

Teach Your Children Well

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“Teach your children well...and feed them on your dreams.” —Graham Nash

The song goes, “You, who are on the road, must have a code that you can live by.” When we look back over our childhood and early adulthood, we see that we’ve spent a lot of time figuring out what that “code” is, a code we “can live by.” If we’re at all reflective, we’ve revised our “code” more than once, and we remain ready to revise it again as we learn from experience.

We are all on the road, on a journey from birth to death with, we hope, a good distance in between. So we have a code we can live by. The songwriter has that other piece of advice: “Teach your children well...and feed them on your dreams.” Whether we have children or not, whether our children are grown or not, “Teach your children well” is a message for all of us. Because all children are “our children”; all children learn from our example, from the culture we create, from the “code” we live by.

Whenever I begin to think about what I hope to teach the children I know, I discover that much of what I’d like children to learn is a child’s version of my own “code.” No surprise there, I guess. And my code is built on my dreams for my children, for all children, and for the world.

Today I’d like to share the things I hope to teach my children; the things I hope all of us will try to teach all the children we know. When I started down this road, I very quickly came up with a dozen things, and I don’t have enough time this morning to go into all of them. So I’ve chosen a few to discuss, but I’ll just mention some of the others that are “basic”: To be kind to others, to help others, to play fair, to accept losses, to try new things, to persist despite setbacks.

These are all important things to teach our children. But I won’t do more than mention them, so that I can spend a little time on these others: To be resourceful, to recover from mistakes, to ask questions, to be open-minded, to cherish differences, to resolve conflicts by peaceful means. Let’s start with—

To be Resourceful

A sense of oneself as a *resourceful* person has great power. Adult confidence rests on childhood self-esteem. How do we learn to feel good about ourselves? By learning to trust our ability to solve the problems we face.

Children need to know they are safe, that their parents protect them; within that bubble of security, they can learn to be resourceful, even at an early age.

I remember the time my mother and my son Kevin attended an event at Harvard. Kevin was only about six years old. Of course they became separated. My mother was concerned, but decided that her best bet was to return to their seats; she thought he might be on his way there. And he was; he stopped to have a nosebleed, staunching it with a paper napkin from a trash can. Someone saw him,

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and asked if he needed help. “I need water to help my nosebleed stop, and I need to get back to my seat where my grandmother is,” he said. The helpful adult gave him water and came along as Kevin found his seat and his grandmother. When my mother told me about it later, she said (in Kevin’s presence), “I knew he’d find his way back to our seats. He’s such a resourceful child.”

Children—and adults—need to see themselves as resourceful, as able to help themselves, and able to ask for help when help is needed.

To Recover From Mistakes

People make mistakes. Children make lots of mistakes. Adults sometimes expect children to measure up to adult standards of behavior. It’s easy for adults to become annoyed and impatient when a child doesn’t do something in the right way, at the right time. Sometimes what an adult wants from a child is what is most convenient for the adult. Children can learn at a very young age that the adults in their life “do everything right,” and that making mistakes is wrong and bad.

Yet everyone makes mistakes. It helps children when adults talk about mistakes and what they did to recover from them. Anyone who is learning and growing is taking risks...the risk that something won’t work out, the risk of failure, the risk of mistakes.

When my daughter Jamie was little she worried about making mistakes. When she was about eight years old we attended an event together; one of the speakers commented, rather casually and off-the-cuff, that “everyone makes at least three mistakes a day.” Jamie was greatly relieved. She took this “voice of authority” to heart, revising the message slightly to suit her own needs. A few weeks later she was with her grandmother, who dropped or spilled something: a “mistake.” Jamie told her, with great assurance, “Don’t worry. Everyone is entitled to make three mistakes a day.”

The trick, of course, is to learn from a mistake and to try not to make the same mistake twice. Fortunately, life allows plenty of scope for making new mistakes.

Recovering from a mistake requires learning from it, but it often requires something more proactive: acknowledging the mistake; fixing it (or cleaning it up); apologizing to anyone who has been harmed. And the final step: moving on.

To Ask Questions

One of the lessons children learn all too soon in life is that adults can find their questions annoying. Anyone who has ever spent much time with a young child must know how much joy children take in asking “Why?” ... so often that it becomes a game. How will the adult escape the trap of the endless “Why?”

I vowed early-on in my parenting that I would not become impatient with questions. My parents brought great energy to the message that asking questions is the only way we learn new things. Questions express a child’s natural curiosity, something no one should stifle. The mantra in our household was: “There are no stupid questions.” Maybe it’s not completely true—but asking questions, even silently, is one of the best ways to learn, and it’s also a way to become a careful and critical thinker.

Still, the endless “why” can get old very, very fast. I had to find a way to get out of it when my patience was wearing thin. I will share my secret (apart from the obvious solution of offering ice cream). There is an alternative. Answer the penultimate “why” with this riddle: “Pete and Repeat were in a boat. Pete fell out. Who was left?” Any child old enough to ask “why” will not be able to resist saying, “Repeat.” And then I’d say, “Pete and Repeat were in a boat...” Go through that a few times, and the child will get it, and then run off to tell it to the first available friend.

To be Open-Minded

It’s surprising to me, still, how our culture teaches us to put things into iron-clad categories. Children pick up this habit early-on. They are like canaries in the coal mine: listen to children swap opinions and prejudices. They fervently reflect the ideas that surround them.

When my son Kevin was in kindergarten, he came home from school with some startling opinions. Despite being the youngest in a family that included a strong and self-determining older sister and a vocally feminist mother, one day he announced: “Girls can’t play baseball.” His sister delivered an immediate and emphatic course correction. Still in the same frame of mind, as we entered the house one day he suggested, “Let’s put a sign on the front door that says ‘No Girls Allowed’.” I noted, gently, that a sign like that would mean his sister and I wouldn’t be able to enter. After some reflection, Kevin decided that he did want us in the house.

The idea that assumptions should be questioned is not easy to teach. It requires that we check our own assumptions, and think about the way we talk in front of children. Some common phrases adults use can signal that close-minded assumptions are acceptable: “People like that” or “Those people.” I’ve come to think of these phrases as the red flags of closed-mindedness. Words like “always” and “never” are (first) usually wrong, and (second) they imply the existence of rigid categories.

From our culture we pick up habits of *condemnation*. It’s difficult to turn on the television without hearing someone “trash-talk” about a person or point of view. As adults who are around children either occasionally or often, we have to challenge this habit of condemnation when we hear it; we have to lift it up for critical examination.

And, of course, we have to try not to pepper our own speech with assumptions or condemnation. “You who are on the road...” It is a road. Life is a journey, and none of us is perfect. But we can correct ourselves, and challenge ourselves—out loud and in the presence of children—when we fall into the cultural bad habits of assumption or condemnation.

To Cherish Differences

I have in mind two main types of differences: ethnic and religious. As Unitarian Universalists, we commit to “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” We resolve to encourage those around us in their own spiritual journey.

Children who attend Sunday School here learn about world religions. They learn to understand the meaning of religious holidays in a variety of faith traditions. They learn that it’s OK if their ideas about the mystery of life, and the ideas of their best friends, happen to be different. They learn that differences are an opportunity for discussion, for learning, not for division and criticism. They learn that the important thing is how we treat others. When Sophia Fahs said “it matters what we

believe,” this is what she meant: that a belief in the worth and dignity of every person *matters*, because it affects how we treat other people, and so it’s a powerful belief—more powerful, more important, than our various and highly individual theologies.

As the parent of two children of color, I’ve learned how important it is to embrace diversity. Each of my children has been the target of casual racial slurs that other children deliver as if they were the absolute, incontrovertible truth.

Jamie, at the age of three: The other girls in pre-school told her she couldn’t have a turn being Cinderella in their game, because Cinderella had blonde hair.

Kevin, at six: One child said casually in playground conversation, “All black people should be killed.”

Where do children get their ideas? From their parents directly, in some cases, but also, and even primarily, from our culture. A recent study of children’s attitudes toward race had very interesting results.

The study discovered that well-intentioned, good-hearted white parents hope that their children will grow up to be “color-blind.” They never say bad things about people of color. But they also never talk about color. They hope that by not calling attention to differences in skin color children will not notice that these differences exist. Yet the study showed that even infants notice differences in skin and hair color. When parents don’t talk about these things, what children learn is that there are unspoken distinctions between “us” and “them.”

When parents taking part in the study were instructed to talk with their kids about racial differences, two things happened. First, many parents simply couldn’t bring themselves to discuss race with their children. Second, when parents were willing to broach the subject, they discovered that their children, even very young children, had horrifying ideas that the parents rushed to dispel.

The study involved before-and-after testing of the children for unconscious racial bias. Nearly all the children had some racial bias when the study began. But in the test at the end of the study, the children whose parents talked about race were the least biased among all the children tested. It was also clear that children’s attitudes toward race could change within a matter of weeks, once their parents began talking about it.

To Resolve Conflict by Peaceful Means

The ultimate lesson we might hope to teach children is to resolve conflict by peaceful means. At a fundamental level, this teaching is that we can’t hit someone just because we’re angry. Kindergarten teachers say to kids, “Use your words, not your hands,” so that children can learn to ask for the toy truck instead of snatching it away. My son once described one of the other children in his kindergarten this way: “He’s a *snatcher*.” So teaching kids to use words, not hands, is a good start. But it’s not enough.

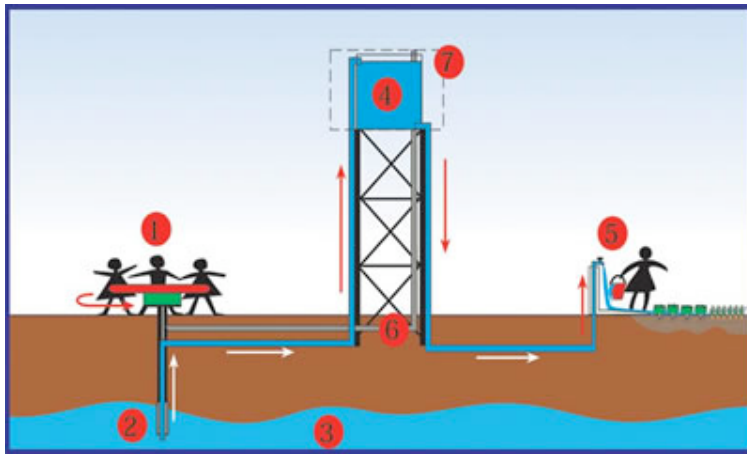
The corollary, which is much harder and yet very important for adults, is that resolving conflict by “peaceful means” includes resolving conflict without using harsh or hostile words. Most adults know not to hit someone when they are angry or have a strong disagreement. Do we know equally well not to use words that hurt? Do we pause to take that deep breath, to remind ourselves that the

person we're annoyed with deserves our respect, to hold back the angry words and re-frame our thoughts into a sentence that might actually be heard and understood? That might be "received"? Children learn what we teach, and whatever we teach is best taught by example.

To Imagine a World Where Everyone has a Good Life

When I think about these lessons I'd like to teach my children, it seems to me that the "big picture" lesson, the "overview" of all these teachings, is to imagine a world where everyone has a good life. Children look around them; they see the signs of poverty and injustice. They want to make a difference. We can teach them to ignore those things, or we can teach them that resisting injustice is important and necessary. We can teach them that by their attitudes and actions they can make a difference. We can teach them that it's up to each person to make the world a better place.

Nantucket children had a good example of this principle in the success of local teenager River Bennett, who raised funds to supply PlayPumps to two African villages. A PlayPump is playground



equipment that pumps clean water from an underground aquifer into an above-ground storage tank—without the use of electricity. The equipment turns as children play, and the turning action works the pump. During his senior year of high school, River raised enough money to pay for two PlayPumps.² River has the ability to imagine a world where everyone has a good life, and the conviction that he can help create that world.

When I get to this "big picture lesson," I have two thoughts. The first is "That's why I'm here." I'm part of this faith tradition because Unitarian Universalism has chosen to focus not on doctrine but on imagining a world where everyone has a good life. We covenant together about how we will be in community with one another and with the world. That's important to me, and it's why I'm a Unitarian.

The other thought is that, if we can teach our children all those other lessons I've talked about, this one is easy. But whether we or our children can imagine a world where everyone lives a good life depends so much upon the "code" that we live by. We are, each of us, "on the road." Life is a journey; we teach by how we live it. And we don't just teach our children; we teach ourselves.

Teach *well*.

² Through the efforts of people like River Bennett, PlayPumps International has supplied free PlayPumps to more than 1,200 locations in South Africa, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Swaziland and Zambia providing improved access to clean drinking water to millions. Expansion over the next few years will bring PlayPump systems to Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. A fully installed PlayPump costs \$14,000. The website: http://www.playpumps.org/site/c.hqLNIXOEKrf/b.2589561/k.C08/The_PlayPump_System_The_Water_Problem.htm