

Teaching Respect to Children

by E. L. Schulman

According to recent data, respect has been on the decline in our society for quite some time now (Farkus et al. para. 1). Most parents would agree that the methods that worked to keep them in line when they were young are just not working for teenagers in today's age. Rude, discourteous behavior floods our everyday lives. It's all over the media; it's in our homes, classrooms, and on the streets. Over the country and around the world, parents are grappling with the challenge of how to impart the fundamental ethic of respecting others to their children. But far too often, many of them forget a child's natural tendency to imitate the behavior of the role models around them. If parents want respectful children, the first step is to master the art of respectful behavior and communication for themselves.

Many parents, especially those who are single, feel they are too busy (or they rationalize some other excuse) and therefore aren't able to teach basic values such as caring, responsibility, and respecting the basic dignity and rights of others to their children. It has become easy to say that it falls upon the schools to impart moral values and principles to our children, instead of accepting and encouraging personal parental responsibility. A survey by USA Weekend showed that out of 40,000 teenagers nationwide, eighty percent think values *should* be taught in schools because "parents don't do it or they believe it's the school's responsibility (Suh et al. para.2)."

The youngest years of a child's life are when his or her character is molded, and parents are the ones who make the biggest impact on a child's character. If children don't get taught some basic moral values at home at an early age, it is extremely difficult to instill those values once they are old enough for gradeschool. As such, Dr. Harold Koplewics, a psychiatrist and

expert in child development, suggests that parents should set aside quality time to be with their children – without distractions. This “together-time” lays the foundation on which a family’s value system can be built. Moreover, that hour or so that is completely dedicated to really listening to a child while spending time together, in an enjoyable way for him or her, reminds the youngster that he or she is valued. The self-validation that children absorb from this quality time boosts their self esteem and will enhance their relationships with others (Norville 29).

Some approaches to correcting children are counterproductive in the long run. For example, some parents imagine that they have instilled respect in their children when they get obedience through coercion. Even more so, the attitude that they should “scare the devil” out of their children is likely to backfire. Instead of motivating a child to do better, if one loses temper with a child, lashing out and punishing out of anger, the criticism can be a self-fulfilling prophecy. When it is the children *themselves* who are personally put down, instead of reprimanding them for their choice of poor *behavior*, they come to believe that yes, they *are intrinsically* all of the negative things that their authority figures call them: a good for nothing, a smart-aleck punk, a liar, a cheater. A child is likely to internalize these insults and come to the logical conclusion that it would be useless to try to be anything better, to work on bringing out the innate better side of his or her personality. Losing temper with children conveys to them that they are not important enough to be treated with respect – tearing down their self-esteem little by little. In addition, a victim of such abuse loses even more respect for authority figures (Radcliffe 17).

Some parents justify speaking disrespectfully to their children on the grounds that “*This is how my kids know I mean business.*” In *Mishpacha* magazine, Radcliffe responds to this attitude by saying that in reality, such parents are sending the message that the way to be heard is through communicating in a disrespectful manner (16). As youthful imitators, children learn

through example. And if such is the example that is set in the home, then that is what they learn. Discipline issues should and can be dealt with respectfully, without yelling or name-calling.

Of course, it is (or it should be) easy to be calm and respectful to others when things are going well. It's when we're struggling with negative emotions that the challenge to uphold our interpersonal relationships and obligations really becomes a difficult issue. The negative words and actions that are reflexively triggered by such emotions lack a vital element: respect. The angry person has lost respect for others and for his or her own self-image by communicating in a rude manner, and the listeners are disrespected by the discourteous language of the speaker. Conversely, maintaining respect for your children under emotional pressure tells them that you care about them very much - enough to treat them respectfully even when you are upset or frustrated with them. The element of self-control is a cornerstone of earning respect, and it breeds good self-esteem. A child who has been nurtured to have a healthy self-image is more likely to go out of his or her way for others, treat others well, and be sensitive to others' needs. Children with good self-esteem also tend to be more honest and accepting of themselves and others (Norville 176).

The idea of teaching respect through example applies to actions too. A child whose parents constantly show respect for their spouse, children, and others, will grow up showing respect as well. Children are very tuned-in to discrepancies between the way their parents tell them to behave and the way their parents act themselves, and they quickly internalize this. For example, Rabbi Yosaif Weiss, who is a school principal and has worked with children at risk for many years, related the following story. One of his students who had been caught stealing was brought to his office to be disciplined. When he asked the young man how his father would react to his misdeed, the boy laughed scornfully. "My father? He brags about how he tricks the IRS

every year so that he doesn't have to pay his taxes. He'll probably be proud of me!" The father was outraged at his son's conduct and punished him severely, yet took no responsibility for creating the attitude that caused the issue in the first place (The Jewish Observer 8). Rabbi Weiss's advice for parents is to strive to be what you want your child to become. The advice of Hasidic philosophy is that parents must be even better than the standard they want their children to achieve.

Acting as an example of respect also includes how you treat your children. Follow through with things you say you will do - be it a favor or a consequence. Give them responsibilities and trust. Hold them accountable for the mistakes that they make - this shows that you believe they are mature enough to deal with a situation of their own making. Let your children make mistakes and have accomplishments, so they will have a feeling of self-worth. Focus on and bring out the positive in them. The result of all this will be a good sense of identity, that will allow them to withstand negative peer pressure, and do the right thing (Norville 183).

It does not come naturally for most children to be respectful. In fact, young children are usually downright selfish. That's why children must be *raised*. They need to be *trained* to do the right thing and act and speak in a respectful manner. This immense privilege and responsibility of guiding our children to be respectful human beings isn't an easy one. It requires us to step up as role models, and show them the primary example of the traits we want them to develop – through the way we treat them, the way we treat others, and the way we treat ourselves.

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