

Role Model the Behavior You Want to See From Your Kids

What you do is more important than what you say

By Amy Morin

Kids are always watching what you do. They see how you handle stress. They watch how you treat other people. They look at how you deal with your feelings. They're very observant and they soak in all that information like little sponges. One of the [eight most important parenting skills](#)¹ is providing your children with a positive example.



Girls copy what they've seen their mom do.

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Modeling appropriate behavior is an important part of discipline. If you act in a way that you want your kids to act, they'll learn just from watching you. That isn't to say they'll automatically start behaving the same way, but they'll be better equipped to manage their behaviors.

Social Learning Theory

A famous psychologist, Albert Bandura, developed the Social Learning Theory. He surmised that people learn by watching others. In his famous Bo-Bo doll experiment, he demonstrated how kids learn by watching adults. After witnessing an adult become aggressive with an inflatable doll, the kids began to imitate the behavior and they became more aggressive.

Proof that Kids Imitate You

You certainly don't need a fancy science experiment however to prove that kids imitate their parents. How many times have you seen little girls putting on their mother's high heels and trying on lipstick so they can look like mommy? Or how many little boys pretend to shave so they can be like dad? Kids repeat what they've heard you say and they imitate what they've seen you do.

Examples of How Parents Can Accidentally Model Bad Behavior

- A mother tells the cashier at a restaurant her 12-year-old son is only 11 so he can get a discount at the buffet. She then yells at her son because he lies when he says he has his homework done.
- A father spends his evenings watching TV but tells his 14-year-old daughter she should read more.
- Parents tell their kids to treat everyone with respect yet they often make critical comments the appearance of people who appear on the news.
- A divorced couple argues frequently about custody issues and visitation but expect the kids to get along with one another.
- A mother tells her daughter to be kind to others but she yells at the store clerk when they refuse to take back an item she had hoped to return.
- A father tells his kids that they should eat healthy but he sneaks dessert after they go to bed and doesn't exercise.
- Parents tell their kids to share and be generous with what they have yet they don't get involved in any sort of charity or volunteer work.
- A father smokes cigarettes and while he has a cigarette in his hand, he tells his kids that smoking is bad and they should never pick up the bad habit.
- Parents tell their kids to take responsibility for their behavior yet when they forget about their child's dentist appointment, they argue with the receptionist and tell her she clearly made a scheduling error.

Follow Your Own Rules

It's really hard to model appropriate behavior for your kids all the time. However, you have opportunities every day to provide your kids with learning experiences so they can see how to behave appropriately.

Although you may find opportunities that you think are appropriate to bend the rules a little, kids aren't able to do this. For example, if you tell a "little white lie" by telling your friend you can't help her move because you "have a headache" but you go to another social engagement instead, your kids will learn that [lying](#)² is acceptable.

Show your kids how to follow your [household rules](#)³. Use discipline that [teaches life skills](#)⁴ and explain how the rules will help them later in life. If you show kids that you value the household rules, it will increase the effectiveness of your discipline strategies.

Live According to Your Values

One of the [four biggest discipline mistakes](#)⁵ parents make is not looking at the long-term impact of discipline strategies. When it comes to modeling

appropriate behavior, it's important to instill values in your kids that will help them to become healthy, responsible adults. The best way to teach them values is to model them.

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