

Building Tomorrow's Leaders

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When we think of leaders, people such as Mahatma Gandhi, Winston Churchill, Colin Powell and Abraham Lincoln often come to mind. These leaders, while all vastly different people, shared qualities such as empathy, trustworthiness, fairness, cooperation, a sense of responsibility, citizenship and valuing the significant contributions of each person. Obviously not everyone is cut out to be a leader, but if you teach your children to lead and give them opportunities to lead others, the results can be amazing.

The keys to nurturing leadership qualities in your children are raising them in an environment of consistency, creativity and modeling. Consistency helps them learn to trust others as well gain confidence. As children test their environment under their parents' watchful eyes, they gain positive self-esteem and a sense of right and wrong, which are the basis for a sense of justice and fairness. Creativity fosters awareness as new experiences open your children's eyes to different ways of doing things. And modeling is also of paramount importance. You, as the parent, are your children's most important role models in developing leadership traits. By serving the community, showing empathy for others and living responsibly, parents can mold their children's behaviors.

Parents can begin teaching responsibility at home by providing enrichment that fosters broad interests, self-esteem, insights and skills that characterize leaders. Leadership and teambuilding experiences help children identify their strengths and weaknesses and build on social, emotional and behavioral development assets. Teaching responsibility carries over into all aspects of their lives and becomes the foundation for turning our children into citizens able to meet present and future challenges in a global society. A wide variety of opportunities helps students learn and practice essential leadership skills within a learning community. As they see that they have more control of their own lives, community involvement becomes more important and they can envision being an effective leader.

By supporting your children and encouraging them to try out a wide variety of activities, you'll widen their scope. The schools themselves provide everything from sports to science clubs, chess to cheerleading. Scouts and other service organization incorporate leadership and character building into all their activities. Religious groups also focus on character building, with a strong belief system and moral teachings. However, parents need to evaluate youth organizations and seek groups that are student-led rather than adult-driven. Young people tend to lose interest in an organization quickly when group decision-making and mission are not student-centered. These organizations should also give student leaders the chance to show off their capabilities and be taken seriously. Group planning that is inclusive and diverse strengthens youth leaders. Student leaders find greater purpose in advocacy, policy-making and service when their needs are met.

By giving children a role in decision-making at an early age, parents foster the critical thinking skills necessary to be an effective leader. Encourage your kids to evaluate inappropriate decisions and offer other options. To encourage independent thinking, discussion and debate about current events nurture leadership potential. Listen openly and thoughtfully to your children's thoughts and ideas, and you'll foster mutual respect, objectivity, empathy and understanding.

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Not all students are leaders in a traditional sense, such as being the football team captain or organizing proms. However, these children can still exhibit unique leadership abilities. At-risk student leaders characteristically have a great influence on their peers, resolve conflicts without fighting and make decisions about their personal lives. These students need to connect how being a leader will improve their lives and help them to find meaning. When they are included in problem-solving and their opinions are valued, children will make better choices.

Your child's school counselor can help you come up with community resources and school-based experiences that will enrich your child's leadership potential. Children respond well to leadership experiences in the community, such as restoring parks, helping to prepare meals for those in need, painting murals to beautify the school grounds and organizing after-school sports leagues. By creating a caring, respectful and encouraging environment, parents and schools can turn today's children into tomorrow's leaders.

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