Teaching Children Values

There is no such thing as absolute value in this world. You can only estimate what a thing is worth to you.

—Charles Dudley Warner

Life is not what it used to be. Yesterday’s child grew up, lived, and died within a small community. Today’s child, on the other hand, faces a kaleidoscope of choices. And tomorrow’s child will enter an even more diverse world. You may wonder how you can help your child live in the new world that lies ahead.

Among the most important things you can provide are the tools to build a set of values.

Values: the cornerstones

Your values are the ideas you have about what is important and what is not; what is good and what is bad; what is right and what is wrong. You may, for example, think the most worthwhile things in life are honesty and friendship. Or you may pursue wealth and power. You may never even stop to think about your values. Nevertheless, they are there, standing behind your beliefs, attitudes, interests, and goals. They affect:

• what you do with your free time,
• how you spend your money,
• what friends you choose,
• how you dress, and
• what you say.

In other words, your values give meaning and direction to every part of your life.

Experience: the bricks

Most of your values have grown out of your experience within a certain family and culture. Some cultures, for example, place a high value on learning. Others think physical fitness is more important. Some cultures stress group cooperation, others reward individual ambition.

But, most likely, the values you learned as a child have changed over time. As the world has changed, so have your values. As you have grown, so have they.

You probably have found, too, that it is not always easy to decide what is good and bad, right and wrong, true and false. To find out what values work best for you, you have to weigh all the choices. And you have to act on these choices to learn if you are willing to accept the results. The best time to start clarifying values in these ways is in a child’s earliest years.

Parents: the architects

Your values will have a great effect on your children. But your children also are picking up other ideas about values from everything and everyone around them.

Your children may have found that some people hold values that seem strange or even wrong. Without some help from you, your children may be confused about what to believe. They may put down values that are different from their own. Or, they may adopt values you feel are dangerous.
To be sure your children form values you want them to have:

- Know what you value.
- Help children think about their values.
- Talk with children about other people’s values.
- Try to give your children confidence in their values and at the same time respect the values of others.

Your children’s search for the meaning of values might lead you to ask yourself why you value certain things. It could force you to work through problems you tried to sweep under the rug. In other words, as you help your children build values, you strengthen your own.

Some valuable decisions

Since your children will end up with many of the same values as yours, you should look closely at your values.

- Are you proud to pass these values on to your children?
- Do you tell your children what you believe and where you stand?
- Do you explain why you make certain decisions and choices?
- Are your children getting the same messages from both you and your spouse or partner?
- Do you practice what you preach?

Here are three exercises to start you thinking about your values.

What would you choose?

- If you could spend one day doing anything you wanted, what would you do?
- If you had a thousand dollars, how would you spend it?
- If you could be anyone in the world, who would you be?
- What do your choices show about what is important to you?

Where are your priorities? If you had to make a choice, would you rather:

- help fight racism or solve the energy problem?
- work at a routine job and get a weekly paycheck or do more exciting work but never know where your next check is coming from?
- spend your weekends fixing up a beautiful old house or work as a volunteer on a hotline?

How do you think you developed these preferences? What values are they based on?

What would you say?

You and your 6-year-old daughter are shopping with your best friend and her 2 children. As your friend drives into a crowded parking lot, she slams into a parked car, breaking a headlight and leaving a large dent. Since no one else saw the accident, she decides not to do anything about it. She quickly parks her car. As you are walking out of the lot, the owner of the other car returns. He asks if either of you saw who hit his car.

What would you say? What values might be in conflict here? How would you explain your decision to your daughter?