Helping Children Learn to Respect Other People

There are some tricks to teaching children to respect people. Parents are tempted to command respect: "You will do as I say." "You will honor your mother." In fact, parents can command compliance, but they cannot command respect. We can make children do what we want them to do (as long as we are more powerful than they are) but we cannot make them respect us or others. Respect is cultivated and earned.

Respect is not earned simply through niceness. There is nothing wrong with being nice, but the parent who tries to 'nice' children into doing things is likely to have a difficult child. Earning respect takes more than niceness.

There is another trick to developing respect: Parents are tempted to point out children's mistakes in order to get them to do better. This can backfire. When children feel judged and rejected, they are not motivated to improve. When children are criticized, rather than learn to improve, they are more likely to learn to condemn - themselves or others.

Children will learn to respect people who show respect to them. The people who are most likely to be respected use a unique combination of being loving and setting limits in firm but caring ways. (There are many units in this series that provide specific ideas in these areas.) While children do need constructive feedback, it must come within a relationship of love, support, and sensitivity if it is to motivate good behavior. Children also need limits, but they can be established with kindness and respect.

For example, if a child starts to hit his sister, a parent could react (unhelpfully!) with, 'What's wrong with you? Stop hitting your sister you barbarian!' That parent could smack the child. That does not teach respect. On the other hand, if a child starts to hit his sister, we could catch the child's hand and say, "We never hurt others. Would you like to tell me what is bothering you?" The wise parent sets limits but does it without attacking or insulting the child.

Children will learn to respect people when people who are important to them set an example of respect. Children benefit from seeing us honor people who are examples of values that are important to us. We can regularly express admiration for such people.

It is easy to make fun of people who bother us or are different from us - people from a different country or of a different faith or with different beliefs. Our willingness to show respect for people who are different from us sets an example of respect.

That does not mean that we agree with everything that other people believe and do. "They believe that women must wear veils over their faces. Their views make sense to them. My view is different." It also does not mean that we accept dangerous or illegal behavior.
In order to teach respect, we must be willing to admit our own imperfections. We apologize to a child when we have been unreasonable. We ask for their forgiveness when we have hurt them.

Respect is the basis for strong relationships and it is the natural result when parents use love and guidance.

Applications:

Who are some of the people you most respect? What have they done to earn your respect?

What are some of the ways you show respect to your children? (Do you listen respectfully to the things they say? Do you spend time with them? Do you try to honor their preferences?)

What are one or two ways that you can better show respect to your children?

When people claim to be better than they are, we notice their faults more. When people admit their shortcomings, we are more likely to overlook them—especially when we know they are trying to do better. Do you admit shortcomings to your children and ask for their patience and help? For example, you might say, 'When I am tired, I sometimes get mad at you easily and am not as kind as I should be. I am trying to get better. I hope you will be patient with me.'

Sometimes a parent is wise to let children know of their difficulties. 'I am having a bad day. I hope you will give me a little extra room so that I don’t say something that hurts your feelings.' But a parent should not burden a child with worry for their well-being. 'I expect to be feeling better after I have a few minutes to relax.'