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## Teaching children to value their virtues

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by Gwen Allen

Listen in on an average toddler play date, and you're almost guaranteed to hear a lesson or two on sharing, kindness or forgiveness. Just like teaching a child how to eat, walk or talk, parents are a child's first instructor, especially when it comes to learning right from wrong.

Mother of three (now grown) children, Dr. Mary Manz Simon said this part of a child's education is so important that she decided to write a series of books called "First Virtues for Toddlers."



After an informal study of a national mom's group called MOPS (Mothers of Preschoolers), Simon was able to conclude that there are 12 virtues that concern mothers most; patience, sharing, kindness, politeness, friendliness, truthfulness, forgiveness, joyfulness, thankfulness, excellence, loving and obedience.

Teaching a child how to eat or talk is one thing, but Simon said that teaching something abstract, like a virtue, is a bit more difficult.

"I couldn't figure out how to relate virtues, like forgiveness, to young children who are concrete thinkers," Simon said. "Young children mentally process only what they can see and touch. I couldn't create a book that would allow a 2-year-old to touch obedience or patience."

After some deliberation, she decided to create a 12-book series, one for every virtue. At the beginning of every story she defines the virtue, and then by means of fuzzy animals, walks the child through situations they can relate to.

In one story, Simon introduces forgiveness and defines it as "move on past, don't let angry feelings last" and then walks the child through a situation; "If a friend steps on my toe, I will pardon her, ya know."

"We are constantly modeling behavior for children," Simon said. "If we want them to learn values that are important, then we need to take the time to teach them."

Simon said these books are even more important in modern society because she said society's moral compass has shifted, and a lack of clarity has formed as headlines are riddled with cheating and scandals.

"We have a responsibility as parents to teach what is right and wrong," Simon said. "We have to take the teachable moments-there are so many-and maximize them, because if we don't, someone else will."

Monika Hall, of Virtue T's in St. Charles, who is also a mother with two small children, said she also wants to help children learn virtues, but in a different way.

It was at a children's concert, among the sea of Hannah Montana, Bratz and "spoiled" tee shirts, that Hall said she had a virtue epiphany.

In response, she designed four "educational" T-shirts for toddlers, each with a virtue and its definition that include courage, kindness, tolerance and patience.

"I thought these were the most simple virtues that are sometimes overlooked," Hall said. "Just like learning their ABCs, numbers or colors, it's (character building) an important milestone."

To be sure children benefit from the tees, Hall encourages parents and caregivers to follow a five-step plan. The first is to introduce the virtue, define it, tell a story relaying it, repeat with wear and then pass it on so that others may benefit (which additionally teaches a toddler to share).

"My goal is that by the time the toddler outgrows their tee, the virtue will be ingrained in their heart forever," Hall said. "We all want our children to grow up to be leaders, but a kind, courageous, patient and tolerant leader is even better."

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