

Parents as Role Models

How to Help Kids Discover Positive Behaviors

by Sandra Yeyati

Like the familiar adage, “Monkey see, monkey do,” children learn habits, attitudes and values by observing and mimicking their parents. This phenomenon, known as modeling, is a double-edged sword. Sometimes parents unintentionally teach their kids by example to smoke, eat too much candy or bully people. On the other hand, with awareness, planning and strategic modifications, parents can use modeling to instill in their kids good habits, positive attitudes, healthy emotional intelligence and strong self-esteem.

“We parent what we know, very often on automatic mode,” says Debra MacDonald, a certified parenting educator at the Center for Parenting Education, in Abington, Pennsylvania. “How many times have you said, ‘I will never say that to my kids,’ and then fast-forward several years, those words are coming out of your mouth. Awareness is your first step.”

“Look at how you handle stress or express anger,” MacDonald suggests. “If you slam the table, break something and yell, that’s what you’re teaching your children to do when

they’re angry. To teach them constructive ways to express anger—like taking deep breaths or running around the block—you’ve got to employ those tools yourself.”

Actions speak louder than words. “To teach your child good values, you have to demonstrate them through your deeds. If you tell your child that they must always be on time for school, but you’re late for work every day, your child hears one thing, but sees another,” MacDonald explains, adding that kids are adept at sniffing out these inconsistencies.



Saying, “Eat your spinach,” while regularly gobbling ice cream won’t inspire desired results. When MacDonald’s son was young, she realized she wasn’t setting the right example at the dinner table. “Slowly, over time, I began to improve our family’s lifestyle choices, and now that he’s in college, he knows how to cook healthy meals, practice portion control and clean up after himself,” she boasts.

Tackling Childhood Anxiety Through Modeling

In his 2021 book, *Breaking Free of Child Anxiety and OCD*, Yale University Professor Eli Lebowitz offers a scientifically proven parental modeling program called Supportive Parenting for Anxious Childhood Emotions (SPACE). Although the goal is to treat a child’s anxiety, parents meet with a therapist and learn tools to modify their parenting approach in two ways: being more supportive and reducing accommodations.

On the support side, SPACE parents learn to show a genuine acceptance and understanding of their child’s distress and to communicate their confidence in the child’s ability to tolerate and cope with the anxiety. The support can be as simple as saying, “I get it. This is really hard. You’re upset, but I know you can handle this.”

“Supportive statements aren’t always intuitive for parents,” says Lebowitz, director of the program for anxiety disorders at the Yale Child Study Center. “Sometimes they don’t believe that their child is feeling anxiety. They might think that the child is being manipulative or attention-seeking. Or, when parents do believe that their child is anxious, they want to protect, soothe and reassure them, but by doing these things, parents aren’t communicating their belief that the child can handle it, which is critical to helping them overcome the anxiety.”

The second change that SPACE parents learn to make is to gradually and systematically reduce all the accommodations they have been making to help their child not feel anxious, such as sleeping beside a child that is afraid of being alone or not inviting company to the house to avoid upsetting a socially anxious kid.

“Research indicates that even though parents are trying to help, accommodations that rush to the rescue tend to maintain or worsen anxiety over time,” Lebowitz says. “I worked with parents of a child who had panic attacks at night and would say, ‘My heart is racing. I can’t breathe. I think I’m going to die.’ Feeling overwhelmed and scared, her parents would rush her to the hospital again and again, even after doctors assured them that she was healthy and didn’t need to come in. From the child’s perspective, when your parents rush you to the ER, that confirms that this is literally an emergency. You feel more worried and scared. When the parents were able to take a breath, give her a hug and say, ‘We know this is uncomfortable, but it’s going to pass, and you’re going to be okay,’ she began to learn that she didn’t need to be afraid of anxiety. She could handle it and didn’t need to avoid it.”

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