



Harmonious Homes

———— Human Values Parenting ————

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Observational Learning



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Objective

This guide focuses on how children learn through observation and the role of parents in their early life.

Introduction

Keeping in our mind that there is inherent Divinity in all, including children, constantly reminds us as parents to regard the child as a gift of the Divine.

“Divinity is present in everyone in an unmanifested form. All human beings are sparks of the Divine like the waves of the ocean. Every man is the embodiment of the Divine Sat-Chit-Ananda (Being-Awareness-Bliss). This has been described categorically in the Bhagavad Gita. As God is the embodiment of love, man is also an embodiment of love.”

- Sri Sathya Sai Speaks Vol 22, Ch #6, 1989



Swami says:

- Children have unselfish love.
- They are innocent onlookers observing the actions of the elders and learn their lessons from the home much earlier than from school.
- So parents have to be very careful in their behavior with the children and between themselves. Mother and father are the first examples of social behavior that the child sees before he/she learns to imitate.

“Parents should never discuss family matters in the presence of their children. They may be having financial and other problems but they should not let their children know about them. They should deal with their problems themselves and try to keep the children as happy as they can and work for their progress. First and foremost, the parents should put human values into practice in their own life and then encourage their children to develop these values. The parents should guide their children on the right path by their own example.”

- Sri Sathya Sai Speaks Vol 41, Ch #12, 2008

Observational Learning - Background

Observational learning is a natural process of human learning that involves learning by watching others, retaining the information, and then replicating the behaviors that were observed. Although this can take place at any point in life, it tends to be the most common during childhood. A tremendous amount of learning happens in children through this process. Children learn how to behave and respond by observing their parent(s), siblings and everyone around them. This plays a very important role in shaping and modeling their interaction and socialization process with others.

There is a phrase: “Do as I say, not as I do”. Children, it turns out, will actually do both. Children learn and imitate behaviors by watching and listening to others. This is sometimes called “observational learning,” when children can learn things simply by observing others. The models do not have to be people that the child directly interacts with. Children learn from models all around them, on television, in the grocery store, at school, and at home. Wherever they are, whomever they are around, children are observing and learning.



Watching a specific behavior does not necessarily mean a child will perform the behavior themselves. Whether or not they demonstrate a new behavior, they are picking up new knowledge.

Children are learning about the behavioral choices of others and also about the consequences of those behaviors. What modeled behaviors children will imitate depends partly on what sort of reinforcement those behaviors receive.

People are more likely to imitate a behavior if they get some sort of positive reinforcement (intended or unintended) for it. Don't forget that laughter can be an unintended positive reinforcement.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, children can also acquire prosocial behaviors through observational learning. Watching someone cooperate, share, take turns and demonstrate altruistic acts can teach children to show those behaviors too.

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Tips on how to ensure your child has opportunities to witness and experience modeling in a positive way:

- Be intentional about your child's surroundings.
- Notice and praise the positive actions of a child.
- Limit or eliminate exposure to negative influences
- In unavoidable situations, talk to your child about what constitutes acceptable and helpful behavior
- Do as you say. You are your child's first and most important teacher.



The above is reproduced and paraphrased from Michigan State University article:

- https://www.canr.msu.edu/news/monkey_see_monkey_do_model_behavior_in_early_childhood

Additional Resources:

- https://www.canr.msu.edu/news/young_children_learn_by_copying_you
- The Children We Mean to Raise - The Real Messages Adults Are Sending About Values:
 - <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/reports/children-mean-raise>

Discussion Questions:

1. What habits and traits do you feel you derived from your parents?
2. What habits and traits do you feel your child has derived from you?
3. How do you feel about both?
4. What actions of your children, good or bad, can you trace back to observational learning (from TV, social media, extended family, friends, school, etc.)?

Example from Swami on “Observational Learning” & Lesson in Good Behavior

“If children are to be persons of good character, adhering to good practices, the parents should have good character and exemplary conduct. The great teacher, Adi Shankaracharya, was a child of parents who were highly virtuous and noble in their conduct. For the great name attained by Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Swami Vivekananda, the credit goes to their parents. Many great men achieve name and fame by following the footsteps of their parents.

If Gandhi, who is an ordinary person was able to achieve greatness and be world renowned it was because of the lessons in good behavior which he learned from his mother. The mother used to observe a vow that she would take her food only after the cuckoo sang in the morning. Once when Gandhi was a boy, the mother was waiting for a long time to hear the call of the cuckoo. Observing this, Gandhi went out of the house, imitated the call of the cuckoo and came in and told his mother that the cuckoo had sung and that she could take her food. The mother who saw through her son's trickery slapped him on the cheek and said: “you wicked fellow, what sin must I have committed to bear a son like you?”. She felt sad that such a child should’ve been born to her. Her grief touched the heart of Gandhi and from that moment Gandhi took a firm resolve never to utter a lie again.”

- Divine Discourse, Easwaramma Day, 6 May 1992

A Child Learns at the Earliest Stage - in the Womb

Swami has mentioned that the first five years of the child’s life is the most important in developing good values. Swami mentioned that even in the womb, the child learns:

“Though earth is one, the plants vary depending on the seeds sown. The womb of mother symbolizes mother earth. As is the seed of thought sown in it, so is the fruit it yields. You cannot expect mangoes by sowing a neem seed. So, the mother's womb should be filled with good thoughts, good words and good deeds. Only then can she beget virtuous children”

- Divine Discourse , Ladies Day, 19 November 2000

Parents Are the First Role Models

In order to emphasize the significant impact of observational learning on children and the critical need for parents to always remain as role models, Swami said these words to a devotee in 2001 during a private conversation on parenting:

“Upbringing a child starts from the womb. What a mother sees, hears, or eats affects the baby. Mother is the first teacher.”

“What parents do matters most to children. Children learn every action from their parents in the first five years of their life regarding what to do and how to behave.”

“Children learn from their parents through observation, especially during the first five years of their life. So, parents must always be good, do good and act as role models for their children. Child’s body, health, and mind depend on their parent’s lifestyle. Whatever the parents do, the children will do.”

We now know that children observe, absorb and learn a lot during their formative years. Their primary contacts and sources for learning are their parents, before other relationships and stimuli begin to attract their attention. So parents are the first role models for the children.



“Women are the mothers of the coming generation; they are the teachers of that generation, during the first five years of life.”

- Sri Sathya Sai Speaks Vol 8, Ch #28, 1968

“The individual child's life is greatly influenced by the qualities of the parents. The loving care of Jijabai made Shivaji a great warrior. Rama's divinity blossomed because of the noble qualities of His mother, Kausalya. The twins Lava and Kusha could become powerful and famous due to their noble and virtuous mother, Sita. The same can be said of our ancient sages and seers. They could sanctify their lives because of the noble influence of their parents.”

- Sri Sathya Sai Speaks, Vol 36, Ch #20, 2003

CHILDREN LEARN WHAT THEY LIVE

By Dorothy Law Nolte

If children live with criticism, they learn to condemn.
If children live with hostility, they learn to fight.
If children live with ridicule, they learn to be shy.
If children live with shame, they learn to feel guilty.
If children live with encouragement, they learn confidence.
If children live with tolerance, they learn to be patient.
If children live with praise, they learn to appreciate.
If children live with acceptance, they learn to love.
If children live with approval, they learn to like themselves.
If children live with honesty, they learn truthfulness.
If children live with security, they learn to have
faith in themselves and others.
If children live with friendliness, they learn the world is
a nice place in which to live.



Discussion Questions

1. Are there instances you can recollect from your childhood where actions of your parents, grandparents, elders or mentors have positively influenced your character deeply?
2. Given what we have read and discussed, what are some new initiatives that you are contemplating for your interactions with your child?

References of pictures and Illustrations

- freepik.com
- "Home" drawing by Pavithra Krishnan