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Born to Serve, Not to Shop-- Effective Parenting in a Nutshell

by James B. Stenson

The real evil of materialism is not the pursuit of things. It is, rather, seeing and treating other people as things--and therefore putting things ahead of people. Youngsters with a habit of thinking and acting this way are headed toward trouble later in life: substance abuse, professional problems, marital break-up, a life dominated by impulse and unrestrained egoism. So what can parents do with their young children now to build strong character and lead children away from materialism?

1. Be confident of your rightful authority as a parent and insist that your children respect it. Your responsibility as a parent is enormous, and you must exercise a self-confident loving authority to carry it out. Your children's confidence in your leadership will derive from your own self-confident sense of mission.
2. Remember that you're raising adults, not children. When you think of your children's future, picture character as well as career. Your job is not to keep children amused and busy. It is, rather, to lead your children to become competent, responsible, considerate, and generous men and women who are committed to live by principles of integrity. Think of what your children will *be*, not just what they will *do*.
3. Teach the great character strengths (virtues): prudence, justice, fortitude, temperance, and charity. In today's terms, these are called sound judgment and conscience, a sense of responsibility, courageous perseverance, self-mastery, and respect for the rights and sensibilities of others. You teach these strengths in three ways: by your personal example, your direction of your children's behavior, and your verbal explanations of right and wrong. But you teach mostly by example. Remember that conscience is the memory of our parents' voices, their loving lessons of right and wrong taught to us in our youth.
4. Teach your children the four great pillars of civilized dealings with others: "please," "thank you," "I'm sorry," and "I give my word." Using these habitually in speech is a basis for respecting the rights of others.
5. Teach your children the meaning of the word "integrity." Integrity means unity of intention, word, and action--that is, we mean what we say, we say what we

mean, and we keep our word. We always tell the truth and we keep our promises.

6. Realize that "no" is also a loving word, and your children must hear it from time to time in order to acquire self-control. Children who never experience loving parental denial cannot form the concept of self-denial--and this can later lead to disaster.
7. Make your children wait for something they want, and if possible make them earn it. Waiting and earning are part of responsible adult life, which is what you are after. Let the children learn the difference between wants and needs. Let them see that "everybody else has one" and "everybody else is doing it" are, at best, lame reasons for any course of action. Sound judgment and conscience are guides for life, and these should never give way to thoughtless conformity.
8. Raise your children to be producers, not consumers. Let them put their powers up against problems to solve them, and thus grow into healthy self-confidence. Lead them to take schoolwork and home chores seriously so they will learn the meaning of responsible service. We humans are born to serve, not to shop. Children do not grow up when they can take care of themselves; they really grow up when they can take care of *others*--and want to.
9. Practice "affectionate assertiveness" in disciplining your children. Correct the fault, not the person; hate the sin, love the sinner. Show your children you love them too much to let them grow up with their faults uncorrected.
10. Keep the electronic media under your discerning control. Permit nothing in your home that undermines your lessons of right and wrong and treats other people as mere things. This means no pornography, no gratuitous violence, no glamorous portrayals of insolence and disrespect for others. Teach discernment in use of the media: to accept what is good, reject what is wrong, and know the difference.
11. Listen to your children. That's listen, not obey. When you keep the media under your control, you will have much more time to dialogue with your children. Learn what is going on in their developing minds and guide them with your responsible judgment. Live as a responsible adult who's on top of life, and let them learn what this means.
12. Never forget: You have one chance--and only one--to raise your children right. Forming your children's character and conscience is your #1 priority. If you make a sacrificial effort now, while your children are still young, you can later enjoy the honor they bring you as confident, responsible, considerate men and women--who strive to pass on your values to their own children.

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