Parents Can be Positive Examples When Teaching Children Honesty

Honesty is an important character trait to teach children. Without honesty, children may find it difficult to build healthy relationships and have a successful future. It takes time, patience, and effort to teach children honesty.

Parents need to set a positive example by being honest themselves. Many of children's senses of manners and morals are learned through imitation of their parents. If parents model cheating and lying, children may learn these as acceptable behaviors (e.g., keeping someone else's belongings without their permission, keeping extra change from a cashier, or telling a lie).

Children sometimes start a dishonest tendency during the pre-school years. For instance, they may grab toys from a child or try to take candy in a store. Parents should correct this type of behavior immediately by teaching children to return what was taken, apologize for their behavior, or teach children a way to pay for what was taken.

Use age-appropriate language to teach positive character development. Help young children understand honesty and why dishonesty is unacceptable by reading stories related to honesty. Ask children questions throughout the story. This process gives children time to share their thoughts, understanding, and questions.

Children often lie out of fear or to protect themselves. They worry about being punished or making parents mad. When parents react harshly to children's mistakes, it may result in more lies instead of taking responsibility for their behavior.

It is important for parents to talk to children about their behavior, what they could have done differently and what they can do to make things right. When children tell the truth, parents should praise them for being honest. Children should know their parents value and appreciate honesty.

Source: Nina Chen, Ph.D., CFLE Human Development Specialist University of Missouri Extension