

The Power of Modeling in Children's Character Development

Tom Lickona

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The character education movement of the past two decades, arguably the most important educational reform movement of our time, reflects a deepening national concern about character. I encounter this concern wherever I go. At an independent school where I was to give a talk to parents, one of the host mothers said, "I worry about the effects of all the material affluence that surrounds our kids. Will they come to value it above everything else?"

The lessons of history remind us that riches do in fact tend to corrupt. The educator James Stenson, author of *Compass: A Handbook on Parent Leadership* (2003), points out that today most of us are rich when measured by the standards of the past. We enjoy a level of prosperity—an abundance of food, drink, amusements, clothing, and technological devices—unprecedented in human history.

But are our children better off? Many, to be sure, possess a resilient spirit and admirable character, but all too many have a poorly formed conscience, are weighed down by self-centeredness, and lack a sense of purpose. It is children from the higher socioeconomic levels, Stenson notes, not the children of the poor, who are the most likely to commit suicide.

Some young people are wise enough to perceive and reject the spiritual emptiness of much of modern life. In his book, *With Love and Prayers: A Headmaster Speaks to the Next Generation* (2000), Father Tony Jarvis, the Episcopal priest who led Boston's Roxbury Latin School for boys for thirty years, quotes a recent Roxbury graduate:

I see so many people just going through the motions: Get into a good school, so you can get into a good college, so you can get a good job, so you can get a better job, so you can get rich and die.

In one of his daily "character talks" to the assembled boys at Roxbury—this talk aimed at getting them to think about what life goals are worth pursuing—Father Jarvis shared a story about a childhood friend:

This guy had everything—good looks, a brilliant mind, a winning personality. He was a schoolboy athletic hero, went to the best college, married a gorgeous—and nice—wife, climbed speedily to the top in business, made a bundle of money, bought an estate in the suburbs, had three kids, a dog, a cat, a lawn service, and three cars. The perfect model of success. My sister just saw

him at a high school reunion. He had just up and left it all—his estate, his wife, his family—and he was talking about quitting his job.

He said: “You remember what I was like as a kid? I knew what I wanted—the whole package of success. I knew I’d be happy if I realized that dream. But when I got it, it turned to dust. I just got sick of it all.”

“Each of us,” Father Jarvis says, “is engaged in a lifelong search for a life worth living.” Today’s media-driven culture, with its worship of money, sex, status, and power, can easily lead our children in wrong directions. As parents and teachers, we must do all we can to help them develop a long-term vision of what really makes for a meaningful and fulfilling life.

For starters, we can share with them the important finding that cultures around the world affirm three life goals as sources of authentic happiness: (1) maturity of character—becoming the best person we can be; (2) loving relationships such as marriage, family, and friendships (religious believers would include a relationship with God), and (3) making a positive difference in the lives of others (Devine et al., 2000). Developing good character is at the heart of all three of these pursuits. What can we do to help our children to develop the strengths of character that will set them on the path to a productive, ethical, and fulfilling life?

“They Set a Good Example”

In hundreds of interviews with parents, young adults, and others, I’ve asked people, “What did your parents do to try to teach you good values and good character?” People speak of many things, including their parents’ love, their high expectations, their firm discipline, and their wisdom about life. But far and away, the most common answer I receive is simply, “They set a good example.”

However, there’s much more to teaching by example than meets the eye. It involves treating our children with love and respect, but it goes well beyond that. It has to do with how we treat each other as spouses—something that our children have literally thousands of opportunities to observe. Our marital behaviors, we can be sure, will imprint themselves on their moral memories. When we fight, do we fight fair? Do we use disrespectful and denigrating language, or do we maintain in our words and tone a basic respect, even in the heat of an argument? Do we forgive and reconcile soon after, or hold on to our anger and resentment? Healthy families, research shows, commonly have reconciliation rituals that enable them to forgive and make up quickly (Curran, 1985).

The example we set includes how we talk about others—relatives, friends, neighbors, and teachers. The mother who says in front of her child, “That’s a dumb homework assignment,” is modeling a disrespect for the teacher that will not be lost on the child. “Disrespect,” says one parent educator, “usually begins in low-level ways. Kids become desensitized to it.”

Our modeling also includes all the ways we manifest concern for the welfare of others outside our family. One father I interviewed remembered his parents' ethic of service:

The thing that sticks in my mind is an atmosphere of genuine concern for others outside the home. My father was a volunteer fireman and rescue worker and still is, in his sixties. My mother was always a volunteer of some sort and was always helping out others in the community. They were generous to others, even when they had little for themselves. Many people would praise my parents to me and my siblings because of their kindness.

Another vitally important dimension of our example consists of the moral stands we take—especially stands that are unpopular with our children or at odds with what other parents are permitting. What do we prohibit? Violent video games? TV shows and movies that contain sex, violence, or foul language? All forms of pornography? Music with lyrics that denigrate particular groups? Immodest dress? Parties where there's drinking? Prom overnights? Said a father at an independent school: "Our daughter is the only one among her friends who is not going to the overnight beach party after the senior prom. She is very unhappy with us right now, but that's our decision."

Do our kids know where we stand on the moral issues of our times—abortion, war and peace, threats to the environment, the plight of the poor? If we've ever taken a stand in the workplace or public arena or even in a conversation with one other person, have we shared that with our children? Stands like these define our values. They let our children know what we care deeply about and are willing to take risks for. That's essential if we hope to pass on our values and convey the importance of integrity and courage in a life of character. If our children never see us standing up for what we believe, never going against the tide, how can we expect them to have the courage to stand up to pressure from their peers?

Exposing Kids to Other Positive Models

We increase the power of our own example when we expose our children to other positive role models. This can be as simple as having someone to dinner who is a good person and then drawing out that individual's thoughts and experiences. Children enjoy and benefit from listening to thoughtful adult conversation.

Friends are obviously important. Peers are powerful role models. We should talk with our kids about what a true friend is and share our own experiences with friendships. (Indeed, sharing experiences from our youth will help kids understand us as persons and parents, and these stories will often reverberate throughout their lives at each stage of maturity.) We can send them to schools where there is a culture of character—of doing your best work and doing the right thing. We can encourage them to join a good club or youth group where they will have a chance to meet other kids who share their interests and values.

We can also take our children out into the community to witness, and be part of,

the good that others do. Australian educator Andrew Mullins, in his book *Parenting for Character* (2005), recounts what one father did to teach his 15-year-old compassion for others:

The son was badgering him to buy him yet another pair of \$200 Nikes. The father said, “Come on mate, let’s go out for dinner.” He took him into the city, and they stood together in the queue of a soup kitchen. Now, two years later, one night each week, the son helps run the soup kitchen.

Several things no doubt contributed to the effectiveness of what this father did. He set an example of compassionate concern himself. He exposed his son to less fortunate persons that his son might otherwise never have met. He gave him the opportunity to experience the joy of serving others, arguably the best antidote to the self-centeredness that can take over in adolescence. At the same time, he exposed his son to the collective good example of all the other kind-hearted people who were working in that soup kitchen week after week.

Examples of good role models abound if we take the trouble to find them. Somewhere in the evening paper there’s at least one story of integrity, courage, or compassion. (The examples of bad character—the latest sports scandal, corruption in high places, violations of human rights—are also valuable learning opportunities.) The Giraffe Heroes Project (www.giraffe.org) has developed a bank of more than 1,000 stories of everyday heroes of all ages who have shown compassion and courage by sticking out their necks for others. The website, www.teachwithmovies.com, catalogues hundreds of good films that offer positive role models and strong character themes, such as “A Man for All Seasons” (integrity), “Gandhi” (the power of non-violence), “Chariots of Fire” (fidelity to principle), “Spitfire Grill” (sacrificial love), “Chronicles of Narnia” (loyalty and courage), and “Amazing Grace” (justice, faith, and perseverance).

Biographies of moral and spiritual giants such as Mother Teresa, Viktor Frankl, Harriet Tubman, and William Wilberforce can inspire all of us to be more than we might otherwise be. There are hundreds of fictional stories, from picture books to novels, whose admirable characters will live in a young person’s heart and imagination (see *Books That Build Character* (1994) by William Kilpatrick for an extensive annotated bibliography). Finally, there are enjoyable books that are full of wisdom about life, such as Hal Urban’s *Life’s Greatest Lessons* ((2004) and Sean Covey’s *The 6 Most Important Decisions You’ll Ever Make* (2006). (Covey’s includes lots of stories from the lives of teens showing how to make good decisions about school, family relationships, friends, drugs and alcohol, and sex.)

Preaching What We Practice

If we want our example to have maximum impact, our kids need to know the values and beliefs that lie behind it. We need to practice what we preach, but we also need to preach what we practice.

Research points to the power of combining example with direct teaching. Character is “caught” *and* taught. Samuel and Pearl Oliner’s *The Altruistic Personality*

study (1988) interviewed 406 persons who rescued Jews from the Nazi Holocaust and 126 people who had lived in the same parts of Nazi-occupied Europe but did *not* get involved. Compared to non-rescuers, rescuers were much more likely to say that their parents both modeled and explicitly taught good values. For example, rescuers' parents were much more likely to teach an attitude of tolerance toward other cultures and religions. One man said: "My father taught us to love God and neighbor, regardless of race or religion. At my grandfather's house, if a Jew happened to drop in when we were reading the Bible, he would ask him to take a seat."

Modeling Moral Reasoning

Setting a good example includes sharing our deepest values and beliefs—teaching *what* we think is right and good—but also includes explaining *why* we think the way we do. Modeling good moral reasoning is an important, and sometimes neglected, part of the example we set.

Consider a moral issue that concerns nearly every secondary school in America: cheating. In *Smart & Good High Schools* (Lickona & Davidson, 2005), our two-year study of what award-winning high schools are doing to foster eight essential strengths of character, we identify the rise of cheating as one of the major moral challenges facing schools and society. For a sobering picture of the widespread erosion of integrity, read David Callahan's *The Cheating Culture: Why More Americans Are Doing Wrong to Get Ahead* (2004). An estimated half of resumes now contain lies. Duke University's Center for Academic Integrity, in its survey of more than 18,000 students at 61 U.S. high schools, found that 76% admitted to cheating. The data show a steady increase in cheating over the past several decades, accompanied by the growing attitude that cheating is the way the world works (McCabe, 2001). One high school student said, "Politicians cheat, businessmen cheat, athletes cheat—why not students?"

If we want young people to resist the temptation to join the cheating culture, they will need clear moral reasons why cheating is wrong. Here are four:

1. Cheating is unfair to all the people who aren't cheating.
2. Cheating is a lie, because it deceives others.
3. Cheating violates trust and damages relationships.
4. Cheating will corrupt your character. If you're dishonest now, you'll find it easier to be dishonest later in life—on the job and perhaps even in your closest relationships.

We also want our children to understand that they will lose self-respect if they cheat and that they will never be able to be proud of anything they got by cheating. We want them to believe what may seem very hard to believe at first: that it is better *not* to get ahead than to do so by cheating. We want them to have honesty at the core of their moral identity so they would feel "out of character" if they were ever to cheat. Indeed, that's what one independent school found to be the ethical orientation of its most morally mature upper school students. A small percentage of students at each grade

level, interviewed as part of a study of cheating, said things like, “I could never cheat—it’s not who I am.” We want all young people to think like that.

Our children also need memorable examples of principled moral reasoning in the face of often intense pressure to go along with what others are doing. The torture and sexual humiliation of prisoners in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere would have been less likely to occur if even a few onlookers had objected. A compelling exception to silence in the face of evil comes from the My Lai incident in Vietnam. When Lt. William Calley gave his soldiers the order to shoot—resulting in the massacre of more than 300 Vietnamese villagers—there was one soldier who disobeyed the order. His name was Michael Bernhardt. We should share with our kids his moral reasoning:

I can hardly do anything if I know it's wrong. The law is only the law, and many times it's wrong. It's not necessarily just, simply because it's the law. My kind of citizen would be guided by his own laws. These would be more strict, in a lot of cases, than the actual laws (Scharf, 1978).

Bernhardt is saying that just because something is legal or approved by authority doesn’t mean it’s right. There is a higher law to which we are all accountable, namely, the moral law. That’s the essence of what the Nuremberg trial judges told the Nazi concentration camp commanders when those officers said they were “just following orders.”

Or consider a domain of decision-making where young people often demonstrate their lowest levels of moral judgment and self-control: sex. This is an area where parents often go mute, either because they’re not clear about their own thinking, would just as soon not know what their kids are doing, or are afraid their teenage son or daughter will ask, “Did *you* have sex when you were my age?” An appropriate response to that question is, “Whatever mistakes I did or didn’t make when I was growing up are not the point. The way to make the best life for yourself, a life without regrets, is to make the best possible decisions—ones that will help you avoid getting hurt and avoid hurting others.”

In today’s debased sexual culture, young people very much need to hear, from people they love and respect, intelligent reasons why they should save sexual intimacy for a truly committed love relationship. Parents can turn for help to authors who have made a well-reasoned case for waiting. Here, for example, is an excerpt from a pamphlet titled “Love Waits”:

Love is patient; love is kind. Love wants what is best for another person. Love will never cross the line between what's right and wrong. It's wrong to put one another in danger of having to deal with hard choices, choices that could change your lives forever.

Having sex before marriage may feel right for the moment. But the possible costs of an unexpected pregnancy, abortion, and sexually transmitted

disease—as well as the deep hurts that can come from a broken relationship—outweigh the feelings of the moment. The feelings are temporary; their consequences are long-lasting.

All good things are worth waiting for. Waiting until marriage to have sex is a mature decision to control your desires. If you are getting to know someone—or are in a relationship—remember: If it's love, love waits.

We can also take heart from a finding from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Resnick et al., 1997): When parents communicate their disapproval of teen sex, their children are more likely to delay sexual involvement.

Reducing the Influence of Negative Examples

Wise parents will seek to maximize their children's exposure to good example. But especially in today's toxic popular culture, they will also strive to reduce their children's exposure to bad example.

Unfortunately, all too many parents have lowered their vigilance. According to *Kids and the Media at the New Millennium*, a Kaiser Family Foundation study (1999), two-thirds of American children between 8 and 13 have their own TVs in their bedrooms. Counting all forms of electronic media, youth between 8 and 18 consume, on average, 6 hours and 43 minutes of electronic media a day.

The Internet has brought new dangers. A 2000 Netvalue Report on Minors found that U.S. youth under 17 spent 65% more time on adult pornography Internet sites than they did on game sites. Four of the ten who had visited a pornographic site were girls. Pamela Paul, author of *Pornified: How Pornography is Transforming Our Lives, Our Relationships, and Our Families* (), quoted a female porn star who was on tour in England promoting her best-selling memoir and who was surprised that pre-teen girls were showing up at signings (Secor, 2006).

Reducing the destructive impact of negative media starts with our clear and authoritative guidelines. Many parents have found it helpful to sit down with their kids and say something like the following:

Use of all media in our home is a privilege, not a right. That privilege must be exercised with our approval and our presence—and in a way that is consistent with our values as a family. So for any particular TV show, DVD, video game, or website, here's the question: Is it consistent with what we value and believe as a family?

Despite our best efforts, however, our kids will inevitably be exposed to at least some aspects of negative media. Teaching media literacy—the skills of critically analyzing media messages (Who created this message? For what purpose? What values are being conveyed? What attention-getting techniques are being used?)—is

something else both schools and families can do to reduce the impact of unhealthy media content (see Lickona & Davidson, 2005, for teaching strategies and supporting research).

The Stronger Our Relationship, the Greater Our Influence

Our influence as role models is embedded within a host of interacting factors. The impact of our example on our children depends, for example, on the quality of our relationship. The stronger our relationship, the greater our positive impact.

Research bears this out. One parenting study (Holstein, 1972) compared “successful fathers” (who had themselves reached Kohlberg’s stage of principled moral reasoning and whose 13-year-old children had reached a stage of moral reasoning mature for their age, where they showed concern about doing what was right in the eyes of parents and teachers) with “unsuccessful fathers” (principled themselves but whose 13-year-olds were at a less mature, more self-centered stage of reasoning). This study found that teens who were relatively mature in their reasoning rated their fathers as much warmer and more involved with them than did teens with relatively immature reasoning.

In developing a close relationship with our children, there is no substitute for spending time with them. As most of us have experienced, there is a special intimacy to one-on-one time. One of my favorite examples of this is comes from the autobiography of Christian Barnard (1974), originator of the heart transplant:

Whenever we were ill, my father got up late at night to doctor us. I suffered from festering toenails that pained so much I would cry in bed. My father used to draw out the fester with a poultice made of milk and bread crumbs or Sunlight soap and sugar. And when I had a cold, he would rub my chest with Vicks and cover it with a red flannel cloth. Sunday afternoons we walked together to the top of the hill by the dam. Once there, we would sit on a rock and look down at the town below us. Then I would tell my problems to my father, and he would speak of his to me.

Modeling Commitment

There is no more powerful example, certainly none that children feel more deeply, than how we model a commitment to providing a loving and stable family for them to grow up in.

About a million children see their parents divorce each year. Divorce is a sensitive subject. Marriages fail for all kinds of reasons, including child abuse, spousal violence, and infidelity. Researcher Judith Wallerstein’s *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: A 25-Year Landmark Study* (2000) documents the often lasting repercussions of family breakdown for both kids and adults. For a great many children, time does not heal the wounds. As young adults, many of them fear commitment, and if they do marry, often panic in the face of the first marital fight—because they have no templates

for solving conflicts.

"The most important thing parents can do for their children," said one mother, "is to love each other and stay together." If we can manage to hold our marriages and families together in good times and bad, we will teach our children a profound life lesson about the meaning of commitment.

Modeling Faith in Something Larger Than Ourselves

The 2002 research report, "Religious Involvement and Children's Well-Being" (www.childtrends.org), finds that youth who frequently attend religious services and say their faith is important to them exhibit higher levels of altruism and lower levels of drug and alcohol use and sexual activity. It is certainly possible to be an ethical person without being religious, and having religious faith by no means guarantees that a person will be good. But for many persons, including many young people, religion gives life a higher meaning and an ultimate reason for leading a good life.

Clearly, religion—or any other world view that places a high value on doing good—has a better chance of taking root in a child's conscience and character if it is central in our own. We can't give what we haven't got. Mary, a young mother who is devout in her own faith, recalls her father:

Dad always closes his letters with, "Work hard and pray a lot." This never sounds phony because it's what he does. He has worked hard all his life. He built the two homes we lived in and did all the repairs. And he prays throughout the day. My most powerful image of my father is of catching him kneeling at the foot of his bed, late at night before he retired, saying his personal prayers.

I once asked a mother I knew to be serious about the practice of her faith, "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 would like them to view the world and everything in it—creation, people, events—through the lens of faith because I believe that's the most freeing way of seeing things, with the greatest potential for happiness, direction, and peace.

I then asked her, "How does your faith 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.

I asked how this vision is made concrete in the life of the family. She spoke of weekly worship and daily prayer. God, she said, is part of everyday conversation, about matters ranging from why you shouldn't be mean to your little brother to saving sex for marriage. Then she described a tradition the family had recently begun, inspired by a sermon on world hunger. 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. The meal begins with a prayer written by the oldest child, age 10:

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 will turn their hearts to generosity and compassion.

The money saved by not having a regular dinner is put into a jar and sent to a charity working to relieve world hunger and poverty. Sometimes, at the meal, the mother or father will read a letter from the charity reporting progress in relieving a crisis 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 to enter into that in a small way. We want our 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, and the beliefs that motivate them, ground character development in a meaning system, a view of life and our relations with each other in which doing the right thing and being a good person are of central importance.

Whatever one's world view, our children need a spiritual rudder in their quest for character. They need a vision that addresses life's largest questions: What is the meaning of life? What is the purpose of *my* life? How can I make my life count for good?

Especially as they enter adolescence, when doubts and questioning are a normal part of intellectual development, our children should know that the spiritual life is often full of struggle, even dark nights of the soul. *Time* magazine's September 3, 2007 cover story reports a new book (Kolodiejchuk, 2007), consisting largely of Mother Teresa's letters to her spiritual directors, revealing that she spent almost 50 years in a state of deep spiritual pain because of what she experienced as the withdrawal of God's presence. And yet she never abandoned her faith or wavered in carrying out what she believed was God's mission for her: to care for the poorest of the poor.

Dealing with Moral Failure

Biblical wisdom tells us that "the just man falls seven times a day." On some days, for many of us, it may feel more like seventy. Moral failure is an inescapable part of trying to live a good life.

We can model how to deal with this, too. Our kids should know that we see our own character as a work in progress, just as theirs is. We should humbly seek their forgiveness when we treat them badly. We should teach them that being faithful to our standards and ideals does not mean never failing, but rising every time we fall. And as we go about the challenging work of trying to be good role models, we can take consolation from what a wise bishop once said: "Our children don't need to see parents who are perfect, but only ones who are trying."

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Tom Lickona is a developmental psychologist and professor of education at the State University of New York at Cortland, where he directs the Center for the 4th and 5th Rs (Respect and Responsibility). He has authored nine books on character development, including *Raising Good Children*, *Educating for Character*, and *Character Matters*.

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