

Parenting for character

Practical tips to guide children into responsible adulthood

by Deon Matthys



Source: Marvel

In the 2012 blockbuster "The Avengers," there is a moment when the superhero Captain America turns to his colleague Tony Stark and says in frustration:

"Big man in a suit of armour. Take that off. What are you?"

"Genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist," is the reply.

The quip is memorable but the root of the question is of course unanswered. The genius, money and charisma of Tony Stark are no more integral to his character than

his suit of armour. All this leads to the question: what is character? And how do we as parents successfully raise children with good character?

Though the example above may seem trivial, it does approach something of a definition of character, which is:

Character is what remains when we are stripped of the incidentals in our lives.

Money, success, fame, even our temperament and talents do not strike to the root of who we are as human beings. All of these things are important, but they are more the result of circumstance than choice. All the money in the world will not guarantee that a rich man will act with moral fibre when the chips are down. Success and fame are fleeting and will be a disappointing source of happiness. Even our temperaments and talents are useless unless they are cultivated, multiplied and put to good use.

We see this recognised in the world even if it is never really articulated. Employers are not interested in employing someone who, while talented, lacks loyalty or consideration towards fellow workers. In our personal lives, what guaranteed social success in high school is not usually the mark of lasting

friendships. Nor do good husbands and wives correlate to a high bank balance. Of course the gossip that surrounds the rich and famous hardly acknowledges this. Young people in particular are surrounded by media that points them towards fame and fortune as the markers of a successful, if not a very happy, life. But the reality is that good character is respected on a far deeper level than fame or fortune. Luck has much to do with the second; it has very little to do with the first.

In a Christian context, the importance of character emphasises our dignity as human beings, created with free will, in the image and likeness of God. As Christian parents, successful parenting means raising youngsters who grow up to become competent, responsible, considerate, and generous men and women. People who are committed to live by principles of integrity, adults who bring honour to their parents all their lives through their conduct, conscience, and character. In other words, our children grow up, with the parents' expectations that they be competent adults committed to living by Christian principles, the love of God and the love of neighbour.

As Christians, our tradition points to a number of character strengths, or virtues, cultivated by repeated habits. These cardinal virtues are prudence, justice, fortitude, temperance, and charity. Though this language might seem a little archaic, what we are talking about is sound judgement, a sense of responsibility, courageous perseverance, and self-control. Cultivating these strengths or virtues in our children must be a priority of all our parenting.

It is worth pausing here for a small, but important disclaimer. You cannot teach the virtues in the same sense that you can teach a skill or a sport. The Catholic Church and the Bible are both very clear that

humanity cannot merit salvation on its own. You cannot become a virtuous man without the grace of God, and ultimately each one of us must choose to cooperate with God's grace. As parents, it might be tempting to try and choose on behalf of our children. But this of course is impossible. The most we can do is create an environment where it is easy (or at least easier) to be good.

How then do we as parents show our children the attractiveness of living a virtuous life and how do we construct an environment conducive to the cultivation of virtue? The first point to remember is the most obvious. It is also the most difficult. It is of course that you teach most by example. Children, particularly teenagers, are adept at sensing hypocrisy. As parents we must lead from the front. And, as with any struggle, there must be a united front. If the parents are divided, the children can hardly be blamed for their confusion over the direction they are supposed to take their lives.



The second point that should be mentioned is that we parent to raise adults not children. In business and professional life, the best leaders are those who can look furthest into the future and have a clear idea of what object they are trying to achieve. Likewise as parents, we must tailor our parenting to

the object of raising responsible adults. A parenting system where children complete their jobs 'because Dad said so' is obviously unsustainable in the long term. Nor does it respect the autonomy and the intellect of our children. One of the necessary ways of raising adults is through proper explanations of what is right and wrong. Proper explanations can be tiring and sometimes it is tempting to rely on our authority as parents but as our children grow, they deserve the respect of strong reasons and a firm foundation on which to base their beliefs and behaviours.



We further create an environment where it is easy to be good by directing our children's behaviour. Virtues are good habits, repeated again and again, until they are forged into the characters of our children. The habits by which our children might cultivate are many, however at a practical "tooth brush" level where are we to start? It is here that we can adopt some hard won advice from experienced parents. There are five areas that form an easy place to start. They are:

- waking up
- room tidy
- entertainment
- money and
- food

Each of these areas offers an opportunity to practice self-mastery over their passions and desires.

Obviously the degree in which each of these areas are guided will be specific to each child and family. Different children struggle with different impulses and where one child may easily control his eating, another may find that the table is the battlefield upon which his character is forged. But the broad aim is to identify where our children's weaknesses lie because it is there that we must help them develop the habits that will form their character. In this sense, misbehaviours represent a golden opportunity for parents to see what is specifically needed. Parents are then on solid ground when they can say, "I love you too much to let you grow up this way, go tidy your room!"

We conclude with two final points. The first is that the younger the child, the easier it is to form good habits. Just like learning a language - it is possible when you get older to learn French or other foreign language, but it is always easier to learn when you are younger.

The second point is that the more support parents get from family and friends the easier it gets. Parenting can get too insular, where the day-to-day concerns and urgencies limit us to interact with other parents and extended family. The reality is that it is difficult to find a sense of perspective particularly on one's own children. The support of a wide network of family and friends is essential if we are to gain a better appreciation of our own strengths and weaknesses and the strengths and weaknesses of our children.

Lastly, if we refer back to the example from Avengers, we see that by the end of the film, Tony Stark does make the sacrificial play, unambiguously putting his own life on

the line. In so doing, he shows the audience the essence of what makes a superhero and a good character and this is sacrifice. At its core, Christianity revolves around the

self-sacrificial love of God and his invitation to partake in his love. Ultimately, self-sacrifice is the highest expression of character.

About the author

Deon studied Commerce at the University of Western Australia and completed postgraduate studies with the Institute of Chartered Accountants in Australia whilst working with KPMG. He currently works in the finance function for a listed corporation servicing the mining and construction markets. Deon is a 'Cradle Catholic' with his parents recently celebrating 55 years of marriage. Deon is married with 10 children and, with his wife Pauline, has a keen interest in 'parenting for character' and is actively involved with parenting groups, friends and family..