Children are mirrors; they reflect back to us everything we say and do. We now know that 95% of everything children learn, they learn from what is modeled for them.

Only 5% of all they learn is from direct instruction. Human beings are like tape recorders. Every word we hear, everything we experience, is permanently recorded in our subconscious. Whenever adults speak, we are being role models for the children in our presence. What we speak is what we teach. Children record every word we ever say to them or in front of them. The language children grow up hearing is the language they will speak.

We often make the mistake of thinking that once children are taught, they forget and have less information and experience than we do—that they don’t have all the same feelings we do.But that is the same kind of thinking that would make human beings harden, unfeeling, callous, indifferent, and hurtful children, when human beings are hurt emotionally, we think they shut down. When we think children shut down we cannot learn, we can only record. Children may be “teaching” children by imitating, hurting, shaming, ridiculing, giving orders, screaming, threatening, and using them to show children what they can’t learn what the adult intended to teach them; they can only record what is being modeled.

The most common children I hear of young people these days, “they don’t treat anyone or anything with respect.” It is obvious adults often try to teach children to be respectful by treating them disrespectfully. Children learn respect or disrespect from how we treat them and how we treat each other. When children see we respect, we teach them to respect only by modeling; treating each other with respect and going children the same respect we expect to receive.

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We often make the mistake of thinking that since children are smaller than we are and have less information and experience than we do—that they don’t have all the same feelings we do. But they do. The same kind of treatment that would embarrass, humiliate or hurt us, embarrasses, humiliates and hurts children. When human beings are hurt emotionally, our thinking shuts down. When our thinking shuts down we cannot learn; we can only record. When adults try to “teach” children by criticizing, lecturing, shaming, ridiculing, giving orders, screaming, threatening, and hitting, it shuts down children’s thinking so they can’t learn what the adult intended to teach them; they can only record what is being modeled.

The most common criticism I hear of young people these days is, “they don’t treat anyone or anything with respect.” Ironically, adults often try to teach children to be respectful by treating them disrespectfully. Children learn respect or disrespect from how we treat them and how we treat each other. When children live with disrespect, they learn disrespect. We can teach respect only by modeling: treating each other with respect and giving children the same respect we expect to receive.

Since children have long been treated as second class citizens, as “less than,” most adults carry “recordings” of disrespect we recorded when we were children. When children’s behavior challenges us, it pushes our recording’s play button and we find ourselves saying the very things that were said to us as children. What parent hasn’t heard their parents’ words coming out of their own mouths? Most disrespectful responses are so automatic we have already said them before we even realize what we’ve said.

Learning to treat children with respect requires a change of heart that can come only from a major shift in consciousness of how we view children and how we define respect. Children are born with human dignity. To treat a person with respect is to acknowledge and preserve their human dignity. To treat a person with disrespect is to attack their human dignity.

Treating children disrespectfully is like using physical punishment as discipline; it only “works” as long as we are bigger than they are. It behooves every adult who wants to be treated with respect to treat children respectfully. Whether children grow up under our roof or not, they live in the same world we do and their behavior impacts our lives. How we treat the child, the child will treat the world.
How can we expect children to understand and practice the Golden Rule if we treat them with less respect than we give our peers? In saying that children deserve the same respect we would give our friends, I am not saying we should treat children like adults or that we should never get angry. I’m saying that there is nothing we ever have to say to a child that we need to say in a disrespectful way.

Yelling, “I’m angry, I don’t like this behavior” is not disrespectful; screaming at, belittling, embarrassing and humiliating children is. If we question whether or not something we have said to a child is disrespectful, we can ask ourselves, “would I say those words, in that tone of voice, to my good friend?” If not, it was probably disrespectful. When we model disrespect, we must then model apologizing.

If we are sincere about teaching respect to children we must expose, acknowledge, and try to eliminate all the ways that we model disrespect. Even if we do not model blatantly disrespectful behaviors such as criticizing, lecturing, shaming, ridiculing, giving orders, screaming, threatening, and hitting, there are many things we do and say to children that have been said and done to children for so long that we aren’t even aware that they are disrespectful. Yet, if these same things were said or done to us we would identify them as disrespectful.

In my parenting class on treating children with respect, we read a brilliant piece by Erma Bombeck, titled, “Treat Friends, Kids The Same.” She imagines having friends over for dinner and saying to them all those things that most of us heard growing up and therefore, say to children. “Shut the door. Were you born in a barn?” “I didn’t work over a hot stove all day to have you nibble like some bird.” “Sit up straight or your spine will grow that way.” Most parents roar with laughter at the thought of speaking to their friends that way, then realize it is just as disrespectful to say those things to children.

We don’t say, “What do you say?” or “What’s the magic word?” to our friends but children hear it all the time. If we expect children to always say please and thank you, we must always say please and thank you to them and to each other, otherwise we are modeling that sometimes you say it and sometimes you don’t. Children imitate what we do. If we expect children to have manners, to share, to apologize, to be honest, kind, respectful, and loving, we must do and be those things so they will have that model to imitate.

Children imitate parents, family members, friends, caregivers, teachers, and television. The more children are out in the world, the more models they will be exposed to. While we can’t
keep children from ever seeing models of the kind of behavior we don’t want them to imitate, we can be more selective of what models we expose them to, especially television. Since parents are the primary models in the early years, we must work on modeling the behavior we expect and refraining from behavior we don’t want to see in them.

The ancient wisdom “what goes around, comes around,” and, “as you sow, so shall you reap,” applies to how we teach children. To move from the disrespectful way of teaching through criticizing, lecturing, and giving orders, to teaching children through conscious, intentional modeling, takes time, practice, and a willingness to look at and sometimes change our own behavior. Gandhi said, “We must become the change we want to see in the world.” Joseph Chilton Pearce said, “We must become the people we want our children to be.”

Most of the disrespectful things we say and do to children aren’t even intentional. Our old “recordings” just automatically play when our buttons get pushed. Learning to teach respect by intentional modeling is simple; it’s unlearning the old ways that is difficult. When a child doesn’t behave in the ways we expect, we must ask ourselves, “Am I providing a model of the behavior I am expecting of my child?” When a child behaves in a way that we don’t like, we must ask ourselves, “Am I modeling that behavior?” If we can honestly answer, “No,” then something else is causing the behavior.

We can train ourselves to stop and think before we speak, and remember that everything we say will be recorded and imitated. We can stop or at least interrupt those old recordings and intentionally model the kind of behavior we expect and will accept from our children. When we give children the same respect we expect to receive, we teach children respect. How we treat them is what we teach them.
Teaching Children Respect

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