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Positive Parenting
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Contagious Kindness

Jesus, when asked which commandment was the greatest, replied, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Mt. 22:37-39)

Our children are growing up in a world that labels them materialistic, self-centered, shallow, and accuses them of demonstrating a raging sense of entitlement. Rather than bristling with defensiveness, let us who have the privilege of shaping these children of God help them learn to be kind, practice kindness each day, and make that kindness contagious. How will we begin?

MODEL IT: Children learn their most profound lessons by what they see and observe us doing. If there is ever a disconnect between what we say we value and what they see us doing, they will believe what we do. Let’s begin with them! On the day you are most annoyed or frustrated, use a kind voice, demonstrate compassion and empathy, and treat your child as you would your best friend.

MAKE IT A CORE FAMILY VALUE: One of my pastors began telling his children when they were very young, “The world outside can be mean and harsh; in our family, we treat one another with love and kindness.” Then, he lived kindness in the way he treated his wife and daughters ... and everyone else his life touched.

TELL STORIES OF KINDNESS IN ACTION: Every family has stories of one of its members living the kindness of Jesus out in the world. Here are a few examples others have shared with me:

- A friend from North Carolina, walking with his family in a downpour, spotted a homeless man, getting soaked. He walked over and gave his umbrella to the homeless man, blessed him, and returned to his family. His preschool daughter exclaimed, “But Dad, you gave that man our umbrella!” and her father had a chance to connect his actions to his faith and family values.
- A friend’s husband went to the layaway desk at K Mart before Christmas and paid the balance due for a woman he had never met. When the cashier called to tell the woman that her bill had been paid in full, he could hear her shriek, “Thank you, Jesus! Thank you, Jesus!” and a chorus of young children’s voices in the background.
- During the Great Depression, the men who rode the railways marked back gates with a chalked “X” to identify the places where others who were hungry would be fed if they went to the door and asked for food. A woman who lived near the train tracks was concerned when four days of heavy rain passed without a single person coming to her door to ask for food. She took white paint and a brush out to her back gate and made a permanent “X,” so that none would go hungry.
- More than 30 years ago, on a cold January Sunday, our family went to McDonald’s for lunch after church. We got our food, said grace, and settled our kids into the booth to eat. My husband got up and went to the counter again, filled a tray with hamburgers and milk cartons and took it to a remote table, where a homeless man sat, nursing a cup of coffee with lots of little creamers. He touched the man gently on the shoulder and gave him the food, encouraging him to eat what he could, then take the rest with him. “And God bless you and keep you safe.” Our adult children still tell this story.

LOOK FOR EXAMPLES: Listen to the news or read the paper together, looking for examples of others who live that loving kindness of Christ. Site those examples and talk about them as a family. Give each person at your dinner table a tea light candle. Light it, naming a person each of you has seen be the light of Christ for each of you.

CATCH YOUR CHILD BEING KIND: Set a second tea light candle and ask each person to light the candle and name a person for whom they have been the light of Christ this week. Tell them, “That’s what I call kindness!” Remember these stories and share them again and again, especially when it’s been a hard day without much kindness. What an important time to reaffirm your child’s capacity for kindness!

PLAN FOR KIND ACTIONS TOGETHER: This is an opportunity for your family to do service together. Help a neighbor with yard work. Offer a ride. Give a frazzled parent some free childcare. Ask for ideas from your congregation. Or go to Jenny Friedman's Doing Good Together website and subscribe to her monthly e-newsletter at www.doinggoodtogether.org

LINK IT ALL TO GOD, WHO FIRST LOVED US: Jesus tells us to love one another as he has loved us. Baptism enjoins us to "Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." (Mt. 5:16)

FAMILY ACTIVITIES

1. The next time your family attends a baptism, discuss the "good works" you have seen that give glory to God.
2. With older kids, read a newspaper or news magazine, looking for kindness on the part of everyday people. Cut out the articles and begin a collage of Good News!
3. Ask your child to tell about the kindnesses they see in class, on a sports team, on the playground, in scouts, or in the neighborhood.
4. Have the adults tell about what they have seen in their workplace, when commuting, or as they volunteer that makes kindness contagious.
5. Find out about the things your congregation does to share the love of Jesus in your community and around the world. As a family, volunteer and participate in one of those ministries.