

Positive Parenting



Building Character in Young People

Positive Parenting



Building Character
in Young People

A Do It Now Foundation Publication
by Philip St. Romaine

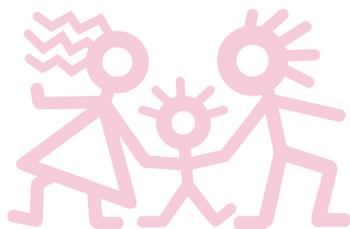




▶ CONTENTS

1. What's Up	5
2. Chaos and Commitment	8
3. Profiles in Character	10
Self-Worth	10
Life Coping Skills	11
Parenting for Self-Worth	11
Guidelines for Discipline	13
Negotiable and Non-Negotiable Rules	15
Consequences: Logical, Natural & Imposed	16
Consistency	18
4. Love in Action	19

CONTENTS



DIN 221

© 2007 by D.I.N. Publications

Published and Distributed by

Do It Now Foundation

P.O. Box 27568

Tempe, AZ 85285-7568

ISBN 0-89230-169-4

▶ WHAT'S UP?

was waiting in the school board office to discuss a substance abuse prevention program with the superintendent when she walked in. She was young and frazzled, and it was easy to see why.

The four-year-old tugging at her sleeve, almost pulling her into the room, could have been a poster boy for attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder. He almost seemed a postmodern meltdown of media overload and genetic engineering gone awry—part Mighty Morphin Power Ranger, part Attila the Hun.

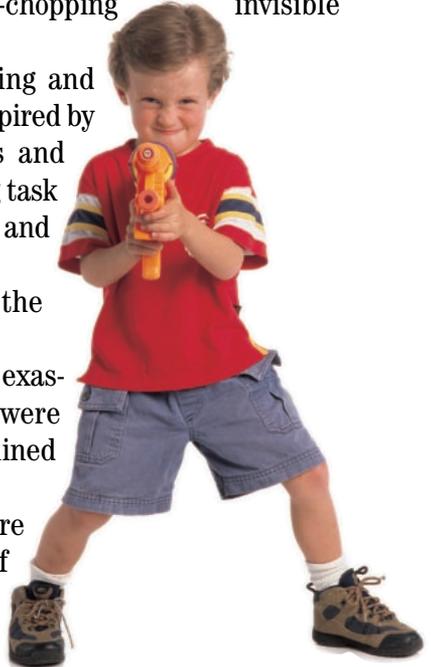
He started ransacking the room as soon as he broke her grip (*or was it the other way around?*), karate-chopping invisible opponents along the way.

The toddler on her lap was whining and squirming to get down. She seemed inspired by her brother's commitment to chaos and struggled to join him in the fascinating task of pulling magazines off an end table and hurling them around the room.

When mom finally released her, the little girl bolted to her brother's side.

"Please, children!" mom implored, exasperated. "Do be good!" But both kids were suddenly deaf and blind—and determined to Go For It. Maximum Impact.

Hardly pausing for breath, they tore through (literally) a year-old copy of



Newsweek, transforming it into a pile of shredded paper and business-reply cards in the blink of an eye.

Finally, some invisible tripwire inside mom's mind snapped and she stormed across the room, whacking the rear of each child.

"How many times do I have to tell you to be good?" she sputtered. The four-year-old only stared defiantly as mom scooped up his sister, dragging her back to her chair, where she (the toddler, not the mom) wailed inconsolably.

Finally, the receptionist called me to my appointment and I left the room, grateful for the quiet and comforted by the thought that the ancient *Newsweek* might finally rest in peace or even be replaced by something more recent. Still, I wondered how the young mother would get through the day.

Later, I joined a high school principal and guidance counselor in meeting with a parent concerning his child's behavior, and heard a similar story

"Can't do nothing to control that boy," the man complained. "We've tried everything from whippings to grounding him to cutting off his allowance. He still does just what he wants to do when he wants and to hell with the rest."

He shrugged. "Kids today just don't have the respect for parents they used to."

► **What's going on here?** During my years as a teacher, campus minister, substance abuse prevention consultant, and parent, I've heard similar comments from scores of adults. It's so commonplace an observation that it seems trite, even irrelevant.

But it isn't irrelevant.

Because the parent-child relationship is at the heart of who we are as individuals and plays a huge role in determining how we feel about ourselves and what we do with our lives.

Some adults simply throw up their hands.

The problem is so vast and touches on so many aspects of modern life—broken homes and fragmented families, the corrosive influence of mass media, the ready availability of drugs and alcohol—that they despair of ever finding a solution.

► **How is it that many poor mothers manage to instill self-discipline and worth into their kids while parents who have everything going for them wind up with spoiled brats?**



Others—me, included—aren't so sure. How is it, for example, that many poor mothers in underprivileged circumstances manage to instill self-discipline and worth into their kids while parents who seemingly have everything going for them wind up with spoiled, irresponsible brats?

And as my own daughters grew—faster than I ever dreamed possible—these issues became more important to me.

That's why I decided to write this booklet.

Because the more I've considered what works in helping kids develop positive traits of character, the more everything has seemed to revolve around a single key ingredient—personal responsibility.

And the more I've looked at responsibility, the more I've come to see it as a two-way street, with parent and child bound up in an interdependent relationship that provides the ground of being for all relationships that follow in a child's life.

Parents *are* responsible for their children—responsible for their welfare and well-being, responsible for communicating their own values and experiences, and generally showing a child the way things are in the world. And children are responsible to parents—responsible for accepting and appreciating their parents' (and society's) rules and regulations, responsible for learning to be a person.

What follows may not be the only way to be a person. But it's the best way I know.



► CHAOS & COMMITMENT

Still, before we even try to tackle the principles of responsible parenting, we really *should* consider the observation made by the frustrated father in the high school principal's office. There's an important lesson there:

"Kids today just don't have the respect for parents they used to," he said.

Is that true? Maybe. But even though many would agree that he's right, it's useful to consider *why* he's right and what we can do about it.

Some commentators have suggested that today's youth are somehow genetically or biologically inferior to kids from a couple of generations ago.

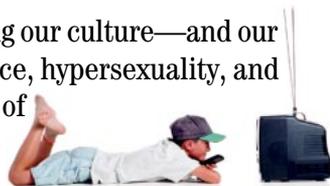
As evidence, they argue that drug use among young adults in the 1960's and '70s and '80s—now parents of today's kids—had a real impact on the quality of inheritable characteristics these parents passed on to their children. If pot-smoking rhesus monkeys have a higher percentage of hyperactive young, they conclude, pot-smoking people probably do, too.

There's another philosophical camp out there, too, and they see things a little differently. They're more likely to view the father's statement through a matrix of cultural, rather than biological, filters.

They echo the sentiments of former House Speaker Newt Gingrich or ex-Education Secretary William Bennett, who believe that the problem *really* started with the personal-liberation movements of the 1960s and '70s.

They argue that such causes—the women’s liberation and the gay-rights movements are favorite examples—unleashed a devaluing of traditional social norms concerning sex, drug abuse, and other core values, including the role and primacy of the family in charting a child’s moral development.

Others blame the media for saturating our culture—and our homes—with a steady stream of violence, hypersexuality, and cynicism. And they’re right; the power of the media in today’s world can’t be underestimated *or* overstated.



Still, while there’s certainly something to be said for each of the above theories, they all have one thing in common: They don’t really focus on the positive, proactive things that each of us can do to help our kids build character and ease their transition into adulthood.

Maybe it’s time to put these theories aside—at least, for the time being—and focus instead on fixing what’s broken: in our families and in ourselves.

To do that, it’s useful to make an old-fashioned commitment to a simple proposition that’s both new *and* old, logical and intuitive, framed as much in the Chaos theory of modern physics as in the ancient faith of believers everywhere: that what each of us does affects everyone else in some way.

Viewed from this perspective, it’s easier to see that family life really *does* matter, and helps determine the values and norms of society as much as culture and society shapes the content and form of our external lives.

If we affirm this simple truth and act upon it, we can be assured that—regardless of how things came to be the way they are—society *really will* change as we change and as our family life changes.

And what we do to build character in our children will, like ripples in a pond, eventually affect the world as a whole.



▶ **PROFILES IN CHARACTER**

In any discussion, it's usually a good idea to define and agree on key terms, because not everyone *means* the same thing when they say the same thing.

The word “character” is a great case in point. Some people use it to describe personality. (e.g. “He’s a real character.”) That’s *not* what we’re talking about.

When we talk about character, we’re talking about the kind of moral and ethical strength that’s reflected in generally positive feelings of self-worth and reveals itself in a variety of life-coping skills.

A profile of a person with this type of character is outlined below. See anyone there that you recognize—or traits you’d like to see more of in your kids?

■ **Self-Worth**

- ▶ accepts self with strengths and limitations
- ▶ feels loved and cherished by family and friends
- ▶ has a reality-based sense of competence
- ▶ believes in ability to create meaningful future
- ▶ can sustain loving relationships

■ Life-Coping Skills

- ▶ is willing to learn new things
- ▶ can delay self-gratification for the sake of future goals
- ▶ understands and can articulate personal values
- ▶ can identify alternatives and make decisions
- ▶ can appropriately express feelings

There are *lots* more qualities we could list (remember the Boy Scout oath?), but this should at least give you a better idea of what we mean when we refer to character.

And helping our kids develop these traits really *is* our primary goal as parents.

More than giving our kids *stuff* (How many video games do you really *need*, anyway?) or finding ways to keep them entertained (Ditto), building character will help prepare them for the day when they leave home, and begin their life's work—and start creating relationships and families of their own.

PARENTING FOR SELF-WORTH

A lot of the communication that takes place between a parent and child involves comments on behavior or personality or both.

And the three basic forms that a parent's commentary can take focus on different aspects of a situation with very different results:

■ **Affirmation.** Comments positively on person and behavior: "I like who you are and I like what you're doing."

■ **Discipline.** Comments positively on person, negatively on behavior: "I like you, but I don't like what you're doing right now."

■ **Shame.** Comments negatively on both person and behavior: "I don't like you and I don't like what you're doing."

Shame—you remember shame. You probably got a lot of it when you were growing up. Parents used to pass it around shamelessly before anyone noticed that it erodes the parent-child relationship and chips away at a child's self-esteem. And that's a *real* shame.

If we want our kids to develop a positive self-concept, we could start by doing less shaming and more affirming and constructive disciplining.

Kids who hear shaming remarks again and again become programmed to believe that they're worthless and incapable. (Which, not uncoincidentally, fits the personality profile of many career criminals and sociopaths.)

We shame our kids when we compare them to one another, belittle them, shout them down, call them names, hit them in anger, or neglect their needs.

These are all counterproductive measures, producing the kind of defiance we saw in the four-year-old who didn't know what his mom wanted when she told him to be "good"—and who, with a little help (or more shame), might eventually learn to stop caring.



When we resort to shaming our kids, we usually do it as a byproduct of our own anger, which points up the need all parents share to constantly monitor the way we deal with our own feelings.

Affirming our kids requires a commitment on our part—and simple observation. Because no matter what *else* they might be doing, kids do all sorts of good and responsible things that ought to be at least acknowledged, if not praised.

If you're like a lot of parents, you may be more in the habit of commenting on mistakes rather than successes, and so need to make an effort at affirming.

That's okay. Even though affirmation is one of the greatest personal skills we can ever develop or use with our kids, it doesn't always come naturally.

But the results are worth it. Taking the time to affirm our kids, our spouses, and others can lead us to become more caring. The payoffs come not only in an increased sense of self-worth in our kids, but in ourselves, as well.

The simple truth is that when parents stop shaming kids and start affirming them, they become easier to live with and so do we. That's the good news.



▶ **Even though affirmation is one of the greatest personal skills we can ever develop or use with our kids, it doesn't always come naturally. But the results are worth it.**

Here's the bad news: It still doesn't magically eliminate the need to discipline them from time to time.

And that raises yet another of the perpetual perplexities of parenthood: How do we discipline kids without shaming them—and confront their destructive behaviors without putting them down?

Good question. We were just getting to that.

GUIDELINES FOR DISCIPLINE

“Discipline” is one of those words that **can** mean different things to different people. In this context, one meaning won't stretch far enough to cover all that we have to say, so we'll give it two.

Here's both in one sentence: Discipline is the ability to respect and follow reasonable rules, and the appropriate consequences that follow when we don't.

It's one of the trickiest areas of all in parenting. Because the fact is that if we really want our kids to learn responsibility, it's necessary to call it to their attention when they behave irresponsibly. It needs to begin early, too. It's ludicrous to expect responsible behavior from an adolescent who was never disciplined as a child.

Still, when we define discipline (self-discipline, in this case) as the ability to respect and follow reasonable rules, we need to point out that what makes these rules reasonable and earns them respect is that they help to maximize the quality of life we share together. As motives go, it's a lot more useful than the fear of punishment, which is usually less helpful in building character.

What works in creating a context for constructive discipline?

Lots of things. You might start by considering some of the following points:

■ **Make home a great place to be.** This is the *best* way to mold behavior. If home is a place where our kids *like* to be, it's easier to correct problems than if they hate being home. We build a nurturing home environment by affirming our kids and by sharing in meaningful activities with them.



Activities can be as simple as family meals, prayer, or chores, or as involved as participating in sports, choir, or community projects together.

Some surveys show that parents spend as little as 20 minutes a day with their kids, and much of this is spent in fussing and checking up. This isn't enough—there's simply not enough involvement to compete with television and peers for influence in their lives.

But even more important than the amount of time we spend together is *what happens* during that time. Passive activities (like watching TV together) don't lead to as much interpersonal involvement as playing a game or even washing the car. Active participation helps build deeper relationships than passive entertainment.

■ **Establish non-negotiable rules for your kids.** As parents, we have the right to make rules that will help us live with our kids in peace and harmony. As authorities in our homes, we need to assert this right and insist on certain behaviors for our kids.

We make rules to establish limits for our kids, who need boundaries if they're to grow. Specific non-negotiable rules should be worked out for each home.

Examples of non-negotiable rules might include:

- ▶ No physical violence or verbal abuse or cursing.
- ▶ Daily bath or shower.
- ▶ Specific limits on TV time and content.
- ▶ Brushing teeth twice daily.
- ▶ No alcohol or drug use.
- ▶ Compulsory school and church attendance.



▶ **Passive activities (like watching TV together) don't lead to as much interpersonal involvement as playing cards or even washing the car.**

Many parents add other rules, and some even eliminate several of the above. Still, regardless of which rules we insist on, we need to be as specific as possible—to let our kids know what we expect and when—in clear and unmistakable terms.

Example? The young mother who yelled at her son in the school board office because he wasn't being good might have had more success if she'd simply told him to leave the magazines alone.

It's important that we model as many of these behaviors as we insist upon. But there are reasonable exceptions, of course. Example: I don't believe that a parent who drinks alcohol responsibly is a hypocrite for telling his or her kids to abstain.

As adults, there are some things we can handle that our kids can't, and they need to accept this without laying a “double standard” guilt trip on us.

■ **Establish negotiable rules.** If our kids are going to learn to make decisions and compromise, the place to start is in the home. Who does which chores, for example, and when? Even toddlers can begin to help with something.

Unlike non-negotiable rules, which parents dictate, negotiable rules involve dialogue. Since they represent agreements made between ourselves and our kids, there's more room for flexibility.

Often these rules change as our kids get older and can take on newer, more challenging responsibilities. Some parents I know list all those household chores that they'd like their kids to take care of, then allow each one to choose two or three.

Needless to say, they have to follow up and negotiate those held in common and those passed over, but their kids are even involved in this.

If the kids can't compromise and make agreements, mom or dad *then* steps in and assigns chores. It's important to note, too, that these parents are careful to screen those chores from negotiation that are most likely to cause conflict and hard feelings.

■ **Reach agreement on rules.** By “agreement,” I mean at least a basic understanding for the reasons *why* a particular rule exists.

If kids understand a rule and agree that it's fair, they're more likely to keep it.

Go over your family rules with your kids from time to time and review the reasons for them. Get your kids to acknowledge their value.

■ **Establish consequences for breaking rules.** “Rules were made to be broken,” goes an old saying, and they get broken at home as often as anywhere else—even those rules that rest on strong agreement.

When this happens, kids must pay consequences, or else they learn that your rules mean nothing.

There are three types of consequences, only two of which help to build character. See if you can pick them out.

▶ **Natural Consequences.** Allowing events to simply run their course. Example: getting cold on a winter day when you forgot to wear a coat.

▶ **Logical Consequences.** Forfeiting a privilege until responsibilities are met. Example: allowing a young person to go out only after chores are done, and denying this privilege (not a *right*) until chores are done.

▶ **Arbitrary Consequences.** Relying on inflicting pain and fear and often unrelated to any established rule. Example: spanking a cranky kid who doesn't know what to do about his or her bad mood.

As you probably already guessed, only natural and logical consequences really teach lessons—or, at least, positive lessons worth learning and which translate into character.

Natural consequences are the best teachers of discipline, and we should let our kids experience them when to do so will not endanger their health or inconvenience others.

▶ **If you and your kids can agree on what consequences will be experienced when rules are broken, your kids then have a choice: Keep the rules or experience the consequences.**

No parent wants a toddler to learn that crossing a street alone is dangerous by allowing a car to teach the lesson. Nor do we want our teenagers to learn the hazards of drug use by allowing them to get strung out on crystal meth.

But we should let them take at least a few of life's lighter lumps and bruises; they'll learn from these.

The principle behind logical consequences is that privileges must be earned and maintained through responsible action. This is, after all, the way most of the world works most of the time.

A toddler can understand that she can't play with a second toy until the first has been picked up, or that she can't come out of your home's "whine room" until the whining stops and she's ready to relate without being cranky.

Similarly, teenagers can respect the fact that they're going to get grounded if they stay out past curfew. If possible, try to link consequences to privileges to maximize the lessons that kids can learn.

If you and your kids can agree on what consequences will be experienced when rules are broken, your kids then have a choice: Keep the rules or experience the consequences.

This way, you're able to slip out of the role of the "heavy," and instead become the person who sees to it that their choices are honored. Then kids are less likely to blame parents for their poor choices, and learn to become more responsible for their own behavior.





▶ **Kids need (and actually want—whether they always know it or not) our consistency and guidance, so they can generate a strong, stable point of reference for growth.**

■ **Be consistent.** Everything we've talked about thus far takes time, effort, and lots of involvement with our kids. Still, there's a payoff: If we're consistent in our affirmation and discipline, our kids won't feel as much need to be defiant and they'll probably be easier to get along with.

On the other hand, if we're *not* consistent in clarifying rules or in allowing kids to experience the consequences of their choices, they'll almost certainly be worse off for it and so will we.

Like trees that go unpruned, children that grow up without consistency often grow out of control, dissipating themselves and bearing little fruit. They need (and actually *want*—whether they always consciously know it or not) our consistency and guidance, so they can generate a strong, stable point of reference for growth.

Consistency is one of the greatest gifts we can give our kids, provided it doesn't turn into rigidity.



► LOVE IN ACTION

Despite all our best efforts and fervid intentions, it's possible that some of the suggestions we've made in this book won't work. That's okay. That's the way life is. We all get to choose and, sometimes, kids choose things we wish they hadn't.

Still, kids who continually choose to break your rules and defy your authority might have a problem that could require professional help. Don't hesitate to seek help if that's the case in your family.

Also, problems that stem from drug or alcohol abuse are sometimes virtually impossible for parents to sort out and correct without the assistance of helping professionals, and the same goes for learning disorders and a host of emotional problems, including anxiety, depression, and other psychological issues.

It's a wise parent who recognizes the limits of his or her competence and turns to those who can help.

It's no failure on our part to be imperfect and limited. We *are* only human, after all.

But that's no excuse for not trying.

Clarifying the principles that help build character in young people is an important first step in effective parenting, but it's important to remember that none of them are effective unless they're applied in everyday life.

Good intentions may count for something, but not always as much as the people who intend them hope they do—unless they're translated into meaningful action.

And while there are hundreds of creative ways to affirm our kids and teach them the responsibility they have for the choices they make in their lives, none of the ways mean a thing until they become a manifest part of the love and trust at the bottom of the parent-child relationship.

Why not begin today to make love and trust the basis of your relationship with your child? And why not begin today to make love and trust the basis of your child's relationship with you?

It's what *we're* here for. And it's what *they're* here for, too. 🍷



▶ **PROFILES IN CHARACTER**

In any discussion, it's usually a good idea to define and agree on key terms, because not everyone *means* the same thing when they say the same thing.

The word “character” is a great case in point. Some people use it to describe personality. (e.g. “He’s a real character.”) That’s *not* what we’re talking about.

When we talk about character, we’re talking about the kind of moral and ethical strength that’s reflected in generally positive feelings of self-worth and reveals itself in a variety of life-coping skills.

A profile of a person with this type of character is outlined below. See anyone there that you recognize—or traits you’d like to see more of in your kids?

■ **Self-Worth**

- ▶ accepts self with strengths and limitations
- ▶ feels loved and cherished by family and friends
- ▶ has a reality-based sense of competence
- ▶ believes in ability to create meaningful future
- ▶ can sustain loving relationships