



Positive Parenting
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AN ENEMY ...

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you ... Do to others as you would have them do to you. Luke 6:27-28, 31

Jesus certainly lived this injunction, as he proclaimed from the cross, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." (Luke 23:34a) To follow this example, to teach this to our children may be one of the hardest parts of parenting. Why does it matter? Consider the alternative: Do we really want to teach our children to hate others, to regard other children of God as enemies? We are all made in the image of God. Jesus enjoins us to "love one another as I have loved you." (John 15:12)

The poignant song, "You've Got to Be Carefully Taught," from the musical South Pacific, captures how hatred and fear are engendered and how we become enemies:

You've got to be taught
To hate and fear,
You've got to be taught
From year to year,
It's got to be drummed
In your dear little ear
You've got to be carefully taught.

You've got to be taught to be afraid
Of people whose eyes are oddly made,
And people whose skin is a different shade,
You've got to be carefully taught.

You've got to be taught before it's too late,
Before you are six or seven or eight,
To hate all the people your relatives hate,
You've got to be carefully taught!

In a culture that has become judgmental and divisive, how might we, as followers of the loving, forgiving, inclusive Jesus, teach our children to love, not to hate; to do good to those who hate us; to bless those who curse us; to pray for those who abuse us? How can we help our children cultivate hearts and minds that are open to hearing the stories of others, finding common ground, regarding differences as enriching and fascinating, rather than threatening?

MODEL THE BEHAVIOR YOU WANT

Let your children watch and listen to you and your stories of forgiving someone who has hurt you, who has left you out, who has maligned you. Include your children in this circle: when they have used unkind words or actions, forgive them. Point out that in the Lord's Prayer, we ask God to forgive us as we have forgiven others. Pray together that God will help us forgive, as God has first forgiven us.

TALK ABOUT WHAT YOU ARE DOING ... AND WHY?

Talk them through the process of making friends, not enemies. Make it explicit. Don't assume that children can see what you do and understand it. When we take the time to explain both what we are doing and why, we give them the information they need to extrapolate and apply it to their lives.

HELP YOUR CHILD TALK THROUGH HARD SITUATIONS

When your child deals with a hard situation, first listen to them. Then, help them to see it through the eyes of the child or adult who has hurt them. You are building empathy through taking another perspective. Help your child brainstorm, then evaluate many ways of responding, select a response, and practice it.

INVITE THE CHALLENGING CHILD TO TELL THEIR STORY

Consider inviting the child to your home. Be present. Encourage the other child to tell their side of the story, but also to tell about their own life. There is an African proverb that says, "An enemy is someone whose story you do not know." Meg Wheatley says it this way: "You cannot hate or fear a person whose story you know." Help your child understand what might be behind another's offensive words or behavior.

PRACTICE FORGIVENESS

Forgiveness is not for the one who has wronged us. It is for us. One of my beloved pastors has taught me this: "Don't let them live rent free in your head." I have given a great deal of space and energy and time to those by whom I have felt wronged. When I forgive those who have wronged or hurt me, I reclaim life energy, experience joy, love others, and serve as Christ has first served us.

FAMILY ACTIVITIES

1. As a family, study another culture. Read books about it. Cook food from that culture. Learn a dance or a few words in their language. Attend a celebration. Learn their history. Listen to their stories.
2. Encourage friendships for your child and for you that cross the boundaries of color, ethnicity, religion, and culture.
Stand up for those who are different from you. Don't label or demonize.
3. When others tell racist jokes, don't laugh or ignore. Say, "I find that hurtful and offensive."
4. Catch your kids forgiving and praying for their enemies. Affirm, affirm, affirm.
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