

The Accidental Teacher: What Do YOU Teach Your Children Accidentally? Cindy Terebush



When I was preparing a presentation about being an intentional teacher, my husband said, “As opposed to accidentally teaching? Are people accidentally teaching?” and laughed. Yes, actually. In fact, we accidentally teach far more often than intentionally. Everything we do and say is a lesson for children. They watch and listen. It is from those moments when we are being observed that children learn so much about priorities, interpersonal relationships, coping, self-control, reacting to events and even their own self-worth. There is a reason why “the apple never falls far from the tree.” Children figure out how to walk through this world based upon their observations. Have you considered what your children learn from these accidental teaching moments?

- **Do you talk about your child’s behavior or parenting/educating challenges in front of your child?** Every parent and every teacher has felt the concerns for children with challenging behaviors or for those who struggle socially or academically. We seek advice and the support of others. Parent/teacher conferences, teachers’ conversations with each other, phone conversations with friends and parent’s conversations about how to handle the challenges of caring for children should never take place in front of the children themselves. Children know when you are talking about them and they listen intently. They hear you say, “I never had these problems with his brother” or “I’m worried about her progress.” We chip away at their self-esteem every time something of concern is discussed in front of them. Imagine if you were in the room while a group of people talked about your less than stellar qualities.
- **How do you treat store clerks, wait staff, custodians repair people or others who provide you with a service?** I have a friend and colleague who tells the parents in her school that the measure of a parent is how he/she treats the custodial staff. We have lofty goals about teaching our children about respecting people and being kind. Kindness should be all inclusive. Every person has worth. We tell young children in preschool that they don’t have to be everyone’s best friend but they do have to be kind. It is from observing our treatment and respect for others that they learn to treat all people well.

- **Do you maintain control when you are frustrated?** Tantrums are frustrating for both the child having them and the adults having to deal with them. It is important to remember that tantrums are not limited to childhood. Adults tantrum too. Adult tantrums look a little different – most adults don't scream and throw themselves on the floor but they most certainly have fits of frustration. I have seen adults yell, hit the table and be unable to hear what other people are saying. That's a tantrum. When adults react with negative emotions and are out of control, children learn to react to the world in the same way. Some children are more prone to tantrums than others no matter what we do but demonstrating self-control does help them see that it is possible to keep emotions in check as we think through solutions to our problems.
- **Do you fight fair?** Conflict is a fact of life. How we handle conflict in front of our children will guide how they do too. When parents swear at each other, they cannot be surprised when their children swear at them. They have not learned to disagree respectfully. When adults spend days not talking to each other, they cannot be surprised when their children don't communicate with them. Children handle conflict in the same way their role models do because they literally know no other way.
- **Do you demonstrate that we are each responsible for our own happiness?** Our responses to the challenges of life are entirely within our control. We can complain without being constructive. We can throw our hands in the air and declare life unfair. We can fill the air with negativity. When we do, we cannot expect to get positive things back. When life throws obstacles in our path, we can help our children to see that improvement comes from positive actions. It would be terrific if children learned from the time they are young that every day brings possibilities even among challenges. They are more apt to see life that way if we are examples of it.

Are you an example of the priorities you want your children to embrace? Most parents will tell you that they want to raise children who are hardworking, productive