



Dr. Karen Explains...

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How to Raise a Child of Character

How many of you think there are many children that struggle with communicating their needs, thoughts and feelings with words and instead are physically impulsive?

Whether you have noticed this behavior challenge with your own children, or in your observation of other children, it does exist for many. Bullying is now in the forefront of media coverage, and it seems that too many children are disinterested and have no concern over another child's feelings.

Some children barely stop for a moment to consider their own feelings or another's feelings, and how their choices impact others. But, a child that is a) interested in the thoughts of others, b) shows empathy, c) has the skill to express her thoughts with words instead of "acts out" her feelings (e.g., misbehaves), and d) has the ability to negotiate with words, can compromise, and has a positive sense of self, is less likely to make intentionally hurtful choices towards another; she is less likely to be a bully. In essence, a child that exhibits the aforementioned skills is on the road towards being a person of character.

There is a direct connection between a child's lack of empathy, a lack of taking ownership of his own actions, and a lack of communication skills. Your child's ability to communicate in a healthy interactive manner that reflects

good character should include sharing his feelings in a style that acknowledges the other with whom he dialogues, caring about and being interested in the other person's thoughts and being interested in trying to understand his own thoughts.

The selfishness of being wrapped up in himself and what he needs emotionally, rather than considering not only what another child needs but also how his own actions affect another's life experience, can be changed, taught, learned, and improved. It is our job as parents to teach and model those lessons.

Having great character includes caring for and about one's self and others. This can be a "both/and" experience rather than an "either/or" life philosophy. Parenting absolutely impacts children's development of character!

Here are four important life skills for your child to develop that will play a significant role in building his character:

1. Show empathy
2. Have the ability to compromise and negotiate
3. Take ownership of one's own actions
4. Express one's feelings and wants with words rather than with impulsive behavioral reactions

Empathy

In an effort to help your child develop empathy, teach him that "What the other person does says more about him than it does about you."

Teach your child this statement about others and help him to understand what it means by offering concrete examples to which he can relate. Then, to make sure he really understands this concept, ask him to share with you an example that proves this statement is true.

For an example, your son tells you that a schoolmate, John (who used to socialize a lot with your son), now excludes him whenever his is playing with his other friend, Mark, and John is more aggressive in school lately. In addition, your son has noticed that Mark's mother often drives John home.

Help your son examine the different reasons why John may be excluding him and being aggressive. Perhaps John's mom cannot pick him up from school because she has to work more hours and Mark's mom is doing John's mom a favor.

Perhaps John is angry and hurt that his mother is not as available or attentive as she used to be and he therefore is attaching himself more onto Mark since he feels like that is who is helping him through this painful time right now.

Perhaps John is struggling sharing Mark and being inclusive because he feels the stability in his life is threatened and does not know how to communicate this feeling of instability with words; instead he acts out his feelings of instability and insecurity. Or, perhaps John's aggressive behavior is also a result of his hurt feelings. Explore with

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your son what feelings he may have about John and whether his reaction to John's behavior may be different based on this new perspective.

Compromise and Negotiation

In an effort to help your child develop the ability to compromise and negotiate, provide her with the "proud technique." Communicate the following types of statements: "I'm so proud of you when you _____. Are you proud of yourself?" and "When you _____ it must make you not feel so good about your choices. Next time what are other options so you can feel great about your choices and who you are? What can you say to your friend? That is a great plan, I will be so proud of you when you _____ and I see you'll be proud of yourself when you _____."

Sharing that you are proud of your daughter helps develop her sense of self-worth. Also, exploring your child's options with her of what she can do when she is not being her best is respectful. By sharing with her that both you and she will be proud when she implements positive behaviors relays that you believe she will.

Use examples that are in sync and fit with your child's life that include themes such as negotiation with other children, compromise, and taking turns as it applies to the proud technique. If you teach your child how to handle these social interactions by offering healthy options, then she will have a toolbox to use when situations arise that include challenging negotiations. This instills the skills to negotiate and compromise rather than express her wants through controlling and disrespectful methods that can lead to bullying.

Ownership

It is important to teach your child to take ownership of his behavior, as his skill impacts his choices and thoughts about himself and others. When he takes ownership of his actions and words, he can choose to grow, enhance, improve, and not blame others for what he needs to improve upon.

The following statement to share with your child is a "self-talk technique" he can use when he feels frustrated, hurt, angry, sad, disappointed, or any other emotion with regards to someone else's actions and/or any event that causes emotional distress, "I cannot control another's behavior or words. What I can do is control my reaction to another and my own choices and actions."

In an effort to feel in control of one's self, which is an important part of character development, teach your child to use the "self-talk technique" in times when he should remind himself not to react impulsively or behaviorally, and rather to think first before he reacts, thereby being in control of his actions.

Words

Teach your child to use her words to share her feelings and opinions instead "acting out" her feelings with her negative behavior.

Teach your child the following communication script to use when she interacts with you and with her peers. "When you _____, it makes me feel _____. When I feel _____, it makes me want to _____. Instead, I will _____, and hope _____." (For example, "When you whisper to Mary and laugh, it makes me feel embarrassed. When I feel embarrassed, it makes me want to push you. Instead, I will go have fun with Laura, and hope that we can work it out and be friends.")

Remember, on your parenting journey what you say and do matter immensely, and you play a significant role in your child's character development.

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