

Raising Children with Jewish Values

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Most parents are concerned about raising their children with good values: parents of Jewish children not only want good values, they want Jewish values. If this is so, then what Jewish values are important in raising Jewish children, and how does one go about it?

When I think of teaching children, I realize that the most important thing is to be aware that our children learn by example. To instill values in children effectively, we must model the kind of behavior we want them to acquire.

Having said that, however, I have selected six values that I notice Jewish texts focus on as the most important ones. Coincidentally, all six, when written from Hebrew to English, start with the letter "T." I've added a seventh which ties them all together and also starts with the letter "T."

Teaching the Seven "T"s

1. The Ten Commandments

The Ten Commandments is a good place to start. If nothing else, your children will appreciate the fact that the Western world has used them as the basis for laws for centuries. We can assume our kids will understand the commandments' basic meaning, but try to show their relevance in your everyday life. Model how to honor parents by honoring yours. Celebrate Shabbat (the Sabbath) in whatever way works for you and your family. Teach your children the value of telling the truth, not only by not telling falsehoods, but by explaining the damage that lies and gossip can cause.

2. Torah

In the Jewish tradition, the word Torah means more than the first five books of the Hebrew Bible that are housed in the Torah scrolls. It is all of Jewish learning, past and present. It means learning in its greatest sense: that of continuing to study and grow intellectually and spiritually as a Jew. And learning is an important Jewish value.

3. Tefillah (prayer)

Helping to acquaint your child with God through prayer is important to his/her Jewish experience. One easy way to incorporate prayer into your lives is to say part of the Sh'ma (Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One) together with your child at bedtime. You can start doing it together as a nightly ritual when the child is young, or help the child to do it on his/her own if that is more age appropriate. Another easy way to introduce prayer is to say blessings at meals or to express gratitude for the beauties of nature around us.

4. Tzedakah (righteousness)

The word tzedakah literally means "righteousness." We use it to describe the giving of charity. In the larger view, it is helping others, through action and/or financial resources: giving of yourself. Jewish teachings emphasize that no matter what your financial status, you can still give to others, and you can point out, or brainstorm with your children ways to come up with, ways to do do this in their daily lives.

5. Teshuva (repentance)

We generally associate teshuva with Yom Kippur, with seeking repentance for our wrong doing, but it is an important concept for children to be aware of year round. It takes a big person to say, "I made a mistake. I am sorry." You will be giving your children a gift by teaching them this concept, and should have ample opportunities in their daily lives to point out the value of doing so, whether with their siblings or their friends.

6. Tikkun Olam (repairing the world)

Children of almost any age can understand the concept of "making the world a better place to live." It is in the Aleinu prayer that we are asked to "repair or perfect the world in the kingdom of God." From this comes the concept of tikkun olam, which asks us to help complete the creation of the world which God began. What this means to us today includes being responsible for the consequences of our own behavior, being kind and accepting of all God's creatures, taking care of the environment and natural resources, and being good citizens--with all that implies. Model this behavior for your children and try to find ways that they can help.

7. Talk about It

We have to talk about these things with our children as relevant issues come up in daily life, showing them how these values fit into a Jewish context. For example, when you are going to a meeting to raise funds for a worthy cause, be sure to tell them what you are doing and why it is important in terms of Jewish values. When you are volunteering your time for a person or group, explain why. When you are taking an adult education class, tell them how important learning is to Jewish tradition, no matter what your age. When you are going to the polls to vote, tell them that you are helping to make the world a better place by exercising civic responsibility, and that this is a part of the concept of tikkun olam. When you light Shabbat candles, make a Kiddush (blessing over the wine), or Motzi (blessing over the bread), or say the Sh'ma, tell them you are participating in tefillah (prayer); that you are communicating with God.

By modeling the values you want to teach, and by making sure your children are aware of them and why they are important, hopefully you will end up with the nachas (pleasure) of seeing your children live their Jewish values as you have done.