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## Raising a child with sound moral values

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DURING a recent morning TV talk show on the topic "Psychology of the Youth", a viewer phoned in to pose a very pertinent question. She had a 12-year-old daughter who had begun to show what appeared to be peculiar behaviour. The young girl had started to spend more time outside the house and when at home she seemed to prefer to be alone.

Even though the father had always been very strict with her, he too was beginning to feel that things were getting out of hand. The mother was afraid that she was on the brink of "losing" her daughter forever. What could she do to put a stop to the deteriorating parent-daughter relationship?

We might think that this situation is unique, but the truth is, similar questions are being asked by millions of parents the world over.

At an international parent conference, one mother voiced her concern in this manner, "The 1970s and 1980s (the 1990s, too) have been the worst time to bring up children. It is so hard to tell what is right and what is wrong. Everything is open to question. My own parents were very strict and autocratic and I followed their orders. But I do not want to be like them. I want my children to understand the reasons behind the rules I lay down. But frankly, I'm not always sure myself what my reasons are. So half the time I simply avoid saying anything at all about what I feel is right or wrong. I've never really taken a stand on lying or cheating in tests, marijuana, or even on household chores. And, believe me, all these issues have come up. I just don't know whether I have the right to demand."

Traditionally, parents and their children have been intertwined in a web of family, community and religious institutions, all of which contribute to the moral well-being of the children.

In Malaysia, for example, it was once common for children, parents, grandparents and great grandparents to live nearby, sometimes under one roof. However, the nuclear family of today is mostly independent and isolated; removed from geographical, cultural and sometimes religious roots.

Parents are now forced to instil moral values in children on their own. But many parents are uncertain about how to go about this and often query whether morality can really be taught at all.

Child-rearing experts have sometimes only added to parents' confusion. In the past, experts proposed that discipline could lead to an inhibited or even neurotic child. "Permissiveness" was the catchword of the day. Today the "disciplinarians" are coming up with counter-proposals. They are calling for the re-imposition of traditional values and the resurrection of the obedient and innocent child.

Obviously, neither permissiveness nor discipline has been successful in alleviating parents' real concerns. The question is not how restrictive or accommodating parents should be, but rather, how to bring up a "moral" child. And "moral" simply means a child who strives to be kind, fair and responsible. These values relate to how their behaviour affects other people. And, indeed, morality is concerned with how we treat our fellow man and nature.

What is the strategy for bringing up a moral child in today's world? The first is called internalisation. Parents are always telling a child in one form or another, "Do this because it's good" and "Don't do that because it's bad". When children begin to give these same instructions to

themselves, then internalisation has taken place. Thus, a mother would say of a child, "He won't do it because he knows it's wrong" and not "He won't do it because he knows he'll get hit".

Internalisation provides the first stage of self-control over selfish and aggressive impulses. It is accomplished when the inner voice speaks to the child before he acts. When he has internalised the moral rules, he "knows right from wrong". It is then fair to say that he has begun to acquire ethics which becomes his internal control for good behaviour.

Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, revealed that when confronted with a difficult decision he would be guided by the words of Mahatma Gandhi:

"Whenever you are in doubt or when the self becomes too much, try the following expedient: Recall the face of the poorest and most helpless man you have ever seen and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he be able to gain by it? Will it restore to him control over his own life and destiny? Then you will find your doubts and your self melting away."

Empathy is the second foundation stone for a moral child. It allows him to feel pleasure at other people's joy, and pain at their suffering. The ability to empathise is something we are born with. It does not develop in everyone to the same degree. Child psychologists have observed empathy in children at very early ages. Some research has even suggested that it begins virtually at birth.

In one study, a team of psychologists observed 26 children aged from three to five during 30 hours of free play in a pre-school setting. The children were found to engage in about 1,200 "altruistic" acts such as sharing, co-operating, helping and comforting. These are manifestations of empathy.

A child is better able to put himself in someone else's place and thus is more likely to feel empathy for that person when he knows not only what the person feels, but why he feels as he does. As moral trainers, parents can guide the child by providing the answers to these questions.

If a mother tells her son in a harsh voice, "Turn down the music", he can be quite sure what she is feeling. The tone of voice would indicate her irritation and perhaps even convey a warning that he'll be punished if he doesn't do what she asked. Scolding and threatening may get her what she wants for the moment, but they won't get her son to care about her peace of mind.

If she wants her son to empathise with her, she'll have to tell him so, and not expect him to read her mind. Perhaps she could say, "When the music is too loud it makes me physically uncomfortable. I need to relax for a while after work." This information would let the son know the specific needs behind her reactions to his loud music. This gives him the opportunity to accommodate her out of compassion rather than fear.

The third pillar is developing personal moral standards the child believes he ought to live up to, with or without the approval of others.

If a child has never learned to evaluate the morality of an action for himself according to principles that he understands and believes in, he remains forever vulnerable to the control of any new authority that enters his life, regardless of how ill-intentioned that authority may be. For example, when he interacts with a competitor, sound personal moral standards will ensure that he remains steadfast in his character.

In the foreword of the recently launched book written by his daughter, Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir, entitled *In Liberal Doses*, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad wrote: "One is tempted to ask from where she acquired this sense of independence, this urge not to conform, to be critical and not just to cheer on those in power." This is what moral

standards are all about.

Ultimately, we want our children to treat other people well because they want to, because they have developed their own standards of moral behaviour. If you want your child to treat other people kindly, you will have to help him develop personal standards of kindness, fairness, and responsibility. This can be done through the power of reason, that is, by convincing the child that if he lives up to these standards, the desired outcome will follow. And the best time to start is, right now!.