

Values for Children

Parenting articles and books often contain suggestions for teaching values to children. However, before we can help our children to develop values, we need to be clear about what our own values are. Is honesty important? Caring for the environment? Helping others? Self-sufficiency? Hard work? Freedom?

It may have been awhile since parents took the time to think about their own values. The following questions may help get you thinking, and can be a good discussion starter with your partner.

What do I value about family?

What do I value in a friend? What does it mean to be a good friend?

What does it mean to be a ‘good person’?

What are my rights and responsibilities?

What are the top 10 values I would like to pass onto my kids?

I asked some parents what were the top ten values that they wanted to pass on and some answers kept coming up-honesty, respect, kindness, faith, family, helping others, hard work, were some things mentioned. But these words may have different meanings to different people. You can explore these values by asking, “what does that look like?” For example, what does respect look like? Do you mean respect for yourself, or respect for others? Does respect look like treating everyone with equal courtesy, kindness and patience? Or does it mean you behave in a way so that others will respect you?

What does hard work look like? Do you believe that work should be done before any leisure activities? Do you mean volunteering to improve your community or the world? Or, do you mean work as a means to financial security?

Many people wouldn’t list money as a value, yet we all hope our children will not struggle with poverty or lack the basic needs of life. So perhaps financial security is a value for you. And what does that look like? What happens when values conflict? What if financial security is achieved by unethical or dishonest behavior?

Once parents are clear about what values they want to pass on to their children, it takes some effort, modeling, and conversation to do this. Following are some suggestions:

1. Model your values. Inconsistent messages are unlikely to be learned. Let your children see you behaving in a kind and honest way and that is what they will imitate. Explain why you did something kind and thoughtful-for example, if you hold the door open for a woman with a stroller, say something like, “she would find it hard to get that heavy door open, so I wanted to

help her.” When you volunteer to help at a charity or give a donation, explain why you are doing so and how that will help others.

2. Ask open-ended questions to spur discussion about values. If you see a fight during a sports event, ask something like, “What do you think caused that? What do you think about it?” If you get a response that is not what you hoped for, you can talk about it further. Have frequent conversation about values, not just when something goes wrong.

Or, if you are trying to teach respect and you overhear nasty put-downs in a public place, ask, “What do you think of that comment? How do you think that other person feels?”

3. Avoid long preachy talks, especially at that time that your child does something inappropriate in conflict with your values. Keep verbal corrections simple and to the point, e.g., “We don’t speak to each other that way in our family. We treat each other with respect.”

4. Tell or read stories at bedtime with a moral or lesson that reflects the values you embrace. These are especially effective if they are true stories, perhaps something from your family history.

5. If spirituality or faith is important in your family, make it a part of your daily living, and find ways to involve your children.

6. Be aware of what values are being modeled to your children by others in their lives; friends, teachers, coaches, neighbours. Think about how you are going to handle conflicting values—for example, is there a coach whose value is ‘win at any cost’? Does that conflict with or agree with your values? How will you handle this? What about a friend who puts others down with insults or physical aggression? Help your children to decide what their own values are in these situations, and guide them through these conflicts.

7. Limit children’s exposure to TV and video games. By refusing to watch certain programs, you send a message to your children about values. Limiting viewing also keeps children from seeing as much advertising, which influences children to believe that appearance and possessions are extremely important. If that is not your value, try to protect your children from this.

8. Children typically have a good sense of what is ‘fair’. You can use their sense of justice to start discussions about values.

In our complex society with its many influences and ideas, parents need to take an active role in values education for their children. Our children *will* pick up values, so parents need to take an active role in guiding which values these will be.

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