

Respect: Parent Edition

The January Character Trait of the Month

**The below article is paraphrased from an article published by PARENTS and written by Cathrine Newman. To be linked to the original article, please click [here](#).*

We know it when we feel it, but what is respect? Thomas Lickona, Ph.D., a developmental psychologist and author of *How to Raise Kind Kids*, defines respect as "showing regard for the intrinsic worth of someone or something. We treat everyone, even people we dislike, as having rights, dignity, and worth equal to our own." Respect, like the Golden Rule, means treating others the way you hope to be treated yourself. With that in mind, here are some ways to approach parenting that will help you raise kids who will make the world a kinder, more respectful place.

Value your kids' choices.

A good way to practice is with a low-stakes request: Your son wants to wear unmatched socks? Let him! Respect your child's preferences and style. You could ask, "What should we serve for dinner when your friend comes over tomorrow?" or "What music should we listen to in the car?" Children benefit from developmentally appropriate participation in decision-making.

Speak politely.

Remember that however you speak to your child is the way he'll speak to you and everybody else. For example, "Let me get you a sponge, sweetie" teaches respect (and problem solving) in a way that "You're always so messy" doesn't. And if you screw up because you're an actual person and not a Zen-scented candle? Apologize.

Resolve conflicts thoughtfully.

Dr. Lickona recommends holding respectful sit-down family discussions with young children. As your kids grow up, the issues will only get bigger (for example, quitting chorus, questioning faith, or dating someone you don't like). It's important to have the practice of mutual respect solidly in place.

This doesn't mean kids always get what they want, and it doesn't mean there's no room for strong feelings. But instead of saying, "Don't be disrespectful," try to listen to the feelings behind what seems like disrespect. I remember taking my 3-year-old from a playdate she wasn't ready to leave, and she cried and kicked her little rain boots and I calmly explained that we had to pick up her brother. It wasn't negotiable, but I could hear how sad and frustrated she was. I didn't try to coerce her or make her consent to it.

I just did what needed to be done and let her have her feelings about it. "You're so mad!" I said to her, "You weren't ready to leave yet!" And she said, "I wasn't!" and cried for a while. And then she stopped crying.

Give your full attention.

Listen, and model active listening by putting down your phone, making eye contact, and asking follow-up questions. One day those kids will have phones (if they don't already), and you'll want them to have had plenty of experience with you putting yours down to look up and tune in. It's okay to be persistent and say, "I need you to look up at me so I know you're paying attention."

Teach kids deep manners.

This is also known as etiquette, but I'm not talking about using the proper fork on a yacht. I'm talking about "Please pass the pasta" and "Thank you so much for coming to my birthday party" and other gracious responses that say "I appreciate your efforts on my behalf and I respect the time you took." You'll also want to help your kids learn to apologize and take responsibility for their actions if they do something (even by accident) that hurts someone else.

Cultivate curiosity.

Your child may go through phases of really wanting to monologue about Minecraft, and you will want to help him learn the give-and-take of mutual conversation. Showing an interest in other people is an important antidote to me-me-me narcissism—the kind that is both annoying and, in a bigger way, treacherous. Teach your kids that good conversation involves asking questions. Even if the question is about something small ("Has string cheese always been your favorite after-school snack?"), it is part of a bigger curiosity that says, "I know that you are different from me. Who are you, and how do you feel about the world?"

Practice positive gossip.

This means noticing what's good about the people in your lives and talking about it. You might say, "Katie has gotten so good at the recorder! I can't believe that she and her friends can play 'Hot Cross Buns' with all that cool harmony." Positive gossip is basically the opposite of behind-someone's-back nastiness, and it's wonderful for developing gratitude, appreciation, and respect.

Call your kids out (respectfully).

Let's say that you usually bring your child a snack to eat in the car after school, but you forgot today. You hear your child mumble, "What a stupidhead." Take a deep breath and count to ten. Remember that in order to teach respect, you need to show respect. "I'm

sorry that I forgot your Goldfish crackers, and I know you're hungry," you might say, "but it makes me feel bad when you call me names. I would like you to apologize."

Experience other cultures and ways of being.

Broaden your child's mind so that respect and curiosity—rather than negative judgment—is her automatic response to difference. This might mean talking about what was most interesting at a neighbor's bar mitzvah, eating at the Korean restaurant that just opened in town, or going to the gay-pride parade. Read a book about kids all around the world, one like DK's *Children Just Like Me*, so you can talk about what's similar and different. All of those habits mean that you'll be creating your family identity around the practice of respect.

More Teachable Moments About Respect

Kids are going to do and say disrespectful things—maybe because they're oblivious or testing limits [or overwhelmed] or learning the ropes. Consider these scenarios and how you might (respectfully) respond to them.

Your child walks with muddy shoes across the floor you just mopped.

SAY: "I'm frustrated because I just cleaned the floor and now it's dirty again. Would you please grab a sponge and wipe up those muddy spots?"

Your child is building a Lego castle and pays no attention to you when you say it's time for dinner.

SAY: "I see you're busy building over there, but I feel upset when you ignore me. Come and tell me about what you're making while we eat, and then you can play more afterward."

Your child refuses to put on her coat to go to dance class, even though it's freezing out.

SAY: "I didn't realize how important this was to you. You don't have to wear your coat, but I still want you to stay warm. Can you find enough layers to make that work?"

Your child says, "More mashed potatoes."

SAY: "I'm so thrilled that you liked them! In our family, we always ask by saying 'please.' Can you please try asking again?"

Raising respectful children is a long-term process. Keep looking for ways to model respect and help your children grow.