Parents are lifelong teachers

Have you ever found yourself saying or doing something to your child that you promised you would never do, before you became a parent? Before you had kids, you were never going to be like your Mum who always reminded you how good you had it and how spoilt you were, or like your Dad, who regularly humiliated you by yelling at you from the sidelines on the football field. Now, you find yourself doing the same thing with your own kids. This is the difference between our intentions and our actions, between our values and methods.

Whilst our intentions as parents, are usually good ones, in that we generally aim to guide and help our children, sometimes our methods are not consistent with our intentions and we know from our own experience, that they are not effective.

We may also complain that our children do not listen to us, when we forget that they are watching everything we do, our values, our attitudes and the feelings behind our behaviour. In the words of Franklin Jones “Children are unpredictable. You never know what inconsistency they are going to catch in you next.”

Although it is impossible for anyone to be 100% consistent, it is important for us to strive for consistency between our values and actions or for us to ‘walk the talk’. How much harder for example, is it for a parent who smokes, to try to influence their teenager son or daughter, not to smoke.

Spotting inconsistency in other parents, is much easier than recognizing it in ourselves. How many times have you witnessed another parent doing one of the following with little or limited success?
- Yelling at a child to ‘stop shouting’
- Smacking a child after the have hit another child
- Losing patience with a child who is being impatient

As parents, we are lifelong teachers to our children, but need to be aware that many of the things we try to teach our children are in fact, not ‘teachable’ but rather learned through experience and by following our example. Arguably, the most important and enduring example that we can set for our children, is how we express and manage our own feelings. It can be helpful for parents to pause, occasionally to
consider “Am I practicing what I preach?” and “Are my teaching aims and my methods consistent?”

Children can push “our buttons” or find our vulnerabilities like no-one else. As well as experiencing enormous love and pride in them, we can also experience intense negative emotions towards them, such as frustration, anxiety and irritation.

Being aware of our feelings and expectations and trying to respond in a more calm and controlled manner, provides a good example for children to follow and helps keep relationships on track. This is no easy feat and it would be unrealistic and maybe unhealthy to expect that we can do this all the time.

Some of the strategies that parents have identified which help to do this include:

- Creating a pause or breather in a tense situation, by going for a walk, to the bathroom, making a cup of tea etc
- Having a mantra or phrase that a parent can silently repeat to themselves, such as “Stay calm”, “It’s my job to be bigger, stronger, wiser, kinder”
- Deep breathing or other activities that can help calm you in the moment
- Regular self-care and relaxation strategies. The more stressed and tired we are, the harder it is to find a way to be calm

If you want to talk about your child’s behaviour with one of our professional counsellors, call 1300 130052 or visit our website www.parentline.org.au for tips sheets and parenting stories.