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How Can I Help Build Character In My Child?

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A weekly question/answer column

How Can I Help Build Character In My Child?

Becky Mitchell answers:*

Last in a two-part series

The national 4-H organization, which is part of a Character Counts Coalition, advocates using the TEAM approach for building character in children. This approach suggests that parents regularly take opportunities to teach, enforce, advocate and model (TEAM) positive character traits.

The coalition is aimed at instilling six points or pillars of character in youth. The pillars are trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and good citizenship. Consider these suggestions for helping instill positive character traits in your child.

- Be a consistent model of good character. The moral messages you send must be clear, consistent and repetitive. Children will judge your values not by what you say, but by what you do and what you permit them to do. They most likely will not judge you by your best moments, but by your last worst act. Thus, everything you say and do either reinforces or undermines the credibility of your messages about the importance of good character. When you are tired, rushed or under pressure you are most tempted to make poor character choices. Set a good example for your children during these times, and remind them that the most powerful and lasting lessons about character are taught by making tough choices when the cost of doing the right thing is high. If you do something wrong, act the way you would want your children to behave if they acted improperly. Be accountable, apologize sincerely, and do better.
- Be concrete. Messages about good attitudes, character traits and conduct should be explicit, direct and specific. Building character and teaching ethics is not an academic undertaking. It must be relevant to the lives and experiences of children. Talk to them in terms of situations they have been in. Comment on and discuss things their friends and teachers have done as it relates to the six pillars of character mentioned above.
- Be creative. Effective character development should involve children in real decision making that has real consequences, such as taking care of a pet or child. Games and role playing are also effective. Use examples from your own life, history and the news.
- Teach children that their success and happiness will depend on who they are inside, not what they have or how they look. Reward good behavior (usually praise is enough), and discourage improper behavior by imposing fair, consistent consequences that prove you are serious about character.

* Becky Mitchell is Utah State University Extension 4-H Youth Development Specialist