



Raising Kids with Values

By Dr. Jenn Berman

When it comes to instilling values, parents face greater challenges than ever before. Children today are bombarded with anti-values messages all day long through television, movies, music, the internet and billboards (did you see the Calvin Klein teenager “orgy” billboard this year?). Kids have fewer young role models that demonstrate valuable contributions to society than they did in years past. Instead, they have people like Paris Hilton, Kim Kardashian and Brody Jenner, kids who are known for, respectively, a sex tape, her buttocks and dating other reality stars for their parents’ money. As though that is not enough of a stumbling block, kids today also suffer from a lack of meaningful adult and peer relationships. So many of us, young and old, tend to be focused on Blackberries, lap tops and television screens at the expense of meaningful connections and relationships.

According to a recent poll by Parents Magazine, the top five values that parents want to imbue in their children are: honesty, self esteem, kindness, self-reliance, and concern for others, qualities which are the building blocks for a moral person and a decent society. However, despite the fact that 70 percent of those polled said that they want to instill self esteem in their children, most parents don’t realize that giving kids the ability to make a difference is the greatest single inoculation against poor self esteem they can give. In addition, giving back to others and knowing that you can positively influence the lives of other

people creates a sense of self efficacy while the meaningful activities themselves decrease isolation and self centeredness which in turn helps to build self esteem.

Where to Begin

When most parents think about teaching their children to give back, they tend to think about teens or even elementary school kids. But as Oprah Winfrey said recently, “You are never too young to make a big difference in somebody’s life.” By teaching this lesson to children as young as two or three years old, you help them develop at an early age the habit of giving and helping others, which then causes this way of thinking and behaving to become deeply ingrained.

Three great tools to start with are:

1) Books

Books open doors to new concepts, cultures and traditions. It is easy to start young since there are so many great values-related books out there for young kids. Early on, start reading books about issues and qualities you value. Check out great toddler books like: *The Story of Rosa Parks*, *The Peace Book*, *The Snail and the Whale*, and *Little Bear’s Little Boat*.

2) Discussion

Look for opportunities for meaningful discussions and show your child that you value her opinion during conversations. Use books to open values based conversations. I recently had a conversation with my

three-year-old daughters about peer pressure after reading *Hey Little Ant* where a little boy’s friends try to pressure the boy in the book to step on an ant.

3) Modeling Behavior

For many parents, this is the greatest difficulty of parenting. Our kids are always watching us and what we do is far more impactful than what we say. Not only do we have to be role models, but also leaders. Next time you are making a charitable donation, instead of doing it quietly at your computer where your kids can’t see, let your children be involved. Let them pick the charity to which you send your donation. Next time you are thinking of a family vacation, consider planning a volunteer vacation. You can build an orphanage in China, teach English, or help save an endangered species. Work together as a family to make an impact on the world and you will help your child while you help others.

Making New Traditions

Sure it is wonderful to go and feed the homeless around Thanksgiving but people are hungry all year round. Think about making a family New Year’s resolution not only to give back on a regular basis but also to have discussions about important issues and values. As children get older the conversations become increasingly complex and their ability to volunteer becomes greater. Try making one of the following a year round tradition:

1) **Make a Kindness Scrapbook.** Create a scrapbook to document things that family members do to help others. Since we started ours, my daughters have made cards for sick children, donated money to save an endangered species, and sent their favorite books to a child in need.

2) **Start a Dinner Table Foundation.** Every month, save up twenty dollars or more to donate to a charity. Let each of your children “pitch” their first choice charity.

3) **Collect Something for Others.** Collect canned food for a food bank, DVDs for donations to a charity like KidFlicks.org, or clothing for a community homeless organization. Each month, with your kid’s help, find something new to give to others.

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4) Be Generous to Public Servants. Drop off some baked good at the local fire station. You can use this as an opportunity to talk to your kids about people who help keep us safe and giving back to the community. Just make sure you call your local fire station to make sure they are open to receiving visitors.

5) Volunteer Together. There are many opportunities to volunteer, especially for older kids. Try food banks, homeless shelters, hospitals, and old age homes. For a great selection of possibilities in your area check out VolunteerMatch.org, a free online service that matches people with appropriate volunteer opportunities.

Keeping Your Family Connected

Kids learn values best when they feel close and connected with their families. Three things you can do to make that happen are:

1) Have family dinner together. Studies show that kids who eat with their family are less likely to try drugs or alcohol, are more physically fit, experience more academic success, have more nutritionally balanced diets, and have a reduced risk for eating disorders. According to a University of Minneapolis study, the more frequent family meals were eaten together and the more connected a family felt, the more self esteem went up while negative factors like depression, suicidal ideation and suicide attempts went down. This underscores the importance that strong connections have to creating meaningful relationships and generating real influence over your child's values.

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