



by Karen Stephens

Parents Are Powerful Role Models for Children

“A chip off the old block.” “Flip side of the same coin.” “The apple doesn't fall far from the tree.” “Like father, like son.” “She lives up to the family name.” “Trouble follows the footsteps of all those Hatfields (or McCoys . . . take your pick of any family in disfavor).” These folk phrases succinctly sum up family characterizations — some complimentary, others definitely not. They all infer that parents are to blame for how kids turn out — for better or worse.

Like quite a bit of other home-grown knowledge, these beliefs have, to a degree, been confirmed by researchers. Children, in general, do tend to grow up to be a lot like their parents. Social scientists and genetic researchers have identified many cycles that loop from one generation to the next. Children who live in homes where parents smoke are more likely to become smokers. Parents who abuse drugs or alcohol are more likely to find their children someday do the same. Adults who were abused as children may indeed hurt their own children. And that's not all. Parents with a low self-esteem raise children with the same affliction. There are cycles to teenage pregnancy, domestic violence, and under-education. Talk shows thrive on the fall-out from cyclical dysfunction.

Just because we know cycles exist doesn't mean researchers have determined exactly what causes them. Current thought is that some of children's behaviors are related to biological factors and some to environmental factors. (Sounds logical to me.) For instance, scientists hypothesize that some children inherit a gene that pre-disposes them to low impulse control. Environmental factors, such as nurturing during early brain development or early exposure to violence, then affect how a child manages impulse control. The theory infers that children raised amidst domestic violence, will more likely develop into hostile and aggressive adults. A child raised in a home that handles disagreements non-violently through respectful negotiation would still struggle with a short temper, but would likely learn problem-solving skills that preclude violence. So, a lot of people, those with folk wisdom and those with professional degrees, believe parents play a major role in how our children turn out. Parents give kids their genes at conception, and then through childrearing, we give them our act to follow, too.

Awareness of cycles is good. But many of us only dwell on the negative implications. Yes, kids are very likely to mimic our self-destructive behaviors. But, if we do a good job of parenting, it means children also get a lot of good things from us! We know parents with good self esteem tend to raise children with more secure self esteem. Parents who succeed in education tend to have children who meet and even surpass their parents' accomplishments. And while it is true that children of divorced families are more likely to divorce, it is also true that children of happily married parents tend to find the same happiness in adult relationships. Why is it easier to believe in negative cycles?

The most important lesson that cycles teach us is that role modeling can be an extremely effective parenting tool. It is powerful that we should use it to our advantage! Being a positive role model requires fore-thought and self control. Today we talk a lot about disciplining our children. We parents need to put an equal emphasis on disciplining ourselves.

“ . . . parents
play a
major role
in how
our children
turn out.”

It's easy to dispense don'ts to our kids: "Don't smoke." "Don't drink and drive." "Don't do drugs." "Don't lie." It takes much more effort and discipline to practice what we preach. It takes a strong character to give our kids a good role model to copy, because copy us they will. What a disservice we do to them if we only give them self destructive behaviors as a road map to follow in life. If you don't want your kids dying of lung cancer, a wise strategy would be to stop smoking yourself. (And if you think you can sneak a cigarette when the kids aren't looking, you are wrong; they smell it.) If we don't want the kids lying to get out of going to school, we best not lie about taking a "sick" day from work.

Children are sensitive and astute with an uncanny ability to distinguish between adults who only talk a good game and those who play the game by the rules they preach.

Challenge yourself to identify the positive things you can role model for your kids — things like happiness, consideration, self respect, patience, generosity, self-discipline, diligence, kindness, bravery, and compassion. Role model feeding your body with wholesome and nourishing food, expanding your mind with enlightening reading, exercising for physical and mental health, speaking well about yourself and others, and enjoying life with friends and family.

Kids respect adults who walk their talk. Children are sensitive and astute with an uncanny ability to distinguish between adults who only talk a good game and those who play the game by the rules they preach. Credible adults inspire kids' confidence and admiration. Hypocrisy disillusion children and sends them looking for others to follow.

It turns out that folk wisdom is right after all — "Seeing is believing." What kids see and believe, they become. Each and every day, parents build a legacy for kids to inherit. Choose to be a parent who role models family traits worth believing in and worth building upon. After all, what goes around, comes around . . . unceasingly from one generation to the next.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.