

Question: How can I keep selfishness from becoming a part of the character of my eight year old?

What would Jesus do?

The New Testament letter to the Christians in Philippi provides a good model for developing unselfishness. These were good people; but a dispute of unknown nature between two prominent women (Philippians 4:2-3) had led to selfish competitiveness, jealousy and grumbling in the church. Thus, the writer appeals for the church to “do nothing out of selfish ambition and vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than himself” (Phil. 2:3). Although not dealing specifically with children, Paul’s letter to the Philippians well illustrates principles that Jesus would recommend for building unselfishness into the character of a child.

From the beginning, the Spirit-guided writer instructed the Philippians about desired conduct and traits, as well as things to avoid in life. Before anyone, child or adult, can do the right thing, he must be taught what is right and what is wrong. Children are often confused by a lack of specific instruction. They may be able to figure out some things by trial and error, but this approach can bring unnecessarily painful experiences. Wise parents take the time needed to be with their children and to instruct them about specific qualities like unselfishness.

Paul, the writer of Philippians, also modeled unselfishness in his own life (Phil. 1:17-18). In the same manner, parents need to model unselfishness toward their children and others in front of the children. Actions always speak louder than words. Children are more likely to do what they see their parents doing than what the parents are saying. Words must be reinforced by example.

In addition, Paul took time to commend the Philippians for their good qualities. Behaviors that are reinforced by praise are more likely to be repeated. Although there is a place for corrective discipline, undesirable conduct is not easily eliminated unless it is replaced with the right conduct and positive reinforcement of that conduct.

Finally, Paul pointed the Philippians to other commendable examples of unselfishness beginning with Jesus. Jesus did not consider equality with God something to hold on to but humbled himself in service even to

the point of death on the cross (Phil. 2:5-11). If we want our children to learn to be unselfish, we need to teach them about Jesus who gave his life unselfishly for us while we were still selfish sinners.

Paul also provided illustrations of unselfishness in the lives of people who were well-known and loved by the Christians in Philippi. He mentioned Timothy as an example of one who took a genuine interest in the good of others instead of always looking out for his own interests (Phil. 2:20-21). He also spoke of a Christian brother named Epaphroditus who risked his own life out of deep concern for Paul in prison (Phil. 2:25-30). We can help our children develop good character by surrounding them with people like these who are good models of unselfish service toward others.

As a child grows in ability to do for herself, we must help her develop independence and consideration for others. Teaching a child to unselfishly share requires time and patience. We must not expect too much too soon, but neither can we assume that good character will develop without intentional guidance. May God bless you as you strive to train your child in the way she should go in life (Proverbs 22:6).

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