



the MITE way

Inculcate the right values in your child by modelling them yourself. Dr William Wan extrapolates



Our world is getting increasingly fast-paced and impersonal, thanks to the accelerated speed of things. What is trendy today quickly becomes obsolete six months down the road. In such an environment

we need to be anchored in values that remain constant, and we need to teach such values to our toddlers and preschoolers to give them a measure of stability in the shifting sands of change.

Often overwhelmed with adapting to the changes ourselves, we parents may find this an overwhelming task. Some of these values that serve us so well are being rapidly eroded by the aggressive tides of innovation. We seek to reclaim these values that served us and our foreparents well. The values I have in mind are those that spring from a kind disposition to inspire a more gracious society. These include gratitude, respect, consideration, courtesy and charity. I am convinced that instilling in our young children the values associated with kindness will give them the handle they need to succeed in navigating the many byways of life.

Today's preschoolers are exposed to a great deal more than ever before. They are highly

stimulated and consequently are much more precocious. They are capable of understanding, learning and retaining much. Studies done by developmental psychologist Paul Bloom at Yale University have also shown that the inclination to be kind is built in the disposition of babies, especially towards the familiar. "At minimum," he writes, "we can conclude that babies are sensitive to third-party interactions of a positive and negative nature, and that this influences how they behave. They have, then, the foundations of morality" [16 October 2010 *New Scientist* 45].

I am therefore of the view that we should inculcate these values in an age-appropriate manner. The MITE way of inculcating values is premised on the inherent ability of our young children to grasp these values. To "MITE" kindness is to Model, Inspire, Transmit kindness and Empower our children to be kind.

Values, it is often said, are better "caught" than "taught". The first place to start is with our own behaviour as parents. We are our children's heroes and they emulate our conduct more than we care to admit. It is therefore imperative that we model the values we want to see in our children. Our toddlers and preschoolers are more likely to act and speak kindly when they

observe us behaving kindly towards others. They are more likely to say the three magical words "Please", "Sorry", and "Thank you" when we practise them ourselves. We are their role models.

Hero worship

The story of Mencius (Meng Tzu), a philosopher-teacher who lived between 372 and 289 B.C. is instructive in regards to the power of role-modelling in a child's life. When he was young, his parents lived near a cemetery. As a result, Mencius watched and imitated the undertakers and the bereaved in the ritual burials. His parents were not pleased and moved into a house next to a busy marketplace. There, Mencius watched the merchants trade and came home imitating them. Again his parents were not at all pleased and moved again. This time, they moved to a home near a schoolhouse. There, Mencius observed the ways of the scholar-teacher. In time, he became a scholar-teacher himself.

Children are by nature "hero-worshippers". It is perfectly normal to "hero-worship" the right kind of persons with the right kind of values. One of my greatest joys was when our youngest son publicly shared at my 60th birthday party a few years ago that I am his hero. He went on to say that I am an inspiration to him.

We all have heroes and when I reflect on them, it will quickly become obvious that they are our heroes because they inspire us. In fact, I am quite sure that almost all our heroes inspire us not only because of their intellectual abilities or successes in life, but mostly because of the values they uphold and practise. That is why Mahatma Gandhi and Mother Theresa are inspirations to many.

Kindness is a value common to these larger-than-life people. It was Gandhi who said, "I shall pass through this world but once. Any good therefore that I can do or any kindness that I can show to any human being, let me do it now. Let me not defer or neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again." Mother Theresa had counselled, "Let no one ever come to you without leaving better and happier. Be the living expression of God's kindness: kindness in your face, kindness in your eyes, kindness in your smile."

As parents, we are the first-line heroes that our children find inspiration in. It behooves us that we are found to be inspiring kindness by our words and deeds.

All our schools implement a teaching module called "Moral and Civic Education (CME)". It is an attempt to teach children different good character traits. However, that should not cause us as parents to abdicate our responsibility to transmit such values to our children at home. In fact, to succeed in inculcating values to our children, we should begin as soon as they are old enough to play and share. To wait until they start preschool would be far too late.

In our understanding of kindness, we consider respect a foundational element. It is important to

teach what it means to respect others very early in a child's moral journey. The components of respect include treating other people the way you want to be treated. Following the MITE model, to transmit respect, we must model respect in our lives. It begins with the way we show respect to one another as adults. If we yell at each other, or yell at them, little as they are, we will soon lose our credibility to transmit the idea of respect because our words and our actions are incongruent. Like any other values we wish to teach, to teach respect, we must show respect.

To be effective in inculcating values, we must take every opportunity to empower our children to practise those values. One effective way to empower is to praise the child for his successes as he practises kind behaviours. This positive reinforcement is much better and more effective than punishing mistakes. Positive reinforcement helps the child to feel good



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about himself. It builds up his emotional bank. No child at this age is expected to behave kindly at all times, but receiving regular, positive feedback will make him want to try even harder every time.

A further step may be taken towards empowerment by celebrating the child's effort. It is a reward system, if you like. Giving the child a special treat by taking him to his favourite joint is one way to celebrate. Throwing a simple party or inviting his friends to a picnic is another way. Creating special events like these for the child to look forward to will motivate him as he associates kind behaviour with fun and pleasure.

The MITE way of inculcating values is not at all complicated. It is aligned to the way a child learns. He learns best by emulation and inspiration. We teach best by modelling and empowering.

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