

RAISING CHILDREN OF CHARACTER: TEN THINGS PARENTS CAN DO

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In 1998, researchers Samuel and Pearl Oliner published *The Altruistic Personality*, the most extensive study ever conducted of individuals who rescued Jews from the Holocaust. Where did they come from? What were their families like? What led them to take great risks to save the lives of strangers?

In interviews, rescuers referred often to the way they were raised, the example of their parents, and the role of religion.

Said one woman: "My parents taught me discipline, tolerance, and serving other people. If somebody was ill or in need, my parents would always help."

Said a man: "When you see a need, you have to help. Our religion was part of us. We are our brother's keeper."

Said another man: "My father taught me to love God and my neighbor, regardless of race or religion. At my grandfather's house, when they read the Bible, he invited everybody in. If a Jew happened to drop in, he would ask him to take a seat. Jews and Catholics were received in our place like everybody else."

Rescuers didn't consider themselves moral heroes. Again and again, they spoke of simply doing "what had to be done." Most of them hardly deliberated before acting. Asked how long it took them to make their first helping decision, more than 70% said "minutes."

Aristotle said that character is a "settled disposition" to behave in a morally good way. "Virtues," he said, "are not mere thoughts. They are habits we develop by performing virtuous actions."

Why is character important? The character of the rescuers saved Jews from the Nazis. Without a good character, we can't lead a fulfilling life. The psychiatrist Frank Pittman observes: "The stability of our lives depends upon our character. It is character, not passion, that keeps marriages together long enough to do their work of raising children into mature, responsible, productive citizens. In this imperfect world, it is character that enables people to survive, to endure, and to transcend their misfortunes."

The educator James Stenson challenges us as parents to begin early to think about the kind of character we hope our children will have when they are grown men and women. Will they be competent and responsible adults who live by high moral standards? Will they make good husbands and wives and good mothers and fathers? Will their marriages be happy and lasting? Successful parents, Stenson says, see themselves as raising adults. They view their children as adults-in-the-making.

That's not to say we can control the kind of adult our child will become. A few years ago, I spoke to parents at a school in Maryland. The next morning the high school Latin teacher said to me privately:

I spent a very guilty night after your talk. Listening to you, it all sounds so simple. I have three sons. The first two are hard-working and responsible. The third says he's a hedonist. He's 26, and his sole purpose in life is to have fun. Where did I go wrong? Did I give him too much freedom? I think everyone should have one failure—it's very humbling.

So let me preface the rest of my talk by pointing out what you may already have concluded: There is not a one-to-one correspondence between our efforts as parents and the choices our children make—either now or in the future. They may turn out to be better persons than we are. They may turn out to be less than we hope. God gives them free will. Not even God can make us be good.

But it's also true that parents are powerful people. We have many opportunities to influence our children's development. We need to take the long view and work now to lay the best possible foundation for their growth as persons. If our children are already teens and we feel we've made mistakes, we must have the confidence that it's never too late to make a fresh start.

The Content of Character

How can we define the good character we all want for our children? The content of character is virtue. Virtues are objectively good human qualities, good for the person and good for society.

Virtues are different from values. Everyone has values, but not everyone has virtues. As one writer quipped, "Hitler had values, but he didn't have virtues." Virtues, unlike values, don't change. Justice, generosity, and courage always have been, and always will be, virtues. Virtues transcend time and culture.

What are the crucial virtues that make up good character? The ancient Greeks named four: *wisdom*, *justice*, *temperance* (self-mastery), and *fortitude*. The Greeks

considered *prudence*, or practical wisdom, to be the master virtue, the one that steers the others. Wisdom tells us how to put the other virtues into practice. It tells us when to act, how to act, and how to integrate competing virtues (e.g., being truthful and being charitable toward someone's feelings). Wisdom also enables us to make the essential distinctions in life: right from wrong, truth from falsehood, fact from opinion, the eternal from the transitory.

The second virtue named by the Greeks is *justice*. Justice is the virtue that enables us to treat others as they deserve to be treated. In their character education efforts, schools often center on justice because it covers all the interpersonal virtues—civility, courtesy, honesty, respect, responsibility, and tolerance—that make up so much of the moral life of the school. Justice is clearly important, but it's not the whole story.

The third, often neglected virtue is *fortitude*. Fortitude enables us to do what is right in the face of difficulty. The right decision in life is usually the hard one. One high school captures this truth in its motto: "The hard right instead of the easy wrong." Fortitude is "inner toughness." It enables us to deal with adversity, withstand pain, overcome obstacles, and be capable of sacrifice. If you look around at the character of our kids and many of the adults in our society, we see a character that is soft and self-indulgent, that lacks the inner strength to handle life's inevitable hardships. Patience, perseverance, courage, and endurance are all aspects of fortitude.

The fourth virtue is *temperance*. By this the Greeks meant something profound, namely, self-mastery. Temperance is the ability to govern ourselves. It enables us to control our temper, regulate our appetites and passions, and pursue even legitimate pleasures in moderation. Temperance is the power to say no, to resist temptation, and to delay gratification in the service of higher and distant goals. An old saying recognizes the importance of temperance: "Either we rule our desires, or our desires rule us."

These four virtues are sometimes called the "natural," or human, virtues. What can we do as families to try to develop these virtues in our children? Let me offer ten ways.

1. Love children and provide them with a stable and secure environment.

Love is the seedbed for all of the virtues.

Why is a parent's love crucial for conscience and character? Attachment makes us human. The people we are most attached to are the ones we are most influenced by. As parents we can have the inside track in our children's development because we can have the closest relationship. Listen to Christian Barnard, originator of the heart transplant, describing his relationship with his father:

Whenever we were ill, my father got up at night to doctor us. I suffered

from festering toenails that pained so much I would cry in bed. My father used to draw out the fester with a poultice made of milk and bread crumbs, or Sunlight soap and sugar. And when I had a cold, he would rub my chest with Vicks and cover it with a red flannel cloth. Sunday afternoons, we walked together to the top of the hill by the dam. Once there, we would sit on a rock and look down at the town below us. Then I would tell my problems to my father, and he would speak of his to me.

When we build a bond of love with our children, we will have a channel of influence. And then, in a world that surrounds them with bad examples, our example is likely to have the deepest and most enduring influence.

Love also protects children against self-destructive activity. Recent evidence of this comes from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, published in the September, 1997 issue of the Journal of the American Medical Association. This landmark study interviewed more than 12,000 7th-to 12th-grade students from 80 high schools across the United States and their feeder middle schools.

These researchers looked at eight high-risk adolescent activities, ranging from sexual activity to drug and alcohol use to violence and suicide. They found that two factors were protective against teens becoming involved in these high-risk behaviors. The first they called *family connectedness*, a feeling of closeness to parents. The second they called *school connectedness*, a feeling of closeness to people at school.

Love means affection and developing a close relationship, but that's not all it means. True love, in any relationship, wants what is best for the other person. That often requires sacrifice. It's an act of love, for example, to tell kids no when they want to do something that's not good for them. It requires fortitude on the part of the parent. And it can help to develop fortitude in a child.

Fortitude, as I've indicated, is the willingness and ability to either solve difficulties or endure them. It is the power to withstand hardship, disappointment, inconvenience, and pain. The opposites of fortitude are giving up, giving in, escapism, and despair.

Many parents today have the mistaken notion that their mission in life is to protect their children from disappointments. As a result, these parents are reluctant to ever say no. Children consequently grow up with the false idea that the world should hand them what they want when they want it, with the idea that life—and school—should not be hard. To raise children with such notions is a sure recipe for the kind of weak, soft character that lacks fortitude and will be no match for life's inevitable disappointments and frustrations. In the past three decades, suicide among U.S. teens has nearly tripled. There are many causes of that trend, but one is surely that large numbers of our children are unprepared to handle adversity.

For many of us as parents, there is no greater sacrifice, no greater act of love we can make for our children than to endure the inevitable trials and sufferings of marriage. A mother said to me recently, "The most important thing parents can do for their children is to love each other and stay together."

Each year a million children in the United States see their parents divorce. Divorce is on the rise in many countries. Marriages fail for many reasons—including spousal violence, child abuse, and infidelity. But in a major shift from a generation ago, both secular and religious marriage counselors are now urging married couples having problems to do everything possible to work out their difficulties and save the marriage. That advice is based on the experience of many couples who vastly underestimated the pain of divorce for both adults and children.

In her recent book, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: A 25-Year Landmark Study*, researcher Judith Wallerstein documents in sobering detail the profound and often lasting repercussions of marital and family breakdown. She finds that children of divorce typically experience not one divorce but a series of "mini-divorces" as their parents go in search of new partners.

The experience of Karen was fairly common. After her parents' divorce, her father remarried. His second wife was nice to the children but left without warning three years into the marriage. After she was gone, the father had four more girlfriends who caused him a great deal of suffering when they left. Karen's mother had three unhappy love affairs prior to her remarriage, which ended after five years. Each of these ruptures, Wallerstein says, renews the turmoil in the child's life. Only 7 of the 131 children Wallerstein studied experienced stable second marriages in which they had good relationships with both sides of the divorced family.

As a result of all this, children of divorce, Wallerstein finds, take longer to grow up. They are held back from adulthood because their vision of it is so frightening. They have a fear of commitment. They enter relationships wondering when they will fail. They have no template, no model, for working out problems. The slightest conflict sends them running. For large numbers, time does not heal these wounds.

Wallerstein's conclusion: Kids do better when they have two parents under the same roof. Parents parent better when there are two of them. What if there are serious problems in the marriage? Her answer: Stick it out if you possibly can.

2. Develop meaningful ways of communicating.

In daily life, the quality of our love is often expressed in the quality of our communication. I know many parents who feel a great deal of love for their children,

spend time with them, sacrifice for them, but are frustrated by the lack of meaningful communication between them and their children.

I've faced this frustration myself as a father. When our older son Mark was in junior high school, our exchanges typically consisted of my asking questions and his giving monosyllabic answers. "How was school?" "Fine."

One day, in an exasperation, I said, "You know, someday I'd like to have a real conversation. I ask all the questions. It would be great for a change if you asked *me* a question."

He said, "Okay, Dad, how are your courses going this semester?"

It was the first time I ever talked to Mark about my teaching. After that, even if we had only five minutes in the car, we'd do back-and-forth questions: I'd ask him one, he'd ask me one, and so on. It's amazing how much this form of conversation brings out. I recommend you try it with your children. Start with something easy, like, "What was one good thing that happened today and one not-so-good thing?" If kids say they can't think of anything to ask, suggest that they ask you the same question you asked them. I used to say, "Ask me what's on my mind these days?"

Consider the family dinner hour. We should make a big deal of the family meal. The family meal is potentially an island of intimacy in which important experiences and beliefs can be shared.

John and Kathy Colligan tell how they protected the family meal in their family. They had five kids. They and the kids often had out-of-home commitments: games, practices, meetings, and the like. But they made a decision to have at least four dinners a week when the whole family would be there. That meant some nights they had dinner at 4:30 in the afternoon. It meant that on another night they didn't eat until 9:30.

Their children are now grown and have their own families. They have asked each of them independently, "What is something we did that you want to do with your own children?" Every one of the five has said, "The family meal."

Making family dinner conversation meaningful, however, requires a bit of thought. I encourage families to set manners for talking as well as eating and then have a topic: What's something you did today that you feel good about? What was something that happened that never happened before? (Almost every day has a unique event.) What's something you're looking forward to? Who has a problem the rest of the family might be able to help with?

In our family, we'd sometimes we'd clip out a letter to "Dear Abby" (a newspaper

advice column) and read it aloud—but not the answer. For example: "Dear Abby, I'm 15, I'm pregnant, and I'm scared to death to tell my folks. What should I do?" We'd all say what advice we thought Abby should give, and only then would we read her answer. The discussions gave us a vehicle for talking about our deepest beliefs—for example, that sex is a gift from God meant for marriage. In the case of the pregnant 15-year-old, we also emphasized that no matter what trouble our kids might be in, we wanted them to come to us for help, because nobody loves them more except God.

3. **Develop the virtue of justice by fostering mutual respect.**

One of the most important moral lessons a parent can teach is that morality is mutual: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. The Golden Rule is the heart of justice.

At any stage of a child's development, conflicts provide important opportunities for teaching lessons in mutual respect. In my work with parents, I encourage them to use a "fairness approach" to solving family conflicts. A fairness approach has three parts: (1) trying to achieve mutual understanding; (2) arriving at a mutually agreeable solution to the problem; and (3) holding a follow-up meeting to evaluate how the solution is working.

You can use the fairness approach with teens, and you can use it even with young children. The sooner, the better. As an example starting early, consider the experience of the mother of Philip, 7, and Ben, 5. She used the fairness approach with her sons to address the chief source of upset in their home: the boys acting badly when she was on the phone. Here's how it went; she began, as I suggested, by stating the purpose of the meeting and trying to get mutual understanding of the problem:

Mom: In a fairness meeting the three of us will work together to solve the problem.

Ben: I don't get it.

Phillip: If you keep your big mouth shut, you might understand, dummy!

Ben: You shut up yourself!

The fairness meeting was obviously off to a rocky start. But the mother persisted:

Mom: I want *both* of you to be quiet and listen. Now, the problem is it upsets me when you guys get wild when I'm on the phone and I can't carry on a conversation. What are your feelings about this?"

Phillip: Are you going to tell Daddy about this?

Ben: Are you?

Phillip: I haven't been so bad.

The mother comments: "This type of reasoning on the part of the kids went on for what seemed like an endless time. It was very hard to get the idea of the meeting across to them. I was astonished to see how punishment-oriented they were." But she persevered: "We need to come to an agreement that is fair to all of us. I want to understand your feelings about this problem." Finally, there was a breakthrough:

Phillip: Mom, I hate it when you get on the phone and talk forever. It really makes me mad.

Ben: Yeah, the other night you talked on the phone when you said you would play a game with us, and then there wasn't time.

Mom: You feel I spend too much time on the phone?

Ben: You're not home that much, Mommy, and when you are, you should want to be with me.

"The more we talked," the mother says, "the more I understood their feelings of rejection when I talk on the phone. I explained that I often do get carried away—but that with working and going to school and taking care of our home, I hardly have time to see my friends, and this is often my only way of keeping in touch with them."

Once they understood each other's feelings, the mother, Phillip, and Ben were able to brainstorm solutions to the problem. They eventually worked out the following Fairness Agreement, which they all signed and posted:

1. *If Mom has promised to do something with us, she will tell the person she is busy and will call back later.*
2. *We will make a list of things to do while Mom is on the phone.*
3. *Mom will make her calls shorter.*
4. *If Mom has to be on the phone for a longer time, she will tell us, and we will behave.*

Two days later, Mom and the boys held a follow-up meeting, the final step in the

fairness process. The mother reports: "We agreed we had stuck to our plan. The kids played together or did things independently when I was on the phone, and I made calls shorter. We agreed there has been less arguing and hassling about this problem."

The fairness approach promotes children's moral development in three ways: (1) It respects them by listening to their feelings; (2) It requires them to take the perspective of others; and (3) It makes them co-creators of the family who share responsibility for solving family problems. A study by Stanley (1980) found when parents took a fairness approach to conflicts with their teenagers, the teenagers became more cooperative and oriented to the needs of others.

As an example of using the fairness approach with teens, consider the problem faced by my friend Jeff. His 13-year-old daughter Kristin would watch the soap operas every day after school and then get on the phone with her best friend and talk for at least an hour about what they had just seen. One problem with the soap operas is that they show attractive people who are sexually amoral at a time when teens need supports for modesty and sexual self-control. The father's second objection was that she was wasting large amounts of time every day talking on the phone. The third was that she was tying up the family phone; nobody else could use it or receive calls. Jeff would periodically yell at his daughter in frustration about this problem, but the problem went on.

In a fairness discussion, Jeff could have explained his feelings about the soap operas and taken a firm, principled stand about that. He could have said:

Look, Kristen, I want you to be able to have friends and talk about things that you have in common. And I know your friends all watch these shows. But the people in these programs are not good people. They sleep around. They lie. They cheat on each other. They do drugs. They spread rumors. You may feel, "Oh, Dad, I'm not influenced by watching this stuff!", but the fact is we're all human and we're all influenced, whether we realize it or not, by the things we take into our minds over and over. Your mother and I wouldn't have these people over to dinner to talk to you about their sleazy lifestyles, and we don't want them coming into our living room every afternoon via the TV set.

So you can see I feel pretty strongly about this, and I'm sorry I didn't say something sooner. It's only because I love you and want what's best for you that I'm saying something now. Okay, you know my feelings. I want to listen to yours.

Listening to Kristin's feelings about the soaps doesn't mean the father would have to compromise on that. If a moral principle is involved, we shouldn't compromise; that would teach a bad lesson. But the father could try to be sensitive to the deeper need—in this case, for friendship. He could stress that he's not asking her to give up talking to her friends on the phone. As for how long to be on the phone, that's an appropriate area for

compromise. Calls could be limited to 15-20 minutes on school nights and a half-hour on weekends. (In general, I think, that's a fair guideline.)

Unfortunately, many parents these days show respect to their children—giving them a fair hearing in conflict situations, for example—but do not require respect from their children in return. This pattern begins in the preschool years as parents slip into tolerating disrespectful talk and disobedience from their young children. The tolerance zone gets wider and wider. By the time kids are teenagers, they have no respect whatever for their parents' authority, rules, or moral teachings.

Kids need to know where the line is. When they cross the line from expressing their feelings appropriately to speaking disrespectfully, they need immediate corrective feedback: "What is your tone of voice?", "Do you need to go to your room and calm down and we'll talk about this later?", and, if necessary, "What will happen if you continue to speak like that?". Respect for a parent's authority is essential. Without it, children will not respect our rules or moral teaching and advice. All moral education in the home depends on respect for parental authority.

Teaching the Golden Rule by fostering mutual respect and solving conflicts fairly is one way to develop the virtue of justice. But it's also crucial to extend this to larger realms and develop our children's commitment to social justice.

Many of us may be blessed with prosperity. But what is the situation of others? Does our economy recognize the right of workers to a living wage? What is the plight of the poor within our borders and beyond? How many of our young people know—indeed, how many adults know—that the gap between the world's richest and poorest nations has been steadily widening for years? An recent article in the *New York Times* reported that rich countries have been consuming more and more each year, whereas in Africa the average household today consumes 20% *less* than it did 25 years ago.

In the United States, we spend more annually on cosmetics—\$8 billion—than it would cost to provide basic education or water to the 2 billion people worldwide who go without schools or toilets.

How can we keep the plight of the less fortunate in the forefront of our consciousness? One family tries to do this through its Monday evening tradition of a "fasting dinner"—usually a piece of fruit for the children and a cup of broth for the parents. (Later on, a bedtime snack quiets growling stomachs.) The meal begins with a prayer, written by the oldest child:

Lord, we pray for all the hungry people in the world, that they may become well and fed, and that the pain they suffer will be lifted from their hearts—and that all people in the world will turn their hearts to generosity and

compassion.

The money saved by not having a regular dinner is put in a jar and sent at the end of the month to Oxfam, an organization dedicated to relieving world hunger. Sometimes at the meal, the mother or father will read a letter from Oxfam reporting progress in relieving hunger in one part of the world or the outbreak of a new crisis somewhere else. Says the mother: "It helps us to be aware of how much suffering there is, and what we can do to help. We want our children to know that God calls us to love our neighbor, wherever our neighbor is, and that we are all members of the same human family."

4. Manage your child's moral environment, especially exposure to the media.

There are many aspects of our children's moral environment that we need to pay attention to. We want them to associate with friends who support good values. We want them to attend a school that makes character development a high priority in all that it does. And we want them *not* to have their character formed by the worst of the mass media.

Our children are growing up in a decadent media culture, one that glorifies money, sex, and violence. Effective parents are aware of the media's influence and are pro-active in dealing with it.

In his excellent 1994 book *A Landscape With Dragons: The Battle for Your Child's Mind*, Canadian author Michael O'Brien observes: "Something is happening in modern culture that is unprecedented in human history. Television, film, and the video revolution dominate our culture like nothing before." The new media culture, O'Brien says, is characterized "by a deliberate attack upon truth. Good is no longer presented as good." Evil is increasingly depicted as good or as a means to achieve good. In this media environment, the mind of the child "is no longer being formed on a foundation of absolute truths." Children's powers of discernment—their ability to tell good from evil, right from wrong—are thereby undermined.

What are guidelines we can use to govern the role of media in our family life? Here are five:

1. In our family, we use media to promote family life and good values. We don't allow media in our home that work against family life and values.
2. We allow nothing in our home that offends our moral principles or treats people disrespectfully: no pornography, no gratuitous violence, no depictions of disrespect or rudeness.
3. No TV during dinner.

4. No TV before homework is done.
5. We will watch TV and videos together as a family: high-quality programs and films, and good news programs and documentaries.

These days, movies are even worse than television. It's a rare film that doesn't have foul language, graphic violence, explicit sex, or at least an approving attitude toward sex outside marriage. For parents who want to be able to exercise good guidance in this area, there's a helpful Internet resource: www.screenit.com.

Finally, we should make positive use of the print media and read to our children, especially at bedtime. Reading good books is a wonderful way to build good values and offset the negative influence of much of the electronic media. Schools should supply parents with a list of good books. One resource I have recommended is *Books That Build Character* (1994) by William Kilpatrick and Gregory and Suzanne Wolfe. It includes an annotated bibliography of more than 300 books, fiction and non-fiction, with strong character themes. Michele Borba's recent book, *Building Moral Intelligence*, has an excellent bibliography of both books and videos related to seven character virtues.

5. **Teach by example.**

When I interview parents, I typically ask them, "How did your own parents influence your moral development?" The most common answer I get is: "They set a good example." A stack of studies points to the power of models to influence children's social-moral learning.

Teaching by example includes how we treat our children but it goes beyond that. It has to do with how we treat each other as spouses—something which children have countless opportunities to observe. When we fight, do we fight fair? Do we reconcile quickly? Our example also has to do with how we treat and talk about others outside the family—relatives, friends, and strangers. In short, it has to do with how we lead our lives.

When I was at Boston University, one of my graduate students, 25 at the time, remembered her mother's example:

When I was seven, my family moved to an all-white neighborhood in Philadelphia. A few months later, an Asian family tried to move in, and the neighbors circulated a petition to try to keep them from doing so. My mother was the only person to refuse to sign the petition. And when the family finally did gain access to housing, my mother baked them a cake and actively welcomed them to our community.

Eighteen years later, her mother's moral courage and commitment to justice were still indelibly etched in her memory.

6. Teach moral standards directly, by exhortation and explanation.

We need to practice what we preach—by setting a good example—but we also need to preach what we practice. There is a quote from Judith Martin, who writes the “Miss Manners” newspaper column, that captures this well: “Raising a civilized child takes 20 years of constant teaching and another 10 of review.”

Direct teaching often involves explaining why some things are right and others wrong. Why is it wrong to call people names? Because name-calling hurts; the hurt is inside where you can't see it, but it's real.

Why is it wrong to lie? Because lying destroys trust, and trust is the basis of any relationship. Why is it wrong to cheat? Because cheating is a lie—it deceives another person—and it's unfair to all the people who aren't cheating. Why is it wrong to steal? Because there's a person behind the property, and stealing violates the rights of that person. Studies show that effective parents do a lot of direct teaching and explaining.

Direct teaching also includes teaching our children a very big idea: Right and wrong do exist. Doing what's right is the only way to be happy. You can't be happy in this life unless you're good.

We can explain to our children that just as there are natural laws that govern the physical realm, there are natural laws that govern the moral realm. These moral laws are built into our human nature. We can't unmake them. They are the directions for operating the human machine. They are absolute in that they have natural consequences which no one can escape. If you lie, cheat, and steal, you make think you can get away with it, but you will always pay a price— internal or external, sooner or later.

How does the natural moral law apply to sex? Most of us recognize that in this area, children today are especially vulnerable and in need of good guidance. Bad choices here can carry a high, often life-altering cost. I would go so far as to say that the damage to health, heart, and character from premature sexual involvement may go deeper and last longer than the effects of any other mistaken choices our children might make. Hence the need for the utmost care concerning every aspect of the counsel we give.

This area is also a great challenge for parents because we live in a world that pretends there are no moral laws when it comes to sex. Contemporary sexual culture asserts a radical sexual freedom. The sexual revolution, which hit the United States in the 1960s and is still making its way around the world, advanced the idea that people should be free to make love with whomever they wish without the strictures of marriage.

Commitment is not necessary for sex; love is not necessary.

The sexual revolution promised greater happiness, but we now have three decades of experience by which to evaluate whether this kind of sexual freedom serves the individual or common good. Mounting evidence points to a plague of problems stemming from the breakdown of sexual restraint. Here are a dozen:

1. sexual promiscuity
2. teen pregnancy
3. unwed births.
4. abortions.
5. an explosion of sexually transmitted diseases.
6. emotional and behavioral problems associated with premarital sexual relationships. According to the February 1991 issue of *Pediatrics*, adolescent sex is increasingly part of a syndrome of troubled behaviors that include drug and alcohol abuse, riding with a drug-using driver, getting suspended from school, running away from home, and committing suicide (among 12-16-year-old girls, for example, suicide is six times as high among non-virgins as among virgins).
7. widespread sexual harassment in the schools and workplace.
8. Children, even in the elementary school years, demonstrating precocious sexual talk and behavior.
9. a growing and increasingly perverted and violent pornography industry
10. the sexual abuse of children.
11. marital infidelity—Studies over the past decade in the *Journal of Marriage and the Family* report that persons who are sexually active before marriage are more likely to be unfaithful to their spouse after marriage.
12. the damage done to families by many of these problems.

Surveying this moral landscape, the artist William Schickel (1991) writes: "Chastity, like honesty, is a civic as well as a personal virtue. When a society loses chastity, it begins to destroy itself." Chastity, sexual self-control, is a necessary human virtue, necessary for all human beings everywhere.

How can we educate for the virtue of chastity with our children? We can start by talking about love. Lots of teens think, "Isn't sex a natural way to express your love?" How can we help them answer that question truthfully? A pamphlet, *Love Waits*, offers these words:

Love is patient, love is kind. Love wants what is best for another person. Love never demands something that will harm you or the person you love.

Love will never cross the line between what's right and wrong. It's wrong to put one another in danger of having to deal with hard choices. . . . choices that could change

your lives, your goals, and your plans forever.

Having sex before marriage may feel right for the moment. But the possible costs of an unexpected pregnancy, abortion, and sexually transmitted disease—as well as the deep hurts that can come from a broken relationship—outweigh the feelings of the moment. The feelings are temporary; their consequences are long-lasting.

All good things are worth waiting for. Waiting until marriage to have sex is a mature decision to control your desires. If you are getting to know someone—or are in a relationship—remember: If it's love, love waits.

We need especially to talk with our children about the emotional dangers of sex without the secure and binding commitment of marriage. We can look to teens themselves for compelling testimonies. One girl writes to an advice columnist:

Dear Ann,

I am 16 and have already lost my virginity. I truly regret that my first time was with a guy that I didn't care that much about.

Since that first night, he expects sex on every date. When I don't feel like it, we end up in an argument. I don't think this guy is in love with me, and I know deep down that I am not in love with him either. This makes me feel cheap.

I realize now that this is a very big step in a girl's life. After you've done it, things are never the same. It changes everything. My advice is, don't be in such a rush. It's a headache and a worry. Sex is not for entertainment. It should be a commitment. Be smart and save yourself for someone you wouldn't mind spending the rest of your life with.

—Sorry I Didn't and Wish I Could Take It Back

Do young men also have these regrets? Many do, although they may take longer to surface. In my graduate course on character education, students read two books and several articles on the topic of character and sexuality and then write a paper. Many are very honest in sharing personal experiences. One young man, in his late 20s and recently married, wrote:

I wish I had somebody preaching abstinence in my ear when I was in high school. That's when my sexual activity started. I don't even want to think about my college years. I wish I had saved this for my wife.

Here is another young husband, talking about the problem of sexual flashbacks, which both women and men can experience. He says:

I've been married to one of the most wonderful women in the world for eight years, but I have never been "alone" in the bedroom with her. I would do anything to forget the sexual experiences I had before I met my wife. When we start having intercourse, the pictures of the past and other women go through my head, and it's killing any intimacy. I've gotten to the point where I no longer want to have sex.

You don't see the psychological consequences of premarital sex depicted on TV or in the movies. You don't read about them in the teen magazines. But they are very real.

A recent article by Sarah Hinlicky, an editorial assistant at *First Things* magazine, offers the kind of sexual wisdom that our children need to hear. She writes:

I am 22 years old and still a virgin. Not for lack of opportunity, my vanity hastens to add. My mother taught me that self-respect requires self-control. My father taught me to demand the same from men. I'm enough of a country bumpkin to suspect that contraceptives might not be enough to prevent an unwanted pregnancy or disease, and I think that abortion is killing a baby. I'm even naive enough to believe in permanent, exclusive, divinely ordained love between a man and a woman.

The dominant feminist ideology, Ms. Hinlicky writes, has misled her generation. This ideology had held that "a woman who declines to express herself in sexual activity has fallen prey to a male-dominated society."

This line of thinking, Ms. Hinlicky says, is "a set-up for disaster." The idea that women must be sexually active in order to be "free" has "opened the door to predatory men." "Against this system of exploitation," she writes, "stands the more compelling alternative of virginity. It is a refusal to exploit or be exploited."

There is no second-guessing a virgin's motives: her strength comes from a source beyond her transitory whims. It is sexuality dedicated to hope, to the future, to marital love, to children, and to God.

Her virginity is, at the same time, a statement of her mature independence from men. It allows a woman to become a whole person in her own right, without needing a man either to revolt against or to complete what she lacks. It is very simple, really: no matter how wonderful, charming, handsome, intelligent, thoughtful, rich, or persuasive he is, he simply cannot have her. A virgin is perfectly unpossessable.

"The so-called sexual revolution," Ms. Hinlicky concludes, was "really just proclaiming oneself to be available for free—and therefore without value."

How might we summarize for our children the rewards of waiting—for both men and women? The medical writer Kristine Napier does an excellent job of that in her book *The Power of Abstinence* (Avon):

1. *Waiting will make your dating relationships better. You'll spend more time getting to know each other.*
2. *Waiting will help you find the right mate (someone who values you for the person you are).*
3. *Waiting will increase your self-respect.*
4. *Waiting will gain the respect of others.*
5. *Waiting teaches you to respect others; you'll never pressure anyone.*
6. *Waiting takes the pressure off you.*
7. *Waiting means a clear conscience (no guilt) and peace of mind (no conflicts, no regrets).*
8. *Waiting means a better sexual relationship in marriage (free of comparisons with other premarital partners and based on trust). By waiting, you're being faithful to your spouse even before you meet him or her.*

7. Use authoritative discipline.

It's not enough to teach standards of right and wrong. We also have to hold kids accountable to them.

In the 1960s, adults—teachers as well as children—began to doubt their moral authority. Diana Baumrind (1975), a psychology professor at the University of California at Berkeley, did some of first important research in this area. She showed that adult authority, properly exercised, is vital to children's healthy development.

Baumrind identified three styles of parenting: "authoritative," "authoritarian," and "permissive." Authoritarian parents used a lot of commands and threats and little reasoning. Permissive parents were high on affection but low on authority. By contrast, authoritative parents included the following parenting practices:

The child is directed firmly, consistently, and rationally; the parent both explains reasons behind demands and encourages give and take; the parent uses

power [to enforce rules and commands] when necessary; the parent values both obedience to adult requirements and independence in the child; the parent sets standards and enforces them firmly but does not regard self as infallible; the parent listens to the child but does not base decisions solely on the child's desires.

Baumrind studied preschoolers and followed them until they were nine. Her central finding: The most self-confident, socially responsible children had authoritative parents. She did another study of 15-year-olds. The most morally mature teens described their parents as "firm" but also "democratic."

Authoritative discipline often kicks in at "teachable moments." How do we respond when our children have done something wrong and moral correction is required? Here is where modern parents often wimp out; they don't clearly and consistently correct their children's misbehavior.

Researchers Dobert and Nunner-Winkler measured the moral reasoning of teens and classified them into two groups: one relatively mature and the other immature. Then they asked both groups how their parents would respond to various situations: Your parents catch you and your friends breaking into a vending machine; your parents hear that you have been bullying a neighborhood child; your parents learn that you cheated on a test at school, etc.

Those teens who were more mature in their moral reasoning described their parents as follows: They much more likely to express disappointment, show indignation, point out the unfairness of their teenager's act, appeal to their teen's sense of responsibility, and demand apologies and reparation. In short, the parents' reaction combined moral explanation and emotional concern. The message to the teen: *It's very important to do the right thing, and when you do the wrong thing, you have to do something to make things right.*

8. Use questioning to promote children's moral thinking.

It's also important to use questioning that gets kids to stop and think—and in that way develop their own powers of moral reasoning.

Effective parents ask questions that help children develop their ability to take another person's perspective, think about the consequences of their behavior, and apply a rule to the situation at hand. Questions such as: "Why am I upset with you?" "How can you be helpful in this situation?" "How will your brother feel if you keep treating him that way?" "What was the agreement we made?"

Questions like these help young people eventually ask questions of themselves, such as "Is this right?" and "What will be the consequences if I do this?" One father

recalls:

Whenever I did something wrong, my parents didn't just demand that I stop my behavior. Instead, they almost always asked, "How would you feel if someone did that to you?" That gave me a chance to reflect on whatever I had done and how I'd like to have it done to me.

I feel this has helped me throughout my life. Now I always try to stop and ask myself that question before I do something rather than after the fact.

9. Give children responsibilities.

In 1975, Harvard anthropologists John and Beatrice Whiting published the results of their study of six cultures. These cultures differed in a number of characteristics, such as social organization and level of technological development. The Whitings found that in some cultures children were more altruistic (made more responsible suggestions, were more helpful to peers), while in other cultures children tended to be egoistic (they sought help and attention for themselves).

The factor most strongly related to differences in children's altruism was *the degree to which children were assigned responsibilities that contributed to the maintenance of the family*. The more children had to tend animals, take care of younger children, do chores, and so on, the more altruistic was their behavior in other situations. The most egoistic children in the study did not have duties in the home that tangibly contributed to the welfare of others.

The Whitings' research is supported by a recent study of family chores (Grusec, Goodnow, & Cohen, 1996). The moral of these studies is clear: Children become responsible by having responsibility. They develop responsible habits by *what they are repeatedly led to do*. Parenting for character must therefore provide regular opportunities for children to develop the habit of helping. Here is a mother who remembers her training in helpfulness:

I come from a Quaker background. Somehow I always knew that whatever I did when I grew up, it would have to be, in some way, a service to others.

Both my mother and my father were always involved in one or another kind of community work. And I can remember coming home after school when I was just a little girl and my mother saying, "Susan, Mrs. Flannigan"—an old lady who lived down the street—"has been alone all day, and I'm sure she would enjoy talking with you for a while." I remember asking now and then why I had to do this and other kids didn't. She said that what other kids did didn't matter—that I

should do all that I was capable of doing.

Helping children set and work toward goals is another form of responsibility training. Goal-setting also develops the virtues of perseverance, determination, and endurance—aspects of fortitude. Author and educator Michelle Borba, in her book *Parents Do Make a Difference*, tells about a California father she once interviewed. He had 10 children. Everyone in the community knew his kids to be successful in school and in life. They were likeable, courteous, responsible, and hard-working. Borba asked him, "Do you remember anything you did that might explain why your children turned out so well?"

He paused and said:

There's one thing I remember doing since my kids were young. Once a month I'd ask each child, "What goal do you have for yourself this month?" I'd try to help them think of something they wanted to achieve. Then we'd talk for a few minutes about what they could do to attain that goal. Every few days I'd check in and ask, "How are you doing? Do you need any help?" As they got older, they started to come to me to tell me their goals. I think these little talks help my kids stay focused on what they wanted to achieve, and usually they were successful. I guess it really helped them become self-motivated.

Dozens of studies validate this father's advice. A number of years ago, Stanford University professor Lewis Terman studies 1500 intellectually gifted children for several decades. He found that high intelligence was a poor predictor of life success. Only a small portion of this highly intelligent group were successful in life. What they had in common was the ability to set goals and work toward them. They had typically learned how to do this before they left high school.

10. Foster a child's spiritual development.

One night, at the end of the graduate course I teach on character education, a student stayed to talk. He said he lifted weights competitively but that it was increasingly difficult to compete because so many people in the sport use steroids. I asked how athletes could continue to use steroids when everything you read says that steroids can make you sterile, cause cancer, and do other terrible things to your body.

He said, "People know all that, but they don't care." The professor in one of his physical education courses had shown a videotape which reported the results of a survey of amateur weight-lifters, collegiate and post-collegiate. The survey posed this question: "If you could take a drug that would guarantee you'd win every competition for five years, but at the end of five years the drug would be certain to kill you, would you take that drug?" A majority of the weight-lifters said yes.

If we ask ourselves, "How is it that a significant number of young people in our society would trade their very lives for five years of drug-dependent success?", the answer has to come back that they are spiritually adrift. As one mother said upon hearing the results of that survey, "Those young men don't know why they're here."

Religion can be a controversial subject. It is certainly possible to be an ethical person without being religious. But for a great many persons, religion provides their primary reference point for moral decisions. It also provides an ultimate reason for leading a moral life: God expects it. He will hold us accountable for what we do with our lives on earth.

For young people who do not have faith in God, there is, I believe, a greater temptation, a human tendency, to make a god of something else: money, pleasure, power, prestige, or, as in the case of the weight-lifters, success at any price.

If you have a religious faith, I would encourage you to make it the center of our family life and try to pass it on to your children. It will be, in my judgment, your most precious legacy to them. But passing on faith from one generation to the next is no small challenge. How can it be done?

The importance of personal prayer is made clear in a small book titled *The Spiritual Hunger of the Modern Child* (1985). It reports an inter-faith conference that addressed a perplexing question: "Why do so many young people, even those raised in committed religious families, stop practicing their faith—and even believing in God—once they leave home?"

In reading the various explanations of why young people cease to practice their faith, I was particularly struck by the thoughts of a British Catholic priest, Father Hugh Thwaites. He emphasized the necessity of prayer. To illustrate this, he told a story about a young man of his acquaintance.

In May of last year, I was talking to a boy of 18 in a Scottish high school. He had been intending to study for the priesthood, but now felt he couldn't. It seemed to him he could no longer accept the truths of his Catholic faith until he had verified them for himself, one by one. It seemed his duty, he said, to jettison all the articles of his religion, and to examine them piecemeal to test whether he could accept them or not.

I explained to him that what was happening to him was a normal stage in many people's spiritual development. You have to live through it, like the measles. He was, I said, going about the right way of surmounting the crisis—intensive study.

But I told him he should increase the time he was spending in prayer. Study alone would never get him out of his present difficulty. But if he studied sincerely and prayed humbly, he would probably be all right in 6 months time — and stronger in his faith for the experience. Only three months later he wrote to me. He said he had done what I had suggested, all was well, and he was going into the seminary.

If a young person who is going through a spiritual crisis gives up on prayer, Father Thwaites says, that young person will likely come to reject his or her religion. Divine truths must be approached prayerfully, humbly. If you approach the study of God with the same attitude with which you approach the study of beetles, the further you will be from God. Father concludes with the scripture, "God resists the proud, but He gives grace to the humble."

"Not praying," he adds, will not of itself kill the spiritual life. Only serious sin does that. But the absence of any prayer life will so weaken the spiritual life, that it will be unable to meet the onslaughts of a pagan world.

In the spiritual domain, as in all areas, our children will remember our example. Mary, a young mother of four, recalls her father:

Dad always closes his letters with, "Work hard and pray a lot." This never sounds phony because it's what he does. He has worked hard all his life. He built the two homes we lived in and did all the repairs. And he prays throughout the day. He would say a morning Rosary with us in the van on the way to school. My most powerful image of my father is of catching him kneeling at the foot of his bed, late at night before he retired, saying his personal prayers.

Transmitting values is very hard work—the work of sustaining a civilization. As we enter the new millennium, we do well to remember that the most important measure of a nation is the character of its people. And we influence that one child at a time.

Thank you for your commitment to raising children of character. God bless you and guide you in all your efforts.