

# Parenting for character

*Good parents do more than give their children affection and provide for their needs. They must plan how they will shape their children's character, says Andrew Mullins.*

## Author

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## Background

Few mothers and fathers would disagree that parenting in today's society is harder than it was in their parents' day. Society has changed and outside influences upon children are stronger than when they were children. Families are smaller nowadays; both parents work and often cannot spend as much time with their children as they would like; and the television is on for hours in many homes. Faced with these challenges, people are beginning to realise that they

cannot rely on their good will alone to raise their children successfully. They have to study how to be a good parent and act according to clearly defined principles. This background briefing outlines some rules of thumb followed by successful parents.

## A few definitions

Character is that dimension of personality developed as a result of moral education. We learn to be fair, generous, tolerant, and so on. Temperament is that dimension of personality endowed by nature -- our genes and our environment. We say that a person is naturally outgoing, taciturn, impulsive, reflective, etc.

## Rethinking how to be a good parent

### **The ultimate outcome of parenting is mature adults**

Parenting is the art of raising happy, mature, generous adults, not merely happy children. Unfortunately most parenting books are tactical rather than strategic. They overemphasize "micro parenting": how to have a happy child (not how to raise a happy adult), how to avoid tantrums, how to talk to an adolescent, how to change a nappy. This leaves parents in the dark about how to raise children who have a clear set of goals and values. Good parenting focuses on long-term outcomes, not just the immediate physical and emotional welfare of a youngster. Parents need to think in terms of building character. They should visualise the strengths of character they want to see in their children and then work at equipping them with these strengths.

### **Children cannot be happy without firm values**

Successful parenting is about passing on good values so that boys and girls become happy in their lifetime commitments to their future families. Good behaviour is one outcome of having good values, but it is not the ultimate goal of raising a child. It is possible to raise well-mannered, capable, hard-working children who become self-centred, ruthlessly pragmatic adults who are unable to make lasting commitments.

We need to strive to ensure that all our actions are underpinned by a kind and loving intention. In life, we need to have well grooved behaviours (eg orderliness, industriousness, sincerity, etc) and these behaviours need to be underpinned by a loving intention. This intention is crucial. We must model it and insist on it even with small children. It is much better to teach a child “Do this because it will help Mum”, rather than to say, “Do this because I said so.”

However, many parents fail to pass on good values. There are three reasons for this.

*First*, contemporary parents often do not have clear values to bequeath to their children, beyond “do what you think is right” and “don’t hurt anyone deliberately”. In today’s world, where young people are exposed to many harmful, but strong and attractive, influences, this is not enough.

*Second*, some parents who do have good values treat them as a burden. They must show that the values they speak about do in fact make them happy, and make their homes happy places. Otherwise children will think, “Mum and Dad, I love you, but I need to find happiness in life. I will need other values.”

*Third*, like parents of any age, sometimes mums and dads do not live up to their own values. Parents who wish to pass on cherished religious beliefs and practices will need, above all, to model those practices in their day as an expression of heartfelt gratitude towards God, and to show that these beliefs and practices are the source of deep peace and equanimity in the face of every small and great challenge that life can bring.

### **The first twelve years are the key ones, not the teen years**

Contrary to what most people think, the teen years are not the testing time for parenting skills; the toddler years are. All teenagers were once toddlers and their problems in adolescence are simply the unfolding of the strengths and weaknesses they acquired, with their parents’ help, as young children. So parents ought to focus on inculcating values from the word Go, rather than leaving it until they stumble across problems. Most of the hard yards are done before teenage hormones kick in.

Upbringing is not about cloning children to conform with your wishes. You are raising them to run their own lives so the less you run their lives, even when they are small, the better. Do not over-manage even young children. Don’t do the thinking for them. If they do not have practice thinking for themselves as younger children, they will not be able to do it as teenagers, and you will not think of giving it priority when they are teenagers. Give reasons, starting from when your child is very young. Young people will need a comprehensive reference manual if they are to run their own lives. Explain simply and honestly the why of decisions you have made in their interests because there has been physical or moral danger involved in following the child’s preferred direction.

Establish very positive habits of communication. Take conversation even with little children seriously. Don’t be negative. Start with what you admire in your son’s or daughter’s character. From early years, make praise very specific and criticism positive and constructive. Without habits of parent-child affection and focused attention in the pre teen years, the parent-teen bonds will strain or snap.

Talk honestly to younger children about relationships and sexuality. You have a real and pressing

duty to ready your child for the complex but positive challenges of sexual attraction. How many marriages will be saved if children were better attuned to the duties that relationships bring.

### **The teen years don't have to be difficult**

Adolescence should be a wonderful time when boys and girls discover autonomy and decide on the values upon which they will base their lives. The physical and psychological changes of adolescence often involve some turmoil, but if children have developed the key virtues of sound judgement, not giving up, self-control and respecting others as toddlers and children, they will be well equipped to deal with it.

### **Mum and Dad are behind the steering wheel**

We often blame poor behaviour on peer-group pressure and negative images in the media. But good parenting calls for strategies to anticipate and counter these influences before they take root in children. Parents have to be responsible for shaping the family environment -- if they want to raise children with their own values, they have to be creative and energetic in finding ways to keep them from being hijacked by purveyors of other values.

In particular, this means that parents have to manage the inputs in the home. The younger the child, the more impressionable he or she is. Children will imitate anyone who spends time with them and takes an interest in them. This includes characters in videos, X-Box, and chatrooms. Children are far too precious to allow the nasties of unsupervised television and internet access into their minds. Get to know your child's peer group, and the parents of your child's friends. Make it easy for them to bring their friends home.

It has become a cliché of parenting that children should not be "sheltered" from real life. This is nonsense. Children shouldn't be swathed in cotton wool, but every family should be a sheltered family. Children can be seriously damaged in adolescence and early adult years when, through inexperience and lack of clear knowledge of what is right and wrong, they make decisions that have lasting negative consequences. Permissive parenting leads to many problems in children because they fail to develop strengths of self control and fortitude. Manage the environment that your children are growing up in, but don't become recluses. Don't raise your children in a bunker; spend much time with other families who share your values. Your children need to see you give of yourself and your time in deep friendships with others, otherwise they will not learn this.

### **What are the priorities of a good parent?**

#### **First, your spouse**

A good marriage is the bedrock of good parenting. If the spouses love each other, are prepared to sacrifice for each other and communicate well, their children will absorb their virtues. But, as everyone knows, this demands a daily struggle.

Learn to admire the strengths of your spouse; don't get fixated on faults. Put your spouse on a pedestal in your child's eyes; back up the other's decisions. Couples need to know how to make decisions they are both happy with. They need habits of talking out differing opinions on privileges, punishments, ground rules, etc.

It's a good idea to create regular times you can get away from immediate pressures to talk each week, to listen to what each is saying, or wants to talk about. No matter, neither bankbook nor bedroom, should be off limits for calm discussion. Couples should organize to do things together often, building up a stock of happy memories to tide them through inevitable challenges.

It is best if parents never contradict or argue in the presence of children, and ensure that they make up in their presence if they do argue in the child's presence. It is a great skill to develop the habit of being able to apologise; it can save relationships. Adults need to learn to be the first to apologise whenever there is an argument.

A couple's joint effort to create a good marriage pays off. Statistics show that children who grow up in homes where there is significant ongoing discord between parents (either before or after separation) are at greater risk of psychological problems. Similarly, children raised in homes where there is only one natural parent are disadvantaged on every measure... socio-economically, emotionally and psychologically, academically, etc.

### **Second, yourself**

Children are chips off the old block. It's hard to expect them to acquire virtues which their parents lack. That's why it is important to look honestly at what your own motivations in life might be... success, admiration, comfort, pleasure, etc, or something higher. Beware of living for oneself... putting one's own timetable before that of the family, work before family, social life above investing time in one's children each night.

Teach by your example that it is loving generosity that brings happiness in life. Carry about with you a habitually deep peace and calm. Lead by example. Show that commitments to others bring great serenity. What a great shame it is when young children fail to learn that it is generosity that brings happiness; it is so much harder to pick this up later. Try not to load this deficit onto your kids.

In particular, if you feel that it is important for your children to take their religious duties seriously, make sure that you do so first. Children learn how to love God by looking at the lives of their parents.

### **Third, your kids**

Children need to feel loved. But it can be hard for some parents to show this in a convincing way, especially busy professional men. Many parents can fail to listen, to take conversation with small children seriously, and to give them focussed attention. The problem becomes even more urgent with teenagers. They need unconditional love and encouragement, too. Do not let 90 per cent of conversation get bogged down on negative issues.

In today's families, time is a scarce resource. But for building up a close relationship with children, there is no substitute for spending time. The notion that quality time is better than quantity time is a myth. There is only one kind of quality time and that is quantity time. Do jobs together. Find hobbies and sports to do together that you both enjoy. Make sure that home is an enjoyable place to be, otherwise your children will not want to bring friends home. You will be excluded from their social world. Remember, the habitual expression on a parent's face determines the atmosphere in the home.

And keep reminding yourself, you are raising children so they can run their own lives well. Some parents punish children to scare them into good behaviour, or simply to gain conformity with what they want. Too often in such a process, parents and children are alienated. It is always more effective to correct children calmly without emotion, choosing punishments that help a child remedy the consequences of poor actions, and making sure that the child realises the most important thing is to fix up the hurt done to others by heartfelt apologies. The purpose of punishments must be to teach, not to make an example of someone, or to frighten them into doing the right thing in future.

## **Educating children for character**

### **How children grow in character**

Good character means developing good habits, or virtues. The development of character requires the development the full range of virtues. Virtues are normally acquired by carrying out a good act with some regularity, which over time builds an enduring strength of character. For example, the repeated effort to be polite regardless of one's feelings builds up the virtue of charity and respect.

During the past 40 years, much of Western society has shied away from the concept of virtue and embraced the ideals of spontaneity and innate innocence. Consequently, as any school teacher will tell you, many children enter adult life without the habits of resilience, responsibility, and respect for others they need to run their own lives. They simply have not been taught to struggle against weaknesses inherent in human nature.

In some ears, the word virtue sounds old-fashioned and implies hammering harsh and unwelcome lessons into recalcitrant youngsters. The truth is quite the opposite. The most effective tool for teaching virtue is affection and its distinctive result is ease and enjoyment in the good habit. Children learn through positive example, loving confident encouragement to meet challenging expectations, clear consistent explanation and direction, routines and responsibilities with accountability and clear constructive correction. Our goal is to teach children to think clearly for themselves free of debilitating habits and external influences, and to have a generous loving heart.

### **What are the most important virtues?**

Western society has a 2500-year-old tradition of discussion about the idea of virtue. It began with the early Greek philosophers who identified four core virtues: prudence, temperance, justice and fortitude. In modern parlance, we would call them sound judgement, self-control, respect for others and resilience. Of course the Greeks did not invent these good habits. Judaism and Christianity assumed them in their moral teaching, as did the great traditions of the Oriental world. But the Greeks, especially Aristotle, were the first to analyse the virtues.

A bit of familiarity of what constitutes each virtue is not airy-fairy academic speculation. Children will need each of these four main virtues to have happy lives, to have successful relationships and to cope with the burdens and challenges that life throws up. Equipped with a framework for identifying a child's strengths and weakness, mum and dad together can discuss strategies to help them grow.

### **Sound judgement (prudence)**

The word "prudence" can mean timidity, indecisiveness and calculation. But true prudence is a

dynamic virtue which allows us to use our freedom in the best way, the way which leads to true self-fulfilment. A prudent person will not hanker after illusory roads to happiness.

The great challenge in raising children is to give them a sense of responsible autonomy and to teach them self management skills. We cannot give young people enough decision-making practice -- appropriate to their age, of course.

Sound judgement is a virtue for all children. Even toddlers can practice making good decisions -- whether to eat now or later, whether to help mum do housework or play games, and so on. They are making decisions without realising it, with their parents' guidance. But the defining characteristic of the teen years is self-direction and thus sound judgment becomes an important issue. Parents should not be scared when they observe a growing independent spirit in their son or daughter. They should not react with panic and legislate rules as if their teenager were still a child.

Usually it is far more effective to let teenagers choose what they are going to do, unless they are venturing into physical or moral danger through their lack of experience, and then to debrief afterwards. They should be encouraged to make their actions consistent with their values, a prerequisite for peace of soul and happiness in life. In loving conversations, help a young person reflect on the causes and consequences of his or her actions, particularly how those actions have affected others.

Another aspect of sound judgement is judging according to principles. Many adolescents (and adults, for that matter) do not have any coherent principles which guide their actions. It is important to talk with children, especially teenagers, about ideals and causes. And not only to talk about them. Successful parents lead by example. It's a good idea to throw yourself into idealistic causes, and talk about them at home with a passion. Be a model for the happiness that comes from helping others. In particular, generosity is best taught by example -- in giving money to good causes, in sharing things, in doing jobs for elderly relatives.

### **Respect for others and Responsibility (justice)**

If children are to truly respect others, they need to work up effective habits of being other-centred. Young persons today have a great many privileges: full room and board, loving parents, access to education, a great variety of entertainment, relative freedom of movement, ease of communication, etc. With these privileges must come the serious responsibility of using them well. This means doing jobs for the welfare of the family, studying very hard, using entertainments with moderation and not as an end in itself, responsible use of cars, reasonable use of telephones (by limiting oneself to short calls, and making sure to ask permission before using the phone), and so on.

It is important to ensure that children have appropriate responsibilities, small daily jobs for the good of the family; and it is important for parents to follow up those jobs that have been given, holding children to what they have agreed to do. Expect responsibility. Don't let your son or daughter out of consequences they have brought on themselves. They have to pay back the phone bill, make the apology or submit the assignment. Don't fight their battles for them. In the teenage years, life will bring challenges for which they have to be ready. The principle also applies to work: if you fail to teach a young child the importance of responsibility in finishing jobs don't expect assignments to get

priority in teenage years.

If our children are to make this world a better place when their turn comes, they will need to have acquired a deep concern for justice. But children will only see time as a gift and develop strong habits of service if these qualities are modeled in the adults they admire.

### **Self-control (temperance)**

Self-control is a virtue which develops very early in life. We live in a very consumer-oriented society in which people really believe advertising slogans like “you deserve it” or “indulge yourself”. If parents don’t educate their children to exercise restraint, their youngsters will be unable to resist the lure of materialism.

Parents must not retard the development of their children by smothering them with childish pampering. Nor should they look on fondly, saying "kids will be kids", as teenagers, who in other times and cultures would already have adult responsibilities, exhibit irresponsible behaviour. Children must be taught that affection is not best shown in material gifts; people are more important than things; good times are not more expensive times; and we have to resist the allure of what is shiny, new or colourful.

Foster a healthy hardiness so that your child will have learnt a degree of self control. There are alcoholics who grew up in teetotaling households and alcoholics whose parents gave them moderate amounts. The key issue is whether a young person has learnt habits of self control.

### **Resilience (fortitude)**

Resilience obviously has a lot to do with physical toughness. But its scope is far wider than that. Mental resilience empowers a child to keep trying even after many failures and to bounce back after making mistakes. Let your child wear his or her mistakes. Children must learn to solve small measured problems so that they will not be swamped when the real problems arrive... their future happiness will depend on their capacity to solve their own problems in adult life. It can be a serious error of judgement for parents to do things for their children which the children are able to do themselves. Do not shield kids from the small difficulties that they can experience as a child.

Do not fight their battles for them, if they can fight them themselves without physical or moral danger. Do not write notes to get them out of trouble for forgetting homework.

We should protect children from moral or physical harm, but we should not be scared of a child making mistakes (provided there is no lasting damage). We are preparing children to run their own lives successfully, therefore they need abundant practice doing this when they are still children. More important than avoiding mistakes is the sincerity to recognise mistakes for what they are, the determination to remedy any hurt done to others, and the habit of learning from mistakes. Parents need to keep a focus on sincerity, and on the development of this loving intention, in their children.

### **Preparing teens for permanent loving relationships**

Many parents are reluctant to speak with their children about the birds and the bees. They can become almost paralysed when it comes to talking about how to relate to the opposite sex. Yet it is

essential for parents to help teenagers think through relationships in terms of the virtues of sound judgement, self-control, resilience and, most importantly, respect for others. This challenge of adolescence is a kind of final exam in character education, when everything a young person learned as a toddler and a schoolchild is put into practice. If they have learned earlier lessons well, it is likely that they will survive adolescence without any major calamities and will go on to be mature husbands and wives, father and mothers.

Each young person needs an effective and loving education in relationships and in the sexual dimension of human life. Yet, the reality is that most children of this generation will be disappointed in relationships, some tragically so. Nobody is better placed to pass on this intimate information by word and example than a child's own parents. Too often however, this task is left to teachers, peers, or television.

Encourage children to mix with and get to know many boys and girls their own age. Teach that the aim of social life cannot simply be to find one girlfriend/boyfriend... with all the emotional obsession that premature relationships create. Young people need to understand the good reasons for not pairing off in mid-teen years, despite the constant negative example in this regard in the media.

The teen years offer challenges which young people have never experienced before. It is good for parents to explain explicitly how certain uninhibited social venues like raves and some discos make it much harder for a person to maintain self possession. Explain how certain heady times, such as the weeks after final school exams finish, can put a young person under pressures never before experienced, leading to mistakes one may regret bitterly.