

The Greatest of These – Teaching Our Children to Love

by Derri Smith

There are so many possible achievements and honors in life. If your child could have only one, what would it be? The Pulitzer Prize? A national sports championship? A doctoral degree? An ambassadorship? An Oscar?

Our 17-year-old recently filled my heart with more joy than if she had won all these honors. How? While serving one week at a Mexican orphanage, she spread the sweet aroma of the love of Christ through her actions, words, and attitudes. The world may not offer awards for such things, but they are clearly top priorities in the Kingdom of God.

When I Corinthians lists things of eternal value, the greatest of these is love. When a lawyer asks Jesus to list top priorities, He tells him, and us, to love God and love our neighbor; these sum up the law and the prophets. It was not that my daughter went to an orphanage that thrilled me so. It was the way God's love flowed unrestrained through her while she was there that warms my heart.

The foundation for love comes from knowing that we are not just random products of evolution; that each person is created by God and of inestimable value. The heart change from selfishness to love is empowered only by the Holy Spirit. Rather than delving into these core issues, however, the purpose of this article is to look at some everyday, practical ways to develop unselfish, loving habits and to free God to pour His love through our children.

Here are 17 tips for training your child up to win the greatest prize of all.

1. Learn to Serve

Regularly give children opportunities to serve others in meaningful ways and to experience the true joy that comes from giving rather than receiving. When children are very little, make them a part of what you do. They can bless an elderly neighbor with a meal or dish, a bunch of flowers from the garden or just a picture they drew. Make it clear to your child that the purpose of learning new skills is so they can bless and serve others.

Little ones who are just beginning to cook beside Mama can bring their homemade cookies or jam to the elderly widow next door or at church. Use budding art skills to make small crafts or colorful cards that might be placed on children's hospital bedside trays. Learning to knit or crochet? Make squares of all sorts, sew them together with yarn, and give the blanket to a homeless shelter. If a child is shoveling snow off a walkway or mowing a lawn, perhaps they can just keep going and do the neighbor's, also.

2. Pray for Others

Make prayer for others a regular part of the day. While living overseas, I took my little one with me each week to the home of an elderly woman who taught me the local language. I asked my daughter to pray for this woman who was still embittered by the losses her family suffered in World War II. My daughter's prayers for that lady continued for years afterwards.

Whenever an ambulance went by, we prayed for the workers and the people they were going to help. When the police sirens blared, we prayed for the police officer's safety and that criminals are caught.

3. Be a Volunteer

Make "Volunteering 101" a required course in your home. A town of any size will have organized efforts to serve people in need. Select a volunteer opportunity that fits your child. It may be sorting through a stack of cans at the local food pantry, or it may be reading stories to children at a hospital. Some children thrive on people contact. Others want to help "behind the scenes."

4. Serve in Secret

Develop in your child the habit of doing something secret each day to bless another family member. One way to do this is to have each person draw names for "secret pals." Family members can make their pal's bed, do a chore, leave a note or some other act of kindness each day. If desired, identities can be revealed after a specified period of time.

5. Love First at Home

When our children were little, I placed slips of paper in a "kindness jar." On each slip was written an instruction, like "Tell one nice thing about your sister," "Give everyone a hug," or "Do one of your sister's chores." When a child exhibited an unloving attitude, all children involved pulled a strip from the jar and carried out the instructions on it. The girls knew that we would judge them fit to be with others, such as at a friend's birthday party, only if they regularly exhibited love at home.

6. From Ill Will to Laughter

Don't just scold children for bickering. Teach and practice godly approaches to conflict. Who started it is not the issue. How one responds to an offense is as important as how the conflict arose. Focus on how each one failed to show love for the other. I read of a parent who made bickering siblings stand nose to nose until they could work out their squabble! Often, the ill will was broken with laughter.

7. Trade Shoes

Treat others the way you want to be treated, Jesus taught. How differently would we act toward another person if we spent a little time first in their shoes—that is to carefully consider what it would be like to be that person? When conflict breaks out between children, engage the offending party or parties in imagining what it is like to be the other person. As a memorable object lesson, have children actually trade shoes for long enough to make the impression that the other person has their own unique perspective.

8. Understand God's Unique Design

Emphasize the uniqueness and importance of each person. When our children were a little older, we studied and identified the spiritual gifts unique to each family member. Now we can appreciate the special qualities each person brings to the family. Just as important, we are more understanding of the weaknesses that often accompany each spiritual gift.

9. Give Rather Than Get

How many times do our children hear, “What did you *get* for (Christmas or birthday)?” The choice of words expresses what we value. Show more interest in what a family member *gave* for Christmas than what he or she received. Likewise, do not place emphasis on whether a child had fun at a special occasion, but rather on if they managed to be a blessing to others.

Show what you value by praising the child who overcomes self and exhibits love. Let such a child overhear you brag about their loving deeds to others.

10. In Word, As Well As in Deed

Make the words “I love you” a regular part of life. Have children call grandparents just to say “I love you.” At bedtime, make it your habit to tell each child that you love them, and let them hear parents say it to each other. Do not limit to only Valentine’s Day those little expressions of love.

11. Learn How to Say Thank You

Teach children to consider the feelings of the gift giver when they receive a gift. Practice making a grateful response to gifts, even gifts not particularly desired. Children can find something truthful to say, like “It was so thoughtful of you.” Develop the habit of sending thank-you notes from youngest ages. Let them hear you thanking your spouse for all things.

12. Be Ready to Give Money

Have children set aside some of their own money, whether from allowances or earnings, as “Jesus money.” This allows them to build up funds for giving when a need arises. Children’s hearts are often touched by the plight of a local accident victim, a foreign orphan, victims of disasters, etc. When such needs become known, they will have the satisfaction of making an instant and significant response.

13. Hold Possessions Loosely

Get rid of stuff. When our daughter visited that orphanage in Mexico, she was struck by the orphan children’s spirit of generosity. Each child had only a shoebox for all their personal possessions, yet they often gave what they had to others. We, who have so much that we must frequently buy new containers to hold it all, find that the “stuff” has a hold on us.

Teach, by example, to hold onto possessions loosely. Before a gift giving occasion, look through the good stuff and find things to give away. Old and ratty things go into the trash can. Take a child with you to drop things off at a local charity or thrift store. When possible, give in circumstances where children have some understanding of who will receive the items and how it will help. Consider using a trade-off service like Freecycle.com, where people in the same locale can match unwanted items with people who can use them. Sometimes a specific need arises, and we have the children go through their own things to meet the need. For example, Daddy made a trip to Romania, and toys were given with joy for those “children who don’t have any.”

14. Read about Love in Action

Read books and tell stories that model love in action. Start this when children are small with books like *Horton Hears a Who!* by Dr. Seuss, which demonstrates compassion and the fact that “A person’s a person no matter how small.”

15. Small Things from Big Hearts

Do not despise the day of small things. When our children were still quite young, we looked for opportunities for them to bless others. We trained them to hold doors open for elderly people or to carry groceries to the car for a lady with a baby and toddlers in tow. Children should be trained to gladly give up a seat for an older person, or to share a treat with another child. No child, from toddler up, is too young to develop a big heart.

16. Watch for and Admire the Love of Others

Speak admiringly of people who act in loving ways. Instead of just commenting on how smart or cute a person is, say “I admire the way Benjamin is learning to protect his little sister,” or “Wasn’t it wonderful how that man changed that stranded motorist’s tire, even in the pouring rain?” Be on the watch to tell of such love. The admirable quality might come from someone in the news, someone you see driving to the grocery, a friend, or almost anyone.

17. Love Your Children.

It is easier for every one of us to love when we know we are loved, I John 4:19 tells us: “We love because he first loved us.” Lavish love upon your children, even as you point out and discipline for bad behavior.



Don’t you wish love came more easily to us as adults? Now is the time to train our children to outdo each other and probably their parents, when it comes to “the greatest of these.”

Helen Keller said, “Even when the urgent is good, the good can keep you from your best.” In the midst of seemingly endless choices of what to teach our children, let us not forget to teach them to love.

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