

Question: How can we teach our children to be honest?

During the three years that Jesus ministered on earth, he modeled some wonderful principles for teaching children by the way he taught and developed his disciples. He lived before them in ways that were consistent with his words. He was always gentle and patient with them, but he also loved them enough to rebuke them sternly when the situation demanded it (See Matthew 16:23 and Luke 9:54). No matter what the disciples did, they knew that he would never stop loving them and that he would forgive them as they listened and obeyed him. Let's think about ways we can apply some of these principles as we teach our children to value honesty.

As adults, we must always set an example for our children by speaking truthfully and living with integrity just as Jesus did. More than anyone else, parents naturally have more influence on the way their children think, act and speak. Thus, they must strive to avoid lying, cheating, stealing or manipulating the truth—even in small things. When a parent tells a child to lie on the phone and say, “Mommy is not home now,” or when a parent does not do what he says he will do for or with his child, soon the child understands that truth is more a matter of convenience than facts. Even when their children are not present, the behavior of parents needs to be consistent with the values they proclaim to their children. Just imagine how disappointing it would be for a child to learn from another source about a parent's dishonest words or actions.

Beginning in the early years, children can be taught the difference between truth and falsehood through stories. Jesus, a master storyteller, often told his disciples parables and used illustrations that contrasted right and wrong. Stories can illustrate the kind of consequences that come from right or wrong choices and actions. Sometimes stories can show how decisions bring immediate consequences while at other times the consequences are delayed. One should not be deceived into thinking all is well because he or she seems to have “gotten away with it.” Sooner or later the consequences will come.

Stories of biblical people can provide an opportunity to discuss with our children how to or how not to react in various situations in life. Old Testament stories like those of King David, the wicked Jezebel, the

righteous Daniel or Joseph and the New Testament story of Ananias and Sapphira are filled with valuable lessons on honesty and integrity in life. By asking the child what he thinks the character in the story should have done, a parent can help him learn to reason for himself about honesty and truth.

While teaching our children to value honesty, we must also teach them to accept responsibility for their own actions by allowing them to face the natural consequences of their choices when possible. We and our children need to hear about the harm caused by dishonesty not only to individuals but also to society in general. We need to hear “what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive” (Quote from Sir Walter Scott). But when children can learn the consequences of dishonesty through personal experience, they are more likely to remember the lesson and listen to sound advice and warnings in the future.

In addition, we should not over react when a child makes a mistake. Severe punishment administered even when a child makes a mistake by accident can lead a child to dishonesty in order to escape punishment. Children need to know that they will be loved unconditionally, even when they do wrong. Jesus taught his disciples that they could always be forgiven when they recognized and admitted their mistakes (Luke 17:1-4). This encourages honesty, but overreaction encourages dishonesty.

In a world filled with so much dishonesty and the corruption, we cannot overemphasize the need to teach the next generation the values that can protect and bless them. But for us to do the job of teaching our children in this kind of world, we need the help of our Lord so we can model and teach the right behavior. I recommend frequent and fervent prayer in behalf of parents in our world today.

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