

Raising Peaceful Warriors Cultivating Courage and Understanding

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As mothers, we integrate compassionate understanding and courage in order to nurture and protect our children. We also cultivate these virtues in our children—so that they can grow up to be peaceful warriors who bravely stand up for themselves, their friends, and eventually all of mankind and our sacred planet. Because of the root 'war,' the term warrior may arouse negative connotations.

But in the ancient eastern tradition, a warrior was a person who personified virtue, protected the weak and innocent, and stood up for justice. Today, one of our greatest threats is an indifference and irreverence for human welfare and the health of our planet. But spiritual warriors are not indifferent—and our world needs children who will grow up and passionately put their hearts into action.

While it's important to protect and reassure our children in today's turbulent times, it's also important to focus on courage and understanding. If we completely shield our children from every challenging situation, they are likely to become more vulnerable to manipulation, fear, and intimidation. Today, it's especially important to find a balance between protecting our children and teaching them to courageously and compassionately protect themselves and others.

Courage is not necessarily the absence of fear; it can be standing up to or facing our fear—even though we're frightened. Fear and anxiety are a normal part of life and are not always negative. Anxious or fearful feelings can warn children of real problems and help prevent them from making poor decisions. For example, "street smarts" can be a beneficial state of anxiety; when children activate their nervous systems to a higher level of attentiveness, it can keep them alert and safe from harm.

But anxiety and fear can also be extremely destructive if it escalates into intense terror and panic. Much more so than the actual events themselves, children's reactions to fear and anxiety will affect the quality of their lives, both emotionally and physically. Their response can lead to personal growth, or it can impair that emotional growth. When children respond to the emotions of fear and anxiety by become stressed, it can affect their ability to take effective action as well as to be happy and experience pleasure.

Courage is an important virtue which can help a child to attain a goal such as jumping off of a diving board. But when courage is combined with understanding it can enable children to do the right thing and take action in a situation. For instance, courage and compassion might motivate a child to tell a friend to stop teasing or playing too roughly with a puppy and it might inspire a teenager to come to the defense of a friend who is the victim of malicious gossip. Confucius taught that to become a warrior one had to practice one essential rule, "As you wish others to treat you, so you must treat others." Kids need to learn that the golden rule means courageously putting your compassion into action. Genuine understanding and compassion is a wish for the well-being of other people and for every living being in the universe. It comes from a feeling of empathy—an ability to put ourselves in someone else's shoes and understand how they feel.

We cannot control all of the things that will happen in our children's lives. As parents, it takes a great deal of understanding and courage to realize that the best way to protect our children is to teach and allow them to protect themselves.

Ways to Nurture Courage and Understanding

Encourage children's dreams. Anticipate success and encourage the belief that your child can do, be, or have anything that he or she desires.

Encourage perseverance. When we encourage our children to try, try, try again, we are helping them to develop the courage to get up after a setback and to have faith in their ability to succeed. Throughout childhood, we can support perseverance by saying things like, "Try again. You can do it. I'm here to help if you need me."

Learn relaxation and self-calming skills. When children are continually unable to control their response to fear and anxiety, unhealthy reactions to this fear will become automatic. But parents can help their children become more resilient to fear-inducing situations by teaching them how to mindfully quiet and relax themselves and thereby interrupt the fight-or flight response. By consciously relaxing and dealing with their emotions, children can avoid panicking.

It's very important to practice relaxation in a fun, imaginative way. The last thing you want your child to think is that relaxation is "just one more thing to do." After all, relaxation is not so much doing as it is an undoing, or a letting go. In order for children to relax when they encounter fearful or stressful situations, the relaxation response needs to become second nature. At first, have children practice relaxation exercises such as progressive relaxation, breathing exercises or visualization when they are not frightened or overly anxious.

Desensitize your child to his or her fear. Completely avoiding feared objects and activities tends to increase rather than diminish the level of fear associated with them. We can see many examples of this—a fear of drowning is not likely to lessen by avoiding water; a fear of flying is not going to go away by avoiding airplanes; and a fear of school is not going to go away by allowing a child to stay home. By gradually exposing your children to their fears, you will be helping them to take progressive steps toward overcoming them. It's very effective to plan a series of small steps that will help your child get closer and closer to the thing he fears. It's important to be patient and let your child set the pace. As children gradually face and overcome their fear, they will gain a feeling of confidence and self-mastery.

- Sing songs about the object of your child's fear.
- Read books and look at pictures.
- Watch TV, videos, and movies that put the feared object or creature in a positive light.
- Play act.
- Tell stories to help a child visualize positive interactions with the feared object or creature.

Clear up misconceptions. Many fears are based on misconceptions. Discuss the reality of your child's fear. For instance, if a child has a fear of dogs, you might help him or her to understand a dog's behavior by telling him that while you shouldn't pet dogs that you don't know, most dogs are friendly and loving. Let your child know that dogs bark to protect their homes and families. Of course, sometimes children's fears and worries are based on realistic concerns. Whether your children are worried about monsters under the bed, or a terrorist attack, it's important to reassure them as much as possible and discuss the situation in a manner that's appropriate for their age and developmental level.

Demonstrate compassion and empathy through your actions, words, and thoughts.

- Compassionate actions. Just as children pick up on our emotional states, they also emulate the way we treat others. When a waitress or a sales clerk takes a little longer than you'd like, your children will notice whether you are understanding or demanding.
- Compassionate words. Teach children that kindly speech and diplomacy are more effective and yield longer-lasting results than angry words, force, and fists. Children pick up a lot by watching how mom and dad work out their differences.
- Compassionate thoughts. Send loving thoughts to others through prayer and meditation. Start by praying for or sending love to close relatives and friends. Gradually expand the loving thoughts to include people in the community, and eventually encompass all living beings from around the world.

Teach children that the Earth is one large family. Help children to realize that in the important ways, they are no different from other children all around the world—and that the Earth is home for all of us. You can cultivate empathy and compassion by telling your own stories about children in other parts of the world, emphasizing that they share the Earth with us and have the same feelings, fears, hopes, and dreams.

TIME OUT WITH PATTI TEEL

DREAM THE DREAM AND STEP INTO IT

- Celebrate each person's uniqueness. Start by accepting your child's temperament; accept that he or she may be naturally timid and soft-spoken or boisterous and loud. By accepting and respecting our children, we teach them to be non-judgmental and accepting of others.
- Respect all religions.
- Avoid generalizations about people and correct any prejudicial remarks that we hear.

Help others. Provide opportunities for your children to put their hearts into action by helping others. Opportunities abound: have your child draw pictures and help you deliver food to a housebound friend, encourage them to donate some of their clothes, toys or books, or regularly visit an elderly person who needs companionship.

Teach children to seek a win-win situation. Replace the idea of "I want me to win and you to lose" with, "I win when everybody wins." It starts by teaching children to become good listeners so that they know what each person involved wants out of the situation.

Build a child's self concept. Children who have a positive self concept about their outer self will accept that their inner self is a divine being, a radiant soul. Only then, will they recognize the same light in others.

Patti helps children to find peace within themselves. She is the creator of a highly acclaimed audio series that teaches children to turn inward and relax. In her new book for parents, *The Floppy Sleep Game*, parents learn playful relaxation techniques to help their children practice the three R's--resting their bodies, relaxing their minds, and refreshing their spirits. www.pattiteel.com

Dubbed "The Dream Maker" by People magazine, Patti Teel is a former teacher and the creator of an award winning relaxation audio series for children. Her book, *The Floppy Sleep Game*, gives parents techniques to help their children relax, deal with stress and fall asleep. She is a popular speaker and presents innovative workshops for parents, children, and health professionals. Get R&R tips and sign up for her newsletter at www.pattiteel.com. You can listen to her online radio show at www.timeoutwithpattiteel.com.