

# Moral Development in Children

We all want our children to become responsible, caring people. Anyone who has raised children knows how difficult a challenge this really is. One thing is clear, though: The family is where it happens. Parents have the most influence with children, and no one but parents can demonstrate greater care or consistency.

The opinions of people outside the family count, however. The comments—like “What a good baby you have!”—begin right away. (Usually, this statement means only that the baby is quiet and easy to please.) After the baby gets older, it’s a lot more difficult for people to say exactly what they think goodness in children is.

Many people, however, agree that caring for others is an important part of being good—both in us and in our children. Parents’ love is critical, because without it, children will not care for themselves. And they must care for themselves before they can care for anyone else.

The support that family members give each other, in fact, helps make a family strong. Parents and children learn to sense that they can count on one another. The sense of caring, however, must be built, day by day, as the children grow up and as the parents’ lives change. Goodness is a moving target.

As children grow up, they can help deal productively with the daily strife and long-term challenges that are part of life. Dealing head-on with problems, both one-on-one and as a family, is challenging, but essential. Obviously, parents need to take the lead in showing children how to deal with prob-

lems. Necessary ingredients include commitment, time, and a lot of talk. Learning to care also requires thought.

Parents can read about techniques to help them take this lead, and public libraries have a variety of books on the topic. Sometimes, too, the short-term help of a professional counselor is useful. In many cases, the example set by parents who deal openly with their own day-to-day difficulties is good for children. (But witnessing parents’ repeated, unsuccessful or hurtful attempts can harm children’s ability to care either for themselves or for others.)

Children also need the chance to act in caring ways. A good place to start within the family is to have children help with yard chores, kitchen chores, or caring for pets. Such tasks give children a structure in which to express their care. At first, children may resent new tasks. But when children become genuinely involved in such routines, they make a valuable contribution to the family. This fact will become obvious to them in time, especially as parents express genuine appreciation. The children’s contribution, in fact, can free up more of the parents’ time for family activities.

To find out more about children’s moral development or any other topic related to education and raising children, call the ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools (ERIC/CRESS) toll-free at 1-800/624-9120. We can provide a free packet of five short reports about parenting and family life. To find out more about the ERIC system and its services, call ACCESS ERIC at 1-800/LET-ERIC.

