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Children learn character by example

By Dana Ailer
Contributor

Six year-old Peyton Moore struggles under the weight of a grocery bag filled with cans as she carries it to Blue Ridge Area Food Bank's drop-off.

Peyton's mom, Liz Moore, has been encouraging Peyton to participate in this and other charity programs for several years.

"It's important to show kids how to help other people, even when they're really young," Moore said.

As Moore already knows, children learn character traits from the adults in their lives much earlier than those adults might think. Observing the behavior of people around them is the most important source kids have in developing their own belief systems, and that process begins early in childhood.

"I don't think it's ever too early, nor can we say it's ever too late, to have positive character modeling," said Susan Phend, a counselor at Thomas Dixon Elementary School in Staunton.

While it's important for adults to set a good example for kids of all ages, by fourth grade the stakes are higher.

"By fourth and fifth grades, life has already started becoming fairly complicated and I think they are desperately looking for answers and role models to follow," Phend said.

She is quick to point out role models are not pro football players or famous musicians.

"We're talking about people in their lives who have shown them respect and who they, in turn, respect," she said.

The parents, neighbors, teachers and coaches who have contact with kids every day are their most influential role models.

Russell Laub, Staunton City Schools Teacher of the Year and Bessie Weller Elementary physical education teacher, agreed.

"I try to get the students to share and take turns as early as preschool ... I ask them to be fair no matter what the game is."

Laub said participation in sports is one important way to help children form good character traits and mutual respect.

"Participation in sports can show individuals that it's OK to make mistakes and learn from them. It also shows that people are different and have different needs."

Reading books is another great way to explain ethics and integrity to kids of all ages. Retired teacher Lorain Harouff read books to her first grade classes to help students identify good character traits.

"It's so important to introduce values this way," she said. "I can't say enough about how important

books were in my teaching because they were a jumping-off point for all kinds of discussions."

Harouff said even young children understand abstract concepts such as loyalty and respect when they are presented in a story.

"Children understand more than we can ever know. It's amazing how they pick up on what it is that the book has to offer as far as knowledge about life. They're very perceptive. Even way before they can read it for themselves, if a book is read to them, they get it," she said.

Indeed, Harouff believes that reading to children is imperative to their character development.

"You have to make time for it during the day; you just have to," she said. "I can't stress it enough. It's very important."

Additional Facts

Suggested Reading

Stanton Public Library's children's programmers recommend these picture books for introducing various character traits to young children:

- Chrysanthemum by Kevin Henkes

Teaches children about bullying and embracing individuality

- The Lemonade Club by Patricia Polacco

Teaches children about friendship and facing adversity (illness)

- Nubs: The True Story of a Mutt, a Marine, and a Miracle by Brian Dennis

Teaches children about loyalty and respect

- Owen & Mzee: The True Story of a Remarkable Friendship by Isabella Hatkoff

Teaches children about friendship, strength and acceptance

- The Perfect Sword by Scott Goto

Teaches children about diversity

- Shep: Our Most Loyal Dog by Sneed B. Collard III

Teaches children about loyalty

- Sophie's Masterpiece by Eileen Spinelli

Teaches children about generosity and life cycle

- Timmerman Was Here by Colleen Sydor

Teaches children about trust and friendship

- The Two Bobbies: A True Story of Hurricane Katrina, Friendship, & Survival by Kirby Larson

Teaches children about friendship and facing adversity

Lorain Harouff recommends these chapter books for explaining personal values to slightly older kids. These books can be read out loud to children as young as 6, and later the kids can read the books for themselves:

- The Boxcar Children (book 1) by Gertrude Chandler Warner

Teaches children about importance of family, responsibility, work ethic, nurturing and independence

- Charlie & the Chocolate Factory by Ronald Dahl

Teaches children about integrity

- Charlotte's Web by E. B. White

Teaches children about life cycle and friendship

- Cricket in Times Square by George Seldon

Teaches children about friendship and adjusting to a new place

- James & the Giant Peach by Ronald Dahl

Teaches children about friendship and acceptance and appreciation of differences

- Stuart Little by E. B. White

Teaches children about importance of family and loyalty

- Trumpet of the Swan by E. B. White

Teaches children about life cycle, tolerance and acceptance and appreciation of differences

- Tucker's Countryside by George Seldon

Teaches children about ecology and importance of caring for land and animals

- The Wizard of Oz by L. Frank Baum

Teaches children about friendship, compassion and acceptance and appreciation of differences
