

# 7 Habits children learn from their parents' marriage!

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*Why a sound marriage is the greatest gift you can give your child*



Parents often share their frustrations and challenges with me when it comes to managing their child's temper, nurturing their child's confidence or getting their children to stop fighting with each other. They expect me to meet their children and 'fix' them. I help them realize that the starting point of their child's attitude and behaviour can actually be traced right back to them – as they play out their daily roles as parents and spouses! This belated realization is not without some shock and dismay.

As parents, we already know that our behaviour towards our child profoundly affects his development. We tend to typically see ourselves only as a parent to our child – and consequently, perceive our role as parents as something separate from our roles as spouses.

As a result, we fail to appreciate that our marital roles, as husbands or wives, also directly affect our children's well-being. Research has shown that the quality of a marriage affects not just the spouses, but also impacts their children.

Our children are constantly watching us. When they see their parents being good spouses, the tone is set for their own interpersonal skills, emotional and social health, as well as their future relationships. After all, a mother and father are the two most important people in a child's life and the way they treat each other teaches a child a lot about life's most important relationship.

Your marriage is the template for your child, so we bring to you seven values your child is learning by observing your marriage.

As Lisa Wingate, popular author and inspirational speaker, aptly summarises, "Your children are the greatest gift God will give you, and their souls, the heaviest responsibility. Take time with them, teach them... when you are old, nothing else you've done will have mattered as much."

**1 APPRECIATION** As a marriage gets busy with the obligations of life – work, children, career, finances, looking after aged parents and other personal and family responsibilities – couples often start to take each other for granted. One day blurs into the other and life gets monotonous. Couples forget to reconnect and take time out for each other. They forget to appreciate and be grateful for each other, and do not spare even a simple 'thank you'. Children need to see their parents demonstrate their affection and appreciation for each other through the use of kind words, compliments and thoughtful acts. This teaches a child the importance of being thankful and grateful, and encourages him to find ways to appreciate other family and friends.

**2 DEALING WITH DISAGREEMENTS** Having different opinions is a given in any relationship, yet this plays a critical role in the context of a marriage. When children see their parents address and resolve these disagreements in a manner that is respectful of each other, they learn that conflicts can be resolved without screaming, shouting, hitting or being mean. Children learn the importance of empathy and paying attention to another person's needs and point of view. Through the experience of watching their parents resolve conflict, children learn that disagreements are normal, inevitable, yet can be dealt with in safe, constructive and healthy ways.

**3 GOAL SETTING AND PLANNING** Companies are not the only ones to have goals; future-oriented families do too! As parents, part of your responsibility is to help your children appreciate the nuances of investing in the future quality of life that a family desires to enjoy. In particular, this means articulating and sharing goals around health, career, finances, entertainment and spiritual needs. How do we afford a new car? Where can we go for our next vacation? How can we all become healthier as a family? Appropriately involving children in identifying, setting and achieving goals as a family, encourages them to respect the fruits of your efforts.

**5 SHARING** A marriage is like a tango...partners need to take turns to lead, to follow, come close but then also move apart again to leave space for individual expression! A strong marriage is one that demonstrates these qualities of sharing and teamwork and children learn these skills early in life when they witness their parents appropriately sharing all responsibilities of a household.

**6 COMMITMENT** The basis of every successful marriage is commitment and dedication to each other. When life is good, it is easy to be patient and loving, but when life gets tough and you begin facing challenges, you could be tempted to let anger and blame creep into the marriage and weaken it. Your children watch your responses to life's hiccups, and more importantly, the way you treat each other through these times. Are you still committed to being loving, patient and understanding towards each other? As they grow into their own adult relationships, your children will call upon this template to guide them through the kinks of their own situations.

**7 RESPECT AND APOLOGIZING** An unhealthy ego has destroyed many a marriage. A thriving marriage requires that spouses respect one another and that means learning to apologize when you are in the wrong. When children see that their parents' relationship is not ruled by their ego, or the 'I get the last word' syndrome, they learn to respect their own siblings and friends. Saying sorry (when appropriate) is then not viewed as a weakness, but as emanating from the strength of a secure spouse. ●

You can spend hours lecturing to your child about the benefits of being a 'good' person, but the reality is that your child needs to see you model these behaviours within the primary social unit a child experiences – the family. It is here that they get a 'how-to manual' of being a kind, empathetic, resilient, positive and happy person.

**4 HUMOUR** Laughter bonds people and it has been said that 'we cannot really love anybody with whom we never laugh.' Humour in a marriage builds fun memories, erases the hard feelings and enhances the emotional intimacy of a marriage. When you laugh together, or laugh at yourself and even at each other, your children learn to take life more positively. Correlating strongly with happiness and joy, humour strengthens family bonds. These 'funny incidents and memories' will be recalled at family reunions and provide laughter for many years to come!