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Helping children grow into their best selves

by Michael Grose

During a recent radio interview, the presenter asked “What’s the job of a parent?”

I replied, “The main task for parents is to help their children grow into the best version of themselves.”

This response can be challenging for parents who want to raise their kids in their own image. Sure, parents want to share the best parts of themselves with their children but that doesn’t mean they should raise them in our own image.

If excellence is a strong value, then in all probability this is a value you may like your child to share. That makes sense. However, if sport is your strength and your child doesn’t share that interest it’s wise to assist your child to develop their own strengths and interests rather than push them down a path of your making.

The following ideas will guide you to help your child grow into the best version of themselves both socially and academically.

Encourage exploration

Young children are great explorers of territory, ideas and behaviour. Their curiosity shows no bounds and can lead them into trouble. The socialisation process that we undertake as parents is designed to keep kids social and safe. But that shouldn’t mean that we discourage the curious spirit that children possess.

As kids move through primary school into the identity formation years of adolescence, stimulate their curiosity and exploratory activities and interests, discuss a variety of ideas and topics and form relationships with different children and diverse generations.

Require self-control

Does your child react or respond to a difficult situation? Can your child wait a few minutes with food in front of them until others join them or do they eat immediately because they are hungry? Does your child spend all their pocket-money on themselves or are they encouraged to save some of their allowance for

later? Lack of emotional control and an inability to delay gratification until later will generally hold most kids back from reaching their full potential. Self-control is like a muscle that gets stronger with practice, so encourage your child or young person to take a breath when angry, be patient and wait, and look forward to receiving gifts at special times of the year rather than getting them on demand.

Model empathy

The ability for children to empathise with others in difficult circumstances is an underestimated skill. Sensitive children generally have empathy in spades, while bullies lack the ability or willingness to put themselves in the shoes of others. Parents, grandparents and carers are well placed to model empathy. When a child comes to you with a problem or worry, validate their concerns with a response such as, "Ah, I see you're really worried by this." Such a response teaches a child the empathetic language they can use when siblings and peers experience difficulty.

Convey compassion

Compassion and caring are encouraged in education and parenting circles as prime values to instil in children and young people. Perhaps this comes as a result of greater community awareness as a response to COVID-19. By developing compassion and caring in kids we lay the foundation for not only a strong sense of community but also for individual happiness that comes from contributing to something bigger than the individual.

Embed wellbeing

If there is a lasting legacy that schools are making to the current generation, it's their recent focus on children's wellbeing practices and principles. As a community we are just coming to grips with the fact that good mental health and wellbeing is central to a person's long-term happiness, work and relationship success. You can assist by embedding wellbeing habits of healthy eating, exercise, sleep, relaxation techniques, regular time in nature, gratitude and mindfulness into family-life.

In closing

Helping kids grow into the best versions of themselves requires parents to focus on character development, capacity building and personal wellbeing. A broad focus with a solid understanding of what it takes to look after their mental health will help kids become productive and community-minded young people.