

Good values guide good behaviour

I dare you!

"Go on, I dare you!" said Ella. The children were using the neighbour's fence post for target practice.

Tao picked up a stone and took aim. The stone hit the post and then bounced off onto the neighbour's car breaking the windscreen. "Oh no!" said Tao. "Good shot, Tao!" cheered Ella. "We're in trouble now," said Harry. "Come on, let's go before anyone sees us," said Tao.

Later that day, their neighbour came over. He wanted to know if anyone had seen what happened to his car. "Do you know anything about it?" asked Harry's mother. "We don't know anything about it," said Ella. But Tao began to cry, "They dared me to do it." "It wasn't his fault, Mum," said Harry. "It was that stupid game."

'Dare' games like this story are a common way for children to test the limits that adults set for them. At the same time, children try out their own strengths and each other's. While this kind of behaviour is a normal part of childhood, effective guidance from adults is needed to help children develop skills to make responsible decisions and to stand up to social pressure.

Influences on children's social development

Children's understandings of responsibility are influenced by their families, by school staff, by community members, by other children and also by the things children see and hear in the media. Young children especially watch and copy the attitudes and behaviour of those closest to them.

As children grow older, they become more aware of peer group values and of the behaviours of role models such as sporting heroes or media personalities. They learn to think through and discuss the values and attitudes they observe in others and use themselves. They think about whether decisions that are made are fair or whether someone is being 'mean' to them or to others.

When adults are fair, caring and respectful, children feel a greater sense of trust and belonging. Children are more likely to cooperate with adult guidance when they feel valued and respected. By contrast, when children feel they have been treated unfairly they are less likely to listen and more likely to try to avoid or resist discipline.

Teaching children values

Values are the internal guides we have for our behaviour. They help us to make choices, and to make judgements about what is right and wrong, good or bad, fair or unfair. While cultures differ in the emphasis they place on particular values (eg individual freedom or duty to family) there are many which are common to all cultures like respect, caring, and justice.

Parents and carers are children's first and most important teachers of values. Schools also have a major role to play in teaching values. Some of the ways that schools help children learn positive social values include:

- teaching children how to think about values and how to behave in ways that are caring, respectful, etcetera
- teaching cooperative behaviours inside the classroom and in the playground
- making sure that behaviour and discipline issues are managed in ways that are positive, consistent and fair
- providing opportunities for children to practise good citizenship – through peer mentoring, student representative council, community projects, etcetera.

How parents and carers can help

Parents and carers can use a range of strategies to help children learn about social values. The following ideas can help.

Teach by example

Children often learn more from what you do than what you say. Your own behaviour is important for showing children how you would like them to behave. Talking about the reasons for your behaviour can help to make your values and expectations clear.

Read and discuss stories that demonstrate positive values

Choose children's stories that reflect the kinds of values you want children to learn. Talk about the story and what can be learnt. You might ask questions like: "How do you think that person feels? Why do you think he/she did that? Was it a good idea? How could he/she have done it better?"

Check what children are watching on TV

Make sure that the programs children watch and the electronic games they play are suitable for their age and reflect positive values. Watching violence on television and playing violent video games can lead to aggressive behaviour.

Teach children to learn from mistakes

Mistakes provide opportunities for teaching and reinforcing positive values. Support and acknowledge children when they admit mistakes and help them find ways to make up for them. Ask them to suggest ways of repairing any damage they have caused to relationships, people or property.

Help children to think about values

Talk with children about the social values and attitudes they encounter in everyday situations and on TV. Teaching children to question and think about social values helps them to be clear about their own values and strengthens their ability to resist pressure from peers, advertising and other media.

Teaching children about values supports their social development. It helps them develop the knowledge and skills they need to play a positive role in society.

This resource is part of a range of KidsMatter Primary information sheets for families and school staff. View them all online at www.kidsmatter.edu.au



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