

How Can I Raise a Moral Child?

What is morality?

How can we raise our children to be empathic, caring, and moral people?

Morality means treating ourselves and others with respect. Empathy, compassion, and a sense of justice are central components of this kind of moral behavior.

Morality is learned

Babies are born neither intrinsically good nor intrinsically bad. Children learn behaviors and values from their environment -- mainly from their parents, but also from siblings, other relatives, peers, teachers, and increasingly, the media. Children learn from watching how other people behave, from having conversations with adults about behavior, and from their own experience.

The moral behavior of young children may first be motivated by wanting to please beloved adults, or by concerns and fears about punishment. As children grow and develop, they begin to internalize external moral values as their own. However, children all grow and develop at different rates, and the ages assigned to the following stages of moral development are approximate.

Practical Suggestions for Parents

- Monitor your own behavior and values. Do you treat other people with respect? Are empathy, compassion, and justice important to you?
- Take an honest look at how you solve conflicts, both at home and at work. Are you open-minded? A good listener? Do you search for fair solutions to conflicts, or is winning and being right the most important thing? Do you yell, use violence or aggression, or coerce people with intimidation or guilt?

If you resort to using violence or humiliation as a way of keeping order in your own family, your children may begin to use those same techniques in their peer relationships.

- From infancy, talk with your children about feelings. Give them words to identify emotions: "I know you're angry that you can't watch television right now." "It's sad that Michael can't come to your birthday party." Help your children understand that feelings are different than actions. It's okay for them to feel whatever they're feeling; what matters is how they act.

Boys, especially, need to learn that having feelings is normal and even positive. All children need help learning to express anger without physically or psychologically wounding other people: "It's okay to be angry at Sean for knocking down your blocks, but you can't hit him. Can you tell him that you're angry?"

- Show compassion for your child's feelings, even when they differ from your own. Let your child know from an early age that you respect her feelings: "I know you're angry that I won't let you sleep over at Ellen's, but I think you need to be home tonight." "I know you're angry that I won't let you go to Emma's party, but her parents aren't going to be there and I don't think it will be safe."
- Talk with your child about how his behavior affects other people: "I think Alyssa was sad when you wouldn't give her a turn to play." "Josh was so happy when you shared your candy with him."

Encourage your child to remember how he felt in a similar situation, or to think about how he would feel under similar circumstances. "Sam's feelings are hurt when you call him names. Remember how you felt when he called you names?" "How would you feel if everyone teased you about how you look?"

- From an early age, your child needs help finding alternatives to violence for resolving conflict: "It's okay to be angry at Eric, but you can't hit him. Let's find some other ways to settle this argument."

Help her see that getting angry is okay and doesn't have to be catastrophic. "No wonder you're angry. Ellen treated you really badly. But you've been friends for such a long time. Can you tell her how you feel?"

Parents aren't the only influence

As a parent you have an enormous influence on your child's values and behavior, but we mustn't underestimate the influence of peers and the media as well.

Excessive exposure to violence or disrespectful behavior can affect the way children resolve conflicts or treat others. The media can affect children's behavior directly, but it also influences kids indirectly through their peers' exposure to it.

Having an ongoing conversation

When your children are very young, get in the habit of talking with them about justice and other moral issues. Talk with them about violence and your feelings about it. By keeping the lines of communication open as they grow, you're providing your children with an invaluable opportunity to explore their own ideas about morality and to reinforce the values that are important to you and your family.

Life is full of moral decisions and quandaries. There are opportunities to talk about your family ethics and morality with your children everywhere. Use news stories, movies, TV shows, books, and daily life events as a platform for talking about moral issues.

Encourage your children, even at an early age, to express their own opinions, to think about what they might do and say in various situations, and to try to put themselves in the shoes of victims of injustice.

Recommended Reading:

- *Bringing Up a Moral Child*
By Michael Schulman and Eva Mekler
- *Moral Child: Nurturing Children's Natural Moral Growth*
By William Damon

Reference

<http://life.familyeducation.com/morality/parenting/29484.html>