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Dear Parents of Young Children – Children and Values
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Dear Parents of young children



Children And Values

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE, MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

IF YOU ARE like most parents, there have been times when you have said of your child, "He ought to know better." This is quite different from saying, "Why can't he do as he is told?" To say that he ought to know better means that you expect him to know better without being told.

You are certain that Johnny knows better when he steps in a puddle of water with a pair of new shoes. But how much does he know about why he should not do it? He probably knows that you get cross when he steps in the water or that you may not allow him to wear his new shoes for a time. He will have little appreciation of how water affects shoe leather, of the time it takes you to change his shoes, or the strain on the budget if you must replace the shoes.

Learning "right" from "wrong" involves the complex process of how mental growth takes place. It includes the ability of a child to pay attention, to comprehend, to remember what has happened before, to relate ideas, to make judgments, etc. To ignore any one of these areas of mental growth is to misjudge the ability of a child to "know better."

Being able to tell "right" from "wrong," however, is dependent upon something more than memory, attention and mental alertness. It means that somewhere along the line the child must acquire a set of standards, ideals or values with which he can guide his own future behavior. Values are those things that are most important to us.

How do children acquire values? How can we help children acquire the values we would like them to have? It seems to me there are at least three ways:

First of all, children learn about values in small doses every day in every way in the process of growing up.

A child does not learn all at once what is moral and ethical. He gains this understanding to the degree that he is able to absorb such learning at each stage in his development. When Billy hits Mary you will step in and make it clear to him that you disapprove of what he is doing. This may teach him that he must not hit Mary. It will take other occasions before he gains the idea that he must not hit because it hurts Mary and many more occasions before he understands kindness to children in general, that we respect other people and consequently do not want to hurt them.

The fact that children learn about values in small doses raises an important question: how much is enough for any one child at any one stage? This question has been raised both about material possessions and the number and kinds of activities in which children engage.

For example, I have noted that the age at which a child "needs" an expensive bicycle seems to have moved down to younger ages. This is not to suggest that a child should be deprived of a bicycle or that there is any one age at which it would be more beneficial. But children do learn something about values simply by the quantity of things that are provided for them.

Similarly we often crowd a child's life with experiences that seem more suited to adults than to children. I was interested and then dismayed at the account of a birthday party for a 3-year-old that was held with all the trimmings in a hotel dining room. The

dinner was served in several courses with flowers, expensive gifts and soft music. The gown of the honored 3-year-old was described in terms befitting this year's debutante.

One experience of this kind may not actually be harmful to a child, but it has the possibility of dulling the appetite for more simple forms of enjoyment. It may also cut down on the time which the child has to enjoy things that are merely "child-like."

The question of how much or what, at any age, is difficult for parents to decide. What you do will depend upon many factors but most of all it should depend upon the individual child and what the possessions (or privileges) do to him or for him at any one stage. One child may delight in a surprise gift whenever his mother goes to the store. Another child might become quite demanding or dissatisfied with his mother's choice. The quantity of toys is not as important as the way in which a child responds to the gift giving.

In spite of our best efforts to spend moderately for toys or possessions, children are bound to learn something about values just from living in a culture that has many "things" and many opportunities.

Children gain some idea of values by observing the values which their parents appear to hold.

Perhaps you wish I had said simply that parents should be an example to their children. If by example is meant putting one's self up on a pedestal, this may not look very desirable or attainable to a child. In fact, if par-

ents occasionally behave in a manner that is something short of perfection, a child may come to feel that he and his parents have something in common. To be able to see how parents handle themselves in difficult situations can be very helpful to a child. The important point is that over a period of time parents exhibit or set forth the kind of values that will give children a clear picture which can be used as a model.

Too often parents are not clear themselves as to what they believe. People in general are less certain today than they have been in the past as to what the basic moral values are. Because of this uncertainty, parents sometimes excuse themselves from clarifying their own values on the grounds that if you keep still about the fact that you are not quite sure, no one will know, particularly your children. But the truth is our values become known by what we do not say as well as by what we say. We are teaching our youngsters values with every word we speak, every action, every look, every silence.

Another excuse which appears to relieve us of the responsibility of clarifying our values is contained in the statement, "but we mustn't make moral judgments." This seems to mean that we should not try to impose our values on others. While this statement may be well intentioned, it has little practical use in the rearing of children. It conveys the idea that we should refrain from clearly showing our youngsters where we stand because it might prevent them from discovering and choosing their own values. But a child who has no model to guide him is like a child lost in the forest who is bewildered as to which way to turn.

In the ordinary everyday events of family life it is our responsibility to sort out and clarify the values we believe in and then to let our children know which ones are important to us.

Values to be truly learned must be absorbed by the child and become a part of his own standards or they can't possibly have any real meaning for him.

As parents we have been working toward the day when our children will come to behave according to their own standards without being told. Sometimes we feel that this time will never come.

What is it that makes some children want to follow the example set by their parents? What is that "something" that appears to be the all-important link?

That "something" can be stated very simply. A child can more easily build up his own set of values if over

a period of time the relationship between parent and child is good.

This really means that if a child loves his parents and feels that they love him he is more apt to want to be like them. We see this developing often in very superficial ways—a little girl wearing her mother's high heels, or punishing her doll, or a little boy who says he is a Democrat or Republican because his father is, or the older boy who brags about his Dad's bowling score. These are some of the things that we see children doing which seem to say that they want to be like their parents.

Imitating the behavior of parents, however, does not necessarily mean that children are absorbing their values. Willingness to absorb parental values depends to a considerable degree on what has been referred to as "identification" with a parent. It may work something like this: if a little boy has a warm relationship with his father he has a clear and satisfying picture of how a man (his father) performs his role, he has happily and completely adopted his father's way of life as his own; he has "identified" with his father. The relationship is satisfying; therefore, he can more easily accept his father's values as his own.

Where there is little strain in the relationship the child will neither feel



that he must accept his father's values out of fear or reject completely what his father stands for. As the child grows older he will likely feel much more confident to take out of his father's values that which he will find most useful to him in his later life.

In much the same way, and perhaps more easily, little girls come to be kindly disposed toward the values which their mothers hold when the relationship is one of acceptance.

Moreover, it is helpful for boys and girls to experience the values held by each parent. In our culture such values as sympathy, willingness to compromise, interest in people, appreciation of the arts, gentleness as well as firmness would seem to be useful to both sexes.

If, due to unfortunate circumstances, this desirable kind of relationship is lacking, do not despair. There are many parent substitutes such as teachers, relatives and friends who can and do help to provide the necessary models when parental models are lacking.

There is also some reason to believe that a parent who passes on favorable comments about an absent mate is contributing something to the child's concept of a desirable parent-child relationship.

This letter has suggested that:

Children acquire the values of their parents more readily if a warm accepting relationship prevails between parent and child.

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Warm parent-child relationships are more apt to prevail if

- parents take time to listen to children
- we realize that it is the little things that build relationships
- a child is greeted with a smile as he awakens
- parents try to discover from the child's behavior how he really feels
- we do not become too upset by his shortcomings
- we look for some of the things a child does right rather than dwelling on all the things he does wrong
- we set limits in a firm and yet kindly way
- we share his small successes with him
- we are ready with comfort when things go wrong
- we display kindness and good will in the family group
- we take time to enjoy children

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