Developing the Virtue of Unity

Unity may not be the first virtue that comes to mind when we think of developing character in our children. It is not a common virtue spoken of like courtesy or patience. The closest we might come to it is to call our children to cooperation, consideration or tolerance. Yet, unity is one of the most powerful virtues for individual, familial and social growth.

What is unity? How is it different than cooperation or tolerance? With cooperation, we work together to get something done. Unity is the feeling of being at one and connected with others. Unity naturally leads to cooperation. Unity is the feeling of being connected to our family even when we live miles apart. It is the sorrow we feel when we see someone's suffering even if they are a total stranger. When we are united with others, their joy is our joy and their sorrow is our sorrow. Unlike tolerance, where we try and 'accept' differences, with unity, we notice and appreciate the uniqueness and diversity each individual brings to the whole. Although different in many ways, we feel connected.

Unity is an easy concept to explain to children. Our natural environment is full of wonderful examples where different parts work together. Fingers of one hand, diverse parts of the human body, members of a bee family and different notes in a piece of music are all examples of unity that even small children can understand.

Unity is also an easy virtue for young children to practice. They naturally have a keen sense of connectedness with their environment and others. They easily feel the pain and happiness of others, be they a relative or stranger. They are the first ones that want to help a poor beggar on the street or stop and help a crying child. They also feel connected with nature, animals and insects. The sight of an animal being captured or hunted pains their hearts deeply.

If children naturally reflect this virtue, why do we need to focus on it? Unfortunately, not much in our language, attitude or behaviors towards others nurtures this sense of unity. As children grow absorbing our comments and attitudes about others who are different, this natural sense of unity with others becomes clouded and weakens. The result of this clouded sense of unity is very apparent in our world today. Therefore, conscious effort is needed on our part to nurture the virtue of unity in our children to enable them to live happy and fulfilling lives and help improve the conditions of our world.

Practical tips to develop and strengthen the virtue of unity in children:

Help children notice signs of 'unity in diversity' in the world (drops of the ocean, flowers of a garden, the interdependence of plant, animals and humans, etc.). As they grow, when we call them to practice unity with their siblings and others who may be different than them, they will have a clear understanding of what is required.

Take children to a quiet beach, forest, waterfall or mountain and have silent periods where you can all feel nature. Talk about the experience of being united with the earth and nature.

Expose children to other cultures, customs, beliefs and languages, alert children to the beauty, differences and points of unity among all cultures.

Refrain from making negative comments about or giving demeaning labels to a group of people based on nationality, race, education, class, gender, etc. If children start to use negative language about others, gently call them to unity and explain that despite differences, we are all human beings on a journey of discovery in life.

Notice and discuss the unity in the diversity of jobs and positions with children. Help them value the contributions each member of society makes to the world. It takes people with all manner of professions to help us get what we need.

Accustom children to language of cooperation and unity rather than competition. Instead of saying "Let's see who puts his work back faster", you can say "Let's see if we can clean up all our work in five minutes so there is time for a story before we go to bed/have lunch."

Help children to see themselves as part of a whole, e.g. student body of the school, member of the family, member of the human family and part of the universe.

Do unity building activities at home or school where children come to appreciate each person's contributions in completing a task together, e.g. do big puzzles, bake or cook according to a new recipe, weed the garden, plant flowers and clean up the attic/basement/closet.

Play games that help children experience unity in action.

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