

Building a Morally Intellectual Base

Teaching our Children to Do the Right Thing

Sow a thought and you reap an act; sow an act and you reap a habit; sow a habit and you reap a character; sow a character and you reap a destiny. --- Charles Reade

We may not realize it but there is a clear crisis in today's society. A crisis that involves our most cherished possession - our children. The shocking tragedies involving children reported everyday together with our constant worry of youth violence, peer cruelty, drug abuse, increase in incivility, vulgarity, cheating and dishonesty should be enough to warrant a declaration of national emergency. Parents and our leaders are baffled and exasperated.

Endless variety of legal and educational reforms have been tried, but the crisis remains. In all these strategies there appears to be one critical piece missing: the moral side of our children's lives. In this increasingly toxic environment it is moral strength that our children need to keep them on a right and honorable path. Parents and teachers need a lot more guidance if they are to succeed in helping their kids not only to think morally but also to act morally.

Moral intelligence is the capacity to understand right from wrong. It covers such basic virtues as the ability to recognize someone's pain and to stop oneself from acting on cruel intentions, to control one's impulses and delay gratification, to listen openly to all sides before judging, to accept and appreciate differences, to recognize unethical choices, to stand up against injustice and to treat others with compassion and respect. These virtues may also be simply classified and defined as:

Empathy - Identifying with and feeling other people's concerns.

Conscience – Knowing the right and decent way to act and acting that way.

Self-control – Regulating your thoughts and actions so that you stop any pressures from within and without and act the way you know and feel is right.

Respect - Showing, you value others by treating them in a courteous and considerate way.

Kindness – Demonstrating concern about the welfare and feeling of others.

Tolerance – Respecting the dignity and rights of all persons, even those whose beliefs and behaviors differ from our own.

Fairness – Choosing to be open-minded and to act in a just and fair way.

Today's kids have to be raised in an environment that is not conducive to easy moral teaching. Social factors such as adult supervision, models of moral behaviour, spiritual and religious training, meaningful adult relationships, specialist schools, clear national values, community support, stability and adequate parenting etc. are increasingly lacking. On top of all these our children are bombarded with messages from outside media that go against the values we are trying to instil. We may try and shield them from these negative influences in our homes but once they step outside they lurk in every corner.

The good news is that moral intelligence is learned. Parents and teachers must not be discouraged. Research shows that babies as young as six months of age responds to others' distress and acquiring the foundation for empathy. Parents therefore must not make the mistake of waiting until their kids are six or seven, the so-called age of reason, to cultivate their moral capabilities. Such delays only increases the child's potential for learning destructive negative habits.

Moral growth is an ongoing process. Start to instill the basic virtues and the child will have the potential to attain even higher moral virtues such as self-discipline, humility, courage, temperance, integrity, mercy, altruism, etc.

So what practices should parents and teachers adopt. Among others the following will achieve the best results.

1. *Be a strong moral example.* – showing the quality of virtue is more powerful than telling.
2. *Develop a close, mutually respectful relationship.* – building this kind of relationship requires one-to-one personal, uninterrupted time.
3. *Share your moral beliefs.* – use every source such as TV, news, magazines, schools, friends and home that raise moral issues to start a discussion.
4. *Expect and demand moral behaviors.* - set expectations and stick to them.
5. *Use moral reasoning and questioning.* – right kind of questions help kids to expand their ability to understand the consequences of their behavior.
6. *Explain your parenting behavior.* – clearly describing why you set a standard helps enhance the child's moral growth.

Experts say that what we do is more powerful moral lesson than what we say.

We all have a tendency to think that our own children are not the same as others. This line of thought is especially prevalent among us Indians. This is not so. Our children too are growing up in the same environment as the others and are under the same pressures. We can no longer sit back and hope our children will become caring and decent human beings.

Our Indian mythology records several instances of behaviours learnt by the child while still in the mother's womb. Neither are such examples lacking in modern times. For our own sake and for the sake of our children let us sow the right habit and reap the destiny of our desire.

Article compiled by: Keshavlal J Patel.