

THE TOP 10 THINGS

What Parents Can Do to Help Kids Build Character

by Jim Loehr

1. Make the character development of your children your highest priority every day, every month, every year. If there is one parenting thing to obsess over, make it this: having your child possess the finest moral character possible—not getting into Stanford, or being the star quarterback, or developing superior moneymaking skills. This is the essence of character building for parents.

2. Create your own character-based scorecard and talk about it regularly, especially when teachable moments arise. Share it with your children as soon as their cognitive, intellectual, and moral development allows comprehension. By age seven, primitive understandings of right and wrong, effort, attitude, obedience, fairness, etc., allow for many character scorecard concepts to be explored and taught. Other concepts—such as loyalty, caring, and empathy—will need to wait until the child is older.

3. Help your children develop their own character-based scorecards and use them daily or weekly; this ensures that issues of character get top billing in their lives. Put their scorecard on the refrigerator. Put your own there, as well. The child grades his or her scorecard, and the parents grade their own. This helps instill the primacy of the scorecard, promotes accountability, helps to establish that character is a dominant part of one's identity, and makes character development real.

4. Praise energy invested over outcome every time. “Failure syndrome,” as Carol Dweck has taught us, comes from unearned self-esteem. Kids are lavished with unmerited praise, which turns out to be the flimsy foundation for a (false) sense of self that collapses at the first sign of failure. Telling children, they are the greatest, most talented, prettiest, etc., in an effort to build confidence and self-esteem has, all too often, the precise opposite effect. But when you praise a child for investing his or her best energy (focused, positive, fully committed, etc.), it is more genuinely rewarding. Why? Because the child has control over it.

5. Make your love unconditional. For a parent, unconditional love means caring for your child without qualification. Your child doesn't have to earn your deep parental caring and affection. You will still love your child whether or not your child acts ethically, respectfully, truthfully, or graciously. You will not, however, overlook character deficiencies or collapses. Self-esteem should always be earned, but parental love should be unconditional—always.

6. Continually reinforce the message to your children that their character will be built from the choices they make on a daily basis. Every choice they make has character consequences. No one can build their character but themselves.

7. Help your children to understand that the “muscles” of character are built and maintained in the same way that muscles of the body are: by regular energy investment. Teach them concretely how this can be done in their lives.

8. Ensure that your children are socially connected and engaged at home and in school. Character does not grow in isolation or disconnection from others. Our fundamental need for relatedness is so deeply ingrained in who we are as human beings that absent such connection, healthy character development simply cannot occur.

9. Assignment: Everyone in the family has to perform acts of kindness and report back on them. Sonja Lyubomirsky has discovered the benefit that comes from doing all of your acts of kindness in the same day, as opposed to spreading them out over a week's time. The impact on well-being is far greater.

10. Use every crisis and critical decision in your child's life to teach moral reasoning and good judgment. Encourage your child to refer to his or her Ultimate Mission and character scorecard before making any important decision.