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TIPS

How to Raise Kids Who Stand Up for Their Beliefs

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The Seven Essential Virtues that Teach Kids to Do the Right Thing

We might as well call the close of America's twentieth century the "Decade of Moral Erosion." Think about it: The Internet became scarier; TV featured more casual sex and vulgarity; video games became even cruder; music lyrics were ruder; movies were often steamier and always more violent. And if that isn't enough, data shows peer pressure became even fiercer. A recent Time/Nickelodeon survey of 991 kids ages nine to fourteen revealed some troubling facts: 36 percent of the middle schoolers surveyed feel the pressure from peers to smoke marijuana; 40 percent feel pressure to have sex; 36 percent feel pressure to shoplift; and four out of 10 sixth graders feel pressure to drink.

These really are scary times to raise kids. What can you do to help your kids counter negative influences and stand up for what they know is right? The answer is to nurture a solid moral core that will guide them to stand up for their beliefs and act right without us. And the best news is that we can teach kids the core virtues and skills of strong character and moral courage and can begin when they are toddlers. Here are seven parenting tips you can use to help your kids stand up for their beliefs, buck negative peer pressure, and live their lives guided by integrity. Just remember: it's never too late—or early—to start.

Seven Tips to Help Kids Stand Up for Their Moral Beliefs

- 1. Know What You Stand for So Your Kid Knows.** Parents with clearly identified moral convictions are more likely to raise good kids. Because their kids know what their parents stand for and why they do, their kids are more likely to adopt their parents' beliefs. So begin by asking yourself what virtues and moral beliefs matter most to you. Make a list, then narrow them to your top three. These will become your personal moral code and guide you in how you will raise your child. It's also the best way to help your child develop his own moral beliefs. Here are five quick questions to gauge how well you're parenting solid moral beliefs in your child:

- You can quickly name the 3-5 virtues you want most for your child to acquire.
- Your child could name the virtues you believe in most without prompting.
- You reinforce your child whenever he shows your selected virtues in his behavior.
- Your child can clearly see your chosen virtues in your daily behavior.
- You use those virtues as your day to day code of ethical behavior and family living.



Emma emulated much of her mother's behaviour

- 2. Walk Your Talk.** One great question to yourself ask each day is: "If I were the only example my child had to learn moral habits, what did she learn today from watching me?" The answer can be quite revealing. By watching your choices and hearing your casual comments, kids learn our moral standards. Make sure the moral behaviors your kids are picking up on are ones that you want your kids to copy. How many of these messages apply to you? Do you...

- ___ Eat a "sample" from a store's candy bin in front of your child without paying?
- ___ Buy a ticket for a "child under twelve" even though your child is older?
- ___ Drive faster than the speed limit with your child as a passenger?

___ Tell your child to say you're not there when your boss calls?

___ Do the majority of your child's work on a school project, but have him sign his name?

3. Share Your Moral Beliefs and Take Stands. Speaking frequently to your child about values and is called direct moral teaching. Parents who raise ethical kids do it a lot. So look for moral issues and talk about them as they come up: from TV shows and news events to situations at home, school, and friends. Tell your kids how you feel about the issue and why. Share examples of morally courageous heroes. There's wonderful books and videos in your local library that you can share with your child. Most important: Stand up for your beliefs whenever you feel a major value is jeopardized. Your kid needs to see and hear about moral courage so he has an example to copy.

4. Ask Moral Questions to Stretch Moral Development. Questioning is an important parenting tool for enhancing children's consciences and strengthening moral beliefs. The right kind of questions can help kids expand their ability to take another perspective and ask themselves: "Is this the right thing to do?" Both are critical precursors to taking any moral stand. Here are a few questions parents can ask that stretch your kid's moral thinking: "How would you feel if someone treated you that way?" "If you don't follow through on your word, what do you think would happen?" "If everybody acted that way (i.e. cheated, shoplifted) what would happen?"

5. Boost Empathy. Kids who stick up for others are kids who feel for others. Empathy is what motivates that feeling, halts cruel behavior and urges kids to take a stand. Here are two powerful ways to nurture empathy:

- *Ask: How would you feel?* Ask kids to ponder how another person feels using situations in books, TV, and movies as well as real life. It forces them to think about other peoples' concerns.
- *Use role playing.* It helps kids imagine others' feelings so ask your child to think how the other person would feel if roles were reversed. "Switch sides: what would the other person say and do?" Young kids can use puppets or toy figures to act out the problem from both sides.

6. Reinforce Assertiveness Not Compliance. If you want to raise a child who can stand up for his beliefs, then reinforce assertiveness—not compliance. Encourage him to share his opinions and stand up for what is right. And do so from early age so he can weather the storm of negative peer influence. Parents who raise morally courageous kids expect their kids to act morally - even demand that they do.

7. Teach Assertive Skills. The truth is that it takes real moral strength to go against peer pressure and to stick up for your beliefs. So teach your child assertive skills so he can take the right kind of stand whenever he's confronted with a moral dilemma. Here are three ways to boost moral courage:

- *Teach assertive posture.* Teach your kid to stand up for his beliefs by using confident, assertive posture: stand tall with feet slightly apart, head held high, and look the person straight in the eye.
- *Say no firmly.* Stress that he must say his beliefs using a friendly, but determined voice. Then don't give in. His job is not to try changing the other person's mind, but to follow his beliefs.
- *Tell reasons why.* Tell him to give the person the reason for his stand. It helps strengthen his conviction: "Stop bullying him: it's cruel." Or: "No, it's illegal and wrong." Repeating the belief several times boosts assertiveness and helps your child not back down from his stand.

Keep in mind that your child's moral growth is an ongoing process that will span the course of her lifetime. The moral knowledge, beliefs, and habits you instill in her now will become the foundation she'll use forever. So savor this time with your child and use it wisely, for although she has the potential to achieve moral goodness, it is far from guaranteed. It must be nurtured, influenced, modeled, and taught. Doing so will be your greatest legacy for your child and the best hope that she can rise to the occasion and demonstrate moral courage whenever it may be needed.

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