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How to raise a moral child

Praise the character, not just the act. And model by action, not words.

By Adam Grant

WHAT does it take to be a good parent? We know some of the tricks for teaching children to become high achievers. For example, research suggests that when parents praise effort rather than ability, children develop a stronger work ethic and become more motivated.

Yet, although some parents live vicariously through their children's accomplishments, success is not the No. 1 priority for most parents. We're much more concerned about our children becoming kind, compassionate and helpful.

Surveys reveal that in the United States, parents from European, Asian, Hispanic and African ethnic groups all place far greater importance on caring than achievement. These patterns hold around the world: When people in 50 countries were asked to report their guiding principles in life, the value that mattered most was not achievement, but caring.

Despite the significance that it holds in our lives, teaching children to care about others is no simple task. In an Israeli study of nearly 600 families, parents who valued kindness and compassion frequently failed to raise children who shared those values.

Are some children simply good-natured or not? For the past decade, I've been studying the surprising success of people who frequently help others without any strings attached.

As the father of two daughters and a son, I've become increasingly curious about how these generous tendencies develop.

Genetic twin studies suggest that anywhere from a quarter to more than half of our propensity to be giving and caring is inherited.

That leaves a lot of room for nurture, and the evidence on how parents raise kind and compassionate children flies in the face of what many of even the most well-intentioned parents do in praising good behaviour, responding to bad behaviour, and communicating their values.

By age two, children experience some moral emotions - feelings triggered by right and wrong. To reinforce caring as the right behaviour, research indicates, praise is more effective than rewards.

Rewards run the risk of leading children to be kind only when a carrot is offered, whereas praise communicates that sharing is intrinsically worthwhile for its own sake.

But what kind of praise should we give when our children show early signs of generosity?

Praise the child or the act?

MANY parents believe it's important to compliment the behaviour, not the child - that way, the child learns to repeat the behaviour. Indeed, I know one couple who are careful to say, "That was such a helpful thing to do", instead of, "You're a helpful person".

But is that the right approach?

In a clever experiment, researchers Joan E. Grusec and Erica Redler set out to investigate what happens when we commend generous behaviour versus generous character.

After a group of seven- and eight-year-olds won marbles and donated some to poor children, the experimenter remarked, "Gee, you shared quite a bit."

The researchers randomly assigned the children to receive different types of praise. For some of the children, they praised the action: "It was good that you gave some of your marbles to those poor children. Yes, that was a nice and helpful thing to do."

For others, they praised the character behind the action: "I guess you're the kind of person who likes to help others whenever you can. Yes, you are a very nice and helpful person."

A couple of weeks later, when faced with more opportunities to give and share, the children were much more generous after their character had been praised than after their actions had been.

Praising their character helped them internalise it as part of their identities. The children learnt who they were from observing their own actions: I am a helpful person.

This dovetails with new research led by psychologist Christopher J. Bryan, who finds that for moral behaviours, nouns work better than verbs.

To get children between three and six years old to help with a task, rather than inviting them "to help", it was 22 to 29 per cent more effective to encourage them to "be a helper".

Cheating was cut in half when instead of, "Please don't cheat", participants were told, "Please don't be a cheater".

When our actions become a reflection of our character, we lean more heavily towards the moral and generous choices. Over time, it can become part of us.

Praise appears to be particularly influential in the critical periods when children develop a stronger sense of identity.

When the researchers praised the character of five-year-olds, any benefits that may have emerged didn't have a lasting impact: They may have been too young to internalise moral character as part of a stable sense of self.

And by the time children turned 10, the differences between praising character and praising actions vanished: Both were effective.

Tying generosity to character appears to matter most around age eight, when children may be starting to crystallise notions of identity.

Shame and guilt

PRAISE in response to good behaviour may be half the battle, but our responses to bad behaviour have consequences, too. When children cause harm, they typically feel shame or guilt.

Despite the common belief that these emotions are interchangeable, research led by psychologist June Price Tangney reveals that they have very different causes and consequences.

Shame is the feeling that I am a bad person, whereas guilt is the feeling that I have done a bad thing. Shame is a negative judgment about the core self, which is devastating.

In contrast, guilt is a negative judgment about an action, which can be repaired by good behaviour. When children feel guilt, they tend to experience remorse and regret, empathise with the person they have harmed and aim to make it right.

In one study spearheaded by psychologist Karen Caplovitz Barrett, parents rated their toddlers' tendencies to experience shame and guilt at home. The toddlers received a rag doll, and the leg fell off while they were playing with it alone.

The shame-prone toddlers avoided the researcher and did not volunteer that they broke the doll. The guilt-prone toddlers were more likely to fix the doll, approach the experimenter, and explain what happened.

The ashamed toddlers were avoiders; the guilty toddlers were amenders.

If we want our children to care about others, we need to teach them to feel guilt rather than shame when they

misbehave.

In a review of research on emotions and moral development, psychologist Nancy Eisenberg suggests that shame emerges when parents express anger, withdraw their love, or try to assert their power through threats of punishment: Children may begin to believe that they are bad people.

Fearing this effect, some parents fail to exercise discipline at all, which can hinder the development of strong moral standards.

The most effective response to bad behaviour is to express disappointment.

According to independent reviews by Professor Eisenberg and Professor David R. Shaffer, parents raise caring children by expressing disappointment and explaining why the behaviour was wrong, how it affected others, and how they can rectify the situation.

This enables children to develop standards for judging their actions, feelings of empathy and responsibility for others, and a sense of moral identity, which are conducive to becoming a helpful person.

The beauty of expressing disappointment is that it communicates disapproval of the bad behaviour, coupled with high expectations and the potential for improvement: "You're a good person, even if you did a bad thing, and I know you can do better."

Actions versus words

AS POWERFUL as it is to criticise bad behaviour and praise good character, raising a generous child involves more than waiting for opportunities to react to the actions of our children.

As parents, we want to be proactive in communicating our values to our children. Yet many of us do this the wrong way.

In a classic experiment, psychologist J. Philippe Rushton gave 140 elementary- and middle-school-age children tokens for winning a game, which they could keep entirely or donate some to a child in poverty.

They first watched a teacher figure play the game either selfishly or generously, and then preach to them the value of taking, giving or neither. The adult's influence was significant: Actions spoke louder than words.

When the adult behaved selfishly, children followed suit. The words didn't make much difference - children gave fewer tokens after observing the adult's selfish actions, regardless of whether the adult verbally advocated selfishness or generosity.

When the adult acted generously, students gave the same amount whether generosity was preached or not - they donated 85 per cent more than the norm in both cases.

When the adult preached selfishness, even after the adult acted generously, the students still gave 49 per cent more than the norm. Children learn generosity not by listening to what their role models say, but by observing what they do.

To test whether these role-modelling effects persisted over time, two months later, researchers observed the children playing the game again. Would the modelling or the preaching influence whether the children gave - and would they even remember it from two months earlier?

The most generous children were those who watched the teacher give but not say anything. Two months later, these children were 31 per cent more generous than those who observed the same behaviour but also heard it preached.

The message from this research is loud and clear: If you don't model generosity, preaching it may not help in the short run, and in the long run, preaching is less effective than giving while saying nothing at all.

As the psychologist Karl Weick is fond of asking, "How can I know who I am until I see what I do? How can I know what I value until I see where I walk?"

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