Most parents want their children to be kind and caring. We want our children to respect and help people rather than be cruel. We want our children to have inner standards of goodness that can guide them through difficult choices.

People who show concern for others and who make good choices are often said to be moral. Fortunately there are ways to raise your children so that they are more likely to develop into moral adults.

Be an Example

Your actions send a powerful message to your children about what you think is important. Your willingness to help neighbors can teach your children how to be helpful. Your willingness to participate in church or community efforts to make the community a better place can teach your children how to be involved. Your willingness to apologize when you make mistakes can teach your children how to solve problems and work well with other people.

We have always wondered how to help homeless people. We contribute to charities but we always wondered if we should do more. Early one morning when we were walking along Canal Street on a visit to New Orleans, we spotted three unkempt older men huddled in a doorway for shelter from the rain. It seemed clear that they were poor and homeless. We weren’t sure how we could help them but we decided that we might take them to breakfast. My husband and I approached them and asked if we might take them to a restaurant a few doors away and buy them breakfast. They were very glad
for a warm meal and for car-
ing company. As we ate break-
fast, they told us about their
lives, both the pains and the
joys. We felt very blessed by
our visit with them. We did
not solve all their problems
that morning but we did a
small thing to make life a little
better for three people.

When parents actively seek
ways to help other people,
their children are likely to
learn a powerful lesson. You
may choose to share your mu-
sical talents with shut-ins. You
may visit and talk with people
who are lonely. You may offer
a ride to a neighbor who has
no car. You might volunteer to
help at school. We can all find
ways to use our talents and re-
sources to make life a little
better for others.

There is always a danger
that people may be so anxious
to help that they become un-
wise. It is not good to neglect
good sense in our efforts to
help others. And it is not wise
to try to help in ways that do
not fit our resources. But our
willingness to try to be helpful
with others can make a very
big difference for children
who are learning about how
people relate to other people.

Q: What are some ways
you can serve and help in
your community?

Discipline
Children To Help
Them Learn

The reason for disciplining
children is to help them be-
come strong and caring adults.
The best discipline respects
children and helps them to
learn.

Think for a moment what it
must look like to a child
to be spanked for hitting his
sister. It must be terribly
confusing to have someone hit
you to teach you not to hit.
Spanking children may teach
them to be mean.

Showing respect for chil-
dren’s preferences teaches
them about sensitivity and
consideration. Discipline that
sets limits but also helps chil-
dren find good ways to get
their needs met, can help them
become moral adults.

One motto that expresses
the challenge of parenting is,
"My job as a parent is to help
my children get what they
want in a way that I feel good
about." We want to respect
children’s preferences while
still setting limits.

Children are more likely to
learn about good behavior
when their parents are willing
to calmly discuss ideas and
rules with them. If parents
blame, criticize, and punish
their children a lot, the chil-
dren are likely to become dis-
couraged or angry. If parents
do not set limits for their chil-
dren, the children are likely to
become careless about rules.

Children learn best by gen-
tle parental teaching and by
parents’ wise use of limits and
consequences.

You may want to study
Extension publication HE-
0687, “Something Better Than
Punishment,” as you think
about good ways to raise moral
children.

My five-year-old wanted to
help me wash the dishes. She
likes to be involved. But when
she helped me with the dishes,
she would often break a cup
or a plate. So I asked her if she
would like to set up her own
dishwashing. She was very ex-
cited. We would set a bowl of
soapy water and a bowl of
clean water on the table and
she would wash, rinse, and
dry her plastic plates and
spoons. She really enjoyed
having her own work to do. Of
course she splashed water on
the table and floor, but it was
easy enough to wipe up the
spills when she finished. And I
was able to wash the family
dishes without breakage.

The common problems with
discipline seem to be of two
kinds: sometimes we are too
insensitive to children’s wish-
es and other times we are un-
willing to set limits. When we
do not listen carefully to chil-
dren’s wishes, we teach them
by our example to be insensi-
tive. When we are unwilling
to set limits, we teach them that
they do not need to respect
rules. The solution is to help
them have the experiences and
opportunities that they want
but to use our adult wisdom to
set limits.

For example, some families
have a rule that children will
be at home rather than hang-
ing out on the streets. Some
families set a standard that
their children will not date
until 16 years of age. Setting
standards is important.

But it is also important to be
sensitive to the children. For
example, a family may allow
friends to come to their home
to play rather than have their
children hang out on the
street. Teens can be allowed to
have friend parties in their
home rather than go on dates
before they are ready.

There are better ways to
teach children than through
spanking and punishment.
Hurting children may teach
them that the world is a cruel
place. Any discipline that is
insensitive to what children
need and want does not teach
them about sensitivity and
consideration. Discipline that
sets limits but helps children
find good ways to get their
needs met can help them be-
come moral adults.
**Principles and Feelings**

Talk with your children about the feelings and principles that guide your life. Children like to be taught rather than lectured. Good stories can be powerful teachers. Perhaps you had a fifth-grade teacher who was especially caring. Tell the children about her and what you appreciated. Perhaps there is a historic figure whom you have patterned your life after. Share with your children stories and lessons from that person's life.

In our family we all want to learn from each other. Every Sunday as we sit down for a leisurely family dinner, we invite every family member to share his or her best experience of the day. Some family members tell about sharing with a good friend. Some may tell about things they have learned. Some tell about feelings of peace or love or joy. We like to encourage every family member to notice what they are feeling and to share it with family members.

Songs also teach powerful lessons. We can use the time riding in the car (especially with young children) or playing together to sing fun songs about things that we believe in.

Some families establish a tradition of meeting one evening every week to learn and to share. Family members can take turns leading the weekly discussion or lesson. Even young children can be taught to share stories about their heroes. It is also useful if parents teach their children to understand other people, their differences and their qualities.

There are some influences that can deaden people's sen-
sivities. Violent, abusive, or cruel movies or games can damage human sensitivity. Wise parents will limit children’s exposure to experiences that are harsh. But they will also teach children about positive, sensitive, and tender experiences. They will listen to children and encourage them to be aware of their feelings. (See “Being Understanding: A Key to Developing Healthy Children,” Extension publication HE-0682.) Sometimes the best parental teaching is done by listening. Teaching children to be in tune with their feelings can help them make compassionate decisions and become moral adults.

Sometimes children learn to be afraid of the bad without learning to love the good. Try to understand their feelings of fear and anxiety. Parents also need to help their children to be optimistic, happy, and hopeful. Notice how much each of your children feels positive and hopeful. Help them to notice the things they are excited about. Help them to deal with the things they worry about. You may want to watch the movie Polyanna with them and talk with them about playing the glad game.

Q: What are some ways you will talk with your children about the feelings and principles that guide your life?

Help Children Experience Loving, Caring Relationships

The most important factor in helping children become moral adults may be the experience of loving, caring, helping relationships. Every child needs someone who is crazy about him or her. It might be a parent or some other relative. It might be a teacher. But every person needs to be loved.

I always loved visiting my grandmother’s house. She seemed to love having me around. She listened to me talk about my experiences. And she cooked special treats for me. Grandma is one reason I am a happy adult today.

The best pattern is for a child to have many people in his or her life who enjoy, appreciate, encourage, and celebrate that child. Of course different children have different preferences for how they want to be loved. (See “Sending Messages of Love,” Extension publication HE-0683.) But all children need to feel valued. A wise parent not only finds ways to show love to each child but helps each child have experiences with other adults who are supportive and caring.

Q: Does each of your children have regular experiences with people who care about them?

Imagine that some day when your children are grown you will study their lives and you will see people who are caring and considerate, and who make wise and sensitive decisions. You will know that your efforts to encourage moral development have paid off.

Some children’s books to help you teach compassion are:


For further reading about moral development, you might be interested in Raising Good Children by Thomas Lickona, published by Bantam, 1994.