

Coming to the University of Missouri Extension Office the Monday morning after an MU loss is never a fun experience. The general office discussion about the game quickly turned to an even more disturbing topic. A recent study of nearly 30,000 American teenagers concluded that responses to questions about lying, stealing and cheating reveals entrenched habits of dishonesty for the workforce of the future.

The basis of the study reveals that boys were found to lie and steal more than girls. Over 30% of the students admitted stealing from a store in the past year. Eight-three percent students admitted to lying to their parents about something significant. Sixty four percent of students said they had cheated on a test, and 38% had one so two or more times. All of these statistics are alarming to say the least, but as a person who works with young people every day the most concerning news from the study was that 93 percent of students indicated satisfaction with their own character and ethics, with 77 percent saying that "when it comes to doing what is right, I am better than most people I know."

So why is this happening? I do not claim to be an ethical or moral expert but find that many parents believe that when there are the schools, churches and so many laws and orders to teach manners, their role in a child's life is just not as relevant when it comes to imparting moral values. This is in fact not true.

When you look at a child's life the people spend the most time with them are the parents. You are the ones who have the greatest influence on your child's life.

As a parent consider the following in helping to establish good moral character in your children at a young age.

Be Committed – Commit yourself to providing a moral atmosphere for your children. If you want your child to be truthful at all times but then ask them to tell a lie or hide the truth, the purpose of moral teaching may never be met. Sending the right message at all times will make it easier for your children to follow the path you want them to.

Be a Role Model – If you wake up each morning in a bad mood the mood will spread to your children. If you eat dinner in front of the television instead of sitting down to talk as a family your children may lack the ability to communicate with others about their day and the events in their lives. Whatever you do, your children are constantly watching you. The old adage "do as I say, not as I do," doesn't work in today's society. Words are usually not as effective to children as actions and when they see you doing a good thing, they will surely follow.

Share Your Stories and Beliefs – As my grandparents get older I appreciate more the time that we get to spend together. Every family has some great stories where relatives were courageous or kind. Share the stories with your children and let them know more about the family and what it believes in. If your family has traditions, be sure that your children are part of them; this is especially prevalent during the holiday season. I remember as a child sharing stories as we added each family ornament to the Christmas tree.

Seize Learning Moments – We never know day to day when a moral lesson will arise. If your child's friend is sick, that may be the right moment to teach her how to care for others, and be compassionate by visiting this friend and giving her a card or small gift.

Learn from Mistakes – We all know that things don't always go as we plan them to. There will always be times when your child does something wrong. While punishment may be part of your plan of action, it may also be a good idea to reflect on the deed after sometime. Ask your child to answer questions like "What was it that you did wrong?" "What else could you have done?" "If this happens again, what should you do?"

Make Moral Behavior a Habit – Make good decision and good habits a part of your daily routine. Have them help in the kitchen, clean out closet to donate to those who are less fortunate, help a neighbor with a simple task.

Set the Standards – Your child should know what is expected of them both at home and in public. Traits that you want your child to have in front of others should be the same traits you display in your home. The more consistent the ethical behavior is the more likely it will stay with them and continue throughout their lives.

This article may not change the moral issues of young people in today's society but I hope that it will make you, as a parent, aware of how much of an influence you have on your children and that everything you do can shape the future for your child. For more information on this or other youth development related topics please contact the University of Missouri Extension Office at 660-885-5556.