

# Building CHARACTER



## How to Raise Kids to Be Good in a World That Often Isn't

By Elaine Rogers

Initially, teaching a child the difference between right and wrong is a pretty straightforward proposition: Cheerios tossed on the floor are a no-no; giving a sister a bop to the head is a bigger one. But add core values such as honesty, fairness, dependability and compassion to the mix, and character lessons get a lot more complicated.

The notion of raising G-rated kids in an increasingly R-rated world has become a classic parenting dilemma. As a culture, we've relaxed our morals over the past few decades. Today's parents have to sift through a mixed bag of media and entertainment offerings – all of which have upped the ante considerably in violent, sexual or just plain disrespectful content. Meanwhile, misbehaving sports figures, provocative starlets, gangsta rappers and other icons routinely make headlines for all the wrong reasons, contributing to what Michael Josephson, founder of the Los Angeles-based Josephson Institute of Ethics, dubs “the widening hole in the moral ozone.”

How wide is it?

The Josephson Institute, which trains educators, business people, public officials and even athletes in ethics, surveys high school students on the topic every other year. Its 2006 “Report Card on the Ethics of American Youth” found some pretty big gaps between what teens believe – and what they do.

The good news is that 89 percent of the more than 36,000 teens surveyed believe that being a good person is more important than being rich, and that lying and cheating isn't worth it because it hurts your character. But while 92 percent give themselves high marks for their own ethics:



With the understanding that actions speak louder than words, parents can use family activities, particularly ones centered on volunteering or helping others, as occasions to emphasize important aspects of good character.

- 82 percent admit they've lied to their parents about something significant during the past year.
- 62 percent admit to cheating on a test in the same time frame.
- 28 percent say they've stolen something from a store.

When the survey became public last fall, Michael Josephson noted that the rates of kids reporting dishonest behavior hadn't really changed from the institute's last survey in 2004. But he also worried that “unacceptably high rates of dishonesty have become the norm.”

Lying, cheating and stealing? What's happening to character, and how can parents make sure they instill strong moral values in their kids?

### A Top Priority

Raising a moral child is still a primary objective for most parents. But today's moms and dads are confounded by the outside influences they have to compete with to reach their children.

“Kids are exposed at age 4 to things that they might not have seen until they were 12 in another era,” says Jan Jones, a mother of three. “Sometimes, it seems a bit like drinking from a fire hose for kids to make much sense of everything that’s out there and to make good decisions.”

The research firm Public Agenda surveyed 1,607 parents nationwide for its 2002 report “Easier Said Than Done: Parents Talk About Raising Children in Today’s America.”

- Nearly half of the parents said they feared they weren’t doing enough at home to gird their kids against the harm of the outside world, including drugs and alcohol, negative images in the media, and negative influences from their children’s peers.

- 47 percent admitted to worrying more about protecting their children from negative social influences than paying the bills. Even low-income parents prioritized the issue similarly, with 42 percent citing societal influences as a bigger concern than family finances.

- 49 percent worried more about raising a well-behaved child who has good values than about providing for that child’s physical needs.

What character traits do parents consider essential? In the Public Agenda survey:

- 91 percent cited honesty
- 84 percent said courtesy and politeness
- 83 percent pegged self-control and self-discipline
- 82 percent mentioned always doing your best in school

## How Do You Teach Character?

In spite of all that we’re up against, the way to teach children good character remains pretty basic, and incredibly important. Essentially, character educators say, it has a lot to do with talking with our kids more, communicating our beliefs and practicing what we preach. Here, from the experts, are the ABC’s of character building for parents on the front lines:

■ **Walk the walk.** In daily family life, parents need to consistently model the values they want in their children.

“Parents need to be clear on whether moral values really are a priority,” says Arthur Dobrin, a professor of humanities

# Shoplifting: A Downward Spiral



Barbara Staib’s job at the National Association for Shoplifting Prevention (NASP) is all about increasing awareness that shoplifting is wrong, wrong, wrong! But it’s an uphill battle, and possibly a losing one, the director of development and communications says, since recent NASP findings estimate that one in four kids shoplift.

Shoplifting has become “a downward spiral in our societal fabric,” Staib says, one that is trivialized in teenagers’ minds by a confluence of factors: peer pressure, a legal system that’s not addressing the issue, companies that won’t prosecute (because it’s too costly to pursue), and par-

ents who aren’t addressing the problem. Add to that our rampant consumerism and a retail-centric world where youths ages 17 to 25 have enormous spending power, and no wonder 25 percent of America’s 23 million shoplifters are kids, she says.

“Our young people are growing up in a world where they’ve got their iPods and computers and cell phones, and they have a sense of entitlement about those things,” Staib says. “They don’t consider them luxuries like their parents might have. They’ve got all this stuff, and they want more. So when they find themselves out at Wal-Mart – this big company with all this money – and they just want this one little CD, they say, ‘I’m not hurting anyone,’ and they take it.”

Worse, Staib adds, is the lack of thought kids put to committing a crime. Credit for that may fall

squarely on the shoulders of parents, she says, since a recent survey finds that, compared to surveys in years past, 50 percent fewer kids say their parents have even talked to them about shoplifting.

“I think parents may be battling so many other things, shoplifting probably isn’t that high on the list,” Staib reasons. “Or, it may be more likely that they simply assume their kids just wouldn’t ever do it because they know it’s wrong – so it’s one of those things that kind of goes without saying.”

Apparently, it shouldn’t.

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at Hofstra University and author of *Teaching Right From Wrong: 40 Things You Can Do to Raise a Moral Child*. “You can’t sit on the fence, saying one thing and doing another with moral education.”

Leslie Talbot, an attorney and mother of two, believes that parents impart daily lessons about values to their kids, whether intended or not, through their actions. “Do you let [your kids] order off a menu that says 12 and under, even though they are 13? Do you sneak that extra person into the hotel room or pay and get the second room?” she asks.

Dobrin agrees: “What a parent does is so much more important than what he or she says.”

■ **Show some respect.** Kids first witness and develop good character traits through interactions between family members. The most essential step for parents is to consistently

treat their children in a respectful manner, says Merle Schwartz, director of education and research at the Character Education Partnership (CEP), a Washington, D.C.-based coalition advocating for character education in the nation's K-12 schools.

"If parents encourage kids to talk about their feelings, teach them about giving those 'I messages' and being active listeners, they'll model that," she says. "Eventually, that type of respectful behavior will carry over into external arenas, but that's where it all has to start."

■ **Tell it like it is.** Given the many questionable messages wafting through our children's world, it's easy enough for parents to vocalize their objections.

"Nobody's too busy to tell it like it is when they see something on TV," says Bernice Lerner, director of the Center for Advancement of Ethics and Character (CAEC) at Boston University's School of Education. "If your kids are watching a show and you think what a character does or says is awful, it doesn't take much effort to tell your kids that. Your opinions count and they'll hear your messages. It seeps in."

■ **Fill the void.** Lerner recommends offsetting the effects of confusing messages with vibrant, life-affirming influences.

"I think parents should put really good, compelling things before their children," she says. "Expose them to good music, literature, cultural experiences and interesting activities. Get them inspired and involved with the world around them by exposing them to the *good* things that are out there."

■ **Promote charity and social justice.** Dobrin and his



**Parents have to be clear about the values they want their kids to have, and model them consistently in everyday life.**

family have a Christmas tradition of devoting time to writing letters of protest and appeal on behalf of prisoners of conscience. It's a habit he started with his own children, and now, his young grandchildren participate as well.

Dobrin also suggests asking kids to earmark a portion of their allowances for a charity of their own choosing. Such activities, he says, encourage children "to take an interest in the world at large," promoting the virtues of charity, social justice and having the courage of your conviction.

■ **Find "teaching moments."** Stopping to help an elderly stranger find her keys or going back into the store to tell the cashier that he gave you too much change are ordinary events with immeasurable impact on a kid's psyche, says Barbara Staib of the National Association for Shoplifting Prevention, which works to raise public awareness of "one of the most prevalent crimes in the U.S."

Sometimes, we let such opportunities pass because of the distrustful world we live in, Staib says, but these are "teaching moments." Eventually, kids learn that "what goes around, comes around" – if you're honest and respectful with someone else, that person will likely be that way with you.

## Crossing the Line

Kids learn about character from their families, schools, friends and even strangers. And the lessons aren't always black and white. Eventually, so-called *situational ethics* show up on a child's good vs. bad radar.

For instance, parents often instruct children in the art of telling a "white lie" to avoid hurting someone's feelings. Few would agree that honesty at all costs is a more noble virtue than compassion or kindness. But once you open the door to dishonesty, it may become harder to discern a clear boundary between a little white lie for compassion's sake and a fib meant to avoid punishment or a fudging for the sake of success.

"Honesty is fluid and people can justify almost anything. You can justify lying if it's to save someone's feelings or to protect someone you love," Staib says. "Most of us could even justify murder if it were done in the name of protecting ourselves or others."

Often, grown-ups who consider themselves people of good moral character continue to struggle with sticky situations involving competing values. Staib, who is also a mom, admits to the common offense of telling schools her daughter was sick instead of on a special family trip, in order to protect her from the consequences of an unexcused absence.

Adults are fairly adept at compartmentalizing such actions,

## The Cynics Among Us

American teens are a pretty cynical bunch when it comes to ethics. The Josephson Institute of Ethics' 2006 "Report Card on the Ethics of American Youth" revealed that while 90 percent of teens say their parents want them to do the right thing – no matter what the cost:

- 59 percent believe that successful people do what they must to win, even if others consider it cheating; and
- 23 percent believe that people who lie, cheat and break the rules are more likely to succeed than those who don't.

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and Staib believes that as long as they reflect on these situations and ask themselves the difficult questions, they're probably still on the right side of the good person/bad person line. But being able to discern why one lie might be more acceptable than another is a difficult concept for youngsters.

"All kids see is the lie," says Julie Dwyer, who heads up the Josephson Institute's youth education program, Character Counts.

So parents need to be both careful and clear with their kids. On the upside, lest parents think that one or two missteps will scar their kids forever, experts say that when children witness how parents deal with the gray areas of ethics, it actually encourages the development of critical thinking. And that's an essential component of good character.

"No one is perfect. Everyone struggles," Dwyer says. "The best thing, I think, is that when you do struggle, you should let your kids see that. It helps them think things through, too, and decide what they would do." ♦

Elaine Rogers is an award-winning freelance writer and mother.

## RESOURCES

### Books

These books are just a few among many that focus on teaching children good character.

- ***A Call to Character: A Family Treasury of Stories, Poems, Plays, Proverbs and Fables to Guide the Development of Values for You and Your Children***, by Collin Greer and Herbert Kohl, HarperCollins Publishers, 1995.
- ***Instilling a Sense of Integrity in Your Child***, by Joe DiPrisco with Michael Riera, Perseus Publishing, 2003.
- ***Teaching Right from Wrong: 40 Things You Can Do to Raise a Moral Child***, by Arthur Dobrin, Berkley Books, 2001.

### Organizations

- **Center for the Advancement of Ethics and Character (CAEC)** – [www.bu.edu/education/caec](http://www.bu.edu/education/caec) – Develops training and awareness programs on character education, with a focus on schools. See the Web site's "For Parents" section for 10 tips on teaching children character.
- **Character Education Partnership (CEP)** – [www.character.org](http://www.character.org) – Advocates effective character education in K-12 schools and promotes the concept that character education must be infused throughout the school environment.
- **Josephson Institute of Ethics** – [www.josephsoninstitute.org](http://www.josephsoninstitute.org) – Develops ethics education materials, including the youth initiative Character Counts ([www.charactercounts.org](http://www.charactercounts.org)), and school, business and public training programs. It surveys high school students on ethics every two years for its "Report Card on the Ethics of American Youth."
- **National Association for Shoplifting Prevention (NASP)** – [www.shopliftingprevention.org](http://www.shopliftingprevention.org) – Works to raise public awareness about shoplifting, and to change the attitudes and behavior behind it.