

DO PARENTS MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN CHILDREN'S CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT?

WHAT THE RESEARCH SHOWS

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In its August 24, 1998 issue, *Newsweek* magazine devoted its cover story to a controversial new book, *The Nurture Assumption: Why Children Turn Out the Way They Do* by Judith Rich Harris. Ms. Harris does not claim to be a psychologist or expert in child development; she is a textbook writer. Nevertheless, she puts forth a startling thesis: Parents do not have much effect on how kids turn out. How kids turn out, Harris says, is mostly the result of genes and peers.

Of course, we all know that heredity and peers play a part in kids' development. But is it true, as Harris says, that parents have little influence? If it's true that parents have little influence on their children, that's very bad news for schools, for schools would logically have even less influence.

I'd like to argue that Harris is wrong and common sense is right: Parents do matter. Studies of childrearing reveal many things effective parents do that make a major impact on their children and especially on their character development.

We should know this body of evidence for at least two reasons. First, so we can counter Harris's claim and communicate to parents what the research really shows, thereby bolstering their confidence that they do make a difference. A second reason is that good schools are like good families. That was the main conclusion of Michael Rutter's celebrated study, *Fifteen Thousand Hours* (Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, Ouston, & Smith, 1979). If something works in the home to foster character development, it should also work in the classroom. So if we wish to develop effective character education practices in our schools, we should look carefully at what effective parents do. What follows are eight parenting practices that make a positive difference in children's character development.

1. Effective parents love their children and provide them with a stable and secure environment.

At any stage of development, morality builds on love. More than a dozen studies, cited in two recent comprehensive reviews (Berkowitz & Grych, 1998; Solomon, Watson, & Battistich, in press), find that a warm, caring, and responsive parent-child relationship is positively associated with children's moral development. Similarly, the absence of parental love predicts troubled development for children. Magid and McKelvey, in their book *High Risk: Children*

Without a Conscience (1987), conclude that the single greatest cause of anti-social and violent juvenile behavior is a child's lack of a secure attachment in infancy and the resulting failure to develop a conscience.

Why is a parent's love crucial for character? Love builds a bond between a parent and child. We are most influenced by those persons we are emotionally connected to. Values are best transmitted, in the home as in the classroom, through a warm and caring relationship.

To take one example: Holstein (1972) compared two groups of fathers: a group she called "successful fathers," who themselves possessed high-stage moral reasoning and had 13-year-old children who, for their age, were relatively mature in their moral reasoning; and a second group she called "unsuccessful fathers," who also possessed high-stage moral reasoning but had 13-year-old children who were relatively immature in their moral reasoning. Holstein asked both groups of 13-year-olds to rate their fathers on dimensions such as how often they showed affection to them or spent time with them. *Successful fathers were seen by their children as much warmer and more involved with them.*

A parent's love is also vital for building a child's healthy self-esteem. Coopersmith (1967) found that high self-esteem children have an easier time making friends and are also better able to stand by their own judgments. What kind of parents do high self-esteem kids have? Coopersmith found they are likely to set clear behavioral limits and show their kids lots of affection and appreciation. By contrast, the parents of low self-esteem children tend to be highly critical of their children and to treat them as a burden.

Love also helps to protect children against self-destructive activity. Recent evidence of this comes from the 1997 National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Resnick et al., 1997). This landmark study interviewed more than 12,000 7th-to 12th-grade students from 80 high schools across the country and their feeder middle schools.

These researchers looked at eight high-risk adolescent activities, ranging from sexual activity to drug and alcohol use to violence and suicide. They found that two factors were clearly protective against teens becoming involved in these high-risk behaviors. The first was family connectedness, a feeling of closeness to parents, a feeling of being loved. The second was school connectedness, a feeling of closeness to people at school. A good school feels like a family.

Finally, love, if it wishes to meet the most basic needs of children, provides them with a secure and stable environment to grow up in. Children need an ordered world. Peck and Havighurst (1960) found that unstable living conditions—for example, lack of regularity in the home, inconsistent parental behavior, frequent changes in child care arrangements, and unpredictable parent work schedules—were associated with low "maturity of character" in children. Pitkanen-Pulkkinen (1980) found these factors to be associated with children's anxiety and aggressiveness. Similarly, Hinshaw and Anderson (1996) found marital conflict and inconsistent discipline to be related to aggressive and antisocial behavior in children.

One especially troubling consequence of our high divorce rate (the highest in the developed world) and out-of-wedlock births (which have risen to 1 of every 3 children) is that the United States is becoming what social historian David Blankenhorn calls "a fatherless society." In his book, *Fatherless America* (1995), Blankenhorn observes:

A generation ago, an American child could reasonably expect to grow up with his or her father. Today, an American child can reasonably expect not to. Tonight, about 40% of American children will go to sleep in homes in which their fathers do not live. Before they reach the age of 18, more than half of our nation's children are likely to spend at least a significant portion of their childhoods living apart from their fathers. Never before in this country have so many children been voluntarily abandoned by their fathers.

"Fatherlessness," Blankenhorn reports, "is the leading cause of declining child well-being in our society....from crime to adolescent pregnancy to child sexual abuse to domestic violence against women. [Sexual abuse, for example, is higher among step-fathers than among biological fathers and dramatically higher among live-in boyfriends.] Yet despite the social consequences of fatherlessness, it is a problem that is often ignored."

We know from the research on resiliency (Benard, 1993) that some kids are able to rise above all manner of adversity. Resilient kids manage to survive and even thrive despite father absence and other kinds of family disruption and dysfunction. More commonly, however, children and society pay a price. New York University psychologist Paul Vitz (1997a; see Brubeck & Beer, 1992 and Forehand *et al.*, 1989 for similar analyses) lists the following consequences of widespread family breakdown:

- *large increases in psychiatric problems, such as depression, among adults as well as children*
- *large increases in physical health problems of many kinds*
- *much higher risks of serious child abuse*
- *large rises in educational problems such as learning difficulties and drop-out rates*
- *a much higher likelihood of using drugs*
- *a very large proportion of serious criminal behavior.*

All of this should be a sobering wake-up call. A stable, loving family is the most fundamental developmental asset we can provide for our children.

2. Effective parents foster mutual respect.

One of the most important moral lessons a parent can teach is that morality is mutual: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

By their responsiveness to children's needs, parents sow the seeds of this reciprocal morality. Kochanska (1997) found that a child's conscience development is positively related to a sustained pattern of mother-child reciprocity. Another study (Stayton, Hogan, & Ainsworth, 1971) compared 1-year-old babies who generally cooperated with their mothers' verbal commands (e.g., "Come here," "Give it to me") with babies who were much less cooperative. Cooperative babies tended to have mothers who were high in their sensitivity to their babies'

needs—for food, attention, comfort, time for rest or play, and so on. In other words, mother and baby were mutually responsive to each other's signals. In this early form of reciprocity, we can see a forerunner of mutual respect.

Mutual respect is never so important as it is in adolescence, when the stresses of accelerating development and rising peer pressure put new strains on parent-child relations. Pikas (1961), in his study of 656 Swedish adolescents, found that teens tended to accept parental authority when they believed it was based on rational concern for their welfare. However, adolescents tended to reject parental authority when they believed it stemmed from their parents' desire to dominate or exploit them.

At any stage of a child's development, conflicts provide important opportunities for teaching lessons in mutual respect. In my work with parents, I encourage them to use a "fairness approach" to solving family conflicts. A fairness approach has three parts: (1) *trying to achieve mutual understanding*; (2) *arriving at a mutually agreeable solution to the problem*; and (3) *holding a follow-up meeting to evaluate how the solution is working*.

For example, a single-parent mother of Philip, 7, and Ben, 5, used the fairness approach with her boys to address the chief source of upset in their home: the boys cutting up when she was on the phone. The mother began: "In a fairness meeting the three of us will work together to solve the problem. Now, the problem is it upsets me when you guys get wild when I'm on the phone and I can't carry on a conversation. What are your feelings about this?"

At first, Philip and Ben were focused on whether they were going to get in trouble with their father ("Are you going to tell Dad about this?"). But the mother persisted: "We need to come to an agreement that is fair to everybody, and I want to understand your feelings about this." Finally, there was a breakthrough:

Philip: *Mom, I hate it when you get on the phone and talk forever. It really makes me mad.*

Ben: *Yeah, the other night you talked on the phone when you said you would play a game with us, and then there wasn't time.*

Mom: *You feel I spend too much time on the phone?*

Ben: *You're not home that much, Mommy, and when you are, you should want to be with me.*

"The more we talked," the mother says, "the more I understood their feelings of rejection when I talk on the phone. I explained that I often do get carried away—but that with working and going to school and taking care of our home, I hardly have time to see my friends, and this is often my only way of keeping in touch with them."

After further discussion, this mother and her sons worked out the following Fairness Agreement, which they all signed and posted:

1. *If Mom has promised to do something with us, she will tell the person she is busy and will call back later.*
2. *We will make a list of things to do while Mom is on the phone.*

3. *Mom will make her calls shorter.*
4. *If Mom has to be on the phone for a longer time, she will tell us, and we will behave.*

Two days later, Mom and the boys held a follow-up meeting, the final step in the fairness process. The mother reports: "We agreed we had stuck to our plan. The kids played together or did things independently when I was on the phone, and I made calls shorter. We agreed there has been less arguing and hassling about this problem."

The fairness approach promotes children's moral development in three ways: (1) It respects them by listening to their feelings; (2) It requires them to take the perspective of others; and (3) It makes them co-creators of the family who share responsibility for solving family problems. A study by Stanley (1980) found when parents took a fairness approach to conflicts with their teenagers, the teenagers became more other-oriented.

3. Effective parents teach by example.

When I interview parents, I typically ask them, "How did your own parents influence your moral development?" The most common answer I get is: "They set a good example." A stack of studies points to the power of models to influence children's social-moral learning (see, for example, Berkowitz & Grych, 1998; Solomon, Watson, & Battistich, in press; and Staub, 1978 & 1979).

Teaching by example includes how we treat our children but it goes beyond that. It has to do with how we treat each other as spouses—something which children have countless opportunities to observe. When we fight, do we fight fair? Do we reconcile quickly? Our example also has to do with how we treat and talk about others outside the family—relatives, friends, and strangers. In short, it has to do with how we lead our lives.

When I was at Boston University, one of my graduate students, 25 at the time, remembered her mother's example:

When I was seven, my family moved to an all-white neighborhood in Philadelphia. A few months later, an Asian family tried to move in, and the neighbors circulated a petition to try to keep them from doing so. My mother was the only person to refuse to sign the petition. And when the family finally did gain access to housing, my mother baked them a cake and actively welcomed them to our community.

Eighteen years later, her mother's moral courage and commitment to justice were still indelibly etched in her memory.

If we respect the power of example, we will also try to reduce the bad examples that children are exposed to. Television is for countless children a pervasive source of shoddy moral values: put-downs, violence, casual sex, and materialism. A friend who is a kindergarten teacher testifies to the fact that children absorb these values at any early age. Her 5-year-old pupils, she says, act out soap operas in the housekeeping corner: "You're pregnant by him," "You run away with her," and "You get shot." This teacher's anecdote is supported by the consensus of social science. In 1985, the American Psychological Association (1985) issued a

major research review concluding that television violence has a *causal effect* on aggressive behavior in children and adolescents.

Parents who want to be their children's primary moral teachers should therefore exercise close control over what their kids watch, keep the TV off during the dinner hour, and limit viewing to no more than one program a day. We can motivate parents to exercise this kind of vigilance by sharing with them what the research shows about television's effects on children. (See Appendix for a "*Letter to Parents*" on this subject). The same vigilance, of course, should be exercised regarding what our kids are viewing in video games, on the Internet, and at the neighborhood movie theater. (One survey found that American teens, on the average, see 50 R-rated movies a year.)

4. Effective parents teach directly, by exhortation and explanation.

We need to practice what we preach—by setting a good example—but we also need to preach what we practice. This goes against the advice of some modern parenting books that say you shouldn't lecture kids, they turn you off and tune you out. But the research is clear on this point: Direct teaching is very important.

Direct teaching often involves explaining why some things are right and others wrong. Why is it wrong to call people names? Because name-calling hurts; the hurt is inside where you can't see it, but it's real. Why is it wrong to lie? Because lying destroys trust, and trust is the basis of any relationship. Why is it wrong to cheat? Because cheating is a lie—it deceives another person—and it's unfair to all the people who aren't cheating. Why is it wrong to steal? Because there's a person behind the property, and stealing violates the rights of that person.

Studies show that effective parents do a lot of direct teaching. Baumrind (1975), in a review of the literature, concluded that families that communicated a strong belief system were better able to keep their children from destructive drug use. Adolescents whose parents discuss their children's misdeeds with them and convey *clear moral standards* are better able to resist temptation than teens whose parents do not communicate in this way (Smart & Smart, 1976).

Some of the most important direct teaching we do as parents happens at "teachable moments," when our children have done something wrong and moral correction is required. Here is where modern parents are often lax; they don't clearly and consistently correct their children's misbehavior. Doing so takes vigilance and stamina. But it's worth the effort: The research shows that how seriously a parent takes a child's moral offenses appears to be a major determinant of how seriously a child learns to take morality.

For example, researchers Dobert and Nunner-Winkler (1985) measured the moral reasoning of teens and classified them into two groups: one relatively mature and the other immature. Then they asked both groups how their parents would respond to various situations: Your parents catch you and your friends breaking into a vending machine; your parents hear that you have been bullying a neighborhood child; your parents learn that you cheated on a test at school, etc.

Those teens who were more mature in their moral reasoning, compared to those who were less mature, described their parents as much more likely to express disappointment, show indignation, point out the unfairness of their act, appeal to their teen's sense of responsibility,

and demand apologies and reparation. In short, the parents' reaction would combine moral explanation and emotional concern. The message to the teen: *It's very important to do the right thing, and when you do something wrong, you have to set it right.*

Strikingly similar findings come from a study of the antecedents of conscience in very young children. One research team (Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, & King, 1979) found that the 2-year-olds most likely to show active concern about others' distress, and to make reparation for their own offenses, had mothers who reacted strongly to their own child's transgressions. The mother's reaction included both moral clarity—pointing out the hurtful consequences—and moral feeling. For example, one mother, whose 2-year-old daughter pulled another child's hair, responded: "You *hurt* Amy—pulling hair hurts! Don't ever pull hair!"

By contrast, mothers who were moral wimps—who corrected their 2-year-olds' transgressions but did so with flat emotion—were significantly less likely to have children who showed concern about another's distress. These children had learned that it was no big deal to mom when they hurt another kid.

The lesson? Moral passion is an important teacher—and part of the direct moral instruction that effective parents provide.

5. Effective parents use questioning to promote moral thinking.

It's important to teach directly, but it's also important to use questioning that gets kids to stop and think—and in that way develop their own powers of moral reasoning.

Effective parents ask questions that help children develop their ability to take another person's perspective, think about the consequences of their behavior, and apply a rule to the situation at hand. Questions such as: "Why am I upset with you?" "How can you be helpful in this situation?" "How will your brother feel if you keep treating him that way?" "What was the agreement we made?"

Questions like these help young people eventually ask questions of themselves, such as "Is this right?" and "What will be the consequences if I do this?" One father recalls:

Whenever I did something wrong, my parents didn't just demand that I stop my behavior. Instead, they almost always asked, "How would you feel if someone did that to you?" That gave me a chance to reflect on whatever I had done and how I'd like to have it done to me.

I feel this has helped me throughout my life. Now I always try to stop and ask myself that question before I do something rather than after the fact.

Questioning is part of a discipline pattern that researchers have called "induction." Studies (see Berkowitz & Grych, 1998; Solomon *et al.*, in press) have consistently found induction to be associated with moral maturity in children.

6. **Effective parents give children real responsibilities.**

In 1975, Harvard anthropologists John and Beatrice Whiting published the results of their study of six cultures. These cultures differed in a number of characteristics, such as social organization and level of technological development. The Whitings found that in some cultures children were more altruistic (made more responsible suggestions, were more helpful to peers), while in other cultures children tended to be egoistic (they sought help and attention for themselves).

The factor most strongly related to differences in children's altruism was the degree to which children were assigned responsibilities that contributed to the maintenance of the family. The more children had to tend animals, take care of younger children, do chores, and so on, the more altruistic was their behavior in other situations. The most egoistic children in the study were those in the United States sample. Their only obligations in the home typically consisted of keeping order in their own rooms, a duty not tangibly related to the welfare of others.

The Whitings' research is supported by a recent study of family chores (Grusec, Goodnow, & Cohen, 1996). The moral of these studies is clear: Children become responsible by having responsibility. We learn to care by performing caring actions. The psychologist James Stenson captures this well: "Children develop character by what they see, what they hear, and *what they are repeatedly led to do.*" Parenting for character must therefore provide regular opportunities for children to develop the habit of helping. This was easier, of course, when we grew up on the farm. We have to make a special effort now to see to it that children contribute to the life of the family and don't just go along for the ride.

7. **Effective parents are authoritative.**

In the 1960s, American society, like most of the Western world, became deeply ambivalent about authority. Adults—teachers as well as children—began to doubt their right and duty to teach a set of values to the young.

Diana Baumrind (1975), a psychology professor at the University of California at Berkeley, did some of first research in this area. She showed that adult authority, properly exercised, is vital to children's healthy development. Baumrind differentiated among three styles of parenting: "authoritative," "authoritarian," and "permissive." She said:

Authoritative control includes the following attitudes and practices: The child is directed firmly, consistently, and rationally; the parent both explains reasons behind demands and encourages give and take; the parent uses power when necessary; the parent values both obedience to adult requirements and independence in the child; the parent sets standards and enforces them firmly but does not regard self as infallible; the parent listens to the child but does not base decisions solely on child's desires (p. 130).

Baumrind (see also Maccoby, 1980) studied preschoolers and followed them until they were nine. Her central finding: The most self-confident, socially responsible children had authoritative parents. (See chart on next page.)

Does authoritative parenting work in adolescence? That question is addressed in a recent book with the provocative title *Beyond the Classroom: Why School Reform Has Failed and What Parents Need to Do* (1996). It is authored by Laurence Steinberg, a Temple

University psychology professor; Bradford Brown, a University of Wisconsin educational psychologist; and Sanford Dornbusch, former Professor of Sociology and Education at Stanford University.

The book opens with a stark truth: *American student achievement in many respects is significantly lower than it was 25 years ago.* This achievement decline is pervasive across ethnic, socioeconomic, and age groups. The drop includes sizable declines in higher-level skills such as inferential thinking and problem-solving.

To try to understand this decline, the authors undertook what they say is the most extensive study ever conducted of the forces that affect adolescents' interest in and performance in school. Their 10-year project looked at more than 20,000 teens and their families in nine very different communities in America. Moreover, it differed from previous studies of schooling in that it also examined what was going on in students' families, peer groups, and communities.

Here are some of the major findings of this study:

1. There has been a dramatic increase over the past 25 years in the percentage of what Steinberg and colleagues call "disengaged students." Two decades ago, a teacher in an average high school could expect to have three or four students in a class who were hard to interest and motivate. Today, teachers in these same schools can expect to deal with classes in which nearly half the students have psychologically "checked out."
2. American students' time out of school is usually spent on activities that compete with their studies. The average American high school student spends only four hours a week on homework. In other industrialized countries, the average is about four hours *a day*. Two-thirds of American high school students have a job.
3. Schools are fighting a losing battle against a peer culture that disparages academic success. Only 1 in 5 students thinks their friends consider it important to do well in school.
4. Increasing numbers of American parents are becoming as disengaged from schooling as their children are. Nearly a third of students say their parents have no idea of how they are doing in school. More than 40% of parents *never* attend school programs.

That's the bad news. There's good news, however, and some of that is contained in the chapter on "The Power of Authoritative Parenting."

To illustrate how authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive parenting would play out in the teens, the authors offer this scenario: Your teenager comes home after the agreed-upon curfew. An *authoritarian* parent would impose a punishment without much discussion; the emphasis would be on following the rule. A *permissive* parent, whose focus is on keeping the kid happy, would avoid making a big deal out of the situation. An *authoritative* parent would find out why the teen was late, discuss the legitimacy of the reason, and help the teen see why a responsible person, regardless of the reason, would have called home before coming back late. The emphasis of the authoritative parent would be on the teenager's development of responsibility.

To investigate the effects of these three parenting styles in the high school years, the researchers looked at 4 outcomes:

- how the teens were developing psychologically, especially in areas such as self-esteem, self-reliance, and social competence.
- how well they were doing at staying out of trouble—away from drugs, alcohol, delinquency, and school misconduct.
- whether they showed any signs of emotional distress, such as anxiety or depression.
- how engaged and successful they were in school.

Teens from *authoritative* families excelled in all four categories. They were more confident and persistent. They were less likely to cut classes or abuse drugs or alcohol. They had less anxiety and depression. And they did the best in school, as measured by grades, attitudes toward their schoolwork, and time invested in their studies.

Teens from *authoritarian* homes also were less likely than other youngsters to use drugs or alcohol or get into trouble, but they had lower self-esteem and were less self-reliant and persistent. Their grades were nearly as good as those of authoritatively raised teens, but they had markedly lower views of their own abilities. In short, the products of authoritarian parents were high on conformity but somewhat low in confidence.

Teens from *permissive* homes were as socially poised as students from authoritative homes but were more oriented to their peers and less to the expectations of adults. They showed the lowest grades and the highest levels of school misbehavior and drug and alcohol use.

For about 75% of the families in the study, one of these three main parenting styles captured the overall atmosphere of the home environment. But what of the remaining 25%? They didn't fit any of these categories. These families were remarkably uninvolved in their children's lives. They didn't provide discipline, and they didn't provide structure or support. The researchers called these the "disengaged parents."

The differences among the teens from authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive homes were significant, but they were much smaller than the differences between those three groups combined and the teens from disengaged homes. Teens from disengaged homes had the lowest self-esteem and social competence. They had the highest drug use and delinquency. They were the least interested and successful at school. Their problems got steadily worse over the course of high school. Parental disengagement, the researchers concluded, is a very strong predictor of many of the adolescent problems that have reached alarming proportions in our society: alcohol and drug abuse, juvenile delinquency and violence, low school achievement, sexual precocity, and suicide.

So, here is a major study showing that parents make a big difference. But that isn't the whole story. Steinberg and colleagues report a puzzle: Black parents in their study were, on the average, more involved in their children's schooling than Asian parents (at least in terms of overt participation in school activities) and also more likely than Asian parents to be authoritative in parenting style. And yet Black teens considered as a group perform worse at school than Asian students do. In fact, even those Asian students from *disengaged homes*, on

the average, do better in school than Black students from *authoritative homes*. There were, of course, many individual exceptions to this generalization, but that was the pattern.

What's going on here? What is keeping authoritative parenting by Black parents from having the normal positive effects it has in other groups? And what is protecting Asian teens from the normally negative effects of disengaged parenting?

The researchers' answer: the peer group. Peer pressure among Asian students to do well in school is so strong, they observed, that it appears to override any deficiencies in the home environment. Asian youth believe that academic success is one of the few routes to social success open to them in American culture.

By contrast, Black students who do well in school are frequently criticized by their peers for "acting White," for selling out their cultural identity. The researchers observed that this is also true, though to a lesser degree, for the Latino peer group.

Based on these results, Steinberg and colleagues concluded: At least by high school, the influence of friends on school performance and on drug use has become more substantial than the influence of parenting style. So for those two outcomes—grades and drugs—Judith Harris is right about the power of peers, at least in the teens and at least for these subcultures.

Steinberg says he found this result so fascinating that he asked a very bright African-American female undergraduate in one of his Temple University seminars to help him understand this phenomenon. She had been raised in poverty in inner-city Washington, DC. She said she was the only one of her school friends to have made it out of the ghetto.

Whenever she went home during school vacations, she said, she was taunted for thinking too highly of herself and teased for not yet having given birth to a child. She said her friends put enormous pressure on her over the years to drop out of college and return to her roots. They said the reason she went off to college and avoided pregnancy was that she was not physically attractive enough to interest a man.

In cases like this, good parenting isn't enough; we have to try to mobilize the peer culture on the side of virtue. How to do that is illustrated by one of the country's most successful public school abstinence programs, Best Friends. Best Friends was developed by Elayne Bennett for fifth- to ninth-grade girls and first piloted in inner-city schools in Washington, D. C. (Best Friends says it hopes to develop a similar program for boys.)

Girls in Best Friends pledge to stay away from sex, drugs, and drinking through their school years. Every girl gets an adult mentor; they spend at least an hour a week together. All the girls take a class that teaches them how to avoid drugs, how to say no to their boyfriends, how to deal with "pressure lines" (e.g., "You're awfully uptight—sex is a great relaxer"), how to practice modesty, how to distinguish a good friend from a destructive one, and how to set and work toward goals. They plan and do many activities together as a group, including dance and fitness classes and community service. They develop bonds and an identity. In short, they learn and experience the benefits of abstinence and enjoy a strong peer culture that supports that decision.

A 1995 evaluation by doctoral student David Rowberry of the University of Colorado found that only 4% of Best Friends girls had had sex by age 15, compared with 63% of girls in the District of Columbia generally (Abstinence Education Resource Directory, 1997). A 1996

survey of 1,141 Best Friends girls in 33 schools in 12 cities found that 96% were drug-free and sexually abstinent throughout their school years. This research tells us that it is possible, with the right intervention, to create a peer culture that supports the values and ideals that nurture a young person's healthy development.

8. Effective parents foster a child's spiritual development.

The last dimension of the parent's role is teaching morality as part of a larger world view—a spiritual heritage that offers a vision of the purpose of human existence, ultimate reasons for leading a moral life, and traditions and rituals that weave this vision into the fabric of family living.

There are different ways to define “spirituality.” Some people consider themselves spiritual but not religious in the traditional sense. The research in this area, however, has to my knowledge studied religion as ordinarily understood. What does it show?

Ninety-five percent of American teens ages 13 to 17 say they believe in God (or a universal spirit); 93% believe that God loves them; 93% report being affiliated with a religious group of denomination; 80% say that religion is at least fairly important to them; and 40% say that they seriously try to follow the teachings of their religion. With regard to their religious practices, 42% of American teens say they frequently pray alone; 48% say they attended church or synagogue within the last seven days; and 23% report being involved in church-sponsored activities to help the less fortunate (Gallup & Bezilla, 1992).

In their review of the research “Religion and Health-Compromising Behavior,” Wallace and Williams (1997) conclude: “There is a moderate yet significant inverse relationship between religiosity (attitudes, beliefs, affiliations, and behaviors) and drug use. Young people who frequently attend religious services, who report that religion is important to them, and who belong to religious denominations that explicitly prohibit drug use on average are less likely to be involved with drugs than are their less religiously engaged counterparts.” The research suggests that one of the important ways religion deters adolescents' drug use is by influencing them to choose friends who do not use drugs.

Wallace and Williams also summarize the relationship between adolescent religiosity and sexual activity: “Attendance at religious services, self-rated importance of religion, and denominational affiliation have all been found to relate significantly to lower levels of sexual involvement. On average, highly religious adolescents initiate sex later, have fewer sexual partners, and have sex less often than their nonreligious peers. Accordingly, they are less at risk of experiencing the negative physical and social health problems associated with early sexual involvement.”

What do religious parents do to try to foster faith in their children? I interviewed a mother, a Catholic, who has three children in the public schools. I asked her, “What values or heritage do you hope to pass on to your children that you don't expect them to get from school?” She answered: “Faith in God. The value of an interior life. Prayer. A religious view of the universe.” I asked her, “How does your faith in God translate into what you teach your children about morality?” She said:

If you see God as the center of things, it affects everything. It affects why you behave in certain ways and not others. There is a standard of behavior. It comes partly

from people who have tried to discern the mind of God over the ages. We also have our own hearts to listen to. There is someone who has created us to behave in a certain way, so much so that if we don't behave in that way, we are unhappy, we create problems for ourselves. We are called to goodness, to live our lives according to a very high standard.

How is this vision made concrete in the life of the family? God is a part of normal family conversation, a reference point for discussion of moral issues ranging from why you should be kind to your brother and sister to why sex should be reserved for marriage. Grace before meals, prayer at bedtime, and worship together are important family traditions. The mother described in detail a family practice which is rooted in their religious beliefs. On the first night of each week, they have a "fasting dinner"—usually a piece of fruit for the children and a cup of broth for the parents. (Later on, a bedtime snack quiets growling stomachs.) The meal begins with a prayer, written by the oldest child:

Lord, we pray for all the hungry people in the world, that they may become well and fed, and that the pain they suffer will be lifted from their hearts—and that all people in the world will turn their hearts to generosity and compassion.

The money saved by not having a regular dinner is put in a jar and sent at the end of the month to Oxfam, an organization dedicated to relieving world hunger. Sometimes at the meal, the mother or father will read a letter from Oxfam reporting progress in relieving hunger in one part of the world or the outbreak of a new crisis somewhere else. Says the mother: "It helps us to be aware of how much suffering there is, and what we can do to help. We want the kids to know that God calls us to love our neighbor, wherever our neighbor is, and that we are all members of the same human family."

Such traditions ground morality in a meaning system, a view of life and our relations with each other, in which being a good person is a central moral imperative. What is more, these traditions integrate that view into the lived experience of the family. This dimension of family life, especially if parents continue to make explicit the values and beliefs that underlie their spiritual traditions, can make a profound contribution to the character development of a child.

Let me close by recommending to you a book by Michelle Borba: *Parents Do Make a Difference: How to Raise Kids with Solid Character, Strong Minds, and Caring Hearts* (Jossey-Bass, 1999). Borba pulls together research that relates to eight skills for successful living, including recognizing and cultivating one's strengths, communicating, goal-setting, problem-solving, caring, and perseverance. She argues that these skills to living successfully are learned, not inherited. They are all skills that can be taught.

We can, in short, make an enormous difference in our children's competence, character, and success in life because we can teach these skills to them—in our families and in our schools.

Thank you for your attention, and God bless you in your work.

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APPENDIX

Dear Parents,

We're writing to you about something that's on all of our minds these days: television. How does TV affect children? Here's what the research shows:

- **In a study at the University of North Carolina, preschoolers who watched a violent cartoon each day for 11 days showed a sharp increase in aggression (hitting, pushing, kicking, choking)—some even *tripling* their violent behavior.**
- **Some early childhood teachers have even reported that children who watch soap operas at home act them out in the housekeeping corner. They play “Guiding Light,” for example—saying things like, “You’re pregnant by him,” “You run away with her,” and “You get shot.”**
- **Children who watch a lot of cartoons are rated “low in enthusiasm” by their teachers.**
- **When our children watch a lot of TV, they may feel a stronger attachment to the tube than they do to us. In a study at Longwood College in Virginia, 44% of the 4-6-year olds interviewed said they liked TV more than they liked their fathers.**
- **Children who watch shows like Mr. Rogers are less aggressive and more cooperative than kids who watch a lot of action shows, cartoons, or game shows. But Mr. Rogers is no substitute for a parent’s involvement. A Yale study compared 3 groups: (1) *Children who watched Mr. Rogers everyday for 2 weeks with no adult*; (2) *Children who watched with an adult who talked with the child about the imaginative parts of the show*; and (3) *Children who did not watch Mr. Rogers but instead played for a half-hour each day with an adult*. The result? Children in the third group—no TV but played with an adult—showed the greatest gains in imagination and pretend play.**

In short, the research shows us what we’ve known for a long time: (1) Children tend to imitate what they see; and (2) They need to be *active* to learn and grow.

Would you help us help your children? We recommend:

1. ***Either a policy of “specials only” (where you turn on the TV only if there’s a special show on that’s worth watching) or a policy of no more than 1/2-hour of TV a day; that shows be ones you feel present positive values; and that whenever possible you watch together and talk about the show.***

- 2. That you encourage your children's active play—both by playing with them and by providing good materials;**
- 3. That you try to read to your child regularly (at bedtime, for example).**

THANKS FOR YOUR HELP!