

Teach Children Well

BY: DOLAH SALEH

IF AND WHEN YOU ARE CAUGHT BEING DISHONEST, APOLOGIZE, DO NOT RATIONALIZE. ONCE YOU LIE, CAN YOU EVER BE TRUSTED?

Do what I say, not as I do. That's what most parents are thinking if not saying, particularly when they screw up. But we all know what really happens. Our children are intently watching and listening to our every move. That is why we refer to parenting as the "toughest job." It is the toughest job, almost impossible to get it all right, and guess what? That's okay. We are human, we do make mistakes; the important thing is to admit it and apologize when needed. Just because these people are our kids does not preclude the necessity to ask their forgiveness for our fallibility.

I have interviewed numerous parents and have concluded that no matter how grave the error, parents have good intentions. When they are too harsh, they mean well; when they are too permissive, they were doing what they felt was best. In either case, we are not assured of the outcome. That is dependent on the individual child and circumstances. There is no manual; it is a combination of trial and error based on our own experiences and how we were raised.

Still, I am convinced that most parents are receptive, willing to hear what other parents have learned and can pass on. And even for those of us who do not face the daunting responsibility of raising our own children, we need to acknowledge how we play a role in influencing young people.

Getting it right for yourself first

Since we can't give away what we don't have, ideally we would have children or be in a position to influence children only after we have worked on our own self-fulfillment.

If you don't live the life you were meant to, you can't expect that of your children. If you live a life of quiet desperation or mediocrity, if you sacrifice everything you are, you will never know how great a role your actions played in your children doing likewise.

Remember that they watch your relationships with great interest. You may have heard someone say "My parents should never have been/stayed married," or "There was no love in my home." You may have known people who have recognized that their parents remained together "for the kids." They ought to have known better; children are much better served by seeing their parents happy or at peace with the potential for intimacy with another partner. Give your children some spiritual foundation. This can include everything from organized religion to a sense of self-respect and living a moral life. Doing things like being kind, helping others through volunteer work, and treating others as you wish to be treated are demonstrations of a connection to a universal good.

Accepting responsibility without question

My sister once told me that she had not planned to have children but once they were "given to her," she decided she would do her very best in raising them and became fully committed to the task. She has never wavered and continues to learn for and with them.

Whether you like it or not, especially if you are a parent, you are a role model. If and when you are caught being dishonest, apologize, do not rationalize. Once you lie, can you ever be trusted? Do not risk losing trust by choosing wrongly. Be sure that children are not fooled by your sins of omission and will feel as deceived as if you had blatantly lied.

I have repeatedly heard and believed that parents do the best they can with what they have to work with in the moment. But I also know that most of us, when we take the time to think through and follow our instincts, can and will succeed in doing the right thing.

Don't squelch the dreams of your children for any reason, especially because of what you want. Honor them as they are.

Disciplining is your job; remember, to discipline is to teach. You will not always be the most popular parent, but appreciation will undoubtedly come your way in the long term.

As best you can, live with integrity. This includes small matters, from not asking your children to lie for you ("Tell her I'm not here"), doing their homework, or failing to return money paid you in error, to much larger concerns such as living an honest life. This also means that you either love their other parent and treat that person with respect, or you decide to live separately. Remember that all children want their parents to love each other, but if that is not possible under the same roof, then we need to decide to love and respect one another the best we can from separate homes.

It is said that it is not divorce that hurts the child, but the ensuing antagonism between the two parties. In making family decisions, think in terms of what is in the best interest of the child. As two parents, speak with one voice. And even as a single parent, be consistent and do not make promises that you cannot keep.

Financial discussions, or any others that are negative and heated, ought to be kept private. Children do not need to be made aware of adult matters. It scares them. Displays of negative attitudes toward other family members ought to be outlawed, as well. It is an offense to our children to keep them from knowing the people who are part of their family history. Take a look at those who succeed in maintaining close family bonds, and observe what difference it makes.

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Paying attention

Pay attention to what your children have to say; really listen and be open to learning from them, for they are in your life for a reason and have something to teach you. Accept your children's unique voices as you want them to tell you who they are and not what they think you want to hear; they will eventually stop telling you if they feel fearful or ignored or unaccepted.

Paying attention also means trying to live in the present. It is so easy for us to remain attached to our past (as we repeat and re-create those circumstances) or continue to anticipate the future in such a way as to miss the moment with them. If we can remember that now is all we have, we will not be so willing to let it pass.

Do the very best you can to have fun with your children, entering their world at the age they are, if for no other reason than the chance to avoid later regrets.

These guidelines obviously do not represent all there is to know about guiding our youth. We can always seek and get help in parenting or in becoming good role models. It is too important not to, even if we need to turn to psychotherapy. It is my dream that each of us strive to become our best selves before we inevitably begin to influence those who come after us.

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