

If you're a parent, you're a role model: How to teach your children by example

OTHER TITLES

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DON'T LOOK NOW, BUT SOMEBODY'S WATCHING YOU!

There's no such thing as the "perfect parent" because being a parent is the world's most difficult job. You may appreciate the special joys of raising a child, but you also know that it can be demanding, challenging and exhausting—and there's no time off.

Some days you do a great job as a parent. Other days you would rather not think about. But every day you act as a model—for your children.

It can be a scary thought, but from the time they are babies, your children are watching you and learning from you. They learn from your actions and your conversations. They absorb your attitudes and copy your expressions. Before they even reach school age they've probably learned far more than you ever intended.

Is this something to worry about?

That depends. Your child will eventually grow up and have to make grown-up choices. If you show restraint when it comes to alcohol, other drugs and gambling, then chances are your child will follow your example. If you control your temper and treat others with consideration, your child will copy your behaviour.

Can other people serve as role models?

Absolutely. If your child has a grandparent, aunt, uncle or friend to spend time with, that person also becomes a role model. A teacher, coach or neighbour may become a role model. The more positive examples your child has to learn from, the better.

Just one caring adult can make a huge difference. Even when a child's life is difficult and filled with conflict, having one person who cares can give that child a lot of strength. Children are able to

overcome very hard experiences in life, as long as they have someone who will stand by them, no matter what.

Anyone can be a role model, but parents or main caregivers are still the major influences in a child's life. Even when your child is a teen and seems to show no interest in being "just like you," they're still watching and copying—still using you as a role model.

How can I be a good role model?

One way is to think about how your behaviour affects your child. You can't always be calm and cheerful—nobody is. Besides, children need to see that their parents can express real feelings in a healthy way. If they see you handling anger appropriately, they'll learn from you. If they watch you celebrating special occasions without alcohol, they'll learn something. If they see you facing difficult times without trying to escape through alcohol, other drugs or gambling, they'll remember. As they grow up, they'll learn by your example. And they'll have that example to follow in years to come, when they are coping with life's challenges.

What if I make mistakes that I don't want my child to copy?

If there are problems in the family, even very young children can be affected. Typically, children believe that they somehow caused the problems, and that family conflicts flare up because of something they did that was wrong.

You can help by talking to your child. Even a very young child understands a sincere apology. It's possible for you to be honest with your child and still not burden them with adult problems. For example, you can apologize and explain that sometimes you make a mistake (by drinking too much, or losing your temper) but that you are trying hard to change. The important thing is to emphasize that you love your child and that adult problems are not the child's fault.

How can I make my child think of other positive role models?

Talk to your child about your own experiences when you were their age. Tell your child about someone who made a big difference in your life, and why you admired that person. This may be someone who is still alive and is also a part of your child's life, or it could be someone your child will never meet.

Tell stories about family members or friends who showed real courage, kindness, humour or determination in their lives. Talk about the people you still think of as role models now that you're an adult. Who do you admire, and why? This will help your child realize that different people behave differently. Your child may begin to consider which people they would like to try to copy as they grow up. These people can be your child's role models.

It's not easy being a model for another human being. But since modelling is a big part of every parent's and caregiver's role, it's probably a good thing to keep in mind. Somebody's watching you!

For more information

We understand that everyone's needs are different. Whether you want to prevent your child from using alcohol, tobacco or other drugs, or you want to help your child deal with a drug problem, we can help. Information and prevention programs, group and family counselling, outpatient and residential treatment, and the Protection of Children Abusing Drugs program are offered by Alberta Health Services and its funded services to help your child and your family.

For more information and to find an addiction services office near you, please call the 24-hour Helpline at 1-866-332-2322.



Activity Page

Role-playing

It's always interesting to see ourselves through others' eyes. Playing parts can be entertaining for you and your child, and gives both of you an opportunity to learn something. Remember to include as many of your child's good qualities as possible when you play the role of the child.

Through this type of role-playing, you can explore with your child appropriate ways to handle anger and disappointment.

1. Think back to some situation that made you angry, and ask your child to act out a scene where they pretend to be you. This could be a confrontation with another adult, or a dispute you may have had with your child and their siblings. Watch and listen carefully to your child's version of the incident—it could be enlightening! Discuss how you could improve the way you handle similar incidents in the future.
2. Think of imaginary situations and ask your child to role-play how they would react in such a situation. For example, ask them what they would do if they found out they couldn't go to the park as promised because of bad weather.

As a variation, ask them how a younger child would react and then how a child their age would react. (A younger child might have a tantrum, whereas they are old enough now to realize that the weather isn't your fault and to respond in a more mature way.)

3. Let your child think of a situation for you to role-play. (Your child could ask you to play an adult or a child's role.) An example might be to play yourself when you can't find your keys and are late for work. Or you could play the child's role when it's time for bed and they want to watch one more TV show. This play-acting can be fun for both of you. Afterwards you can talk about different ways to handle stressful situations.

Learning from others

1. Talk with your child about different ways to handle celebrations, as well as ways to handle anger and disappointments. Talk about how someone you both admire would handle a situation, as opposed to how an immature person would handle it.
2. Look at sports figures or performers and watch how they behave. Talk with your child about what makes a person a good winner or a good loser. What makes a person a poor winner or a poor loser?
3. When you see strangers in public behaving in ways that are kind and considerate, talk about this behaviour with your child. When you see strangers behaving in ways that are inappropriate, talk about this as well. Discuss different behaviours with your child, and encourage them by complimenting them when they behave well.



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