

Your Family's Values in Action

Young children pick up many things by watching their parents, including what their parents think is important in life. In other words, they learn their family's values. You teach them to say please and thank you, and they learn that it is good to be polite and respectful. You praise them for putting their toys away, and they learn that tidiness is a virtue. But as family life fills up with more and more activities, how often do you sit back and think about what your actions are telling your children about your values?

Big rocks

There is a story about a professor who wanted to teach his students about time management. He brought a box into the classroom, took out a large jar and set it on the table. Without saying a word, he began putting rocks the size of golf balls into the jar. When he got to the top, he asked the students, "Is the jar full?" Most of them answered yes, but then he took out a bag of pebbles and poured them into the jar, filling the spaces around the big rocks, right up to the rim. "Is it full now?" he asked. "Yes," they answered again. This time the professor took a bag of sand and poured it into the jar to fill the spaces around the pebbles. "Full now?" came the question. Now the students were sure that yes was the right answer, so they were surprised when the professor took his water jug and poured water into the jar till the sand was saturated. "Now it is full," he declared. "And what can we learn from this demonstration?" One bright student answered, "No matter how full we think our schedule is, there's always room to squeeze in one more thing!" "Not quite," the professor replied. "If you think about it, you'll see that if I hadn't put the big rocks in first, I wouldn't have been able to get them in at all."

What comes first

Your family's values are the big rocks, those core beliefs that you want to pass on to your children. To make sure there is room for them, you may want to reflect on what is most important to you. Some people take time to make lists and then set priorities. Others come up with a family motto that expresses their beliefs and goals. Once you've identified your values, it becomes easier to make decisions about how to translate them into action.

Actions speak loudly

Since children are more influenced by what we do than by what we say, it's important to practise what we preach. You demonstrate community service by helping out when neighbours are sick. Children learn what it means to care for the environment when you get them to help sort garbage into recyclables and compostables. When you allow children to experience the consequences of their actions, they learn that you want them to take responsibility for what they have done.

Priorities

It can be easier to make choices if you have reflected on the priorities you give to different values. For instance, if being physically active is important to you, but a feeling of belonging to a family is *more* important, you might choose an activity that the whole family can enjoy together, like cycling or going to the swimming pool, instead of registering everyone in a separate sport.

You teach honesty by telling the truth even when it might save money to say the children are a bit younger than they are. However, it may be that you don't always tell the whole truth, for instance when you don't want to hurt another person's feelings by saying what you *really* think about their new outfit. That's when you teach that being tactful sometimes has a higher priority than being frank.

Making values explicit

Children's books and movies often tell stories that focus on prized qualities, such as patience, friendship, loyalty and courage. Young children enjoy simple, traditional tales; older children may appreciate biographies of famous people who have won general admiration. You can refer to these stories and use the same words to recognize times when your children are putting the values into practice. If your child sticks with a hard task, you can name the quality: "I see you're persevering, just like the tortoise in his race with the hare."

Stories can also serve as a starting point to involve older children in conversations about how to embody these values in your family's daily life. Try doing the demonstration with the jar like the professor and ask them: "What are our big rocks? Are we putting them in first?"

by Betsy Mann