐ Truthful
- ☐ Doesn't lie
- ☐ Admits fault regardless of consequences
- ☐ Acknowledges mistakes or violations of rules or expectations
- ☐ Doesn't take credit for other's accomplishments
- ☐ Doesn't exaggerate statements or stories
- ☐ Doesn't mislead or create mistaken impressions
- ☐ Recognizes the importance of honesty and/or dislikes for deceit
- ☐ Values honesty in others

If your kid doesn't measure up, here are some ideas on how to encourage them to be a more honest person.

What's a parent to do?

Model it. (i.e., lead by example). Your kids need to see you being honest. When you start looking at your own behavior through the lens of honesty, you may be surprised at what you discover. It is one thing to tell a bald face lie. But, there are a multitude of ways you can end up telling fibs, little white lies or don't take the opportunity for honesty that presents itself. Make

sure you're an honest person. Don't give explanation or reasons that aren't true. Don't have your kids lie for you (e.g., "Tell them I'm not here."). Your kids are watching.

Another area in which you can model honesty is through storytelling. This can be through formal stories from a book, religious text or fables and fairy tales. It can also be more informal stories about times when you or family members were honest (and dishonest).

Notice it. (i.e., point it out in everyday life). Instances of honesty in everyday life may be more difficult to identify due to fact that honest people tend to quietly go about being honest. Keep a look out for news accounts of honesty (e.g., people returning wallets or money or things found that belong to others). When you find an example, be sure to point it out.

It is also important to make sure you catch your kid when they are being honest. It can be as little as responding truthfully when asked about something they might be hesitant to admit to. It can be as big as a major transgression of values or rules that they don't make worse by also being dishonest about it. It is easier to build on honesty they are demonstrating than by punishing them after they have failed to be honest.

Express it. (i.e., talk in terms of morals; right, wrong, good, bad). Talk a lot about how important it is to be an honest person. "If there is one thing I hate, it is when someone lies to me." "Being honest is one of the most important things in a relationship." "Lying is just not right." Have a motto (i.e., a pat phrase that you express at various situations whether it is relevant or not). "Hey, Mom? What're we having for dinner." "I don't know sweetheart but one thing I do know is honesty is the best policy." "Huh?"

Expect it. (i.e., set the bar high for your kid's behavior). Honesty should be mentioned often in relationship to what you expect of your kid. "I expect you to tell me the truth, even when it will get you in trouble." "Don't lie to me." Talk at length about what you expect from your kid when it comes to being honest.

There is a dilemma you can find yourself in as a parent if you encourage or demand moral behavior but fall short of your own standards. This can lead to a discussion about how difficult it is to hold yourself accountable (and why you should). It can provide an opportunity for you to talk about what led to your falling short of your own values and how you addressed it. You can talk to them about what you want for them and the effects of your own transgression being a reason why. But mostly, it is important to strive to live the values you want for your kid. Not just for their sake but for your own growth. Thinking about things from the perspective of what we want for our kids can be an unexpected catalyst for our own personal progress toward a virtuous life.

Teach it (i.e., give direct moral instruction). There are a number of component skills that are a part of being an honest person. Kids need to know how to *give an honest opinion*. They can also benefit from learning how to be *diplomatic* about speaking honestly. Honest people also need to know how to *set limits* on what they are willing to reveal. They also need to develop *refusal skills* for to people who are trying to pressure them to be dishonest.

Giving an honest opinion. Even with all the groundwork laid, teens still need to know how to go about being honest. They usually don't need help with what can be called *easy truths* (i.e., compliments, positive emotions, etc.). These can be expressed without much consideration and with no social cost. However, expressing *difficult truths* is not so straightforward. People are not always happy to receive disagreements, criticisms, negative evaluations, invalidating views or expressions of disappointment. Unless they are going to be totally honest about everything to everyone (something that is risky at best, catastrophic at worst), teens must figure out how to negotiate the treacherous waters of expressing difficult truths. Inadequacies, mistakes, shortcomings, failures, sins, and violations of trust, confidence, and commitments are embarrassing and carry social consequences. When the difficult truth carries a direct cost in status, trust, or punishment, honesty can be especially painful.

Here's a formula for giving an honest opinion about difficult truths.

- Warn the person about what is coming (if you are initiating the conversation). "I have something that is kind of difficult to say." "I need to tell you something." "I want to be honest with you about something."

OR . . .

- Make sure they want you to be honest (when others initiate the conversation). "Are you sure you want to know what I think?" "You're not going to get mad at me for giving my opinion are you?"
- Identify your feelings about being honest with them. "I'm worried about how you are going to take this." "I'm afraid you are going to get mad at me."
- Tell them the truth. "I really think Marcus is wrong for you." "I can't believe you had sex with her." "I smoked marijuana last weekend." "You look like a COW in that dress!" (OK, maybe not that last one.)
- Give a subtle reminder that you think honesty is important in a relationship. "I had to tell you because it was eating me up inside." "I couldn't just lie to you." "I know you are disappointed in me but I didn't want to keep it from you." "I needed to be honest with you."

Diplomatic truth telling. Kids also need some ideas about how to present difficult truths about others. Here are a few ways to soften honest opinions or views.

- Raise doubts ("I'm not sure that's such a good idea.")
- Lack of positive rather than presence of negative ("Well, I guess it doesn't look that bad but maybe we can find something better.")
- Alternative desirable option ("I really like how you look in that other outfit.")
- Opinion with uncertainty ("I'm not really sure but it seems to me that . . .")
- Self-derogation ("I get hung up on certain things that may not be important but . . ." "I'm probably missing something but . . .")
- Reference other's opinions who support your truth ("What did your mother/girlfriend/therapist/probation officer say?")

Setting personal boundaries. There is this commonly held view that you have to respond when someone asks for (or, worse, demands) a response. It is important for your kid to understand that they

don't HAVE to answer. You can help your kid by giving them ways to just not answer while remaining honest. "I'm not comfortable answering that." "I'm not able/willing to tell you so I'm not going to answer at all." "I can't tell you."

Refusal skills. The other side of setting limits is knowing how to refuse someone who is trying to get them to be dishonest. "I'm not going to lie for you." "You are putting me in a bad position by trying to get me to lie about that." "Stop pressuring me! I'm not going to lie about this." This is probably one of the most difficult situations that require your kid to remain true to their commitment to honesty. If they have a friend who is lying and trying to get your kid to lie, not going along could actually cost them their relationship, however unfair that may be. Be sure to encourage your kid to talk to you if they are being put in this position. They will need some complicated problem solving to get through this moral dilemma.

Encourage it. (i.e., admire them for it). Your kid will need clear indications that you want and can tolerate honesty from them. "I hope you can be honest with me like that kid was with her parents." "You can tell me honestly what happened and we will just figure out what to do about it. This time, you won't get in trouble." It is unrealistic to think your kid will have nothing to hide. Honesty will be a difficult struggle for them as they are moved to violate the rules they consider ridiculous (or just inconvenient).

Here's the thing though. Like all morals, the real test of character is when your morals or values cost you. It is important to talk to your kid about the importance of knowing in their heart they did the right thing by being honest. They also need to know that YOU are proud of them for doing the right thing. Be very sure you catch them following their personal convictions about honesty when it will cost them in the moment. Keep up the encouragement for them to be honest.

Anticipate it. (i.e., project moral behavior into their future self). "Your honesty is what will make you a fine man." "This kind of honesty will really pay off across the rest of your life." "By the time you are an adult, you will have learned how to be honest with yourself and with others." Find ways to let them know that you are just assuming that they will be an honest adult. "I know you will be the kind of honest grownup I can be proud of."

Guilt it. (i.e., be disappointed, "is this really who you are?"). Talk at length about how they let you down if they have been dishonest. Talk at length about what they should have done differently and why when they have fallen short of the honest ideal. Talk at length about how disappointed you will be in them if it turns out they are lying to you (before you know for sure they are but have a strong suspicion).

Repeat it. (i.e., once is not enough). Stay on it. Don't let up. Character issues need a lot of repetition.

Honesty as not lying. Honesty is not the same as telling the truth. You can refuse to tell the truth to remain honest ("I promised I wouldn't tell." "That's private."). Kids need to have practice standing up to pressure to violate their values. Unfortunately, that will sometimes mean standing up to you. This most often occurs when there is a moral dilemma (i.e., conflict between two

important values like truthfulness versus loyalty or not wanting to get in trouble vs. not wanting to lie). It is important to provide kids with an alternative that allows them to maintain their integrity (i.e., not lie) while also not answering at all (and accepting the consequences).

- Encourage them to voice their position (“Why won’t you tell me?”).
- Praise them for standing up for their principles (“At least you didn’t just lie to me to get out of it.”)
- Act based on the current facts (“Well, since all I have to go on is what I know, we will have to talk about how you are going to be punished.”).
- If there is a stalemate, support their principled stand and improve your information and monitoring to catch them next time (“Since you aren’t talking and I don’t know for sure, I guess we’re done. For now. I am glad that you didn’t just try to make up something to get out of this.”).

Too much honesty? Total honesty (sometimes referred to as being brutally honest) usually doesn’t work well in our everyday world. (See www.radicalhonesty.com for an alternative opinion.) When is it OK to lie?

- When honesty will hurt the other person and the benefit of honesty doesn’t outweigh the damage emotional damage. Compassion for others should supersede the need for honesty.
- Never to yourself. Therein lies the path to madness and failure.
- NOT primarily because of self-serving reasons, that is immoral.

Nobody’s perfect. Your kid is going to lie to you about something. If they haven’t, you haven’t caught them. Most kids don’t lie often and they self-correct when it is addressed. The lie they tell provides you with the opportunity to address honesty in a much more relevant way than all the hypothetical situations you could create. Good hunting.

Honor

def: (*noun*) fair and respects the rights of others

One of the primary ways that societies regulate the behavior of their fellow citizens has been through an emphasis on honor; upholding it, defending it, living with it. In many considerations, honor represents the whole collection of Character-istics, similar to Character and integrity. However, in this column, honor represents a specific Character-istic; a commitment to what is fair and rightfully due to others. When honor is defined in this way, the code underlying honorable behavior is derived from an entitlement to certain basic human rights, not the least of these being life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. (And, no, this definition of happiness is NOT about what feels good. The philosophical concept of contentment would be closer to the concept of happiness considered here.) So, therefore, honorable behavior is represented by a sense of fairness (regardless of your feelings for or against the other person) and a dedication to the protection and defense of the rights of others (regardless of whether or not they deserve it).

Kids (and not a few adults) can have trouble recognizing their own bias in “deciding” whether someone is deserving of fair treatment or respect. There are some pretty despicable people in the world, after all. Fairness and justice is something all people deserve. Your kid will need a lot of help learning how to act with honor toward other people; particularly the ones that tick them off.

Character Check. First, find out where they stand when it comes to honor. Is your kid someone who:

- ☐ Takes turns
- ☐ Doesn't blame others carelessly
- ☐ Compromises
- ☐ Is open minded
- ☐ Displays good sportsmanship; win or lose
- ☐ Recognizes when they are in the wrong
- ☐ Looks for peaceful, fair solutions to problems
- ☐ Plays by the rules
- ☐ Looks out for the rights of others
- ☐ Is upset by unfair treatment of others
- ☐ Refrains from making comments or jokes that put down another group or person

If your kid is missing a lot of these Character-istics or you want to shore up what is already there, read on.

What's a parent to do?

Model it. Fairness and respecting the rights of others comes in many forms. It can be as straightforward as distributing chores equitably among siblings and as subtle as whether you treat people the same regardless of their heritage, ethnicity, religious beliefs or sexual preference. How fair minded are you? Are your decisions based on strong and clear prejudices,

“isms” (e.g., racism, sexism, AGE-ISM!, etc.) or bigotry? (Notice that Honor doesn’t require you to be unbiased or prejudiced; it means you strive to not have those determine how you treat others.) Does your honor code include the concept of “every person for themselves?” These beliefs and actions are inherently unfair. An honor code that makes it acceptable to deny fair and respectful treatment “except . . .” runs counter to the fundamental tenets of our constitution. It also runs the risk of being used against you (and your kid) by other people. (Virtually every category of humanity has experienced unfairness, injustice and death at one time in history; some repeatedly.)

Don’t forget about the power of stories as a way to model your kid’s Character development. Tell them stories about people who are personal models of Honor to you; even better if they are members of the family. Find fables and stories that emphasize fairness (e.g., *The Cow of No Color: Riddle Stories and Justice Tales from Around the World* by Nina Jaffe, Steve Zeitlin and Whitney Sherman). And, there are movies, of course (e.g., *A Civil Action*, *The China Syndrome*, *To Kill A Mockingbird*, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*).

Notice it. Draw attention to instances of Honorable actions people perform in the world around you. There will be stories in the news (though not as often as we need to hear) of people who treat others fairly, especially when they might have benefited from just keeping quiet or turning away. Standing up for the rights of others, protesting some unfairness in the world, acting to right a wrong committed toward someone else; these are things worth mentioning to your kid. Pay attention to your kid being fair in their assessment of others, distributing possessions or providing opportunities for other people. Make sure they know you noticed. Support them in their indignation about injustice in the world. Teens are at risk for entitled outrage (“That’s not fair! I should get more”) so be sure to provide lots of admiration when this outrage is directed at unfairness toward others.

Express it. Use words and phrases that indicate Honor is important to you (and should be to them): honorable, person of honor, fair, just, unfair, being a good sport, playing by the rules. Talk about fundamental human rights (as they relate to what another person deserves simply because they are a person).

Expect it. Your kid will learn to be honorable through requirements that they be fair and just in their treatment of others (including their siblings). Make sure your kid knows that you expect them to respect the rights of others, especially those people they dislike or disagree with (like their siblings). This is not the same as requiring them to accept other’s views or behaviors. It is about respecting their rights and treating them justly despite the fact that they are despicable human beings. (Though you should equally expect your kid to maintain a firm hold on their own personal value system. Being fair doesn’t mean you like or even agree with the person.)

Teach it. While research suggests that people have a natural tendency to be fair, there are also lots of experiences (and cultural messages) that encourage kids to think only of themselves. There are a number of qualities that underlie a sense of Honor.

Define honor. Honorable people treat others fairly. Fair, just, equitable, right, good sport; these are a few of the concepts upon which honor is based. Your kid will need to be prepared to deal

with possibility that friends (or other nefarious influences like the internet) define honor as following a set of rules that are self-serving or biased. When the so-called honor code is flawed, then acting honorably can actually be the wrong thing (think honor among thieves or gang members).

Understanding fairness. Fairness requires you to put aside your own desires and feelings to determine an equitable and just resolution or treatment. Fairness is about justice and freedom from bias. Fairness is about balance and equality. It is not about everyone having the same amount. It is not about getting special treatment because of who you know or how much influence you wield. It is not about getting something because someone else got it (i.e., gift, cool car, etc.). Have your kid practice identifying fair solutions (“Do you think that was fair? Why?”). Some kids have a particularly difficult time separating out whether something is fair versus they just don’t like it. (“You are grounded.” “That’s not fair!” “No, you don’t like it. It is fair because you knew what we expected and you had the opportunity to follow our rules or break them.” “That’s what I said, it is unfair!” *sigh* “Just go to your room.”

Recognize biases and prejudices. Bias is thinking that people are fundamentally lesser and undeserving (or fundamentally superior and deserving) because of the group to which they belong. Unfortunately, people can’t avoid being biased but it doesn’t have to lead to discrimination. Fortunately, it is possible to be objectively fair and just (regardless of how you feel). You will need to help your kid see that fairness and respecting others is something all people deserve (regardless of whether they return the favor). Even people you wouldn’t want your kid to associate with deserve equal treatment and consideration. “I think they are immoral and would not want you to associate with them but they still deserve to be treated fairly.”

Perspective taking. Being fair and just requires the ability to look at things from another person’s perspective. Help your kid learn to have a balanced view of the issue or situation at hand. “If it was you would you think that was fair?”

Encourage it. “Remember, it’s important to be fair and treat people right.” Let your kid know that honor is important. “Don’t take unfair advantage. Play fair.” Talk about how succeeding or acquiring things unfairly takes away from whatever you may gain. Talk to them about the importance of doing what is right. Let them know that you expect them to stand up for what is fair and just for themselves but also for everyone else.

Anticipate it. Talk to your kid about how much they will benefit from being an honorable person. Talk about the good things that come from being an honorable person (e.g., admiration, respect, self-respect, parental pride, etc.). Let them know how much people admire it (and how much you admire it). Talk about what honorable people accomplish and the example they set for others. Help your kid see that the obligations each citizen has to be fair and just and to promote fairness and justice are the foundations of a democracy.

Guilt it. SHAME! DISHONOR! Honor is kind of a big character-istic because of our obligations as citizens in a democracy to be committed to fairness and justice, even for people you dislike. Let your kid know that dishonorable behavior is unacceptable. Make sure you communicate your disappointment (not disgust or revulsion). “Well, I’m really disappointed that

you treated them so unfairly. They really didn't deserve that. I guess we have some more work on what it means to be a person of honor.”

Repeat it. One discussion is not enough. Punishment for being dishonorable is not sufficient. Keep on it.

Fairness for others vs for self. There is kind of a paradox about focusing on fairness. When people focus on fairness for others they more naturally behave in honorable ways. However, focusing on fairness when it comes to yourself can result in becoming more selfish and concerned about getting what you deserve (which is often more than what you actually DO deserve). Be sure to keep your kid's focus on other people when it comes to fairness and justice. Honor is about how you treat others not what you require for yourself.

A Note on Spite. Here's something else to consider. While humans demonstrate a natural tendency to be fair, we also seem to be naturally spiteful (i.e., feeling the urge to retaliate against someone who has harmed or hurt us). Honorable people are not spiteful; they do not seek revenge or retribution. (They seek justice and show mercy.) You may have to provide direct intervention if spite shows up in your kid.

Additional Reading:

- The [Josephson Institute](#) has an excellent discussion of fairness.
- Here <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-19421644> and here <http://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2012/09/kids-merit/> are a couple of articles on our natural instinct to be fair.
- This explains SO many things about my relationship with my dog <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=97944783>
- *The Honor Code* by Kwame Appiah. This book is an academic treatment of the concept of honor and the codes that define it by a Princeton professor.

Kindness

def. (noun) benevolent, considerate and helpful

Kindness, particularly in the form of altruism, does a person good; so much so that it appears to be hard wired into our system. People who are mean and selfish are likely to be shunned; those who are kind, considerate and helpful are liked and valued. Acts of kindness reduce stress, increase the release of feel good chemicals in your body, boosts your immune system and, in the form of volunteering, can provide more joy then doubling your income or obtaining a college degree. And, you can pass it on like a virus. A couple of [researchers](#) have shown that people who experience a kind act behave kindly to at least 3 other people (who pass it on to another 3, etc.). Kindness is a Character-istic that is crucial to the well-being of your kid as well as making living in communities pleasant and worthwhile. Here's the problem though, hurtful and insulting behavior can also be passed along. If you want to promote a greater sense of Kindness in your kid . . .

Character check. First, review these qualities to see where your kid falls on the continuum of kindness.

- ☐ Makes comments that build up others
- ☐ Treats animals gently and looks out for those treated unkindly
- ☐ Refuses to be a part of insulting, intimidating, or ridiculing others
- ☐ Offers help and assistance to people
- ☐ Naturally steps in to help others
- ☐ Does things to cheer others up
- ☐ Goes out of their way to encourage or include others
- ☐ Has nice things to say to and about others
- ☐ Does considerate things for others “just because”

If they are showing a lot of these qualities, hug them and tell them how proud you are that they are such a Kind person. If they haven't quite got the knack, here are some things you can do to give them a kindness booster.

What's a parent to do?

Model it. Since practicing acts of Kindness infects other people, get to it! More importantly, practice it on your kid to make sure they get infected with the Kindness bug. [Here](#) is a long list of kind acts anyone can do. Don't forget about movies, books and stories that show kindness rewarded and have characters who are the personification of kindness. [Here](#) is a list of movies where Kindness is a dominant theme. You can even track your acts of kindness (as Karma cards) through a [website](#).

Notice it. Pay attention to when your kid shows kindness to others. Make a habit of commenting on it. It is how your kid knows what you value and what you think they should value. Point out kind acts when you see them in the world around you. Especially talk about

times when kids have demonstrated kindness. (Not to shame your kid but to help them see how kids can show Kindness. “You could do something like that too!” not “Why can’t you be more like THAT.”)

Expect it. Expectancies have a strong effect on what kids end up trying and doing. Make sure your kid expects kindness of themselves by you expecting it of them. Talk as though you just assume your child will be kind to others. “You’re going to go help that woman with her groceries aren’t you?” “I know you’ll find lots of ways to be kind to other people, once you think about it.”

Express it. Use words like kind, considerate, selfless, gentle, sweet. Require your kid to use kind words when talking about others, especially when mad or provoked by others (or as we say in the South “bless their heart”)

Teach it. Kindness is a combination of several different qualities you can help your kid develop. Here are some worth cultivating.

Empathy. Kindness, like other prosocial Characteristics (e.g., Compassion, Generosity), requires understanding of others feelings; viewing things from their perspective. It is important to help your kid “walk a mile in their shoes.” Take the time to talk about how the world looks to someone else. Help your kid understand how different life circumstances can lead to a sometimes radically different view of possibilities and opportunities.

Benevolent expectancies and interpretations. If you think someone else means you harm or is an undeserving or bad person, you are not likely to think kindly of them. Your kid needs to be forgiving and positive when imagining other’s motives. To be Kind, they will need to make situational (i.e., temporary) explanations (e.g., he must be tired, she must be afraid) rather than dispositional (i.e., permanent) (e.g., he is inherently evil, she is a completely selfish person who can’t ever change). Make sure your kid has kind words to say about people who are both in need and even those who are jerks.

Collaborative, cooperative and considerate. Ambition, competitiveness and determination make it possible to get ahead in the world (though not in relationships). Unfortunately, if you are oriented toward crushing your opponents and erasing any evidence of their existence it is more difficult to be kind. Help your kid learn how to temper their ambition with collaboration, integrate competitiveness with cooperation and balance their determination with consideration for others.

Smelling the roses. When your day is completely scheduled and you are late to everything, it is difficult to feel kindly toward others (because they are GOING TOO SLOW). Make sure your kid makes time to slow down and look around. Help them notice the beauty in the world and the kindness shown by others in everyday situations.

Feeling lucky and blessed. If your kid believes that everyone else gets the break THEY deserve, that life has cheated them, that getting something means others must go without, they will be much less likely to consider Kindness as a desirable Characteristic. Make a point to help

your kid recognize the blessings in their life (and the blessings that others experience). Help them be happy for others' successes and lucky breaks.

Humility. To be kind, your kid must be able to be selfless. They are not the most important person in the world and that their problems are not the worst problems. They need to appreciate that there are many reasons someone succeeds with personal effort being just one (and not always the most influential). When you notice signs of self-centeredness in your kid, make a point to have them notice the difficulties of others who have overcome adversity. Make sure they give credit where credit is due for successes and accomplishments, even their own (meaning help them recognize the many different people who helped along the way).

Joy. Kindness is easy to demonstrate when you feel happy. Help your kid make sure they have joy in their life. Singing, dancing, hobbies, walking in nature, laughter; these are all derivatives of (and sources of) joy. Find ways to include them in your family life.

Anticipate it. It is important to talk to your kid about what the future will be like for them. This provides hope and it also indicates what kind of adult you expect them to be. Make comments that predict Kindness in their adult life. "That is just the sort of thing that will make you a wonderful adult." "I don't know what I would do if you turned out to be someone who was mean to people." "You are a lot like your Uncle Jeff. He is such a kind man and everyone loves him for it."

Encourage it. Kids need to be encouraged to behave in ways you think most appropriate and desirable. Be sure to find ways to nudge your kids toward Kindness to others. "How do you think you could help that person out even though you don't really have to?" "That person looks like they could use a Kind word. See what you can do." You might even consider setting up Kindness competitions within the family. Who was able to show Kindness to someone else without them knowing it?

Guilt it. And, of course, un-Kindness toward others deserves comment, and censure (but not humiliation). It will be important to express your disappointment, concern, frustration and even anger. Remind them how important they found Kindness shown to them. Talk to them about the importance of being the sort of person who does Kind deeds for others without needing to have recognition or reward. Have them rededicate themselves to being a Kind person.

Repeat it. Just like you can't show too much Kindness; you also can't repeat it too often.

A word about hate watching and reality TV. Hate TV (i.e., shows, programs or videos that focus on being able to ridicule or condemn the people in the video) has become a spectator sport. It puts people on a stage, in a news report or on a reality television show to have the observers jeer as they are humiliated (or humiliate themselves). It is shocking. It is fascinating. It is horrifying. It is secretly gratifying. It is disgusting. It makes us feel better about our own lives. It also sends the message that other's pain, life difficulties, tragedy misery or vices are merely entertainment. Avoid it if you can. If you find yourself participating, it is important to make sure that you draw attention to the sad and destructive aspects of the situation and circumstances. It will create a MAJOR downer for your kids. It's worth it. Let them get their

secret glee at other's misfortunes where humans have always derived it-neighbors and friends. Because they are people you actually know, the affection and love you have for them will help temper this nasty little human fault and keep it from getting out of hand.

Selfless acts of Kindness are uniquely human. Make sure your kid lives up to their potential as a member of humanity.

Resources

- [Random Acts of Kindness website](#)
- [21 Acts Of Kindness That Will Make You Believe In The Human Race](#)

Responsibility

def. (noun) accountable or answerable for your actions

If your kid is going to accomplish anything, they have to take personal responsibility for making it happen. Responsibility is directly tied to success. Responsible people are both proactive in addressing issues and hold themselves accountable for the consequences of their actions. Responsible people are trusted, they are given greater opportunities and they get more done. Responsible people accept blame for mistakes they make. Responsibility is synonymous with adulthood. Your kid needs to be as Responsible as possible to get the best out of life.

Character Checklist. Is your kid responsible? Here are some of the signs.

- ☐ Rarely needs reminders, coaxing, or reprimands to behave appropriately
- ☐ Accepts appropriate blame
- ☐ Apologizes when they are wrong or have messed up
- ☐ Doesn't attribute problems to others
- ☐ Acknowledges personal obligations
- ☐ Fulfills personal commitments to others
- ☐ Pulls their own weight in a situation
- ☐ Takes action to solve their own problems
- ☐ Does their fair share
- ☐ Apologizes for mistakes
- ☐ Tries to make amends if physical or emotional injury occurs
- ☐ Doesn't whine

What's a parent to do?

Model it. Responsibility is a pain. You have to do a lot of stuff you committed yourself to before you realized how much trouble it would be. Your kid will need to have a clear example that Responsibility is important and is a worthwhile way of being as a person. This means, of course, they need to see what a Responsible adult looks like. That would be you. There are a lot of slippery areas when it comes to Responsibility as a parent. Taking "sick time" when you aren't sick. The divorce process. Child support. Keeping promises. Putting aside what you are doing to help your kid. And, the biggest one, admitting you are wrong to your kid. It all comes around to you taking your own Responsibilities seriously.

Another way to present your kid with models of Responsibility is through story telling. Take time to recount stories of family members (including yourself) who have demonstrate Responsibility. There are movies that have responsibility as a theme like *Iron Will*, *It's a Wonderful Life*, *Mulan*, *Kramer vs Kramer*, *Les Misérables*.

Notice it. Look for examples of Responsibility in everyday situations. Comment on it to your kid. Point out people who are working hard. When someone goes above and beyond make sure

you say something about it to your kid. Let your kid know how much integrity it takes for people who apologize for mistakes or problems with service.

Expect it. Let your kid know they should be a Responsible person. Make sure they know how to be a responsible person through your expectations. “I expect you to follow through with this because you made a commitment.” “You will need to see this through. That is what a Responsible person does.” “You must be the kind of person who accepts responsibility for their decisions. That means taking what comes if it doesn’t work out the way you expected.” “A Responsible person apologizes and makes it right.”

Express it. Use words and phrases that emphasize the importance of Responsibility: accept responsibility, take charge of your own learning, accept consequences, the buck stops here, own up to your mistakes, admit when you are wrong, pull your own weight, do your fair share, make amends, make it right.

Teach it. Being a Responsible person requires a number of specific skills. Your kid will need help developing them.

Self control. Responsibility requires the ability to resist impulses and delay gratification in the service of longer term goals. Your kid will need practice dealing with frustration and remaining calm and focused under stress. Make your kid wait. Require them to share. Insist that they use manners (because manners are almost always about waiting for someone else to go first). And let them know you expect them to be polite about it.

Keep their word. Your word is your bond. Your kid should know that giving their word is a sacred pact. It is a dedication of their integrity and personal worth to the fulfillment of that commitment. Make sure they know it. Make sure they give it. Make sure they live it. Only extraordinary circumstances justify going back on your word. Make sure they DON’T give it unless they mean it.

Work hard. A Job worth doing is worth doing well. Responsibility contains an expectation that you will do your best and work your hardest to fulfill a commitment. While parents and kids often dispute what constitutes hard work, there are some commonly agreed upon signs: exertion, dedication to the task, personal investment in the quality of the product, going the extra mile. These should be criteria you require your kid to exhibit when working at a task.

Follow through. Once a commitment is made Responsible people continue until the task is completed and the work is done. Your kid will need lots of experience being required to finish what they start. It should become so ingrained that it isn’t even questioned.

Accountability. Responsibility means you also answer to others (and, ultimately to yourself) for the outcomes. You don’t get to take the credit if it succeeds but blame others if it fails or goes badly. Responsibility means accepting the consequences. Hold your kid accountable for their actions. They will make choices. If their choices involved risk, make sure your kid suffers the consequences (just as surely as they will reap any rewards). It is important for them to recognize how their decisions and actions have led to particular outcomes. Make sure they pay the price

for screw ups and poor choices (and then commend them for accepting these consequences as a sign of Responsibility).

Admit fault. Being Responsible means you have a role in whether something goes well or goes badly. Responsible people are always partly to blame. This is not the manipulative, guilt based form of self-blame but the recognition of the influence you have in effecting outcomes. Responsible people do not shift blame for bad outcomes onto others. To correct problems or to improve outcomes next time requires the acknowledgment of mistakes and failures. Require your kid to identify the role they played in the success of a venture or situation. They need practice admitting fault (without automatically feeling like a bad person) as a way to improve in the future.

Apologizing. And so, of course, Responsible people recognize their role in mistakes or screw ups that affect others. And apologize when warranted. You will need to make sure your kid is practiced in apologizing appropriately and gracefully for mistakes or misunderstandings.

Encourage it. For your kid to learn to be responsible they must have the opportunity to be responsible, with all that entails. Let them choose for themselves. Give them the opportunity to do it their way (while making sure it won't end in catastrophe). Nudge them to take on Responsibilities. Require them to be Responsible for things around the house.

Anticipate it. Kids need to know that Responsibility is important to a happy, productive life. Talk to them about your expectations that they be a Responsible adult. Help them see how Responsibility in adulthood leads to specific outcomes: job success, relationship success, personal growth and satisfaction. "In the business world you will be . . ." "When you are married . . ." "When you can look at yourself and know that you are a Responsible person . . ." "Doing Responsible things like this when you are an adult will lead to . . ." Help them envision the Responsible adult you know they will become.

Guilt it. Guilt rightfully arises from the contrast between what your kid has done versus what they should have done as a measure against an important value or moral. It is an important signal to a kid that this is more than just a mistake; it is a violation of principles or morals. "I am really disappointed you behaved so irresponsibly." "I thought you were ready for this responsibility. I guess I was wrong." "It is really unacceptable for you to ignore your Responsibilities." "I expect more of you." "You know better than this." Use it sparingly but use it when there is a violation of personal values (yours and theirs).

Repeat it. Over and over again. "Did you or did you not give your word?" "Do I have your word?" "You gave me your word." "Give me your word."

Blaming and excuse making. The opposite of Responsibility is blaming others and making excuses for what went wrong. If your kid responds to mistakes and screw ups with these, it is time to give some attention to developing greater Responsibility for their actions (and their life). Make sure your kid always identifies their role in the outcome of a situation in which they were involved; both good and bad. Require them to analyze how they contributed to (or didn't do something to impede or stop) problems that arose.

Shame and self-blame. The dark side of Responsibility is shame and self-blame. It is possible to be too Responsible. Guilt as a response to specific situations is appropriate and helpful. It is an emotional signal that you violated your own value system in a specific situation. “I screwed up. I fell short of my own expectations.” Shame is the characterization of the self as inadequate and bad. There are some kids who are so conscientious about doing what’s right and being a good person that any transgression becomes an indictment of the self. They blame themselves for everything. Be sure to keep an eye out for signs of this in your kid. Help them make some room for normal human failings. Make sure they don’t lose perspective.

And while you are at it, make sure you don’t inadvertently shame and blame your kid when they mess up. Focus on building up Responsibility not on pointing out their inadequacies and failures.

A Final Word (or two)

The range of things required of us as parents raising our kids to launch into the world ready to construct health, happy and productive lives is really overwhelming. Part of this is due to the remarkable complexity of modern life. But our burdens have been increased by the lack of real community our modern lives force upon us. Parents have to work, often long hours, to support the family. Families have to move away from their social roots to pursue a more comfortable and secure life. Involvement in faith communities, the traditional keepers of the flame of Character (as ALL major faiths do) is no longer a central part in the lives of most families. Our attention is fractured and distracted by a variety of human and non-human (i.e., electronic) sources that are difficult to escape. Our consumer economy monetizes everything from basic necessities to exorbitant luxuries to ideas. Our “brand” (what used to be called reputation) is something to be crafted and marketed (rather than embodied and lived). We are all inundated with marketers (both professional and self-created) attempts to draw our attention by pandering to our vanity or our baser instincts (because it will get our all-important attention). Rather than tales that impart important lessons and morals, modern stories (e.g., fiction, movies, video games, etc.) are scripted to merely titillate and amuse (and in the process, desensitizes us to violence, depersonalized sex and mindless perception). Our insecurities are preyed upon. Our desires are aroused. Our loyalty is abused. Cynicism (i.e., no one is genuine and everyone is after something) and sarcasm (i.e., disdain and condescension) and pessimism are mistaken for sophistication and understanding. Wisdom is seen as quaint, naïve and irrelevant. The range of people who are influencing your kid’s thinking, preferences, values and decisions is seemingly endless. You at least knew the “bad seed” your kid should avoid in the neighborhood where families knew each other (for better or worse). Kids are vulnerable. WE are vulnerable. And much of it is happening outside of our awareness as we automatically process the world around us while we go about raising our kids and living our lives and trying to be good people. But, challenges like these have always been the lot of parents across time.

What’s a parent to do?

Character is the answer. Character has always been the answer throughout the whole of human civilization. It is the foundation of civil society. When character loses its importance, when character failings are dismissed or ignored in ourselves, in each other and in prominent members of our community, society crumbles. Every time. There is nothing more important for us as parents to impart to our kids than they be people of character. We must demand that people who aspire to lead us are people of honor and integrity; people of character. We can’t afford to settle, for ourselves, for our kids and for our society.

And, as always, it all starts with you raising your kid. A daunting, noble, admirable, terrifying, painful and deeply gratifying responsibility. You are up to the challenge. (Luckily for me and lots of people, you don’t have to be a genius.)

I wish you the best of luck and trust you to love your kids with all your heart. For it is through love that all things are possible.

Jim