

Teachable moments

“At the heart of meaning – at the core of why we do things – there is always a virtue”

Two-year-old Sophia was trying to exercise her budding independence in everything she did – including dressing up. She was in the process of putting on her running shoes when she accidentally pulled on the wrong side and caused the Velcro tab to slip out of the hole. After a couple of attempts to fix her mistake, her frustrations mounted and resulted in a big scream of disappointment – with the shoe flying across the hallway.

Her mother Debbie, under pressure to make it on time for her appointment that morning, reached out for the fallen shoe and quickly put it on Sophia's foot.

In Debbie's mind, the job of getting ready was done and the goal of getting out of the house on time was achieved. But that was Debbie's goal. What was Sophia's? What did Sophia learn from this event? She may have been asking herself: "If doing my shoes was an easy job, what is wrong with me that I cannot do it?", "Why did I need to try anyway?"

In our love for them or maybe due to our hurried life, we would rather do such tasks ourselves as the children passively watch, though they are capable of doing it themselves. But doing such tasks, in fact, isn't in their best interest.

The obvious result is that the child may be delayed in their learning of a specific skill. However, the child is also deprived of a greater opportunity to sharpen his or her character qualities. According to the authors of "The Family Virtues Guide," difficulties and successes are both opportunities for us to

develop character in our children. They are "teachable moments," or valuable opportunities in which children can be helped to master their virtues and to understand the meaning of what they are doing and learning. In struggling with the Velcro tab, little Sophia was having an opportunity to develop patience, perseverance and determination. Debbie could recognize Sophia's "teachable moment" by acknowledging her efforts and saying: "Putting the tab in the hole takes a lot of patience and perseverance. Let's get your shoe and you can try again."

However, challenging experiences, disappointments and so-called failures in our lives have often brought us great growth and development. Our responsibility, forgiveness and determination have grown when we have owned up to our mistake, and then made it right.

Helping children to recognize the "teachable moments" in their experiences can give them fuller and happier lives. It gives them courage to try new things, the patience to tackle

difficult tasks, and the self-confidence to persevere when the going gets tough.

Practical suggestions:

Look for and recognize the "teachable moments" in your own experiences. Ask "What virtues do I need to face this challenge?"; "What have I learned from this?" Acknowledge development in your virtues at the end of each day, even when the day feels like "a failure."

Celebrate children's successes in developing virtues as much as you might celebrate their mastery of a skill. Be especially on the watch for signs of development in a challenging virtue and encourage the children about their improvement. Children love to receive "Hug Notes" which tell them that they are growing in their virtues. Naming the virtues muscle they are exercising helps children to identify success with the process of developing their character instead of only meeting the goal of mastering a skill.

Be a teacher, not a preacher. Do not use the virtues to moralize and shame the child by saying "Why can't you be more tidy?" Instead, call them to their virtue by asking "What will help you keep your room/desk more tidy?"

Use virtues, not labels. Instead of labelling a child or student shy and advising him "Don't be shy," acknowledge his peacefulness and obedience. Then call him to his less developed virtues of assertiveness and confidence by saying "Please be assertive and let me know which activity you would like to participate in."

Ask virtues-oriented questions to help the child understand the deeper personal meaning of the events. For instance, while reading a story or watching a movie, ask: "What virtue does Peter need to call on?"; "What character strengths does the main character show?"

More character education strategies and practical tips will be provided in the next issue. If you are interested in receiving a list of virtues for 3-6 year olds in poster format, please e-mail : character_ed@thefamilylearninghouse.com



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