

## Developing Leadership in your Children

How can *you* foster a leadership mentality? Here are eight secrets.

**Be a Booster.** Confidence comes from being told, “I know you can do it!” And then, “You did it! That’s terrific!”

Building confidence begins with the child’s first steps. When he toddles triumphantly towards your congratulatory embrace, he has scored Victory No. 1 and savoured its reward. Each subsequent little success leads to others. No success is too tiny to be complimented. But this doesn’t mean you should fill the air with insincere hurrahs, or that you should never criticize. Criticism should be coupled with both praise and instruction. After youth soccer games, well-meaning dads often say to their children, “Wow! You missed those two easy shots on goal!” Believe me, your son knows he missed; he doesn’t need to be reminded. Instead, praise his efforts: “I like the way you took the ball in towards the goal! You’re really aggressive!” Then, “Why don’t we practice tomorrow evening? I bet we can improve your aim!”

**Let them Explore.** One spring day I watched a girl who lives near me dig a rock out of her rain soaked front garden. She ran to her father. “Daddy! Look at this beautiful stone I found!” He looked at her disapprovingly: “You’re getting all muddy! Her face fell. She threw the prize away unhappily and trudged indoors.

What might he have said? How about, “What a beautiful stone! Let’s clean it up so we can really see it. Then I’ll give you a trowel and some gloves, and maybe you can find some that are even prettier!” After all, mud can be washed away; the mark on the child’s imagination lasts longer.

Children (and adults too) admire and follow someone who is willing to explore, to rise to challenges. Yet all too often we teach our children to play it safe.

A primary-school teacher told me about two boys who arrived in Sub A already skilled readers. She asked if they’d like to be moved to a special advanced reading programme. One boy agreed eagerly. The other chose to remain with the beginners. Sadly, his parents supported the decision. “You can guess which of those two will go on to be a leader,” the teacher said to me.

**Focus on Success.** Recently a promising 12 year old gymnast came to me for help. She had all the skills for a future Olympic medalist, yet never seemed to live up to her potential. I handed her four darts and instructed her to toss them at a target across my office. She looked at me nervously. “What if I miss?” she asked. Those four words summed up her disappointing career. Instead of focusing on how to succeed, she worried about how to keep from failing.

Persuade your child to think about success, not obstacles. The person who believes in success is the one who inspires others to follow.

Too often we step in and shield a child from mistakes, their consequences and the lessons they teach. The child who gains her inner resolve is the one who tries, falls short, corrects his or her

errors, and gets up to do it again. The one who inspires others is the one who rises to the occasion even though he or she might fail.

**Listen to Their Dreams.** Your daughter comes home and announces she wants to be a professional bull-fighter. Or your son says he's going to be a stunt man. Neither squares exactly with the future you had in mind for them. What do you say? "Girls don't do that," or "Gosh, that's a dangerous job?"

Chances are the wannabe toreador will change their mind and study law, and the daredevil will detour into a business career. Meanwhile, encourage their dreams, however outlandish they seem to you. What counts is the ability to fantasize, and to think about what might make the fantasies come true.

A leader has been described as one who can have a vision, explain it to others, and influence them to follow his path to it. But the first step is the dream itself.

**Ask, "What If?"** In a park near my house, I watched a little boy whose legs were too short to climb the first step of a slide. He ran to his mothers. But instead of boosting him on to the step she asked, "How could you reach it?" The boy thought for a minute. "What if I pulled my wagon over there?"

**Give Them a Chance.** Leadership needs to be sharpened by practice. Just as a young cricket bowler must practice his throw to perfect it, an aspiring leader needs opportunities to nurture leadership skills. Enroll your children in sports teams, boy scouts, church groups, community organizations where they will gain experience in dealing with others.

Encourage them to hold office too. An athletic-team captain gets plenty of chances to demonstrate leadership skills. So does the head of the school French club or a prefect.

But let your children strive for leadership in their own areas of interest. Some children are leaders on the playground, others in the classroom. Not everyone can be class captain, or wants to be. But a talented writer can become editor of the school newspaper, or a young strategist, chairman of the chess club. Operating in an area where one feels at home builds confidence, the foundation of leadership.

Some schools conduct leadership training sessions. Children are taught such techniques as chairing a session, bringing all the members into a discussion, keeping the group focused on its objective, gaining a consensus.

You can practice such skills around the family dinner table. Let your child lead the evening's discussion, calling on each member of the family in turn and listening to comments, then summarizing what has been agreed upon.

**Be a Campaign Manager.** There's a class election, and your son or daughter would like to be chosen. Without being pushy, you can help. For instance, in my seminars for executives, I point out one "secret" of management leadership – a simple, friendly hello and smile for each

employee every day. Similarly, the outgoing youngster who greets not just those in his or her own circle but others as well as quickly recognized as a potential leader.

Encourage him or her to speak up in class too. Learning to express yourself in front of others without shyness is a key skill. Have your child rehearse classroom recitations at home. Give suggestions about voice level, strength of expression, and eye contact.

**Teach the Three R's.** Family psychologist John Rosemond has identified **respect, resourcefulness and responsibility** as the basic characteristics parents should develop in a child. **The mantle of leadership falls on those who try to understand and abide by the rules (respectful), who keep trying, or try new ideas when there's a setback (resourceful) and who face up to the consequences of the actions (responsible).**

In the end it's not your words but your example that matters. If you make carping remarks about your neighbours or colleagues, you can't expect your son or daughter to develop respect for others. **If you dodge paying your taxes, you can't preach about taking responsibility.**

Studies of leaders have shown that their parents, too, exhibited leadership qualities, though often in unrecognized ways. They considered community service important. They made a point of helping others. They had dreams for their families – couched in terms of values and standards, rather than material gain. Put to the test, they displayed inner strength that brought the family through tight places.

Nutrition experts tell us that if you want a healthy child, you provide a healthy diet: what you put in is what you get back. That applies in character development as well. The love and concern that you direct to your child returns in an inner strength and confidence that translates to leadership.