Raising Ethical Children

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No society can endure, or at least flourish, if it fails to take seriously the eternal task of socializing the next generation of youth, to whom we, as the keepers of our societies and cultures, will bequeath that which we have shepherded and crafted. This responsibility falls on the shoulders of all individuals and institutions that influence the development of youth. While there are many such influences, the two that stand at the front are families and schools. I have written about how to leverage schools to educate for ethical development elsewhere (Berkowitz, 2012), but will focus on the influence of families here. Specifically, the focus here is on optimal parenting.

First, however, it is important to address what we want parents to influence. What kind of child do we hope that parents will raise? In my case, I am concerned with raising moral children. However, that is not a comfortable term for everyone, nor is it necessarily clear. What do we mean by a moral child? It is well beyond the scope of this paper to go too deeply into the nuances of morality. Furthermore, there is great disagreement about specifics of what this is about. For this chapter, I will simply say that I am talking about human goodness. On the extremes, there is little controversy. A child who is predatory, sadistic, and destructive would not fit the bill. A child who is compassionate, respectful, honest, and generous most certainly would. In this chapter, I want to explore what we know from social science about what parenting strategies are more likely to produce a child whose goodness is closer to the latter and further from the former. What can parents do to maximize the likelihood that they will raise children of moral character who have an enduring tendency to struggle to discern what is right and the motivation and capacity to actually do the right thing? What will tend to raise children who will add to rather than detract from the world?

Second, as I suggested already, the words we use to label this "human goodness" are imperfect and often contentious. Part of that comes from the very point of this volume: the religious-secular divide. If one is religious, then one is often concerned about whether or not the words connote something that is consistent with one's faith system or one's sacred texts. If one is not religious, then one is suspicious that words like virtue, value, character and morality are smoke screens for theologically-based concepts. But on a deeper level, talking about how "good" a person is can be very threatening to anyone and hence people often blanche at the terms, simply for fear that they may somehow be connected to a perspective that they do not hold. I see no perfect solution to this semantic quandary. I will use terms like moral, character and virtue. I mean them simply to represent those aspects of a person that makes him or her motivated and able to do the right thing. I will let the reader color between those lines.

Third, I want to take a brief but deeper look at what moral character entails. Character can be about goodness, but it can also be about effectiveness or intellectual skills. I am concerned here with the moral side of character. Even that is fairly complicated. It, at least in a broad sense, has a cognitive, an emotional, and a behavioral side. In other words, character is only complete if we have the cognitive abilities to both know about goodness and to reason critically about it, the full suite of moral emotions (e.g., empathy, compassion, guilt), and the social and emotional skills necessary to navigate the socio-moral terrain that we all cross every day, even three and four year old children. A shorthand for this is knowing the good, loving the good, and doing the good, or as some refer to it the head, heart and hand of character.

So what do we know about what actually works to foster such development? This is a critical question. All too often people choose parenting strategies based on how they were raised, through intuition, by chance, or from other sub-optimal sources. When I am working with teachers, they are often also parents. So I like to get them reflecting on the choices they typically make to influence the development of character in their students. I ask them a series of questions about strategies they might use at home with their own children. "How many of you spend your hard earned cash to buy expensive posters with just one word on each….honesty….respect…responsibility…and post them around your house?" "How many of you rename the spaces in your house with cute street signs like 'Caring Kitchen', 'Benevolent Bathroom'?" "How many of you convene your family once a month to announce which family member had the best character that month?" They routinely squirm and nervously laugh as they realize the absurdity of the choices they make at school that they never would consider employing with their own children. And yet, the strategies at home also often fall far short of the mark, partly because they simply don't know what works and partly because they rarely stop and reflect on and justify their parenting choices.

I am a social scientist (a developmental psychologist) and have found a niche in trying to bring the empirical wisdom of social science to educators and parents, so they will choose strategies based on solid research and theory. Interestingly, I have found substantial overlap between what research tells us that parents should do and that teachers should do to nurture the development of moral character in children. Many years ago, John Grych (a child clinical psychologist) and I reviewed the parenting research to see if we could identify a manageable set of "common denominator" parenting strategies that were shown to be related to the

development of moral character in children. We discovered what I have subsequently labeled the “Fab 5." These are things that any parent (or any adult for that matter) could do, and things that have been shown repeatedly to increase the likelihood that children will develop a wide range of moral characteristics. So let’s take a look at the Fab 5.

To help remember these five strategies, I will create an acronym for the Fab 5: DENIM. Each letter represents one of the Fab 5. D is for Demandingness. E is for Empowerment. N is for Nurturance. I is for Induction. M is for Modeling. Let’s take them one at a time.

Demandingness

One of the great myths of parenting and teaching for goodness is that it means to set low standards for your child; to be a “soft touch.” That is far from the truth. Effective parenting for character entails setting high standards or expectations for how the child will behave. However, this is not as simple as it sounds. There are very important conditions that are necessary for demandingness (or high expectations) to have a positive impact on child development. First, the expectations must be high but they must also be reasonable. That doesn’t mean easy. It means possible. Demanding that children do the impossible, or even highly unlikely, is cruel and destructive. It is fine to ask a child to do more than she thinks she can do, or even more than she might ultimately be able to do, as long as there is a reasonable chance of success. Asking children to do the impossible breeds a sense of helplessness and can lead to depression.

Secondly, this is not a “sink or swim” strategy. In other words, it is not a good idea in many instances to set high expectations and then leave the child to her own resources (of

course, in many cases that would in fact be sufficient). Often we need to provide a scaffold for the child to climb in order to have a chance at reaching the heights of our expectations for them. Sometimes that may entail teaching them necessary sub-skills, like brainstorming ideas or preparing how one will deliver a message or craft a request in advance. Sometimes it may entail taking the time to engage in dialogue with them so they have a sounding board for ideas. Or it might simply be pointing them to resources that might provide information or other guidance they need. "That's a tough question. I wonder if we know anyone who knows about crime?" "Uncle Jack! He used to be a policeman. I can ask him about it."

The bottom line is that, if we want our children to develop moral character, we need to expect it from them. One final caveat is that we often in our lives have expectations of others about which they are unaware. We do that with our parents, our siblings, our spouses, our co-workers…and our children. And then we get angry when they fail to meet the expectations that they never even knew about. Be sure your expectations are clear, and not to you (although that is important too), but be sure they are clear to your child. Ask him to repeat it back to you, or in other ways check that the message you think you have sent is the same as the message they received.

Empowerment

This is a tough one. There is a necessarily hierarchical relationship between parents and children, and for good reason. Parents, at least healthy ones, are wiser and more competent than their children in most respects. And they have the legal responsibility for the welfare of their children. However, in most places where this book is likely to be read, they are raising the

future citizens of a democratic society. For their children to be ready to take on the responsibilities of citizenship, they need to discover their voices in public discourse. As children, the most notable public sphere, after peer groups, is the family. It is in this microcosm that much of citizenship development will occur. Learning that one's voice matters and can be lent to the collective search for the good is a critical part of this development.

But parenting for empowerment is important for larger reasons than simply civic socialization. It is good for children's development more broadly. Parents who share power have more moral children. Parents who value, invite and seriously listen to children's voices have children who are more moral. In large part it is because all people, including all children, have a fundamental need to feel that they are heard, that they matter, and that there is a chance they can make a difference. Note that I said "a chance." I am not talking about parental abdication nor child veto power here. I am talking about respectful collaborative discourse. When parents invite their children's input on decisions and problem-solving, and do so authentically, children need to know that the best ideas are the ones that will get adopted, and that if their ideas are the best, they will get adopted.

As is true for Demandingness, Empowerment is nuanced too. The most important caveat here is that only certain categories of decisions and problems should be presented for child input. Do not ask them to chime in on issues for which the parents are not willing to alter their plans. Do not ask them to chime in on issues for which they will not be competent to help (e.g., don't ask your children about complex family financial decisions like investment strategies, or how to file your tax returns). Choose issues they can understand and for which

you are willing to consider options. It is extraordinarily powerful for a child when in fact it is their voice that changes the decision or wins the day. This just as true for each of us at work or in the community when it is our idea that resonates and solves a problem or generates a better strategy for a difficult decision. In doing so, our very humanity is affirmed, just as it is for the child.

Nurturance

This one is as lot simpler and easier to swallow than the first two. Nurturance is simply a fancy term for love. The Beatles were wrong about this one; love is NOT all you need. But you do need it. We all need it, and certainly all children need it. It is like sunlight for a plant. Tragically too many children grow up doubting they are loved, or knowing they are unloved. Make sure your child is surrounded by loving nurturant adults, especially parents, and that they know they are loved. Usually kids are pretty good love detectors, but it is a good idea to be sure they know it.

Induction

This one is a bit complex, but well worth taking the time to understand and implement. Induction is a technical term for a specific way of sending evaluative messages to children. By evaluative messages, I mean telling them either how proud/pleased we are with them or how disappointed/frustrated/angry we are with them. Both groups of messages are sending a message of evaluation of the child and/or her behavior that is either positive or negative. Certainly it is important THAT we do it, but for it to have a positive impact on character development is it crucial HOW we do it.

The first ingredient in proper induction is to give a clear and legitimate reason for your evaluative message. "I am so proud of you **because**…" "I am so angry at you **because**…." Just as for expectations, it is important that you are sure the child understands the reason. When we chastise children, they become upset. All too often, they are not upset for being reprimanded but rather because they don't understand WHY they are being reprimanded. Even when they are being lauded, they get little from such affirmation if they don't know the reason for it. So we need to explain.

The second ingredient is the content of the explanation. In induction, the reason for the evaluative response should focus on the consequences of the child's behavior, ideally for someone else's feelings. "I am so frustrated with you because I told you over and over to use your words and not your hands. Now you hit your little brother and what is he doing?" "He's crying." "That's right. He is crying because you hurt him and you scared him." Or "I am so proud of you because I know you don't like the present Aunt Margie gave you, but you hugged her and thanked her and look how happy she looks. You made her so happy."

Induction has been found over and over in research to generate a host of positive character outcomes.

<u>Modelng</u>

The last ingredient in the Fab 5 (DENIM) is both simple and challenging. It is pretty simple to understand and pretty daunting to implement. Gandhi once said "be the change you want to see in the world." I am challenging you to be the character you want to see in your children. I periodically ask people to think of one of their character strengths and then to

consider how they ended up being that kind of person. The vast majority of answers is that one of their parents embodied that same characteristic. Try that question out on yourself. See? So if most of us think that our character strengths came from parents who modeled those same characteristics, then it should not be surprising that research tells us that children who develop empathy had empathic parents, altruistic children had altruistic parents, and so on.

It takes some courage to change. I remember when my son was born I asked myself what I do that I didn't want him to replicate. I was able to make a list. It is not horrendous, but I found plenty. Stop swearing. Stop watching violent TV. Etc. And I did. It wasn't easy, but it was necessary. Parents need to clean up their acts, and to use as a guide the dictate to be the character they want to be in their children.

Conclusion

We have explored what social science can tell us about effective parenting for character. If we want our children to grow up to be pro-social, ethical people who add to the world and not anti-social hedonistic predators who drain the value out of the world, then we need to be deliberate and consistent in using the Fab 5 of DENIM. Research tells us that this set of strategies result in increased moral reasoning capacities, greater altruism and empathy, stronger consciences, and a general orientation to have healthy relationships with others, among many other desirable character strengths.

It is also important to understand that DENIM is a weave of the Fab 5, not merely a set of five discrete disconnected strategies. As noted already, being transparent is important for Demandingness and Induction. But demanding, using induction, loving, and empowering are all

acts of modeling how to treat others. Empowering is a way of loving by showing respect for the worth of the child. They are woven together to make the fabric of parenting for character. This then is a research-based recipe for parenting for character.