Nine Key Qualities to Cultivate in Children
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Children benefit immensely when parents, their first gurus, teach thoughtfully with specific goals in mind

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Every father and mother is indeed a guru in fact, an individual's first guru, teaching by example, explanation, giving advice and direction. When we think of gurus, we automatically think of teaching, thus looking at parents as gurus highlights the importance of what parents teach their children, grandchildren and possibly even their great grandchildren.

A swami is an individual's second spiritual guru. A simple analogy will point out why swamis are deeply concerned about what parents teach their children. Imagine being a young man or woman's second dance teacher. If the first teacher has not been systematic in teaching the basics of dance, the second teacher may end up spending years undoing what the first teacher ineptly taught before he can advance the student

further.

A common problem many individuals have when entering adult life is a negative self-concept. This is the sense of feeling that you are inherently flawed and inferior and that others are vastly superior to you. Parents create this in their children through frequent critical comments, such as "How could you do such a stupid thing?" "You're so dumb!" "You'll never amount to anything." It can take the swami years of working with the individual to help him replace a low self-esteem with a sense of personal worth. This would be totally unnecessary if the parents had raised the child wisely to cultivate good character.

There are nine key qualities we want our children to possess in order to be happy, religious and successful when they reach adulthood. We will explore each of these to see what children should be taught, or not taught, by the parents to develop that quality.

1. Positive Self-Concept is when we think of ourselves as a worthy individual deserving of a wonderful life. Unfortunately, many children reach adulthood with a negative self-concept, feeling that others are better than they are and life has little to offer. A negative self-concept is developed through verbally running

down a child. This can occur in two distinct situations. The first is simply making these kinds of remarks as a form of teasing or joking. This, of course, needs to be stopped and replaced with remarks that encourage and praise the child. Parents should also not allow their children to call each other names, such as fat or lame. When it comes to correcting misbehavior, it is wise to distinguish between the person and the behavior. The behavior was foolish, not the person. For example, "What you did was very foolish, but you are smart, and I'm sure you now know better and won't do that again." Having a positive concept about his outer self allows the child to accept the Hindu teaching that his inner self is a divine being, a radiant soul.

2. Perceptive Self-Correction is when we are able to quickly learn the lesson from each experience and resolve not to repeat our mistake. How do parents develop this quality? By teaching kids that making mistakes is not bad. Everyone makes mistakes. It is natural and simply shows we do not understand something. It is important for the parent to determine what understanding the child lacks and teach it to him without blame. When parents discipline through natural and logical consequences, children are encouraged to learn to reflect on the possible effects of their behavior before acting. Such wisdom can be nurtured through encouraging self-reflection, asking the child to think about what he did and how he could avoid making that

mistake again. Perceptive self-correction enables us to quickly learn from our mistakes, refine our behavior accordingly and thereby make more rapid progress on the spiritual path.

3. Powerful Self-Control is restraining destructive emotions, such as anger, when we are tempted to express them. How is such control cultivated in children? It is through parents never expressing such emotions themselves. Children learn, by observing their parents, whether it's acceptable to behave emotionally or not. It is by referring often to the ten restraints of Hinduism's Code of Conduct, known as the yamas, finding illustrations of these ideals in daily life, on television and in movies. The yamas are noninjury, truthfulness, nonstealing, divine conduct, patience, steadfastness, compassion, honesty, moderate appetite and purity. It is through emphasizing the traditional Hindu imperative to maintain chastity until marriage. Self-control leads to self-mastery, enabling one to be more successful in achieving outer and inner goals.

4. Profound Self-Confidence is exemplified when a

child is confronted with a difficult task and his first response is the certainty that he can accomplish it. Unfortunately, many children reach adulthood lacking self-confidence and have as their first response the feeling that they will be unable to accomplish the task, as it is too difficult. How is profound self-confidence cultivated? It is first through the child's possessing a positive self-concept. It is then through helping the child be successful at progressively more difficult tasks as he or she grows up. A pattern of many successes going into our subconscious mind is what produces the sense of self-confidence and the feeling that we will be equal to any task. For example, a father teaches his son carpentry from age ten through eighteen. Each year the father helps the son make something that is more complex, never giving him a project that is too advanced, praising each achievement. Self-confidence is cultivated by watching for failures at school or at home and compensating for them. If the child is shy and has trouble at school with public speaking, work personally or through a tutor to overcome that shyness so he or she can speak successfully at school in the future. Self-confidence makes one magnetic to success in both outer and inner endeavours.

5. Playful Self-Contentment is expressed when a child's usual mood is fun-loving, happy and satisfied. How is this developed? It is through the parents living and verbalizing the philosophy that life is meant to be lived joyously. It is by holding the perspective that happiness does not depend on external circumstances but is a consciousness we can claim, whether life is free of or filled with challenges. It is by teaching the children to be satisfied with what they have in the present rather than dissastified about what they don't have. It is nurtured by the family spending time together filled with play and laughter. The ability to remain fun-loving, joyful, secure and content enables one to face with far greater equanimity the ups and downs of life.

6. Pious Character is expressed when we naturally treat others with kindness, generosity and appreciation. It is fulfilled when we seek the blessings of God, Gods and guru throughout life. How can this be cultivated? It is through the parents demonstrating these qualities themselves. Children learn that this behavior is expected of them by observing their parents' actions. It is by referring often to the ten obser

vances of Hinduism's Code of Conduct, known as the niyamas, and pointing out their relevance in daily life, on TV and in movies. The niyamas are remorse, contentment, giving, faith, worship of the Lord, scriptural listening, cognition, sacred vows, recitation and austerity. It is nurtured by teaching the child to worship and pray in the home shrine or at the temple before important events such as beginning a new school year or before final examinations. Pious conduct brings into our life the joys of Divine blessings.

7. Proficiency in Conflict Resolution is exemplified when we work out disagreements with others by using intelligence and seeking for a win-win situation. How is this cultivated in youth? It is through the parents demonstrating these qualities themselves. Children learn that this behavior is expected of them by observing their parents' actions. It is by sitting down with children any time they

use anger, physical force or verbal injury to prevail in a conflict and discussing with them how it could have been settled with intelligence rather than violence. It is through replacing the idea of "I want me to win and you to lose" with that of "I win when everybody wins." Illustrations of what to do and what not to do can be drawn from the people they see in television and movies. It is nurtured by parents following the wisdom of resolving their husband-and-wife disagreements before going to sleep, as this teaches by example the importance of facing and solving a conflict rather than fleeing from it. Proficiency in conflict resolution keeps our life sublime and our subsconscious mind free of the disturbances caused by memories of unresolved disagreements.

8. Parental Closeness is fulfilled when children reach adulthood and choose to spend time with their parents because they really enjoy being with them. A strong bond

of love and understanding exists. Sadly, we know of many instances when a boy reached adulthood, moved out of the home and maintained as little contact with his father as possible. How then is parental closeness developed? It is through expressing love by hugging and saying often the three magic words "I love you." Distance is developed by never expressing love. Closeness is nurtured by correcting a child's misbehavior with positive discipline methods, such as time-out and appropriate natural and logical consequences, and using reason without blame and shame. The use of physical violence, anger, irrational punishments, blame and shame cause distance. Closeness comes when quality time is spent together in activities that all members of the family enjoy. It is developed by the father bonding with his sons and the mother bonding with her daughters, through developing common interests in hobbies or games and working on them together. It is protected when parents create a nonthreatening atmosphere of love in their home in which their children feel free

to tell them everything they have done without fear of the consequences. They know their parents love them no matter what. Distance develops in a threatening atmosphere where children will keep secrets, each secret adding to the distance between the child and the parents. A loving relationship between child and parents powerfully influences all subsequent relationships, even one's relationship with God.

9. Prejudice-Free Consciousness manifests when we see God in everyone and embrace differences of ethnic background and religion. Are we born with prejudices? Absolutely not! These are all learned, at home, at school and elsewhere. How is a prejudice-free consciousness developed? It is through teaching our children that the whole world is our family and all human beings are divine beings. It is through complete avoidance of remarks which are racially or religiously

prejudiced. It is through discussing with our children any prejudice they hear from others at school and elsewhere and correcting it. It is by teaching children to avoid generalizations about people and, instead, to think about specific individuals and the qualities they have. Again, television and movies can provide useful situations to discuss. It is through having our children meet, interact and learn to feel comfortable with children of other ethnicities and religions. Tolerant individuals help communities function with less friction and misunderstanding.

Summary: A wise mother wrote to me recently on e-mail saying, "I truly believe we live out part of our karma through our children, and we grow and improve as they do." Though we may think we are just helping our children be more happy, successful and religious, in truth we cannot separate ourselves from them. Their growth and

spiritual evolution is our own as well.