



Second Sunday of Lent C March 17, 2019

- ◆ TEACHING CHILDREN RESPECT
- ◆ DEVELOPING A CHILD'S CONSCIENCE

A Little Respect

In U.S. Catholic magazine's July 2015 issue, Annemarie Scobey writes:

Teaching children to be respectful can be a handful for some parents. "My dad didn't tolerate any back talk," remembers Bob. "He'd smack us across the mouth if we answered him in a way he didn't like. My dad thought we respected him, but really we were just afraid of him. I know I don't want to hit my kids, but I'm not sure what to do when they act disrespectfully."

At the heart of true respect is not fear, but gratitude and appreciation. Parents can teach their children to be thankful for what others do for them. From thankfulness and appreciation flows respect.

Coaching respect. Kids, with their limited ability to look beyond themselves, do not feel particularly grateful to parents or teachers when being corrected. Yet this can be exactly when respect is most important. When a child is angry, respect for a parent or teacher can prevent the child from using words or body language of defiance. The behavior of respect needs to be taught as consciously as shoe-tying and teeth-brushing.

Techniques to teach respect. Maria, mother of two older teens, says that she established a rule early on of having her children look her in the eye when they were having a difficult discussion. "This served the purpose of reminding each other that we are not fighting, but working through difficult issues," she says. "It keeps our humanity, our care for each other, and our desire for resolution at the forefront."

Carol, mother of four, learned from parents she knew who had respectful kids. "My friend would stop her child immediately after the disrespectful action and would have her child 'try it again,' first modeling how to respond respectfully and then having her child do the same. I copied this approach."

Sandy says that when her daughter was 3, she became very sassy. "I knew we could be setting ourselves up for conflict throughout her childhood," Sandy says. "I explained when I asked her to do

something, it was because I loved her very much, and the way she could love me back was to answer, 'OK, Mom.' I was amazed at how well this worked. She just needed a different script."

Few warnings, more action. Parents of older kids who are respectful have one element in common—consistency. "Ignoring children's disrespect is a common mistake I witness," Maria says. "I firmly believe that disrespect must be addressed every time. It's as important as stopping the infant lunging at the outlet with a metal fork. The more we teach them that disrespect, in whatever form, is not tolerated, the more they will learn."

Maureen, mother of five, agrees, noting the disrespect kids see in entertainment can prompt them to disrespect their own families. A logical consequence is loss of screen time because it helps foster the family relationship and remove the isolation.

"My children lose their screen time or have to clean toilets if they are disrespectful to my husband or me," Maureen says. "If they are disrespectful to other adults, first is they have to cool off, and then they earn double consequences."

Above all, seasoned parents keep a sense of humor. "Sometimes when I'm going to a meeting after dinner, I tell one of the kids, 'OK, I'm leaving, so you can be me,'" says Elizabeth. "The chosen kid will start doing this exaggerated routine about me telling the other kids to clean up the kitchen. Everyone laughs, including me. And you know what? The kitchen is usually clean when I get back."

Developing a child's conscience

The following article on another important topic on a child's moral development is also by Annemarie Scobey. She writes:

A few months after Hurricane Katrina, Andrea and Greg told their son, Jeremiah, then 10, that the family was thinking of buying a vacation cabin a few hours from the family's home. "Jeremiah had one question," Andrea remembers. "He asked if all the survivors of Katrina now had homes. When I told him they did not, he said he thought our family should give the money we would have spent on our cabin to a family from New Orleans who didn't have a home." Andrea and Greg, moved by their son's concern, canceled their trip to the

cabin and made a significant donation to the Katrina relief effort.

Children's development of a conscience differs by the individual. Just as some children may hit puberty at 10 and others not until 15, so it is with moral development. Some children seem to have a fully developed conscience by middle school, while others struggle with basic honesty late into high school. And some children, like Jeremiah, have precocious moral development—wisdom and compassion for others that belie their years.

Stages of moral development

Psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg's famous Six Stages of Moral Development can be a helpful guide for parents who may worry that their child has no sense of right or wrong. Kohlberg asserts our morality continues to develop throughout our lives, with most children operating in the first three stages until adolescence—initially being good simply to avoid punishment, then moving on to behaving well for rewards, and finally making good decisions because they want to be known as a good boy or girl. Teens and adults usually operate in the fourth stage: working within conventions of what society has deemed ethically right and wrong. Many teens and adults steadily move to the fifth and sixth stages, which center around human rights and justice; for Christians, these levels also have a strong connection with gospel values.

Parents who want to help their child develop a moral compass can first identify the stage in which their child usually operates and then gently ask questions or make observations to help them move to the next stage.

Talk about behavior and connect it to feelings

"My 10-year-old is pretty self-absorbed," Carrie, mother of three, says. "His conscience doesn't seem to be very loud, or he is just choosing to ignore it." Carrie says it bothers her when she sees her son intentionally leaving others out. "I end up wondering what kind of child I'm raising." But when she talks to her son about his actions, he shows embarrassment for not acting differently. In moral development, remorse is a good sign because it paves the way for growth. Carrie is correct to call her son on shaky moral behavior. The mistake some parents make is in dismissing incidents of dishonesty or unkindness, choosing to hope the behaviors will disappear on their own. Instead of denial, parents need to have the strength to discuss (without lecturing) the incident and its consequences in terms of how it made others feel.

Jesus' example in the gospel about the men ready to stone the adulterous woman is an apt guide for parents. Jesus didn't tell the men not to throw the stones. He

made an observation: "Let you who is without sin throw the first stone," and allowed the men to listen to the voices inside themselves.

Acknowledge it's not easy

If you're a parent operating in stage five or six of Kohlberg's scale, you're concerned for the poor, making good choices for the environment, behaving ethically when no one is watching—and it can be devastating to have a child who struggles with making sound moral choices. "I just learned my high school daughter has a reputation of cheating on tests," says a father who asked not to be named. "I was stunned. I had seen some dishonest behavior at home, but I did not know it went that far. Now we need to figure out what to do."

Moral development, like intellectual development, is a process. While you can definitely give children excellent examples through your behavior, as well as good discussions and nudges in the right direction, ultimately they will need to learn to listen to their own conscience—that voice inside themselves. Jamie Lynn, mother of two, says that when her daughter makes a poor choice, she helps her identify "side-by-side" feelings. "Even though she may have gotten a 'high' from her poor choice, I help her to see that part of her still did not feel at ease. I plant this seed of awareness and then ask if she noticed her quiet inner voice that did not feel okay. We then identify that voice as God, love, the heart, or the true self."

Celebrate the growth

Amy's daughter, Colleen, 14, was in class with her cousin. She attended a party where her friends gossiped about him and she didn't say anything in his defense. "When I picked her up, she started crying and said how hard it was and how bad she felt that she didn't do anything," Amy says. "So we had a long conversation. She felt so guilty." With Amy's guidance and some practicing at home, Colleen was able to confront her friends the next time it happened. "Some of the girls apologized. They stopped talking about her cousin—at least in front of Colleen."

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Have a blessed

