

The Example

By John Blackwell, Ph.D.

Years ago, I heard someone say, “Children do as their parents *say*. Teenagers do as their parents *do*.” What this person meant was that children at first obey us, but they also watch us. Eventually, they start imitating us, replicating our behavior. They start acting like us, whether we like it or not. They begin to treat people the way we treat them. The son will start treating women the way his father treats his mother. The daughter will start responding to men the way that her mother responds to her father, and so on.

This line of thinking reminded me of something that Albert Schweitzer once said: *Example isn't the most important thing; it's the only thing*. Or, as we sometimes say, *actions speak louder than words*.

What if we were to pay attention to the examples we set for others, especially young people. What if we were to look at ourselves and ask, “What if everyone behaved the way I do? What kind of example do I set for others, especially young people?”

How, then, do I treat others? Am I respectful? Do I cultivate relationships? Or do I run roughshod over others?

How do I speak about others behind their backs? Do I defend those who are absent? Do I work at fairness and justice?

Do I act as though I am superior to others? Do I think of myself as number one? Am I the kind of person who has to dominate others? Do I have to win at all costs? Am I always “right?” Am I the kind of person who has trouble admitting when I am wrong? What is my attitude towards others? Am I hostile? Am I calculating? Am I manipulative? Do I constantly seek my own advantage?

Am I the kind of person who is easily offended? Do I imagine others slighting me? Do I play by the rules? Or, do I make them up as I go along?

Do I offer credit where credit is due? Do I freely celebrate the successes of others?

Am I the kind of person who constantly badmouths others and points out their faults?

Am I the kind of person who is always noticing what other people are up to? In other words, am I a spy?

Am I the kind of person who is accountable? Do I live for the benefit of others while also seeking to improve myself?

Can I accept criticism? Do I learn from others, including those with whom I differ?

Am I self-centered? Do I know how to put others first?

If these are problem areas for me, what can I try to do to be a reasonably good example for young people? I use the phrase “reasonably good” because none of us is perfect, but we need not be. We can, however, work at taking positive steps.

I can assess myself honestly—both strengths and weaknesses.

When I am wrong, I can admit it. I can own up to my mistake, error, or sin; and I can change. If young people see us being honest about our mistakes and doing our best to change, they will learn, by our example, to do the same thing.

I can take responsibility. I can find my motivation for doing what is right from within. I don't have to wait for others to coerce me to do the right thing.

I can see others as children of God—dignified human beings. I can speak well of others, and I can treat all others with respect befitting their dignity.

I can compliment others who do well, celebrating their achievements.

I can give up the need to look good, trying always to impress others.

I can actively practice hospitality—for God and for fellow human beings. I can live with an open heart. I can create a climate that is warm, relaxed, and friendly. I can get rid of the tension and the intensity.

I can embrace limits and live within them.

I can practice accountability, including holding myself accountable to my children.

I can speak the truth with an eye towards reconciliation and the healing of relationships.

Finally, I can accept imperfection as a part of life. The reality of imperfections gives us room to grow, to improve, and to rise to the full stature of our humanity.

I believe that when we actively live in this way, we set a reasonably good example, creating the space in which our children can grow and eventually thrive.