

Teaching our Children Respect: Through the Eyes of Faith

■ by Debi Mitchell, MS, LMFT



***“Train up a child in the way he should go:
and when he is old, he will not depart
from it.” (Proverbs 22:6 KJV)***

My pulse races faster than an Indy 500 driver when I see a child act disrespectfully in public. I also confess I desire to meddle in the situation, knowing it would likely become messier than any toddler eating Spaghetti-O's for the first time. I hear people grumble, “Kids these days...” and I know I'm not alone.

Respectful children, teens, and young adults do still exist, but they will not be perfect. When children act disrespectfully, parents can feel helpless. This article discusses understanding what respect is and sharing some respect teaching tools, all through the lens of faith.

Understanding Respect

Have you ever tried defining the word respect? For many people, understanding respect is as easy as giving the cat a bath. Webster's defines it as: “to regard as worthy of special consideration; to consider worthy of esteem; or, to regard with honor.” Respect sends a message that someone is valuable; he or she has worth.

Most people consider respect something earned. This is Biblical. Paul reminds us, “Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.” (Romans 13:7, NIV).

Christian beliefs impact respect. Most would agree, faith or not, that we should treat family and friends respectfully. However, if we believe that Jesus valued all of humanity enough to die on the cross for them, we are likely to value other people as well. In fact, God commands us by saying, “Show proper respect to everyone...” (1 Peter 2:17a, NIV).

Philippians 2:3-4 describes it this way: “Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too.” (NLT). This is the attitude that God calls us to cultivate, motivating our choices and priorities.

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Respect Teaching Tools

Everyone needs these respect teaching tools:

1. **Be sure the family is on the same page.** Respect looks different to different people. For example, I consider eye contact while speaking respectful, while in some cultures it is considered challenging and disrespectful. If the parents don't agree, children become confused and sometimes resentful. Colossians 3:21 (NASV).
2. **Keep expectations in keeping with ages and abilities.** People become more capable with age. Expecting a lively 2-year-old to sit quietly in the church pew for an hour without something to do is probably asking for trouble.
3. **Be consistent with respect rules and consequences.** Just like other types of rules, they are only taken seriously if expectations and consequences are consistent. Many parents fear discipline. If you fear losing your child's love, take comfort! In Hebrews 12:9, God said it works! "Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it" (NIV).
4. **Model it.** The saying, "Do as I say, not as I do" doesn't work. Jesus called those people hypocrites (Matthew 7:3-5). Kids WILL do what we do, particularly before middle-school when peer influence increases. Modeling respect includes body language: no eye-rolling, not texting or emailing work while she is talking, or letting him know you are listening by nodding occasionally.
5. **Apologize - without excuses.** This means no: "I'm sorry, but..." Healing happens when we confess, both within ourselves and within relationship. (James 5:16, NIV).
6. **Teach consequences, good and bad.** Keep in mind Tool #2, but start young! Point out how one choice affects others (e.g.: "Thank you. You waited to talk so I was listening better..."). For kids 7-12, it helps to draw it out, working toward the child drawing it out. Only use real situations. For kids over 12, you can discuss hypothetical situations or possible future choices. (e.g.: You attend a job interview and choose to hold the door open for a mom with a baby. She feels grateful and tells her husband. Her husband is the manager and frustrated with disrespectful people. He decides this makes the difference and hires you).

Sometimes we try and it feels like nothing gets through, but we can't give up. The world fights for our children's hearts and attitudes. Study God's word for ways to improve. Get on the same page with your spouse and show them what respect looks like. Be real and accountable about weaknesses. Apologize when needed. Teach about the consequences of disrespect and rewards of respect. And someday, when our children are old, "they will not depart from it" (Proverbs 22:6, KJV).



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