

What do you stand for?

During a recent trip to Washington, D.C. I was in the gift shop at the Holocaust Museum (a must see if you are planning a trip to our Nation's Capitol). As a youth worker I am always looking for new and interesting things to hang in my office to remind me about the job I do and why I do it. As I wandered around the gift shop waiting for a friend I found a poster entitled "What do you stand for?" Some of the words on the poster included tolerance, purpose, humor, loyalty, restraint, and caring. I bought the poster and now have it hanging in my office. As an adult or older teen we have influence on the people around us. What we stand for and how we act is easily picked up by children in today's society. It is important that we all take time to identify what we stand for and how we can convey that to the people around us.

A great way to start a discussion like this with your children is to first figure out what your family stand for? This doesn't mean if you vote Republican or Democrat, but rather what character traits define who your family is. What virtues do you embrace? What principles guide your behavior? Do your children know -- and more importantly see in action -- what you feel about some of the words in the poster I described above. Your children need to know the reasons behind what you stand for. Your family of origin's values? Life-changing events in your past? Your religious beliefs? They also need to know what you won't stand for and why, like racism and bigotry.

Before you engage your children in a discussion of what your family stands for, you might ask them what they think are your family's most important beliefs and values and how have they come to those conclusions? Their answers will give you a child-centered focus to begin your talk. Simply listing the character traits of your family -- "We stand for honesty, empathy, and tolerance" -- isn't enough.

In your family you can teach values by the discussion topics you engage in. Sitting down to dinner as a family, or maybe a Sunday breakfast can be a great way to help in identifying and establish values. Have family members talk about their best experience of the day or the past week. Family members have a chance to review their own best experiences and to learn about what is important to other family members. This can not only help you to learn about each other's values but also deepen the bonds that unite you as a family.

Values are established by the traditions that a family follows. The family that makes a tradition of helping neighbors teaches caring. The family in which family members help each other in times of need is teaching cooperation. The family that goes to the library and talks about ideas is showing its value for learning. Some families establish a regular family fun time. Some families set aside a regular time for reading or sharing. Some families carefully choose their media (TV, videos, games) to fit with their values.

Values are also taught by the way we deal with family problems. When a family member is having trouble, do we unite to support that person? When a person breaks important family rules, do we try to help that person find better ways?

Positive family values don't just happen. Family members learn to be strong and caring people partly because the family has carefully cultivated practices that support those values.

Talk with your family about some of the values that are most important to your family and to different members in your family. Rather than try to decide which values are the "right" values, notice how each person chooses differently. Enjoy the differences. Maybe each family member would pick the 3 or 4 values that mean the most to him or her.

What do you stand for? Asking these questions will help you and your family to identify what is important to you and lay the foundation for what will be important to you and your children. Truthfulness, respect, accountability, citizenship, imagination, justice, and equality are just the beginning of what might be important to your family. For more information on youth development related topics please contact the University of Missouri Extension Office at 660-885-5556.