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Making children responsible for others will develop leadership skills

By Ed Brenegar

REAL LIFE LEADERSHIP

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Question: How can I help my children become leaders?

Answer: Children learn by example, through experience and with a mentor who teaches them.

One of the best ways to teach leadership is to do a wide variety of things with your children. Teaching involves more than imparting information: It is showing our children how to observe what happens in the social situations they are in. We want to help them understand the motivations and expectations of the people they encounter every day. Learning to relate to a wide variety of people is critical if they are going to develop their capacity for leading.

Children also need to learn how to think clearly about the decisions they may need to make as leaders. Learning to observe, understanding what they see and then deciding what actions to take are some of the skills that can be fostered through mentoring. When we help children think through situations by asking them questions, they learn to be open to a wide variety of options.

We can also find settings where children can learn to work within a leadership role. Youth organizations like Boy and Girl Scouts, sports teams, 4-H, service clubs and religious youth groups are ideal places to learn leadership. There is no substitute for the experience of being responsible for a group of people. Participation in these groups should not be just another activity. These are opportunities where children can develop a wide range of skills that will help them in future years.

My own experience has shown me that there is a dual benefit to this approach. First, children gain the confidence to believe they can make a difference in the world — learning to lead is learning to do things that matter and help others. Second, parent and child can become co-partners in leading an organization. You learn together how to lead. Of course, this requires that the parent is open to learning to be a better leader.

Leading by example is the third key way to help children learn to lead. Stories can be particularly helpful in capturing the qualities and character of leadership. One of the best examples of children leading can be found in the Harry Potter series, which follows Harry from ages 10-17 as he leads his fellow Hogwarts students through extremely challenging situations. Harry's character of courage and self-sacrifice in the face of crisis is an inspirational example for children and their parents. To be like Harry is to discover the same self-confidence needed to take on life's challenging leadership opportunities.

The most important example of leadership for our children is our own life of impact. As they watch us learn to be leaders, they see that leadership is a lifelong commitment to making a difference. By our example, we lead our children to become the leaders that our world needs.

This is the opinion of Ed Brenegar. He is president of the Community of Leadership, a leadership development and transition-planning consultancy. He writes the Leading Questions blog at <http://edbrenegar.typepad.com>. Send questions to him at ed@edbrenegar.com.

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