

**Prepared for:**

**South Brunswick Public Schools  
Monmouth Junction, NJ**



# **How to Instill the Character Traits Of Success in Your Child**

**One of a series of Parent Guides from**



## **Parent Guide**

# How to Instill the **Character Traits** of Success in Your Child

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## Introduction

More than anything else, you want your child to become a happy, healthy and productive adult. You focus on providing him\* with the best education possible. But education is more than just academics. Studies show that the key to your child's future happiness is probably less dependent on his I.Q. than on his moral intelligence.

And what is moral intelligence? **It's good character.**  
Some essential traits include:

- **Respect**
- **Responsibility**
- **Empathy and Kindness**
- **Tolerance**
- **Self-control**
- **Honesty and Trust**
- **Perseverance**
- **Gratitude**



Researchers say that developing good character traits in your child can help him learn better and make more friends at school—and eventually succeed in his career, marriage and family relationships.

It's your most important job to impart the core values that will develop your child's character. Before you can do that, you must decide which traits you feel are most important to you. Use the values from the lists above or come up with your own set.

*\*Each child is unique, so this publication alternates using masculine and feminine pronouns.*

Once you know the character traits you want to instill, go about the job in a conscious, organized way. Here are some of the basic steps you will want to take:

- **Be clear about the values you want to teach** and discuss them with your child.
- **Make your family a safe island of support**, acceptance, respect and love.
- **Model the character traits** and values you want your child to learn.
- **Point out behavior in others** that demonstrates the traits you value.
- **Tell your child where you stand** on important social and ethical issues.
- **Build moral reasoning skills** in your child by explaining why certain attitudes and behaviors are desirable.
- **Encourage your child to tune in to her inner voice**—that innate sense of right and wrong—rather than just “going with the flow.”
- **Read and discuss books** with value messages.
- **Take advantage of teachable moments**—during trying situations, decision-making times and when mistakes have been made.
- **Set clear behavioral expectations** for your child.

## Model Good Character

Does your child see you:

- Call in sick when you're not?
- Grab a parking space when someone has been waiting longer than you?
- Agree to do something and change your mind when something better comes up?
- Snap at the clerk in the grocery store?
- Abuse alcohol or drugs?

Parenting requires integrity. Telling your child to "Do as I say, not as I do," just doesn't work. To make sure your child grows up to be a person of good character, you have to examine your own character and values. Your challenge is to live your life, knowing your child is watching and will be imitating you. When faced with difficult decisions or trying situations, think about what you would want your child to do.

Practice moral reasoning out loud. Let your child see and hear you ask important questions in determining right and wrong: "How would I like to be treated?" "How will my actions affect others?"

Always act in ways you would be proud to have your child copy. *Always* is the hard part, but keep in mind that the behavior or attitude your child sees in you will be the most important influence as he develops the character traits he will carry through life.



## Introduce Role Models

Although you are the primary role model in your child's life, you don't have to be the only one. Here's how to draw upon people she knows to help instill positive character traits:

- **Talk about relatives,** friends or celebrities who show respect, responsibility, compassion or other desirable traits. Make it a point to say how much you admire them and why.
- **Share your heroes with your child.** Introduce her to people such as Anne Frank, Martin Luther King, Abraham Lincoln and Mother Teresa. Discuss the traits you admire in them.
- **Encourage your child** to choose and find pictures of people she admires and tell you why. Heroes can be fictional—from books, movies or television—or people she knows, such as an uncle who volunteers with Habitat for Humanity or a grandmother who worked long hours to put a child through college.
- **Monitor your child's television time.** If she views disrespectful behavior, discuss it with her. Look for entertainment that showcases positive values. A fictional character, such as Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, offers a wonderful starting point to discuss ethics and values with a teen. For a younger child, talk about the positive character traits of Charlie in *Willie and the Chocolate Factory*.

**To teach your child:**

That it's important to give to others,.....give to a charitable organization.

To treat others with love and respect,.....treat your child with love and respect.

That honesty is important even when no one is looking,.....leave a note after bumping a car. in a lot.

That we have a responsibility to protect the environment,.....spend an afternoon cleaning up the park.

That it means something when you give your word,.....help your child with a project as promised.

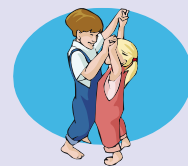
To aim high and work hard, even when it's tough,.....make goals and work hard.

“Children have never been very good at listening to their elders. But they have never failed to imitate them.”  
—James Baldwin

**Consider Developmental Milestones**

As you instill good character traits, keep your child's age in mind:

- **Preschoolers** can engage in role-playing to imagine how others feel when they are not respected. They also understand consequences. They can understand that they should not hit because it hurts the other person.



- **Elementary-aged children** have a strong sense of fairness. They show the most respect for adults who make fair rules and apply them fairly. It's helpful to give elementary-aged children a say in the rules they're expected to follow.



- **Middle and high school students** sometimes use disrespect to make themselves feel or seem more independent. It's important to continue to treat them with respect. But do not allow them to mistreat you. *Do allow* teens to express their growing independence through clothing or hairstyles. Those are phases. Respect is life-long.



# RESPECT

Respect is not about robotic obedience. It's an attitude that becomes ingrained as a child learns its importance. It encompasses respect for parents, authority, peers, belongings and, ultimately, himself. As such, respect is the foundation virtue for many other character traits, such as tolerance and fairness, kindness and empathy.

Respect encourages your child to treat others with consideration because he regards them as having worth. It starts with learning the golden rule—to treat others as he'd like to be treated. Experts say that until a child learns respect at home, he will not practice it in school or anywhere else.

To show and instill respect:

- 1 **Treat all members of the family** with respect. Think of the ways you like to be respected and give that to your child. Once she experiences how wonderful it is to be respected, she'll realize how important it is. Then she'll want to respect others.
- 2 **Use positive language.** "You can go to the mall after you finish your homework," rather than, "You cannot go out until you finish your homework." If you can avoid putting your child on the defensive, you'll build her respect for you.
- 3 **Listen with full attention.** Don't interrupt your child and try to ignore outside interruptions, such as the phone.
- 4 **Keep your promises.** Arrive on time to pick your child up. Let her know that her needs are just as important as those of any family member.
- 5 **Encourage self-respect** by promoting exercise, good eating habits and smart decisions.
- 6 **Use common courtesy.** Manners matter! Even toddlers can learn to say "please" and "thank you."
- 7 **Be fair.** Listen to your child's side of a story before reaching a conclusion. Don't argue. Explain that fair doesn't mean equal. Older children have more responsibilities and more freedom. Younger children have fewer responsibilities but less freedom.
- 8 **Respect your child's privacy** and belongings. Knock before entering her room. Ask permission before borrowing something of hers.
- 9 **Don't insult or make fun,** even in a teasing way, and even when your child is dishing it out. She'll learn best by your ignoring or quietly pointing out her negative actions.
- 10 **Show that you trust** your child's judgment. Let her make decisions when appropriate.





## Promote Respect for Rules

Children experience a sense of security when they are expected to follow rules. Rules in your home communicate to your child what's expected and how to behave. And a child who has learned to follow the rules at home is ready to follow rules at school, too.

To instill respect for rules:

- **Explain why rules are important** and why your child needs to respect rules, whether at home or at school. "Too much TV could get in the way of doing well in school."
- **Ask for your child's input** in making rules. Get his opinions, but make it clear that you are the one who has to decide on the rules.
- **Make reasonable rules.** Keep them to a manageable number. Kids cannot remember endless rules. Focus on the important stuff—"Parents must be home when you visit a friend." State them positively whenever possible.
- **Encourage your child** to play sports or other games that require him to follow rules.
- **Enforce the rules and consequences.** Caving in teaches your child that you don't mean what you say. Be consistent to avoid hearing the words that make every parent cringe, "But you let me do it last week!"
- **Talk about what would happen** if there were no rules at home or school or in the community. "What if there were no traffic signals?"
- **Obey your own rules.** At home, a no snacks before dinner rule means no cookies for you either. If you do not allow your child to use four-letter words, monitor your vocabulary, too.
- **Praise your child for obeying the rules.**

## RESPONSIBILITY

Instill responsibility by assigning tasks as soon as your child can handle them. You can start with simple household and personal care tasks and extend to having your teen watch a younger sibling while you run to the store. Since you know your own child's abilities, you can best decide on the right level of responsibilities.

Consider all the things you do for your child. Then choose one thing each month you can turn over to her. A younger child could select an outfit to wear to school the next day. An older child could prepare her lunch or plan a menu. Teach the skills needed to do the job, go through the activity with her, allow her to practice, and then turn the job over to her.





## Use Mistakes to Teach Responsibility



### Parents

It takes a good parent to raise a good child. But we all make mistakes. Regard them as opportunities. Show your child how you admit mistakes, deal with consequences and take responsibility.

When you goof up, be honest. Talk with your child about what you did wrong and what you should have done differently. "I should not have been so angry with my friend. I'll go over and apologize."

Talk about your past mistakes, too, sharing the lessons you learned from them. Reveal your bad choices, the consequences and how you tried to fix them. Through your example and discussion, your child will find it easier to admit wrongdoing and learn to take responsibility for her mistakes.

### Kids

Getting your child to assume responsibility for a wrong action is an important step in building character. In addition to admitting mistakes and apologizing, your child needs to understand his reasons for misbehaving and find solutions.

Your child needs to know that the things he does lead to consequences—both good and bad. If he forgets to take his homework to school, he won't get any credit. If you continually fix the mistake by taking his homework to the school, he won't worry about it the next time either.

Use these ideas to turn mistakes into character-builders:

- **Discuss the reasons** for the behavior. Was it a careless mistake or purposeful misbehavior? Encourage your child to consider why he decided to be unkind. Understanding what happened may prevent repeated mistakes.
- **Ask your child to promise** better behavior in the future. The promise should be specific and can be both verbal and written. Remind him about the promise when necessary.
- **Ask your child to make amends**, such as replacing a sibling's toy or a vase he destroyed.
- **Work with your child** to find tangible solutions. "I'll pick out one spot for important papers so I won't lose them." "I'll think harder before saying something that could be hurtful."
- **Encourage your child** to forgive himself. Not forgive and forget—forgive and learn. Congratulate him on his maturity: "I'm proud of how you're growing up."

## To help your child become more responsible:

- **Discuss what happens** when people are irresponsible—neglecting chores, or forgetting homework. What happens if no one does the dishes or waters the plant?
- **Connect responsibility to freedom.** The more responsibility your child shows, the more freedom and privileges he earns. For example, if your teen has regularly met his curfew extend it for a special event.
- **Allow your child acceptable choices** so he can practice making good decisions as to clothes, hobbies or meal selection.
- **Give your child an allowance** so he can purchase small items and save for larger ones. This will also help him learn what things cost.
- **Let your child take care of a pet** or garden. A younger child can assist you, while an older one can work without supervision.



## EMPATHY AND KINDNESS

Empathy allows your child to understand how others feel. It is a powerful character trait that motivates your child to do what is right because she can see the distress that poor behavior causes in others. When children understand and care about what others need, they have better relationships at school and lay the groundwork for good relationships throughout their lives.

To develop a caring attitude in your child:

- **Show your child unconditional love.** Studies show that children who feel loved are more friendly, generous and affectionate.
- **Share your personal concern** for family members, neighbors, animals, world hunger and the environment.
- **Get your child to think about how others feel.** “Hannah is new in school. Can you imagine how that would feel? What could you do to make her feel more relaxed?”
- **Ask your child about her feelings** after watching a sad television show. Suggest she put himself in the place of the suffering character.

## Teach Your Child to CARE

Make your child more sensitive to how others feel by employing the CARE acronym:

**C**all your child’s attention each time he exhibits any insensitive, uncaring behavior. Make a simple statement such as, “Making fun of Alan by shouting at him during the game was cruel.”

**A**sk, “How would you feel if that happened to you?” or “Would you like to be treated like that?”

**R**ecognize the consequences of the behavior by helping your child understand how he made the other child feel. Ask, “What do you think Sam is thinking and feeling right now?”

**E**xpress and explain your disapproval of the insensitive action. Make sure he understands what is wrong about the behavior and why you disapprove. Shift the focus from your child to the negative effect his words or actions have on others.

## TOLERANCE

Tolerance is respect for the dignity and rights of all people, even those whose beliefs, behaviors and appearance differ from our own.

Model tolerance for your child by treating everyone you encounter the same way. Encourage your child to accept and enjoy the rich diversity in the world. Expose her to diverse people—older people, those with physical or mental illnesses or disabilities, and people of various ethnic backgrounds. Discuss differences and similarities between your child and people in these groups.

To develop tolerance:

- **Teach your child about other cultures.** Together visit a multicultural fair, cook ethnic food or read a book about another country. Watch TV programs that teach about our multicultural heritage or about life in other countries.
- **Express your opinion about intolerance.** Note when a joke is offensive or when discriminatory language is used. When you speak up, you also teach another important character trait—standing up for what you believe.
- **Encourage your child to become pen pals** with a child from another country, through email or regular mail.
- **Seek out integrated environments** for yourself and your children—day care centers, schools, neighborhoods, churches, summer camps, sports leagues and more.
- **Play “Who am I?” with your family.** Describe a friend or relative without saying the name of the person. Focus mainly on personality traits.
- **Question your child if she’s acting intolerant.** Find out if she’s doing so to make herself feel better. Stress that we all have the right to be ourselves.
- **Watch your language** to make sure you are not unknowingly promoting stereotypes.



## Encourage Individuality



As you help your child learn to be tolerant of others, help him learn to be comfortable expressing his own individuality. Let your child know it’s okay to be different. Express your own unique personality to your child. He’ll learn that everyone has individual characteristics, interests and talents, and all are valuable.

Some kids feel a strong peer pressure to be like everyone else. Stress your child’s individuality in positive ways. Tell stories about his formative years. “When you were a baby, you loved to imitate elephants.” Have him start a scrapbook that captures his earliest memories. Encourage him to draw or paint pictures to express himself. A younger child can have a “Me Box.” Let him fill a shoebox with objects that express his interests and who he is.

## SELF-CONTROL

Learning self-control can help your child restrain her impulses and think before she acts. She'll not only behave better, but she'll also learn the social skills that will enable her to get along with others.

To promote self-control:

- **Talk with your child** about what to do if her feelings get out of control. What are the warning signs? Instead of saying or doing something she might later regret, encourage her to breathe deeply, take a time out or walk away from the situation.
- **Remind your child** of the golden rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Use role-reversals to help your child understand another person's feelings and actions.
- **Make your reaction** and punishment more severe when your child does something that hurts others, as opposed to when she does something wrong where she is the only one involved.
- **Encourage and teach sharing.** "You can play with the toy for a little bit, and then it will be Sara's turn." "Can Amy play with your bear? She'll give it to you after a few minutes." Praise your child for sharing and taking turns.



## Help Your Child Manage Anger and Conflict

Don't ignore family conflicts. Use them as teachable moments. Encourage compromise and collaboration. Let your child see that it's okay to disagree, as long as it's done with respect. Ask for an explanation when he shouts, "I hate you!" Get him to choose different words to express herself.

Role-play a situation where your child is likely to experience conflict with his friends, such as getting called a bad name. Encourage your child to express his feelings without making the conflict worse. Get him to consider options and consequences of his actions.

Don't allow name-calling and bullying. These are not part of growing up. People become scarred by such treatment, and often end up turning on others. Teach that name-calling hurts everyone. Don't accept, "I was just joking" as an excuse. It's not funny when someone ends up feeling rejected or put down. Voice your anger and disappointment if your child has done this. Have him apologize.

## Teach Your Child About Forgiveness

The next time your child loses his self-control and does something wrong, help him apologize and seek forgiveness. Then, talk about how being forgiven made him feel. The next time his little sister breaks a toy or spills something on his new t-shirt, he will be more open to forgiving.



## HONESTY AND TRUST

Honesty is more than just not telling a lie. It involves keeping your word and being true to yourself. When we lie, cheat or steal, everyone suffers. Get your child to think of a world where she cannot rely on or trust anyone. This will help her see how important it is to be honest. Make sure you are always honest with her.

To teach your child to be honest:

- **Talk about honesty** and all that it entails—from taking a small item, keeping the wrong change, to cheating on tests and making up stories. Tell your child that she may fool other people, but she can never fool herself. She can't be proud of anything she gets by cheating, stealing or lying.
- **Remember that preschoolers are still learning** the difference between fantasy and reality, so don't get upset by their lies.
- **Explain to an older child** that withholding important information is also lying. Silence in that case is not golden.
- **Make sure your child understands** that you always want the truth, even if she's afraid that you'll get angry. Tell her you'll love her no matter what and are proud of her for telling the truth.
- **Give your child many chances to tell the truth.** Tell the story of George Washington cutting down the cherry tree. Assure her you will not be angry if she tells you the truth.
- **Don't trap your child in a lie.** If you know where she's been, don't ask where she's been. Let her know you know.
- **Let your child know that you appreciate her honesty** in admitting a mistake (even if it took a few efforts to get the truth), and that this is why she is not being punished as severely.
- **Never call your child a liar.** You don't want to label your child in any way. That's a sure way to communicate extremely low expectations. Instead just tell her that you'd like to believe her, but it's hard to believe that she's telling the truth.
- **Emphasize that it's wrong to copy homework** or "borrow" term papers directly from the Internet.
- **Tell the story of the boy who cried wolf** once too often, to illustrate the importance of people being able to believe your word.
- **Check your child's motivation if she's been caught cheating.** Often, students cheat to please parents with unrealistic expectations regarding grades. Reflect on the messages you may be sending your child. Make sure you emphasize doing your best, not being the best.
- **Reward honesty with praise, new privileges and your trust.**



**"Character, in the long run, is the decisive factor in the life of an individual and of nations alike."**

**—Theodore Roosevelt**

## PERSEVERANCE

Success is all the sweeter when you've worked very hard for it. This is true with children as well. If you teach this lesson early, your child will believe he can accomplish nearly anything he sets his mind to!

To make your child become someone who perseveres through hard times:

- **Don't rush to your child's rescue** when he runs into trouble on some project or problem. Allow him to figure it out.
- **Don't let your child give up too soon.** If he wants to get a paper route or take guitar lessons, sit down with him and reach agreement on the minimum amount of time he will devote to it before quitting.
- **Offer words of encouragement.** "I believe in you." "Everyone makes mistakes." "I know you can do it if you keep trying." "I'm impressed with your hard work." "If you work on your science fair project every day this week, you're sure to be proud of the result."
- **Make sure your child knows how hard you had to work** to get where you are. Tell him how many hours you worked to master a computer program or paint a room. Also stress how great you felt when you succeeded after persevering.
- **Teach the value of failed attempts.** Tell your child how many times you tried to solve a puzzle or learn how to drive before you did it successfully.
- **Downplay your child's past failures** and do not overreact to his mistakes. Urge him to strive for excellence, not perfection.
- **Reward your child's effort** for sticking with something difficult. Plan a favorite activity.

## GRATITUDE

What's the difference between a spoiled child and a grateful one? Guidance and training from parents.

Don't pamper your child. Pampering ingrains a sense of entitlement. When you meet your child's every need, you're training her to expect the same from others. What a shocker it'll be when she's out in the real world! She could become angry with teachers and other authority figures and end up dissatisfied and disappointed with life. Instead, instill a powerful dose of gratitude. Here's how to administer it:

- **Let your child know you expect appreciation** from her for things you do. Don't respond to demands. Remind her of the correct way to ask for things.
- **Have your child express appreciation when she receives a gift.** Review with her what she should say. Get her into the habit of writing thank-you notes.
- **Start a gratitude calendar.** Have family members write things they are grateful for on the calendar each day.
- **Go around the table at dinnertime,** allowing each family member to express gratitude for something or someone.
- **Review the day** as you tuck your child into bed, naming a couple things for which each of you can be grateful that day.

"... sow a character and you reap a destiny."

— Charles Reade

## For More Information

### **Building Moral Intelligence: The Seven Essential Virtues That Teach Kids to Do the Right Thing**

by Michele Borba, Ed.D.  
John Wiley Company and Sons  
1-800-762-2974  
www.wiley.com

### **Educating the Heart: Lessons to Build Respect and Responsibility**

by Frank Siccone and Lilia Lopez  
Pearson Education  
1-800-947-7700  
ablongman.com

### **How to Raise a Child With a High EQ: A Parents' Guide to Emotional Intelligence**

by Lawrence E. Shapiro, Ph.D.  
HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.  
1-800-331-3761  
harpercollins.com

### **Motivated Minds: Raising Children to Love Learning**

by Deborah Stipek and Kathy Seal  
Henry Holt and Company  
1-800-330-8477

### **Raising Children Who Think for Themselves**

by Elisa Medhus, M.D.  
Beyond Words Publishing, Inc.  
1-800-284-9673  
www.beyondword.com.

### **Right From Wrong: Instilling a Sense of Integrity in Your Child**

by Michael Riera and Joseph Di Prisco  
Da Capo Publishing  
1-800-345-5359  
www.perseusbooks.com

### **Teach Your Children Values: 95 Things Parents Can Do!**

by Sharon Vincz Andrews and Cynthia D. Ali  
The Family Learning Association  
812/323-9862  
kidsscanlearn.com

### **Useful websites:**

[www.micheleborba.com](http://www.micheleborba.com)

[www.parentingbookmark.com/pages/ArticleHome.htm](http://www.parentingbookmark.com/pages/ArticleHome.htm)

[www.tolerance.org/parents](http://www.tolerance.org/parents)

[www.charactercounts.org](http://www.charactercounts.org)



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### **Family & Home Set**

*10 Great Ways to Teach Children Responsibility*  
*25 Ways You Can Put the Power of Routines to Work for You and Your Child*  
*52 Great Ways Families Can Spend Time Together*

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*Developmental Milestones for Preschool Children—Is My Child on Track?*  
*Preparing Your Child for Reading Success—Birth to Age Five*  
*How to Choose the Best Preschool or Day Care for Your Child*

### **School Readiness—Set 2**

*Common Discipline Problems of Preschoolers and How to Deal With Them*  
*37 Experiences Every Child Should Have Before Starting School*  
*Getting Your Child Ready for Kindergarten*

### **School Success—Set 1**

*The Road to Reading Success—Elementary School Years*  
*Common Discipline Problems of Elementary School Children and How to Solve Them*  
*31 Alternatives to TV and Video Games for Your Elementary School Child*

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*How to Help Children Do Their Best on Tests*  
*Helping Children Get Organized for Homework and Schoolwork*

### **School Success—Set 3**

*Help Your Child Develop Good Learning Styles*  
*How to Instill the Character Traits of Success in Your Child*  
*Seven Proven Ways to Motivate Children to Do Better in School*

### **When There is a Problem—Set 1**

*Help Your Child Deal With Bullies and Bullying*  
*Help Your Child Deal With Peer Pressure*  
*How to Help Your Struggling Student*

### **Other Important Titles**

*Common Discipline Problems of Teenagers and How to Solve Them*  
*What to Do If Your Child Has ADD/ADHD*  
*Common Discipline Problems of Middle School Children and How to Solve Them*  
*Making a Smooth Transition to Middle School*

*For more information about these and other materials for  
parents to encourage learning in their children:*

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